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# SOLAR ASSIGNMENT

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Mark Denholm.

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*The planet Pluto may be what it seems, but two roving reporters in space find a different answer.*

Len Dayton peered through the main observation window of the spaceship, made a wry face, fixed his blue eyes on the cold, merciless darkness of Pluto. To he and Rex Lanson was reflected the starlit wastes of this outcast of the Sun's family, desolate beyond belief, frigid outpost of the Solar System.

"Maybe we're crazy," was Rex's comment at last as he rubbed his red hair, "but don't forget that the Ed. will be even crazier if we don't bring back a story worth printing this time. We've fallen down on most of our assignments so far. This is our last chance."

Len grunted, wondered whether he had been a fool to suggest coming out this far in the hope of finding something. For the normal space routes limited themselves at Neptune; and even within the orbit of that planet it was no picnic. Telescopes had already shown that Pluto wasn't worth the extra hazard. It was only dead rock anyway.

"Funny how a journalist's instincts drive him on," Rex sighed. "But we've gone up a gumtree all right. I think we'd better be getting home and prepare for the wrath to come. Six fuel containers used up and no results! Wow! Will the chief burn when he sees the mess we've made of our roving commissions!"

Len turned back to the controls disappointedly, forced the vessel into a jolt of speed to break it away from the heavy little planet's field, then he hesitated with his hands resting on the switches, his eyes gazing fixedly through the port.

"Say," he breathed, "what in cosmos is that?"

Rex joined him again. Down there, now they had come to a different part of the frozen world, there was something glinting, throwing back the light of the diamond-bright stars. It was fairly large—had to be indeed—to catch so much reflection. Water was not possible on a world like this. Ice? Well, perhaps, if it were highly glazed.

"Looks like—glass," Rex said, and he spoke in a hushed tone as though afraid he was sounding ridiculous.

"Glass! Here?" But Len Dayton's voice wasn't exactly scornful: it was bewildered. He stared for another long moment, then, gripping the controls, he swept the ship down amidst feathers of rocket exhaust.

They came low over the gleaming portion, and transiently they saw quite clearly that an immense dome of glasslike substance was indeed bulging out of the summit of a rocky eminence.

"It's some sort of observation tower!" Rex cried excitedly. "Think of that—way out here on Pluto, of all places. A story, man—a story! Take the ship down: we want a close look at this!"

Len nodded, twisted and turned the vessel round, crossing and recrossing the dome at a lower altitude each time, until at last he brought the machine down gently on the black plain immediately under the towering rock on which the dome was perched.

The engines stopped. Tense, still-quiet descended.

“Okay?” Rex questioned, and hurried over to get spacesuits.

In a few minutes they were provisioned and armed, left a single guiding beam on their vessel, then stepped outside. Above them over the airlock the beacon light glowed with a solitary splendour in the dreadful darkness.

Here, indeed, was a world of eternal night, so distant from the sun that the primary was but an over-bright Venus in the infinite remoteness, blazing a little brighter than the hosts of other stars and nebulae.

The feet of the two men, encased in heavy tinium waders, crunched through powdered substance, which was half crumbled rock mixed with ice javelins and crystallised air. That there was air at all surprised them; they had always thought Pluto to be utterly devoid of it. Certainly, it was at an extremely low density, for even through their spacesuits they could feel the merciless cold trickling into their beings—cold which had the sting of instant death if the slightest flaw developed in their coverings.

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They didn’t bother to talk through their intercoms as they trudged to the foothills of the giant rock needle. Indeed, speech was something which had become a needless faculty. Dead silence was the thing: silence to match up with the weighted oppressive tomb into which they had come.

Finally Len untied the wire rope from his tackle, handed one end of it to Rex. They linked their waist belts together, then began the slow, tedious climb up the frozen rock face. It was dangerous work, with death as the reward for miscalculation. Up above their heads, three hundred feet and more, loomed the summit they were determined to reach.

The higher they went the more complete became their view of the terrain, and it was something certainly never vouchsafed to the most ambitious Earth mountaineer.

