

PLANET STORIES

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THE UNIVERSE OF FUTURE CENTURIES



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OF THE
VOID**

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by
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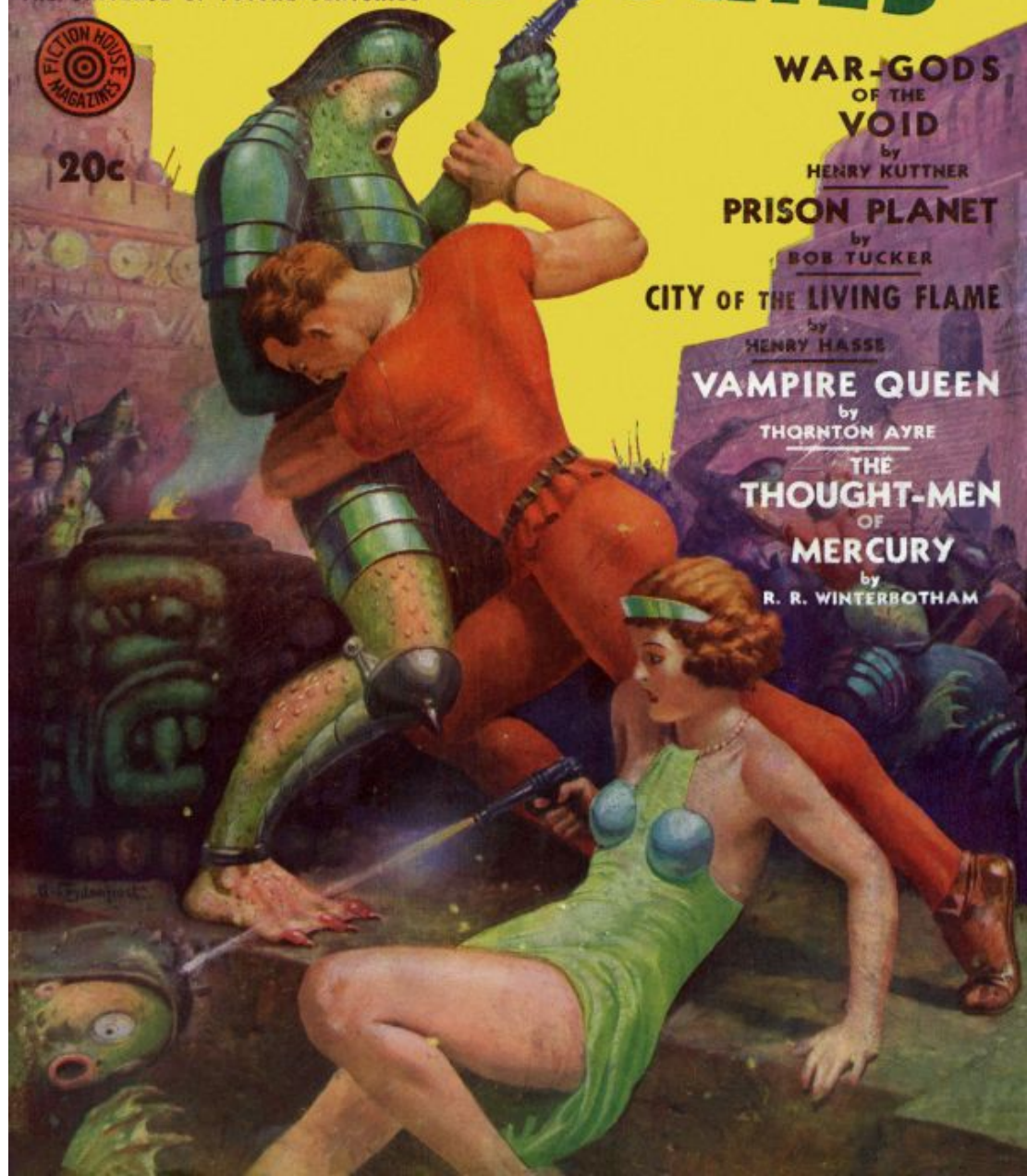
by
HENRY HASSE

VAMPIRE QUEEN

by
THORNTON AYRE

**THE
THOUGHT-MEN
OF
MERCURY**

by
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VAMPIRE QUEEN

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Thornton Ayre.

Illustration by Frank R. Paul.

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“I’m mightier than the law!” Valeine Drew, Vampire Queen of the Starways, flung her challenge at the Interplanetary Patrol. Curt Stanley accepted the challenge—and stepped directly into a Jovian space-trap from which there was no escape.

I had been wondering for some little time why the Chief had summoned me with such urgency. However, being a well trained special agent of the Interplanetary Police I knew my place and kept quiet while he went through his papers, and generally attended to matters which were of no concern to me.

Then at length he glanced through the huge windows of the office and motioned me to his side.

“See her?” he asked quietly, nodding outside.

Here on the ground floor of the building we had a clear view of the square outside. The building opposite belonged to the Consolidated Trust, one of the biggest financial groups in the world and virtual backers of the Interplanetary Corporation itself.

Just emerging from the building was a slender girl in a cornflower blue costume of the time. She was blonde—flaxen blonde almost—and wore no hat. I could see her features were acquiline; her manner alert and decisive.

“What of her?” I asked the Chief presently, puzzledly.

“Ever see a woman without a soul, Curt?” the Chief asked me seriously, his lips tightening. “If not, now’s your chance. That is Valcine Drew—or if you prefer it, ‘The Granite Angel’.”

I began to understand. Valcine Drew—mystery woman, incredibly wealthy—known among the lower dives by her queer appellation because she traveled the starry ways and was reputed to be inhumanly cruel.

It is never easy to reconcile beauty and viciousness; I certainly couldn’t manage it in regard to this lovely girl.

“I’ve something to tell you about her,” the Chief went on, watching her. “From the private reports I have received it is more than clear that she is dodging the law somewhere. Take a good look at her: later you may need to meet her at closer quarters.”

We watched her finally get into a sleek atomic roadster and make off for parts unknown. Cruel? Ridiculous! I began to suspect the Chief had gotten a bad dose of suspicion from the reports he had received.

Then he crossed over to his desk, motioned to me. There was no doubt of the gravity of his expression.

“Valcine Drew is a menace,” he said. “From somewhere in space she keeps obtaining critanium mineral. Not just a few grams at a time but whole pounds of it! How she gets it is the mystery, and that is why we suspect it must be illegal. Naturally she sells it to the Trust and because of its immense value they buy it without question. But since we represent the law we have to look into it. It’s a knotty problem to solve how she gets the stuff because our own ways of getting it demand skilled engineers. The stuff can only be obtained from Jupiter so far as we know, and Jupiter is a living hell as you realize. Twice a year our engineers get some of the mineral from there, and more often than not lose fifty percent of their men doing it. But this girl secures the stuff incessantly! How, I can’t imagine. And it is your job, Curt, to find out.”

I nodded slowly, thinking. “The only critanium deposits known to us are of course on Jupiter. It’s inconceivable that she’d risk that deadly planet every time. Maybe she has found deposits of it somewhere else?”

“Maybe; but the fact remains the source isn’t registered in the interplanetary claim files and it ought to be. So, it comes under the heading of piracy. Find out what she’s up to. Get busy!”



Ice, rocks, mineral-ores—all crumbled in behind the fast moving globe, in the obliterating thunder of an avalanche.