Being a small planet, though its density produced a gravity comparable with Earth’s, Pluto’s horizon was correspondingly nearer and the range of vision from a height far greater. Halfway up the Needle the two could see that the plain ended in a deep valley. In the base of it, couched under the stars, was the dense Plutonian mist and immovable mounds of crystallised air. Then, beyond this valley, the plain continued until it was chopped off clean by the backdrop of the stars. For wild, deadly beauty it had no equal.

Rex switched on his intercom and said laconically, “Say, whoever built this dome here must have been nuts! Unless it was a crazy astronomer who wanted a nearer view of the stars than he could get from any other planet.”

“Talking of being nuts . . .” Len’s voice came back to him in an awed whisper, “I think I’m that myself! What’s *that*?”

He nodded towards the valley and Rex turned to look, then he frowned. Either it was a mirage or he was— My God, but there *were* figures moving down in the valley! Glowing figures indeed, as though soaked in phosphorescence. Nor were they the fantastic forms one might have expected to see on an alien world, but very human looking men!

Now and again the dense mists hid them from sight, then again they would emerge, walking rhythmically like robots up the valley side. In the airless expanse distance was deceptive. Possibly they were still a mile distant.

"They—they're alive all right!" Rex gasped at last, and sensed his spine crawling. "But what in hell are they?"

"Search me," Len said nervously—for he *was* nervous and made no pretence of being otherwise. The occurrence was positively mind-shattering on a supposedly dead world. Finally, he pulled forth his night glasses and held them to the glassite eyepieces of his helmet. A long whistle came through Rex's intercom.

"They're men sure enough—and Earth men, to judge from their looks! They're glowing and they're stark naked! Who'd start a nudist colony on a world like this, I wonder?"

Something of Len's natural dry humour came to his rescue, but both of them looked at each other soberly in the starlight. It was utterly impossible, as they knew, for anything human to exist in such a temperature and near-vacuum.

Then suddenly, as they watched, the men vanished again in the mist. Rex glanced up at the frowning summit of the Needle.

"What do we do, Len? Forget the story and push on?"

Len thought of an editor slow burning back on Earth and then set his jaw.

"Like hell! With all this gathered around us we might get a yarn which will stand the *Cosmisheet* on its ear. . . . Those men were perhaps light delusions . . . or something."

Rex knew he was only saying that to console himself. That the men were no longer apparent was the fault of the mist. They did exist. . . .

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"What are we waiting for?" Len snapped suddenly, and with that they resumed their climb but now with increased energy. Their spines were tingling at the thought of those ghostly beings coming inexorably after them. Better to fight them at the pinnacle top if they had to, than on these treacherous slopes.

Higher they went up the smooth-faced glaciers, managing it somehow with rope and toe-and-finger-hold, staggering finally to the narrow table-like summit on which the dome was perched. Indeed, it occupied most of the summit: there was precious little room to walk around it.

For a moment they looked back. Far below near the base of the pinnacle the six shapes were visible again, still marching with implacable resolve. In the other direction the orange beam of the spaceship's guide-light shone.

"Let's get busy," Len growled. "We've got flame guns for these walking Roman Candles if they start any trouble."

They clambered over the rocks separating them from the dome, finally reached a point where they could gaze down through it. Its entire hemisphere was covered with a film of perfectly pellucid ice—had probably remained there ever since its erection in this searingly cold waste.

And through this barrier the two men stared down on to the unbelievable. Below them, dimly lit by the pitiless stars, was some kind of observation room. They could catch the faint reflection from numberless instruments, all of them indeterminable in their outlines. This, though in itself amazing enough, was by no means as remarkable as the sight of an Earthman sitting at a bench, head fallen on his pillowed arm, the other arm stretched outwards to end at some kind of notepad under his motionless hand.

"Suffering comets, is this a story!" Rex whispered.

Len fumbled in his belt and dragged out his torch. The white beam he directed below brought the man into clear relief, showed that he was still young apparently—or had been

when death had caught up on him. He had strongly set shoulders, a black haired head and powerful neck.

Len mumbled his mystification. "What in heck do you make of it? An Earthman *here*? There is nothing in the archives of space to match up with it!"