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. To tell me to get busy was one thing: how to start was another. Evidently the Chief guessed my thoughts for he added, "Her ship will probably be at the Main Spaceport—the *Silver Eagle*. She takes on a fresh crew every trip, perhaps to prevent any one crew from getting too familiar with her ways."

"But can't you find out from a member of a dismissed crew what she's up to?"

“No. Fear of her striking back keeps mouths utterly sealed; and as yet we have no authority to make anybody speak. We need evidence. Your best course is to get yourself hijacked onto that ship and then figure out best how to get the proofs we need.”

I nodded understanding and then shortly took my leave.

I'd been seated an hour, soaking in thick weed smoke and listening to the buzz of conversation around me, when things began to happen. The doors of the saloon suddenly sprang open and a man in immaculate blue uniform appeared. He stood with his arms at his sides just staring round.

He was quite the ugliest man I had ever seen. His face was square, brutally strong, with a projecting jaw scarred down one side. The lips were tight, unyielding: the eyes that gazed under the shiny peak of his cap were frosty blue. If one could forget the bullying, swaggering air he adopted, it had to be admitted he was a fine man—well over six feet and proportionately broad.

“Know him?” whispered the out-of-work engineer next to me. “That's first-mate Casper of the *Silver Eagle*, as tough a nut as ever prowled a catwalk.”

“Stop your jabbering here for a minute!” Casper roared suddenly, glaring round. “Don't you know your damned manners when there's a lady around? Shut your traps, all of you!”

The quiet that followed was more of astonishment than respect for his command—astonishment at the sight of the lovely girl in blue who came in beside him. I watched her intently, noting how she entered this den of riffraff without the least timidity. Indeed she moved with urgency and authority, stood looking round on us all with supreme contempt.

Beyond a doubt she *was* beautiful; oval faced, flaxen-haired. But I began to understand something of what the Chief had said now I came to study her at close quarters. It was a face without a single redeeming quality of sentiment about it. It was cold, inhuman, granite indeed. And her eyes I noticed were a deep sea-green, enhanced if anything by fair, curling lashes and eyebrows.

“I want twenty men!” Her voice suddenly rang over the silence with the clearness of a bell. “And I said *men*! No namby-pamby rubbish for me. I want men of iron who'll battle the toughest fields in the spaceways; men who'll risk death. Twenty, I said. And you'll each be paid a thousand dollars apiece for the trip out and back. Let's have your offers.”

She folded her arms and waited in insolent expectation. The man next to me grinned cynically.

“Not for me!” he murmured. “A thousand dollars to work under that she-cat and Casper. Not damned likely!”

“Work for the Granite Angel?” breathed another. “Hell, no!”

Casper's voice roared forth again. “What in hades has gotten into you? Unbutton your uncivil tongues and speak up! You heard the offer—thousand dollars for the round trip. Step up, and quick! If you don't I'll—”

“Well, you'll what?” yelled a derisive voice. “We got rights, remember, and you can't alter 'em!”

Casper's face colored rapidly and he took a step forward; but the girl restrained him. She looked round again and repeated her offer. At that one or two men began to rise and slowly make their way forward. To them no doubt a thousand dollars was worth plenty of grief, so when half a dozen or so had got on the move I joined too, shuffled along in my rubber space shoes until I was finally face to face with Casper.

“Name?” His flinty gaze swept me up and down.

“Stanley Curtis,” I said, reversing my names. “Rocket hand.”

“Here’s your papers,” he said brusquely, thrusting a bunch of identification sheets in my hand. “Take ’em to Main Spaceport and get aboard the *Silver Eagle*. Quick as you can. We take off at sundown.”

I nodded, cast a sidelong look at the girl. All I got was the icy stare of her green eyes. I shambled out, puzzling to myself. The even closer look I had had of her face had convinced me her expression was more forced than natural: it was as though she were laboring under some immense tension or other. Had she relaxed only for a moment I could have imagined her as little short of adorable. Granite Angel, eh? It got me wondering.

I got aboard the *Silver Eagle* and went down into the rocket hold, that stifling quarter in the ship’s belly where none but riffraff and special agents are ever found. With the other sullen-faced men I went about the job of attending to my particular rocket junjit, getting it all in order for the departure signal from the control room above.

After a while it came, in Casper’s full throated bellow.

Off we went, our only indication of flight down here being the pressure of the gravity on the floor. It held us down for a moment or two as we made steady upward climbing; then it relaxed a little. We settled down to our job, sweating heavily.

Presently I left the others and went to the outlook port. No reason why I shouldn’t: I had done all required of me at the unit for the moment. I stared out into space. Earth was dropping from us far below, and to right and left of us were Venus and Mars. They too were receding: clearly they were not intended as our destination. Jupiter was perhaps the answer after all, twinkling far away in the star-sprinkled backdrop.

Then suddenly the view was shut off as the steel slide of the port slammed shut. I had a vision of a blue coated arm clamping the combination lock. I twisted round to stare into Casper’s square, grimly smiling face.

“Get back to your work,” he ordered in a low voice. “Get back, before I beat the living daylight out of you! What do you think this is, a tour?”

“What’s wrong with looking outside?” I asked calmly.

“Plenty so far as you’re concerned! You’re here to tend a rocket unit, not pry into things that don’t concern you! Get moving!”

With a shrug I returned to my task, but there were murmurings from others among the crew. One remark evidently reached Casper for he swung round and came forward, hand resting on the butt of his flameword.

“What was that you said?” His eyes blazed inquiry.

“I said who in hell do you think we are!” repeated one of the men. “We’ve the right to see where we’re goin’, ain’t we?”

“Not on this ship you haven’t! Your best course is to keep your trap shut and your mind on your job. It’ll be healthier for all of you. Besides—”

Casper broke off and stood aside as the girl herself appeared at the top of the ladder. She came slowly down, looked round on the men.

“Trouble?” she asked Casper shortly.

“They don’t like the window shields being drawn,” he sneered. “Maybe they’d like a few feather beds to lie on too!”

The girl’s stony gaze settled on us. “Perhaps my first-mate hasn’t made things quite clear to you,” she said slowly; “so I will. You will get your money when the trip is over. For that

money you'll sweat your guts out down here watching these rockets. On board this ship there are no prying and peepings. You're here to work to the full, and under my command you'll do it. If any man dares to show a hint of mutiny, or is found slacking on the job, he'll be punished without mercy. I don't mean irons; I don't mean solitary. I mean death!"

I looked up at her sharply. "You haven't the authority to do that!"

"The law gives the master of the ship entire jurisdiction," she retorted. "On this ship there is only one law—Mine!" Then she stood eyeing me reflectively and added, "You sound pretty educated for an ordinary rocket hand. What are you doing here?"

"Money doesn't last forever," I said evasively.

She pondered that, her green eyes piercing me. Then with a final warning glance round she retreated up the ladder with Casper behind her. The trap slammed down. Not only that: it was locked. We were virtually imprisoned down in this hell hole with no conception of how to get out of it.

The big fellow who'd complained spat suddenly. "The dirty sun-fried hell-cat! I'll be damned if I'll stand for it! There are rules on all ships!"

"An' a special one for the ship run by the Granite Angel," commented another dryly. "I say we should lie low and stop trying to quiz. It's sticking out our chins."

This started an argument in which I'd no wish to take part. I had my own immediate problems to work out. The closing of the windows and trap door suggested important moves afoot, moves significant enough to be shut off from a crew anyway. It was essential I see something of what was destined to happen. How to get out of here, though? I looked around me for some sort of weapon with which to perhaps pry the trapdoor, or else unseal the window. But I found nothing.