"Dead—or just asleep?" Rex mused; then he glanced back anxiously towards the edge of the plateau. "No sign of those walking ghosts yet, so how about trying to get inside this dome? We might get better protection, too, if it comes to a spot of slugging."

This started them investigating, but all their searching drew a blank. The dome was solidly sunken into the rocks without the least sign of anything to suggest an opening or airlock. Finally Len tugged out his raygun and fired it at the glass experimentally. Immediately there was a fissuring, splitting impact as a gap of some three foot width was shattered in the curved wall.

"Big enough to get through anyway," Len murmured. "I figured that sudden intense heat after years of eternal frost might do the trick. Let's go."

He eased himself down through the rent, dropped lightly into the long-forgotten observation room. In a second or two Rex had alighted beside him. Their torches blazing they stared about them in bewilderment.

They could see now that the smashing of the dome had made no appreciable difference to the interior temperature of the place. Everything was covered with a film of ice, and the air pressure gauges, when Rex scraped the frost from their faces, showed a pressure pretty close to the external vacuum. In any case, the man himself was proof positive. He was frozen into a half lying position, as hard as granite.

"Frozen to death and completely preserved," Len muttered. "He just couldn't decompose. . . ."

He stared at him thoughtfully, at the strong, though hopeless looking face and glazed eyes. Then his gaze travelled along the frozen, outthrust arm to the hand still holding a queer stylo pen between immovable fingers. Under the hand was an ice-glazed mass of metalfoil, and upon it a number of notes.

Struck with a thought, Len used his raygun on quarter power and thawed the ice round the notepad, dragging it free. It looked like some kind of log—twenty-six metal sheets of it—and ending in the middle of a line. But, damnably, the language was utterly foreign to him. Even the hieroglyphics made no sense.

"Guess this isn't going to tell us much," he growled, thrusting it in his suit pocket. "Keep it, just the same."

"I suppose," Rex asked dubiously, "he is an Earthman?"

"Seems little doubt about it, but don't ask me what period of time he belongs to. Looks as though he was an astronomer, to judge from this tackle—but the stuff is way ahead of anything we've got even to-day, and the Twenty-First Century ain't exactly backward, either."

Rex looked about him thoughtfully. "I don't see how he could live here alone, without anybody else. There must be an exit from this chamber, surely?"

He turned, intending to look more thoroughly, but at the identical moment a vibration and rattling overhead, vaguely transmitted by the thinnest of air, caused him and Len to glance up sharply. They fell back, watching.

It was not, as they had fully expected, the six ghost men, but instead an object like a monstrous icicle, slowly extending itself, creeping down investigatorily through the crack in the dome. At first it seemed to be stealing down like a frigid finger, but gradually it was forced

on the two men that this was but an illusion. Actually the stuff was elongating itself by adding more crystals to its main mass with a speed which was positively magical.

“What—what is it?” Rex gulped. “It’s nothing like those six men we saw——” He broke off in alarm as the stuff suddenly thickened and increased its speed tremendously.

Like a mass of living ice, hurling back a multitude of lights from the torches trained on it, the substance creaked and swelled through the fissure, obviously alive, searching for something.

And gradually it became apparent to the awestruck Earthmen what it was looking for——  
It was heading for the frozen man at the bench!

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“Say,” Rex whispered, forcing himself to be calm, “it looks like—like frozen protoplasm. If there is such a thing! Frozen life. . . . Living stuff at zero!”

Len’s only response through the intercom was a fascinated grunt. Then he and Rex gave a startled jump as the stuff at last contacted the motionless man.

There was something horrifying about the way it branched out into a myriad fine, stretched tendrils, enveloped the man in a cocoon of ice strands. Firmly, slowly, the stuff got a hold on him, then, by some inexplicable process, seemed to sink into him. In a similar strange manner the stuff broke away from the main bulk in the dome fissure. This mass promptly withdrew into the Plutonian dark and left the gap clear: the remainder simply oozed into the man at the bench until there was not a trace left.

“Suffering hell, what sort of a planet is this, anyway?”

Rex’s voice was shocked beyond belief. He could feel himself sweating with fear inside his heavy suit.