This problem occupied my mind for a long time afterwards, through several work and rest periods indeed, during which time we must have covered enormous distances across the gulf. Once I fancied I detected the zig-zagging course which pilots usually adopt to go through the asteroid belt. If that was so we were heading for the outer planets. Jupiter, no doubt, since it was the only known source of critanium.

Finally I made up my mind to take a chance.

"Listen, all of you," I said to my colleagues, arresting their attention from their work. "We've got to get action. Talking's no use. We're shut down here and for all we know we may be murdered or something before we ever sniff that thousand bucks. Am I right?"

They nodded sullenly.

"There's only one way to get our rights," I went on. "We've got to stop the ship! We'll cut out the rockets and refuse to start 'em again until this woman conforms to regulations and leaves the windows free and the trap open, so we can go up for a breather every now and again. That's the law, and we'll enforce it. Come on, cut off the power! Close the valves!"

Naturally I had my reason for all this and stood watching in grim satisfaction while they earnestly followed out my idea. I had figured that by this time we must be pretty close to the Jovian gravity field, and therefore probably quite close to whatever secret moves Valcine Drew was proposing to make. And perhaps I could escape from down here while the confusion was being sorted out.

It meant leaving a bunch of cutthroats to take the rap, but I felt I was justified. I had a job to do: they hadn't. Casper and the girl couldn't do much anyway since they were powerless

without men to control the rockets.

I stood watching intently as at length all sources of power were cut out and the ship continued to cruise on smoothly of its own momentum. Then came Casper's roaring voice from the control room above.

"What the devil's wrong with you scum down there? Use your forward tubes! What do you want us to do? Crash?"

We maintained a stony silence at that. Sure enough Casper's heavy feet pounded over our heads along the steel corridor. The trap rattled and clanged as it was opened. He came hurrying down with a raygun in his hand. I took good care to edge my way behind him to the ladder.

"Well, what's the idea?" he roared, glaring round. "Which of you is responsible for this? Get the hell to work!"

Still nobody answered him, so he strode down among the men and struck out savagely with the butt of his gun. Instantly he became the focus for a concerted rush. I seized the chance to steal silently up the ladder, making no sound in my rubber shoes.

In a moment I had gained the narrow corridor above. Just in time I pressed myself into the recessed doorway of a storage room as Valcine Drew appeared from the control room, obviously bent on discovering for herself what was wrong. She hurried past me, never noticing, and began to descend into the rocket hold. I could hear the noise of a rising altercation, and above it all the roaring voice of Casper, the thud of fist on bone.

Quickly I looked around me. My next job was to find concealment and yet be able to watch what happened. Carefully I edged my way down the corridor to the control room. It was empty, of course, and woefully bare of any chance of concealment. Then I glanced above me

The very thing! Up there in the roof was the air vent trap leading into the storage containers of the circular ceiling—a kind of loft. Fine! I leaped up to the girders, swung on them quickly, and eased my way through the vent trap into the wide space beyond. Gently I lowered the trap down again and lay full length, peering through its holes. Here indeed was perfect concealment.

From this position I could also see through the broad outlook window near the switchboard. My guess that we were near Jupiter had been right. The giant planet was filling all space outside—banded, clouded, mysterious, his Great Red Spot about the only clear thing on his surface, and, as most of us pilots and spacemen well knew, the only habitable part of his surface.

Then there were his moons, all of them but briefly explored because of their inimical conditions. Frozen chunks of rock, most of them, some with vague pretensions to solidified air; others entirely without. Of the possibly habitable ones Ganymede came about the nearest. Bleak, inhospitable satellites circling round their equally unattractive primary. Right here indeed was a region where few ever ventured. Certainly the ordinary space runs never came this far; and the special ships for the critanium deposits only twice a year.

II

I looked away from the window view suddenly as there were sounds beneath me. Casper and the girl came into the control room.

“Damned mutinous lot of scum,” Casper breathed savagely, jabbing his gun back in his belt. He moved the controls and since the ship reacted instantly, I presumed he’d enforced order below.

“We’ve a mutinous bunch to hold down, Valcine,” he said at length. “But I’ll do it if I break them one by one!”

I lay watching in some surprise. This struck me as a queer way for a first-mate to address the commander of the vessel. It was an even bigger surprise to see the girl’s face relax for a moment into a semblance of sympathy.

“I suppose we can’t really blame them,” she said slowly. “After all, pinned down there in that heat, all shields drawn tight—”

“Stop getting so damned sloppy!” Casper interrupted, and slipping the robot control in position for a moment he went over to a water-faucet. “Here,” he said, handing her a glass of water. “Don’t forget your medicine. Time for it.”

Intently I watched. From her belt the girl took a glass phial and shook a tablet from it into the water. She said briefly, “Don’t forget to make me up some more tablets. This is the last of this supply.”

“I won’t forget,” Casper growled, and watched her drink off the draft steadily.

“That’s better,” she said, straightening up. “All right, let’s get busy.”

He nodded and I noticed there was a malignant grin on his face as he turned to the switchboard. I noticed too that Valcine had lost again that temporary look of compassion for the men below and was now standing grim and erect before the outlook port, studying the view.

From my position I saw the vessel was sweeping round to one of the moons of Jupiter. For a moment I had difficulty in placing it since most of them look alike. Then Casper cleared things up for me.

“More I see of this frozen hell of Ganymede the less I like it. But we picked a swell spot, Valcine. No guys in their right senses ever start prodding around places like this. I guess the only habitable spot in this whole gosh-awful region is the Great Red Spot up there.”

The girl nodded silently, still gazing outside. I shifted my eyes from her to the window again as Ganymede loomed up in its entirety. Cold, ruthlessly desolate little world; hardly any air; puckered into rumples and folds of rock.

Mountains seemed to be everywhere, riven asunder by bleak gorges and deadly chasms. Slowly, very slowly, this maw reached up to catch the ship as Casper lowered it gently on its under jets. We came to rest at last in the depths of a valley, smeared with the mounds of frozen, congealed air. Down here all was dark, Jove himself hidden by the mountain ranges, the only illumination coming from the icy stars.

Silent, I lay watching, wondering what was coming next. Valcine Drew and Casper seemed to be waiting for something; and after a while I saw that Casper was steadily depressing a button on the switchboard. Outside, in response, was the winking of a powerful searchlight. A signal of sorts.

Then I beheld the answer to it. Lights were coming bobbing along the valley, for all the world like miners with headlamps heading for the pit. Nearer they came, each bearing on his space suited shoulders a heavy packing case of some kind. My mind flashed instantly to illegal critanium, then I realized this could not be since it is radioactive and demands immensely heavy triple-lead containers, far heavier than a man can lift even on Ganymede's light-gravity surface.

"Open the airlocks," Valcine Drew said suddenly.

The valves opened one by one so no vital air escaped the control room. The first man entered, dumped his case down, then unloosed his space suit. He was not familiar to me, but from his hard bitten face and tattered uniform I placed him instantly as an ex-pilot of the spaceways, obviously fired for some misdemeanor or other. He stood looking at the girl sullenly.

"There's a dozen of 'em this time," he announced. "It's worth ten thousand dollars to you."

"You'll get five thousand and no more," she retorted, gazing at him. "Fetch them in—the rest of them."

The man hesitated, burst out suddenly, "Look here, Angel, what in hell do you think me and my buddies are? Why do you think we rot out our bones in this dismal hell? Just for you to cut our prices in half? Like hell! We've been stuck here for a year now, hunting up Ganymedians."

"And getting paid for it," the girl interrupted him coldly. "If anything you're overpaid, the whole lot of you. What more do you want?" she proceeded angrily. "I saw to it you had a comfortable base camp, food for two years, ample air—everything you need. All you have to do is hunt and collect money. In a few more trips you'll be worth a fortune. You'll stick it and like it! Don't forget you can't please yourselves, either. One word from me and the whole twelve of you are finished. There's a nice cosy lethal chamber waiting for all of you back on Earth. This is the only place in God's universe where you're safe, and you know it!"

The man was silent, biting his lip.

"Bring the rest in," she added briefly.

He turned and signaled into the airlock pressure room hidden from my view. One by one the spacesuited men came in, each carrying a crate. The whole dozen were finally dumped. Then Valcine Drew went to the nearest one and snapped open the side. In the interior was something I had hardly expected to see—a small humanlike creature with a big head and slender green body. The eyes were like those of a cat; the face ridiculously small and screwed up into an expression of obvious fright.

"Queer looking devils these Ganymedians," Casper grunted, standing looking at the creature. "Queer or otherwise we've plenty of use for 'em, eh? Come on you—out!" and he kicked out his heavy boot, sent the little creature sprawling out of the confinement of the crate onto the floor.

"Always remind me of animated lozenges," he grinned. "Kick your foot right through 'em if you wanted to."

He raised his foot to kick again, purely for his own brutal amusement—but the girl stopped him.

"Give them their money," she snapped; and turning to them, "You can have the crates back when we're through. Make it in six hours."

Casper went over to the cashbox and handed over the money, bundled the men roughly from the control room and slammed the airlocks after them. Through the window he watched their lamps go bobbing away into the distance.

To me all this had a definite interest. I wondered what the devil the idea was of Ganymede; even more the purpose of the poor inhabitants of this inhospitable little moon. Frail, brittle looking beings, obviously attuned to temperatures far below zero and an air too thin to ever support an Earthly form of life.

Even now the one Casper had kicked onto the floor was starting to gasp painfully in the pressures of the control room. Noticing it the girl promptly lifted him in her arms and dumped him in an upright glass case in a corner of the room. She clamped down a lid, contemplated his frightened little face for a moment, then shifted a control on the switchboard.

I saw tubes inside the case start glowing with energy. Two particular prongs turned violet and projected almost, but not quite, to the top of the creature's shiny head. What sort of black magic was she up to now I wondered.

"Listen to me," she said steadily, holding a microphone to her mouth. "I'm giving you instructions. Since you possess no ears my words will reach you through bone vibrations—telepathically, since that is your way of communicating. Nod your head if you understand what I'm saying."

The head nodded vigorously.

"Good," the girl said. "Here are your instructions: In a moment or two you will be put inside a small, globular safety ship. It will be guided by radio from this vessel. You will be sent to Jupiter, to a chosen spot, and once you land you will operate three switches connected to magnetic anchors on the ship's exterior. I should say levers, not switches, since they are too heavy to be moved by radio and need somebody like you. They will be marked A, B and C so you cannot mistake them. On landing pull them in that order. Is that clear?"

Again came the urgent nodding.

"When that is done, which will take no more than a few minutes, radio power here will withdraw your ship back. That will end your particular task and you will be released."

There the girl finished her communication. To me, bits of the puzzle were beginning to fit into place. It was the cold inhumanity of the idea that made me shudder. For Jupiter, biggest of all the worlds, has a gravity field of such overwhelming force that only the smallest of ships and toughest of men had ever defeated that upward drag from the planet. Going down was bad enough: coming up was sheer hell and had accounted for more pilots and engineers than I cared to remember.

Here, to save herself or her unscrupulous first mate from disaster, the girl was using slave labor. Nothing else. It was cunning—vicious. I began to realize at last how she had collected such huge amounts of critanium. I began to realize too why she had such a reputation for cruelty, and above all why nobody below was permitted to observe what was going on.

At a nod from the girl Casper went over to a valve and unscrewed it. Beyond I could see a small, but quite roomy, globe spaceship of the safety-type—not unlike a bathysphere. Into this the girl lifted the Ganymedian and then shut the airlock on him. Casper closed the valve again and pulled a lever.

"Your father would have given plenty for a system as good as this, Valcine," he muttered. "Pity he was so sentimental: it killed lots of his chances, and I could never talk sense into him. You and me have done a lot together, eh?"

"Shut up, I'm busy," she answered tensely.

I could not see immediately what happened but I guessed that explosive forces had driven the globe out through a tube into space. Valcine Drew waited a moment then turned to the radio instruments, watching a visiplat intently as the globe came into view. Carefully she began to operate the remote-control apparatus, Casper watching intently over her shoulder.

Her silence irritated me for I had felt I was on the verge of learning something worthwhile. I looked at the visiplat keenly. There, twirling down toward Jupiter, a mere black speck against his swirling cloud belts, was the solitary globe. At last it vanished in the cloud-banks, but the X-ray television never once lost track of it.

Eventually I saw it land on an unthinkable desolate plateau beneath a sky of twilit dark. The landscape, so far as I could see, was studded with gray lumps rather like dirty snow. Some of them moved visibly as the globe alighted amidst them, began to draw toward it under the pull of the magnetic anchors.

"It's a masterpiece," Casper breathed. "A virgin field of critanium. We got it by accident. Rather queer to think of those suckers from Earth digging for the stuff twice a year and we know the exact spot where it lies around loose. I tell you, Valcine, you and me have got about the best brains in the System."

She didn't answer. Her whole attention was on the controls. Finally she snapped a switch and sparks flared from the globe. It began to rise again, a whole mass of gray lumps clinging to it like barnacles to a ship. Gradually it began to rise back toward Ganymede, became larger on the screen.

Casper moved over to the outlook port and began to give directions as he watched the sky. Then when he bundled on a spacesuit and went outside I guessed the globe had arrived back again. The girl operated switches on the control board and there came a rumbling thud from the firing tube. Evidently the globe had been drawn back into place by magnetism ready for the next trip.

Then there were other sounds from a remoter part of the ship. Valcine Drew waited impatiently; until at length Casper returned holding the Ganymedian by one arm. He tossed down the limply dangling body as though it were a rag doll and then commenced to take off his space suit.

"He's dead," he shrugged, seeing the girl's glance. "Died, the same as they all do under the strain of leaving that hell-fired world. Well, it was worth it. He cleaned up about a million dollars' worth of mineral that time. I've put it in the safety locker."

The girl nodded composedly. "Ship okay for the next trip?"

"All set and ready."

I'd heard of a few cold blooded rackets in my time as special agent but this had them all licked. Suddenly I thought of my micro-camera. Carefully I eased it into focusing position as the girl fired her ray pistol at the dead Ganymedian. I caught her in the very act of destroying him while Casper looked on. And I did something else too. I slipped in trying to get a better vantage point for a second photograph.

Instantly two pairs of eyes stared up at the ventilator. I put my camera away promptly, waited. Just for a moment I saw real fear leap into Valcine Drew's lovely face, then it froze again into bleak hate. A gun flashed in her hand. Almost as quickly Casper yanked one out too. He reached up with a long rod and slammed up the hatchway, stared into my face.

“You!” A start shook him. “What in hell do you think you’re doing there? Come down, damn you!” he roared.