Len frowned over formulating an answer, but before he could get it the man at the bench suddenly jerked—moved—and came to life! With a huge and oddly mechanical effort, he reeled to his feet, just like a manikin jerked by wires. Frost shards splintered from his board-stiff clothing, left gaping rents. His eyes, blank and staring, turned to the two men with an absent glare.

Sensing danger, Len whipped his flame gun forward, but to his amazement, the revived man worked with even greater speed, whipped up a frosty weapon from the bench and fired it. Len felt his gun whizz from his stinging fingers. He was unhurt, but certainly stupefied with amazement.

“Nice going!” he panted into his external mike. “What happens now?”

The man motioned significantly to the gap in the dome.

“I think he wants us to leave,” Rex muttered. “And in his present mood I’m quite agreeable. First time I ever figured I’d be given orders by a lot of ice water anyway. I suppose that stuff is completely in control of him?”

They moved across the chamber until they were under the dome, then, clambering on the bench, they eased their way through the crack to the exterior. Here they got another shock. Grouped about the spot were the frozen six they had seen in the valley—and behind them again a palpitating mass of luminous crystal life which surged, ebbed, spawned and flowed over the utter dark of the plain.

“Seems to me that they are not really luminous,” Len muttered. “It’s the crystal life in possession of them that makes ’em look that way. Guess this gets curiously and curiously, to quote one Alice.”

“Wonder where we go from here?” Len said. “Better hang on to your gun, fellow. With mine gone we may need it——”

The words were hardly spoken before that gun went too! One of the frozen men had stolen up from behind and snatched it from its holster, hurled it far away.

“What the hell!” Rex exploded, his fury getting the better of him—and he dived for the gun frantically. It was too late though. Before he could reach it he was seized by three of the men, whirled round, and then lifted on high. Though protected by his spacesuit, he could feel the icy grip of those hands, sending the flowing cold of the void into his being.

He struggled and fought like a demon as he saw Len being similarly treated, but for both of them the effort was useless. It was three to one in any case, and the man with the gun was in charge.

“Stop struggling,” Len called suddenly, as they were carried swiftly to the plateau’s edge. “One rip on our suits with these icicle hands of theirs and we’re finished.”

He was right there, Rex realised, so he relaxed and resigned himself to the uncomfortable, bumping, dangerous journey at the hands of the captors as they began to descend the side of the Needle.

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In surprisingly quick time they completed the descent, crossed the plain and made for the valley. The two men had long since given up trying to imagine where they were being taken, but finally they realised that they were underground, being carried through a short tunnel of densest darkness.

Then light began to grow upon them. They noticed that they passed three mighty airlocks, each swinging wide open—and these gave not on to a cavern, but a complete underground city, its most dominant feature being four Cyclopean pillars of rock reaching upward to support the curving roof rock.

Set on their feet again, they stared about them wonderingly.

The light was provided by glowing tubes in various parts of the city, so arranged that they threw all the squat, many-windowed buildings into a grouping of silhouettes. It seemed evident that the city had been planned originally with stream-lining, but had had to stop short because of the limitations of the cavern. The final result was a squat, powerful looking metropolis with orderly streets, parks, resting places and flat roofs.

But nothing vehicular moved anywhere. And the trees that should have been green were petrified grey images of cold. Indeed, nothing was moving except frozen grey men here and there, going about tasks known only to themselves.

Len glanced back finally to the open locks leading to the outer tunnel and Plutonian dark.

“There is no more density of air here than there is outside,” he murmured. “Nothing human could live in this—not even vegetation, either, if those trees are any guide.”

He stopped talking as he found himself nudged. Perforce he and Rex had to move on again, walking slowly and curiously along the main street of the city. It was about the most extraordinary experience they had ever had.

From what they could make out, the buildings on either side of them had been designed in the first place as human habitations. Everything connected with them suggested earthly comforts—but, like everything else, these comforts were frozen into a common pattern of grey and gleaming ice-film.

Even the huge hall into which they were finally conducted was little better. It was vast in proportions, had obviously once been a place of assembly. Right now it seemed too fantastic



for words as the grey men came into it with their blank eyes staring ahead of them. . . . Slowly, mechanically, they formed into a circle round the baffled Earthmen.