Slowly I obeyed, dropped to the floor. The girl got up grimly from the control board, her green eyes blazing at me with unholy fury.

“How did you get up there?” Her voice was low, deadly.

“I climbed. I engineered trouble below, then while you and Casper here quelled it I did a bit of muscling up. Simple, eh?”

“Don’t try and be funny with me!” she spat back. “I’ve had my suspicions of you from the very first. In the confusion down in the hold I never noticed your absence.”

“I counted on that,” I murmured.

“You’re no ordinary rocket hand,” she went on slowly. “Just who are you?”

“Just an adventurer,” I smiled, and for that smile I was rewarded with a stinging slap in the face from the palm of her free left hand. I kept my grin as it was and that seemed to infuriate her even more.

“You’ve seen everything!” she panted. “You know—”

“I know you are slave trading through the aid of a bunch of wanted murderers,” I nodded. “I know too you are deliberately killing Ganymedians to gain critanium mineral and save your own skin and Casper’s here. I know you’re building up a fortune through methods pretty similar to those adopted by a one time Simon Legree. But one day, Valcine Drew, the law is going to catch up with you.”

“Only if you talk,” she said coldly. “I can stop that! If I choose I could have your tongue torn out so you couldn’t speak; your hands amputated so you couldn’t write. I did that once to a man who thought he could cross me.”

“Perhaps that was where you got the name of the ‘Granite Angel’?” I asked quietly.

Her only immediate response was a look of such icy fury that I knew she was quite capable of carrying out her threat. Then all of a sudden she turned aside and drummed impatiently on the control bench.

“All right,” she said slowly, thinking; “since you are so anxious to poke your nose into my affairs you might as well go the whole hog. You saw what happened to him?” She gestured in contempt to the Ganymedian.

“Well?” I asked.

“You can die being of service to me: that’s fitting. You’ll get into that safety globe and go to Jove, operate the three levers and bring back the next load of critanium.”

“What makes you think I will? You’re not dealing with a Ganymedian now, Angel. I’m an Earthman.”

“If you don’t,” she stated, coming back to me, “I’ll not withdraw the globe from Jupiter until you’ve died out there, alone, unable to move. I’ll throw a negative power over the driving controls which will lock them. I’ll destroy you. See?”

“Are you doing this because you’re afraid to kill me outright with that pop-gun of yours?” I asked dryly.

Her eyes flamed again. “I’m not afraid of anything! But I happen to have a crew to bring back to Earth. One short would raise an inquiry, especially if that one was found to have flame gun wounds as the cause of death. If, however, you died from pressure and spacestrain—not uncommon in space and unavoidable when leaving Jupiter—I’d have a legitimate reason for your demise. I like to play safe with the law.”

I daresay I could have played my cards well enough to make her change her view, only I didn't. As a matter of fact another idea had formed in my mind, and it was well worth putting to the test. I noticed she looked surprised when I gave a slow nod.

"You win, Angel," I said quietly. "Though I'd remind you I'm none too sure Jupiter *will* kill me. I'm no brittle man of Ganymede, remember, I'm two hundred and twenty pounds of Earthman."

"If Jupiter doesn't oblige, I will—and take the consequences," she retorted. "Now get into that safety-globe."

Shrugging, I moved to the valve and unscrewed it, clambered into the globe beyond and sank into the cushioned seat at the controls.

III

Suddenly the valve slammed shut again. Radio control also closed the airlock. I sat back and waited. All of a sudden I was seized with the most ghastly sinking sensation as the globe went hurtling outwards from the tube, flinging me tight back in my seat. Staring through the port I saw I was spiraling high over the rocky surface of Ganymede.

The view changed as I seemed to turn a somersault and found Jupiter suddenly below me with his heaping cloudbanks. The radio remote control was in full sway now, guiding the globe unerringly on the same course as before. In these few minutes of trip I had the chance to study the radio equipment, satisfied myself that a few brief conversions could make it suitable for ordinary short-wave transmission. That was what I wanted, later.

Again I turned my attention to the outlook port. In all directions, once I struck the cloud belts, there was just fog and nothing more—fog blown into a million wraiths and shapes by the eternal winds which roar over Jove's surface; ammonia winds, blasted by hurricanes of between four and five hundred miles an hour in velocity.

Certainly there is no planet in the System more grim than Jupiter, a planet whereon no big space machine had ever dared to land for fear it might never again depart from the giant's toils, or else because of the ever present hazard of meeting destruction in the furious hurricanes. Only a small globe such as the one I was in stood any real chance by very reason of its shape.

The temperature gauge showed me what I already knew—that the external temperature was minus two hundred Fahrenheit; the air-sampler confirmed the presence of ammonia, methane, and other deadly gases in profusion.

Swiftly, still under radio control, the globe dropped until the clouds suddenly cleared and I burst on an inimical landscape. I was directly over the plateau I had seen in the X-ray telescreen—that plateau of gleaming, glassy black, frozen solid and marked here and there by the grayish lumps of the precious mineral deposits.

The lower I dropped the more I disliked the view. I cannot conceive of anything more desolate. Buffeted and battered by the atmospheric twists I went lower and lower, staring at the jagged peaks of the valley. They reared up like black towers, their basic darkness not entirely concealed by the sheen of eternal ice covering them. Half way up their Cyclopean heights the mists were swirling, blotting them out. I had only my imagination to tell me what sort of a hell must exist at the top of those monsters.

Once I landed I did more things than pull the levers to attract the critanium. I made a few tests of Jove's surface for the first time in my life. Atmosphere pressure and quality I already knew: the other thing I discovered was the vast pull of the gravity, so enormous I could scarcely move my jaws without experiencing pain. My hands suddenly weighed tons. I thanked God I was seated for it enabled my heart to keep a fairly steady though labored action. Certainly there was a gravity nullifier on the control board which would have put things right, only like every other switch it was locked by radio power.

Despite the physical distractions I was interested in the exterior. The ground was flint-hard, scored into innumerable rifts and furrows by the swirling hurricanes, blowing in their track monstrous surges of pebbled dust which had gouged out tracks in the ice-caked rocks. Without doubt Jupiter is no place for a vacation.

Then all of a sudden the radio controls operated again and I found myself being borne upwards with the globe once more. Hell gripped me. I gasped and choked under the strain of forcing against that titanic gravity. I realized in those moments why the weak, fragile Ganymedians had been destroyed once their job was done. Strong though I am I was doing everything in my power to protect my life. I conserved my breathing, made no movements, was gratefully content to even retain consciousness at all.

Nor did the strain weaken much for the pull of Jupiter is as strong when near Ganymede as it is when close to the surface. The only relief was when the accelerating motion ceased and I was gripped by Ganymede's own field. Swiftly the globe spiraled back to the satellite's desolate surface, landed finally only a few yards from the *Silver Eagle*.

Magnets got to work and pulled it back into the tube. I don't think I saw two faces ever look so surprised as Casper and the girl's as I stepped forth unharmed through the valve into the control room.

Valcine Drew studied me for a moment, then she said briefly to Casper, "Go and see the minerals are fixed."

She waited until he was gone in his space suit then advanced toward me slowly, playing with her gun.

"So the big fellow *is* tough," she murmured.

"Can't say I didn't warn you." I shrugged.

"Pity it failed," she said bitterly. "I'll have to use the other way after all."

"Before you do," I interrupted her, as she leveled her gun, "there is something you ought to know. You could never have known it if you hadn't sent me to Jupiter as you did. You see, you're just wasting your time collecting critanium."

"Oh, I am! I'm quite satisfied," she answered curtly.

"But you wouldn't be if you'd seen what I've seen," I insisted. "Down in that Jovian valley are whole seams of tranite-x! You can't see it in that teleplate of yours because it's below surface, but it's there. I've seen it. I don't suppose I have to add that tranite-x is worth three times as much as the stuff you keep collecting?"

Her gun lowered as she stared at me. Then Casper came back and took off his helmet. She turned to him quickly.

"You ever hear of tranite-x?"

"That's all I have done—hear of it," he grunted. "Frozen mineral deposit used for medical services. What about it?"

"There are whole seams of it waiting to be frisked up on Jove," I answered him. "Just below the surface ice. And that," I finished, looking back at the girl, "means real money."

They were silent for a moment, then Casper looked at me in ugly suspicion.

"What's the idea, feller? You trying to buy your liberty or something?"

I eyed him steadily. "I'm suggesting we forget our differences and get the stuff while we can. Two crates of that will make all your critanium sales look like pocket money. If you're willing, Angel, I'll take you with me and show you the exact spot. We can soon decide on the disposal method."

She hesitated for a long moment.

"Afraid?" I asked cynically; and that made her flush.

"Of course I'm not afraid! I'm just thinking that it might be dangerous to lower the *Eagle* to Jove. We might never get away again."

“We wouldn’t,” I confirmed grimly. “Our only chance is to use the globe. There’s room enough for the pair of us, anyway.”

“All right,” she said slowly. “We can’t afford to pass up a chance of getting tranite-x. I’ll get some samples first and bring them back for examination. If it’s the real thing we’ll have the Ganymedians mine all they can.”

“Better put some instruments in the ship—electric cutters and so forth,” I advised. “That ice is going to take a lot of smashing open.”

She nodded and motioned Casper. Still eyeing me with some doubt he put the necessary tackle into the globe, then stood aside. I clambered through the airlock into the spare seat next the control board, and the girl followed me a moment later. Casper slammed the airlock with a viciousness that clearly expressed his suspicions were deep.

I smiled grimly to myself and eyed the girl as she detached the radio remote control equipment and shifted the power levers. Casper released the power which gave us the initial send off from the tube; immediately the girl had the globe under control and we were dropping toward the storm-swept surface of Jupiter.

I sat in dead silence, but I was doing plenty of thinking. Finally my gaze dropped to the flamgun in the holster at her waist. Abruptly, before she had the least chance to grasp my intention, I’d whipped the gun free and leveled it straight at her.

She glared at me tigerishly with those green eyes of hers, but she didn’t take her hands off the controls. She dared not.

“What’s the idea?” she demanded savagely.

“Just to make sure I have the initiative,” I smiled. “Keep on driving and you’ll be okay. Two people can play with a gun, Angel, and I’m not exactly an amateur either. Keep your hands on those switches!” I snapped, as for a moment she released them.

Her face set she looked through the port upon the swirling scum of Jove below. I don’t think I ever saw such bleak fury on a woman’s face before. It was more than anger at being tricked; it was a sheer baleful malice out of all proportion with the situation. And suddenly it must have mastered her, for her hands left the controls again.

Violently she swung in her seat and dived for my face. Just in time I jerked my head back but even at that her long, sharp nails dug savagely into my cheek. I felt the trickle of warm blood.

“You think you can do this to me?” Her voice was a positive screech as she leapt up and battered away at my head with her fists. “You clumsy great fool! You can’t—”

“The switches!” I reminded her hoarsely. “We’re falling!”

She was too blind with fury to notice it so I leaned across to them. Seizing her chance she picked up a spanner and brought it down with stinging force across my wrists. My hands went numb. Controlling the globe was hopeless. Helplessly I fell back in my seat, the gun dropping from my unfeeling hand. Then it was leveled at me. I stared into the girl’s cruel face as she tossed the tumbled hair out of her eyes.

“Get out of that chair, you no account space tramp!”

I moved slowly.

“Quickly!” she yelled, suddenly directing a startled glance through the window. “We’re falling!”

She dived to hurry me out of the chair and I saw her hand slide up to the gun button. In self preservation I did the only thing possible—delivered a right uppercut which hit her

straight under the jaw. She collapsed her length on the metal floor.

Right then I'd no time to notice her. Frantically I worked on the controls, but I was unfamiliar with them. In any case we had dropped into the full tug of Jupiter's field and were whizzing downwards with diabolical speed through dense cloudbanks.

I stared out into the pall in horror.

Then we landed. The shock was terrific. I was pitched right out of the chair and landed against the padded wall. From outside came the crash of rending ice; then the globe started to roll over and over like a fast traveling snowball, came to halt finally amidst the rasp and crackle of crumbling ice shards. Somehow, dazed and bumped though I was, I managed to retain my senses.

Carefully I moved again, but the iron weights of Jupiter had sway once more. With superhuman effort I crawled to the port and stared out. All was unnaturally dark, for Jupiter has a surface twilight glow. I fingered the switches until I found the one to operate the external searchlight.

The blaze showed me we were not on the surface of the planet at all but in some kind of glassy cavern, its walls made up of sheer, black ice. For a long time I puzzled over the situation, then heard Valcine Drew moan slightly. Immediately I returned to her and with considerable difficulty hauled her into a chair. Her weight was stupendous.

Slowly she came back to consciousness, fingering her jaw. Then as remembrance flashed back into her brain her green eyes blazed malevolently and she reached out for the gun on the floor. I was a shade quicker however and slipped it in my trousers' belt.

"You won't need it," I told her briefly. "In fact neither of us will. Unless I miss my guess we're going to be lucky if we either of us get out of this alive."

That got her on her feet, with a strain that brought anguish into her lovely face. She stumbled to the control board and closed a switch. Immediately the weights fell from us as Earthnorm was established in the floor. Then she went over to the port and stared outside with me. Finally her hate-filled gaze turned to me.

"This is your doing, you clumsy idiot! We must have crashed through the surface ice into an underground hole or something."

She turned to the radio and switched it on. Then as I leaned over and prevented her seizing the microphone she stared at me fixedly.

"If you're going to send for help from Casper, or try and get him to remote control the ship out of this mess, you've another think coming, Angel!"

"Don't be an idiot! We can't just wait here and die!"

"If there's any way out we'll find it for ourselves," I said grimly. "Get away from that instrument. Go on!" I roared, as she hesitated.

I think it was her surprise at my action more than anything else that made her obey. Roughly I elbowed her aside and switched on the instruments for myself. My earlier plan to convert the radio-apparatus was unnecessary now since she'd done it for me.

"Calling Space Patrol," I intoned into the microphone, and watched the girl out of the corner of my eye. "Calling Space Patrol. . ."

Her expression changed, and the moment it did so she dived for me furiously, made to grab the microphone and smash it. I struck her over the wrist with it. She fell back, holding her hand painfully.

"I owed you that one," I said dryly, tugging out the gun and leveling it at her. "Take it easy—Hallo there! Space Patrol? Special agent Stanley speaking. Pick up a pirate space machine

by the name of *Silver Eagle* and hold the crew and first mate Casper for full inquiry. The charge is illegal ore trading. The ship is located on Ganymede, north position. You will hold it there until further orders from me.”

Suddenly, my attention diverted from her for a moment, Valcine Drew acted. She lifted a heavy stool and whirled it with devastating force. It crashed into the microphone and shattered it, drove a dent through the control panel. Instantly of course, the apparatus went dead.