“You—you are men from Earth?”

It was the man with the gun, the last to be “converted” from death to life, who spoke. He had come to the forefront of his fellows.

“Right,” Len acknowledged through his external mike.

“You removed a notepad from the watchtower. Hand it over!”

Len’s jaw set obstinately, then as his eyes settled on the thing’s steadily levelled gun he thought better of it, tugged the metal foils from his pocket and tossed them over. The man studied them, frowning. Finally, he looked up with his dead, lifeless eyes.

“So *that* is the explanation!” he breathed in wonder. “Long indeed have we puzzled over it —”

He broke off and looked at the two Earthmen directly.

“In case you have not already grasped the fact, my friends, we of this world are highly intelligent, but Nature has endowed us with a crystalline physical form, the only form of life indeed which can evolve in a temperature nearly space-zero and an atmosphere nearly non-existent.

“We began to wonder about the strange manlike life living under the surface of our world. We wondered about the dome that projected on to the surface——. And one day we found all these queer men were dead and so decided to make an effort to take over their bodies. To our delight our crystalline forms were able to pass into these frozen human frames. For the first time in our history we had hands and feet, a method of moving ourselves!

“The higher members of our race, whom you see about you now, took over bodies—but even then there was a surplus of crystal material which still needed bodies. One body, in the watchtower, separate from the rest, we dare not investigate for fear there might be air present in dense quantity. Such would have been fatal to us. We could only conjecture about the solitary watcher—have conjectured for many ages indeed, until you came out of the void. Machines registered your arrival, and to our delight you broke the dome. That enabled me to take over that body. But *still* there is surplus crystal. . . .”

The man paused, something grimly significant in his last words. Then, as Len and Rex attempted no reply, he went on:

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“I saw that the record which had lain so long under the man’s hand had gone. Only you could have taken it. We have had time to learn the language of the men, of course—and yours too by way of radio transmission. But the cause of these manlike beings from Earth being present here has never been solved—until now.”

The man waved the foils in his hand.

“What is it? A log?” Len asked, curiosity ahead of the present danger.

“One might call it a last statement of events,” the man replied. “It seems that he was the last of his race. He died voluntarily like his fellows by cutting off the air pumps and opening the valves to the void. Told briefly, it seems that he and his fellows left Earth because the sun was shielded by a cosmic cloud which had entirely enveloped Earth and shut off the luminary. This cloud, it seems, created a Glacial Epoch, of which you may have some knowledge.

“These scientists saw their race dying under the sun-blot. No other planet was safe to visit, so they created a synthetic planet in the void close to Earth by fusing together streams of meteoric matter and adding it to matter projected by their own mammoth space guns.

Ultimately, they fashioned a small, heavy world. They migrated to it, fully believing they would be free from the blight enveloping Earth. But something went wrong with their gravitational anchors and their little world was hurled into furthest space, to become—to become this world you call Pluto.

“Here, with the scant few who had survived, and all of them males, which made any chance of perpetuation impossible, they sought the underground, for the atmosphere had almost been whipped away and the Solar heat gone. But our life, cold-life spores which had always remained dormant on Earth’s warm surface, came into being in the airless cold. So our life occupied the surface and evolved into intelligent crystal protoplasm, while below was the type of life about which we had wondered.

“These Earthmen—and the Earthman in the tower particularly, for he was an astronomer—had studied his world to see the outcome of the Blight. He saw that his magnificent race had been reduced to cavemen, the survivors that is, and were walking the icy plains of the now clear world. Atavism, caused by the blocking of vital Solar rays, had set in. . . .

“To return to a world of cavemen was useless: better to wait until they evolved. But evolution only brought wars and strife, so these scientists, virtually trapped in a world of their own making, decided on voluntary relinquishment of life. Thus runs the log. . . . The astronomer in the tower was the last to die and made the final record. . . .”

“So that’s the explanation,” Len mused. “It explains the Glacial Epoch, Pluto’s queer size in relation to the four giant outer worlds, and perhaps even solves the mystery of our mighty extinct civilisations, the remains of which are still found.”

“What it explains,” said the Plutonian, “is of little importance. Naturally, we are gratified to have the problem solved, but more pressing things concern us. I have explained how we have taken over these dead, frozen bodies for our own purposes—how we are the rightful denizens of this frigid world. I have also mentioned that there is surplus crystal waiting for a home—crystal which you have seen for yourselves. It requires—just two more bodies! Then our race is complete. There will be no limit to what we can do.”

Len’s eyes narrowed. “So that’s the idea, eh? You want *us*? That damned crystal stuff wants to split into two and sink into both of us as it did into the guy in the tower. Try it!” he finished grimly, and then thrilled as his hand clamped on his empty gun holster. He had forgotten his loss for the moment.

“It will not be difficult,” the Plutonian said coldly. “One puncture in your suits and your bodies will instantly freeze to the desired hardness for us to take possession. Then we can use your legs, your arms, your tongues for speech. . . .”

He stopped and made a motion. In response the flowing mass of the crystal which had been near the doorway came forward, swelling and flowing as usual within itself.

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Len and Rex stared at it in horrified fascination, unable to absorb the fact that here was a form of Earth life which had never been suspected—zero life—filled with merciless and superhuman intelligence. Perhaps it hadn’t been such a mistake on Nature’s part after all to pin it down with a useless physical vestment, for given the priceless appendages of hands and feet there were clearly no shackles on its ambition.

“Only one thing to do,” Rex murmured through his intercom. “Make a dash for it! The ship’s not far away, anyhow, and the valves to the exterior are open. I’m for chancing it.”

Len nodded his helmeted head—then suddenly the pair of them swung round, dived for the nearest gap in the encircling men and fled for their lives to the door of the huge chamber.

They found they had miscalculated the speed of their foes, however, for, with lightning movements, the zero-men wheeled round, charged after them, barred the doorway with their bodies.

Furious, desperate, Len clenched his fist and drove it with stunning force into the blank, granitelike face in front of him. A cold, sickly chill went through him as he found the power of his punch had knocked the man's head right off! No blood flowed: the body was as hard and brittle as though it had been immersed in liquid air—but there was something revolting about seeing the head go flying, to smash into a thousand splinters on the floor. It had been like hitting a plaster statue.

Len hesitated, appalled—and his horror rose still higher when the man did not drop, but continued to bar the way! Of course! The truth flashed through Len's mind. The creature did not rely on the dead man's nerves, arteries and muscles. He merely used them, could do without them if need be. Instinct was his sole guide. The missing head made no difference as long as the body could move. . . .

With a terrific effort Len mastered himself, punched again. This time he missed and the others came piling up on him. Thick and fast he and Rex hit out, right and left, knocking off the men's fingers here and there, smashing forearms like carrots, generally hurling themselves through the creatures which sought by every possible means to stop them.

The leader came hurrying up and fired his gun. By a fluke he missed—and by that time the two men were through the doorway, pursued by the weirdest assortment of damaged men that ever came out of a nightmare—and behind them again moved that expanding, spreading crystal life.

This stuff indeed was the more deadly by reason of the length to which it could stretch itself and so bar the path. Despite the speed at which the two men travelled, it somehow headed them off as they raced for the still yawning valve-way.

Baffled, Len slid to a stop and looked sharply about him.

"In here!" he panted, nodding to a building.

They dived for the open doorway of the building, then paused a moment as they noted that two of the zero men had gone ahead and were busy closing the valves to shut off all avenue of escape. Then they came back to their fellows and the crystal. Both began to converge slowly on the building where the two Earthmen stood indecisively.

They backed inside, amongst machines. So far as they could tell, the place was some kind of factory. With their eyes fixed on the damaged men and the crystalline, they did not notice where they were backing, but they suddenly realised with horror that they were stopped against a wall. They could retreat no further.

Len flashed a glance behind him, then swallowed hard. It was not a wall, but the oval side of an immense machine as long as a locomotive, and if it came to that it wasn't unlike one either. It seemed from the brief glance he gave it to be bristling with valves and wheels, its whole ponderous mass connected to a switchboard close by.