“A space cop, eh?” she shouted hoarsely. “I might have known it! Well, you might get Casper but you’ll not get me! A space cop!” she went on savagely. “You’re worse than we are! You were willing to do a deal in tranite-x, and now it’s failed you are trying to get me, Casper, and my critanium mineral. You cheap, dirty double crosser!”

“Finished?” I asked impassively.

“Not yet! You’re nothing but a—”

“There is no tranite-x,” I stated quietly; then as her green eyes blazed in furious amazement I went on, “That was a simple gag to get you away from the *Eagle*. I wasn’t fool enough to think I could capture you and Casper single handed when you had the radio and all the advantages. The only way was to divide your forces, so to speak. Casper will be nabbed by the S.P., just as I’d planned, but my original intention to fly you in this globe to the S.P. headquarters in the Asteroid Belt will have to be altered. So far as you are concerned the plan’s slipped up. But believe me, Angel, your racket’s busted wide open from now on. Especially so with the evidence I’ve got with a micro-camera, providing I ever get away to use it. Even without it, though, your mining days are over.”

She folded her arms and smiled cynically. “And what does the copper do now?”

“Nothing,” I shrugged. “Thanks to what you’ve done to the radio we’re stuck. I can’t tell the Space Patrol to come for us, as I’d intended a moment ago. Anyway I doubt if their big machine could risk the gravity and hurricanes. So our only course is to find the way out for ourselves.”

“And if we do, you hand me over? Count me out!”

I got up, eyed her grimly. “Listen, Angel, I’m not asking for death even if you are. There’s got to be some way out, and I’m going to find it.”

“All right; I’m not stopping you. But if we get out it means death to me, so why should I help?”

“Only because death *here* means slow suffocation,” I said quietly. “But maybe you prefer it that way?”

She was silent, dropping her gaze. Then as though suddenly thinking of something she fingered inside the pouches on the belt she wore and pulled out a phial—that same phial I had seen her use aboard the *Eagle*. She took the cork out of it, then stared at its emptiness dumbly. A curious expression was on her face as she put the phial back.

“Perhaps you’re right,” she said abruptly. “I’ve got to get away from here— I’ve *got* to. If I don’t, it means far more than death for me.”

IV

I puzzled over her remark for a moment.

She seemed on the verge of explaining herself; then suddenly changed her mind.

“We’ll look around outside,” she said, and hauled two space suits to view. We were inside them in a few seconds, then armed with cutters and flashlamps we scrambled through the airlock.

We were in an ice cavern all right, virtually buried. Looking around, we could see clearly what had happened. The ship had smashed through a mass of surface ice into a depression in the ground, bringing tons of ice blocks down on top of it. Inside here, where the ship was buried, was the pocket in the ice with heaven knew how much thickness of ice above us. We were inside a natural bubble with unguessably thick walls. To strike upward was far too dangerous: we might precipitate an avalanche.

I linked up our helmet phones and said, “We might stand a chance at the end of the pocket there,” and I nodded to where the hollow came to an end. “If that is where the bubble ends we can work our way upwards at an angle; that should prevent any chance of a collapse.”

She nodded inside her helmet and, nailed down by the huge gravity and our studded boots skidding on the ice, we struggled forward, finally reached the solid, glittering wall which barred our one possible avenue to escape.

We went to work with our vibrator gauges first, devices which told us by etheric recoil waves exactly how thick was the barrier in front of us. It was fifteen feet, as compared to forty and fifty feet in other directions.

“Well?” the girl asked finally, looking at me.

“We drive through,” I said. “Let’s get started.”

I trailed the extension cables of our cutters back to the ship and connected them to the power plant, then each of us with a cutter apiece we set to work on the wall, standing our ground amidst the bombardment of flying ice fragments and solidified mineral deposits. It was dangerous work for the stuff was as sharp as glass. One direct impact on our space suits might very easily have made a fatal tear. However, fortune was with us.

But it was slow, grueling work in that crushing gravity. And at the end of an hour our spacesuit air tanks were running low: we had consumed a surprising amount of oxygen with our exertions and strain, and all we had to show for it was a penetration of two feet and a width of perhaps ten, just enough for the globe to pass through.

Wearied, we went back to the ship and relaxed gratefully in the Earth-norm gravity. Once I’d locked the door, I switched on the air supply to the full for a while, but a quick glance at the gauge showed me we had to husband every scrap of our supply.

“Any rations aboard?” I asked Valcine anxiously.

She nodded her blonde head tiredly toward a cupboard. In it I found a plentiful supply of canned concentrates. Far more food indeed than we could ever use with our air supply so low. In silence I put out a meal.

“Pull up,” I said briefly, and Valcine drew a chair over and sat down, to moodily regard the meal. I ate in silence for a long time before I noticed she wasn’t touching anything. All she did was take a drink then relapse into moody quiet again.

As on that other occasion on the *Eagle* she had at the moment lost her look of frozen viciousness and instead looked distressed, human. I was trying to figure it out to myself when she glanced at me sharply as though divining my thoughts.

“How long do you think it’ll take us to get free?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Five more shifts, I guess—if we’re lucky. It depends if the air supply will hold out that long.”

At that she unbuckled the pouched belt from about her waist and began a meticulous search of its various pockets. I watched in puzzled interest. She tipped out a variety of feminine trifles onto the table—then at last with almost a yelp of delight she pounced upon a small round tablet and flaked away the dust which was adhering to it.

Her whole manner had changed miraculously. Gone utterly was her tiredness. Quickly she hurried to the water faucet and filled up a glass, but before she could drop the tablet into the water I had grabbed it from her outstretched palm. I had remembered that other tablet back on the ship.

“What is this stuff?” I asked her curtly.

“Give it to me, please!” Her voice wasn’t cold and commanding: no, it was desperately entreating. She put the glass down and stared at me urgently.

“Why?” I insisted. “What does a girl like you in the prime of health need with tablets anyway?”

“Prime of health!” She laughed hollowly. “If you only knew how funny that is!”

I stared at her. “But I don’t understand.”

“If you must know, I have space fever,” she interrupted. “I’ve had it for a year now. You know what it does unless tablets of calrax are taken regularly every five hours. It seeps into your bones, slowly destroys the nerves, brings horrible agonizing death. Only by these tablets can I keep myself in anything like normal health. Give it to me! All this is Casper’s fault. I came off on this trip without getting a fresh supply from him. I’m lucky to find this odd one.”

I looked at her fixedly, still holding the tablet. I have seen space fever in all its phases, and I know it produces certain unmistakable signs even when the sufferer uses calrax to antidote it. For instance, it leaves the whites of the eyes muddy and yellow; it contracts the pupils; it makes the hands knotted as though with acute arthritis. Yet Valcine Drew had none of these symptoms.

“Who told you you have space fever?” I demanded.

“Casper of course. I got it on one of our trips and he made up these tablets for me—has done ever since.... Oh please give me that tablet!” she nearly screamed. “I feel ill! I’ve got to have it!”

“In a moment,” I said, and hurrying over to the microscope I put the tablet on the slide, studied it carefully. She did not interfere but watched with itching impatience. I saw plenty through the lenses which startled me.

“Valcine,” I said slowly, looking up, “there’s a lot about you that I’m only just beginning to understand. For instance, your harshness, your disregard of all law, your stubborn courage. To speak plainly, you’ve poisoned yourself with these tablets until you couldn’t help but be that way! Or rather Casper has seen to it that you have poisoned yourself!”

“What do you mean.” She stared at me bewilderedly.

“I mean that this pill is not calrax! I know the stuff backwards. It’s olvis-root powder made into a pill and bound with some sort of glucose. Do I have to tell you what even a few grains

of olvis-root will do?"

The color drained still more from her pale face. From the utter horror in her eyes I could see she knew as well as I that olvis-root is deadly poison, obtainable from Venus' toxic lands.

"It—it deadens the nerves, alters the impulses, destroys fear, operates on every gland secretion," she breathed, half to herself. "Yes, yes, I know what it does. God, now I begin to see! What I contracted was nothing more than a touch of space radiation perhaps; it's common enough. That devil Casper started to feed me olvis-root poison tablets in quantity enough to change my entire nature as long as the effect lasted. Yes—that's it! Now I know the reason why he never missed telling me the times for my pills. I thought it was concern for my welfare — The beast! The filthy, dirty beast!"

She sat down heavily, staring at me. Then she went on,

"Before I had space fever, or whatever it was, I used to work with my father in legitimate ore mining. Casper wanted us to do it illegally and make a fortune. I think, though I can't prove it, that he killed dad in order to put his devilish plans into effect. When dad died, I was left alone in space with Casper. He tried to force me to agree to piracy, and I wouldn't. It was against all my natural principles.

"Then I was taken ill, and I see now that it was since then that I have been a changed woman. Cruelty suddenly appealed to me; sadism was as natural as breathing. I was proud of my name of 'The Granite Angel.' So Casper deliberately destroyed my real nature to make me a willing ally—to make me the scapegoat for everything when justice caught up."

Suddenly she dropped her flaxen head to her restless hands. Just as quickly she got up and started pacing agitatedly.

"Don't you see what he's done to me? I cannot live now without the drug! Every time I lost my sense of courage and harshness he gave me a tablet, and in this one tablet here is my one chance of preserving my life until I can get more. Without them the reaction is deadly. Insufferable weariness; a slow decline into death. Anybody knows that olvis-root victims die swiftly if the supply is stopped."

She stopped, staring at me. I wish I could fully describe the wild loveliness of her now she was temporarily herself. I freely admit I wanted nothing more than to take her in my arms and swear the most impossible resolutions in order to save her. But being a trained realist I tried instead to find a way round the problem.

"Whatever happens," I said quietly, "you are not going back to your old role. I'd sooner see you dead than that. If I read your true character aright you'd sooner be dead than. . . ."

She stood facing me, hands clenched at her sides. Abruptly I decided the issue by dropping the pill on the floor and grinding it under my heel. She watched my action dumbly. Quietly I went to the medicine chest and shook restorative powder into the water she'd drawn.

She drank it off, then sat down again wearily.

"Listen, Valcine," I said seriously, taking her limp hand, "if we once get out of this jam there are hospitals on Earth fully equipped to deal with your problem. You can be cured, and though in honor bound I shall be forced to hand you over to the law, I have no doubt of the verdict. A victim of olvis-root poisoning isn't responsible to anybody or anything. It is Casper—and he alone—who'll take the rap. Understand?"

"I'm answerable to my conscience," she said bitterly. "The unspeakable things I have done. Nothing can eradicate the penalty due me for that." She stopped and winced with transient pain, then said, "I—I must rest awhile."

With that she coiled herself up on the single bunk by the wall and was soon asleep. Finally, after a long study of her beautiful features in repose I cursed and damned Casper until I could curse no more. Then I lowered the air pressure and lay down on the floor to doze.

I awakened again to find Valcine shaking me.

“We must get busy again,” she said urgently. “The air is getting so much weaker!”

I nodded and scrambled up, studied her quickly. She looked wan, her eyes dead with weariness even though she had slept. We had a small meal then got into our spacesuits once more and recharged the air cylinders. This revived us a little and we set out on our task again. We kept at it until fatigue got us down again, but our cutters had done good work. I almost dared to hope that we could cut things short by a sudden forward impetus which might smash the remaining barrier and drive us right out into space.

I told this to Valcine when we got back into the ship. She turned from studying the air gauge.

“We shall have to do so,” she said seriously. “Our air will only last that long anyway. Don’t forget that in getting away from Jupiter we shall draw enormously on the air because of the strain on our lungs with the acceleration. We’ve barely enough to get away with.”

I went to her side and looked at the ominous needle. Barely enough was right.

“Of course,” I said, thinking, “there is another way. By this time the space patrol will have picked up Casper. Suppose I were to stay behind in the cavern outside here, protected by a spacesuit? I’d have the air cylinder. You could go ahead and tell the S.P. Then recharge the globe with air and come back for me. You’d have ample air to make that journey from here alone.”

“Walk right into the lion’s jaws, eh?” she asked somberly.

“Only as a means to your final escape from your beastly other self. Only as a means to absolute cure.”

She smiled faintly. “Cure? I wonder. I feel burned out. Dead. I doubt if I’d ever live long enough to reach a hospital anyway. Besides, how do you know I’d ever come back for you?”

“I just . . . know,” I said.

Her eyes looked into mine, reflecting something of what I was thinking. But at last she shook her head slowly.

“No—I can’t go to the S.P. and tell them to return here. I can’t even face them. I’ve my conscience to reckon with. There is a better way. *You* go alone and *I’ll* stay behind in a spacesuit. You can arrange the details for the S.P. to come and take me.”

“I won’t do it,” I said firmly.

“If you love me, Stanley—you will.”

It was the first time she had ever used what she thought was my Christian name and it made me stare at her for the moment. Then almost before I had realized it I was covering her face with kisses and telling her my real name was Curtis Stanley.

“And Val, I *do* love you,” I whispered.

“Then, Curt, do as I say, please! Every minute is precious. It’s the only way I can feel easy in my mind. For you to explain things away a bit about me first to the S.P. If I know you’re coming back I’ll last out, until we get to a hospital.”

Then she had turned quickly and was clambering into her space suit. Before she put on the helmet she gave a long, lingering gaze with wistful eyes. Then her helmet snapped in place and she climbed out through the airlock.

I watched through the port until she was at a safe distance, then clamping the airlock I moved to the control board. Carefully, I let in the power switches. The globe started vibrating on the ice. Ahead of me was the brief tunnel with its rearing wall, into which I might easily smash to destruction. And behind was—

It was Valcine! She was running back toward the globe just as it started to move down the slope. What the devil was she doing? The flaring of the rocket exhaust might quite easily melt the ice columns and bring down tons of ice and rock upon her.

It was too late now to stop. The globe was hurtling for the barrier. I wasn't even looking at it. I could see Valcine had stopped now and was waving.

Then in a tumult of endless thunders the thing happened. Ice, rocks, mineral ores—the whole lot crumbled in behind the fast moving globe and blotted her out of sight in chaos. At the same moment I was hurled back in my chair as I smashed right through the ice wall and went soaring away against the merciless Jovian pull, battling with the tempest.

Up and up. I hardly realized what I was doing. As I plowed through ammonia fog with laboring heart I pieced together odd bits. I remembered Valcine's reference to her conscience. I remembered too that she had deliberately walked back into the danger area in the ice-hole—

Air enough for one—and she had wished it to be me!

Dully I stared in front of me. To the end of my days I shall remember a lone figure—an infinitely courageous figure—waving a last good-by before the obliterating thunder of an avalanche.

[The end of *Vampire Queen* by John Russell Fearn (as Thornton Ayre)]