Sideways and backwards, there was no escape now. Forward meant another charge at the creatures, but this time they were ready to balk all efforts. And the leader had his gun ready, too, obviously reluctant to use it in case he damaged the potential "carriers" of the crystal life too severely.

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"Climb on to this machine!" Rex cried. "It's the only thing to do. Might fight them from the top of it."

He set the example by blundering up the side of the machine, hanging on to the wheels and valves to support himself. Len followed immediately, fell back again as one of the wheels spun resistlessly in his fingers. Then he was clawing his way up the bellying mass, kicking at the fierce, brittle hands which tried to drag him back.

By dint of hard effort the pair of them reached the top, stood waiting grimly to sell their lives as dearly as possible. All chance of escaping from the machine into the further reaches of the building were negated by some of the creatures grouping in readiness round the back. To slide down into their clutches would be suicide.

"Okay, let them have it!" Len decided finally, as the first zero-man clawed his way to the machine's top.

He lashed out with the toe of his heavy boot, struck the man under the jaw. It cracked his chin, but he came on doggedly, backed by the rest of his fellows swarming beside him.

Len drew back his fist to the limit, but he never landed the smashing blow he had intended, for the thin, fiery stream of the leader's raygun slashed at him, tore a gaping hole through the sleeve of his spacesuit.

Hardly had Len realised the fact that he was doomed before icy coldness stabbed throughout the interior of his suit. He fell to his knees on the cylinder top, choking hoarsely. In a blur he saw Rex brought down too, brittle fingers tearing the spacesuit from him. Death in this place, steeped in airlessness and space cold, was inevitable.

With swimming brain Len fell his length, hardly conscious of the frantic hands pulling at him . . . then, to his surprise, he felt a sudden heady current of fresh air, so powerful it nearly keeled him into unconsciousness with its intoxicating strength.

He sank limp, drinking it in, feeling himself getting stronger and stronger. The cold was still there, biting in its intensity, but already the void-sting had gone from it. . . . And the air increased suddenly to a positive wind.

Aware that the hands had fallen from him, Len twisted his head round and saw Rex also gulping in the currents swirling about him.

"It's—it's this cylinder!" he shouted huskily. "Air is coming out of it—— Out of these ——"

He motioned to immense gratings in the cylinder top from which there was undoubtedly something hissing and rushing. A vague memory stirred Len—— The wheel he had accidentally moved when climbing up. . . .

He staggered to his feet, shreds of his spacesuit still hanging about him. To a slight extent it served to mitigate the tomblike chill. He stared about him.

The zero-men were bundling away from the cylinder as fast as they could go, all ideas of fight banished. Suddenly he understood why they had been so nervy. They had known, of course, that this was an air cylinder, and as the leader himself had said, air was fatal to them.

"Look!" Rex gasped suddenly. "By all that's queer!"

Queer was right. From their high vantage point they saw the zero men fleeing for their lives through the open doorway of the factory towards the valves they had so firmly closed. This indeed had proven their undoing. In trying to cut off escape they had also stopped all chance of the air leaking out—and it was fast overtaking them, swirling in all directions.

They hurried on desperately, the most weird assortment ever, but before they could even reach the doorway of the factory they began to stagger and fall. Then it was that the normal death and disintegration which should have so long ago claimed these frozen Earth bodies,

caught up. Each body collapsed into a dissolving mass of putrefaction from which, tortured and smashed by air, escaped long columns of rapidly evaporating crystal life.

In time even the crystal life turned to jelly and ceased to move. Inside ten minutes the only remains of the zero life were splotches of dead matter and dusty piles of lifeless crystal.

“Looks like they finished the job for themselves,” Rex said in a sober voice.

“Yeah.” Len’s face was grim for a moment as he surveyed the remains. Then a smile spread slowly over his face.

“But why the heck are we worrying? Think what we’ve found! The biggest story ever—the biggest scientific advancement in history! All we have got to do is to weld up these suits and then get moving. . . . We have cameras to photograph everything, sound detectors, all we need to provide proof. Come on, fellow, this is where we have *our* turn!”

[The end of *Solar Assignment* by John Russell Fearn (as Mark Denholm)]