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**MYSTERY FROM THE STARS** by **JOHN COLERIDGE**

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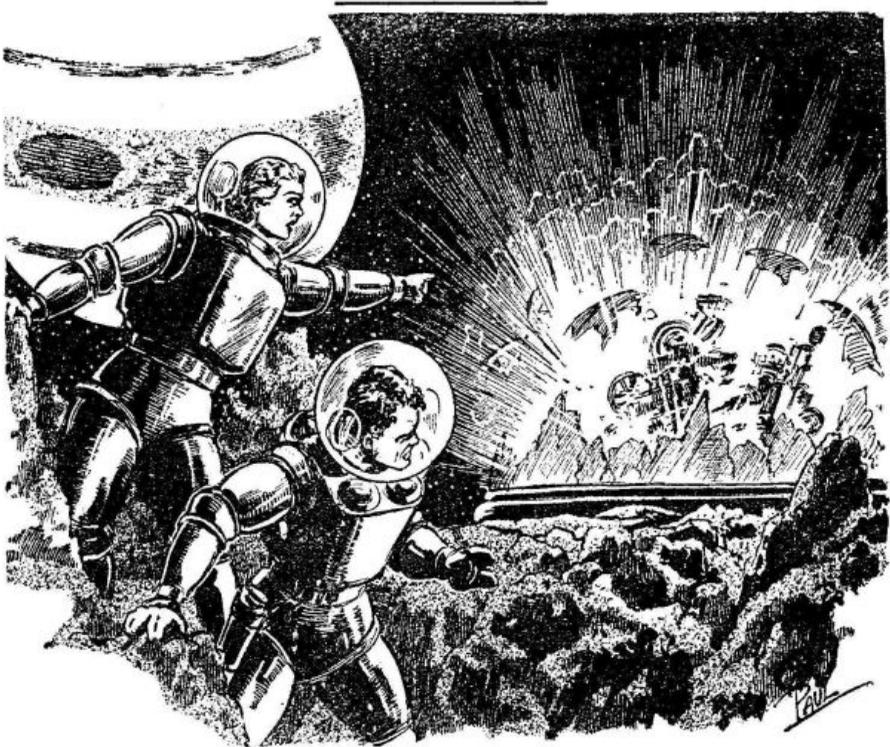
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Abruptly the distant dome of the station vanished in a blinding sheet of flame.

# FRIGID MOON

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Dennis Clive.

Illustration by Frank R. Paul.

First published *Future Fiction*, November 1939.

*Fighting their way through a blizzard of frozen carbon dioxide, Smithy and Eva struggle against impossible odds to reach the one point on little Ganymede where there is chance of rescue—a weird battle between nightmare creatures spells life or death for the two Earth people!*

Barry Smithson—“Smithy”—tossed restlessly on his light bed and finally sat up with a jerk, staring around him in the dull glow of the bedchamber safety lights. Stiffly he stuck out his arm and jabbed the switch that illumined the twenty cold light bulbs set diamond fashion in the glittering lanium ceiling.

He recognized the sound that had awakened him almost immediately—the release of the alarm bell by means of a greatly improved photo-electric device outside of this solitary Ganymedian refueling supply station.

For a moment, he sat trying to still his throbbing head. The lonely jitters had gotten into him again, plunging his vitality to the lowest ebb and turning his mind to black despondency. Lonely jitters was the American slang term for the predominant disease of Ganymede, solitarius melancholia, supposedly a nervous reaction from continuous months of solo work in a viciously cruel climate and light gravity.

Grunting painfully, Smithy slid off the bed at last and reeled rather than walked across the shining expanse of floor, passed through the giant machine room wherein the silently working pumps extracted the raw mineral from Ganymede’s depths for later pulverization and refinement into fuel for the giant liners on the Earth-Planet XII run, three worlds beyond Pluto. The Planetary Commission of 2316 had extended the known frontier of the Solar System enormously.

Stopping the alarm, Smithy lumbered across the great place, broad shoulders slouched, lank strings of black hair bobbing over his craggy face, furrowed with unbidden despair and melancholy. Tiredly, he ascended a rigid steel ladder and came up under the two-foot thick dome of viltex glass, looked at its arcing smoothness and tried to grin as he beheld the sight of blue vapor contracting and mushrooming on the exterior surface. So the Gasbrain had intercepted the cell-ray with his fantastic misty body and set the alarm going. . . .

“What’s on your mind, Rope Trick?”

Smithy called the being that because of its magical ability to form its gaseous body into any desired representation of thought. Rope Trick, a true Gasbrain of Ganymede, composed entirely of carbon dioxide and oxygen under slightly heavier pressure than the surrounding atmosphere, represented the frigid satellite’s highest form of life, far in advance of even Terrestrials, each one of his widely spaced molecules being an actual tiny brain working in conjunction with the neighboring molecules. He was easily able to catch and interpret the

thoughts of the lonely Earthman under his shelter dome, but Smithy's brain was incapable of receiving thoughts back again.

Accordingly, Rope Trick did the next best thing and formed his astounding body into a series of pictures to represent his communication. Smithy watched him wearily, eyes adroop, as the Gasbrain caught the thought behind his words and began to writhe in the unimaginable cold of the Ganymedian night—minus 200° F.—cold because mighty Jupiter, though so near at hand, reflected little or no heat from his 35,000 miles of surface. Ganymede was no steaming jungle, as the first explorers had anticipated; it was a cruel, ruthless little world infinitely colder than the terrestrial Antarctic.

The shafting beams from the cold light bulbs revealed Rope Trick as a billowing cloud of blue against the intense dark of the Ganymedian night. As he stood watching, Smithy's eyes took on a new light. With magical speed, the gas transformed itself into the unmistakable outlines of a raniac space-suit, the only substance safe to use in an atmosphere where the minutest fraction of a spark would blow to atoms anything containing a bit of cotton with its gathered charges of unexpended static.

"Space-suit?" Smithy cried, impacting his thoughts simultaneously. "What do you mean? Want me outside?"

Rope Trick changed from a space-suit into the outline of an Earthling, unmistakably that of a young woman with her eyes closed. . . . Smithy scowled with perplexity. Woman? Space-suit? What the hell—?

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The only women on Ganymede were those at the Settlement beyond the Mountains of Excelsior, the wives and daughters of the relay pilots who drove the huge space-liners on the savage tugging run past Jupiter's attraction field to the further planets. What in insanity was the Gasbrain driving at? No space-suited woman in her right senses would surely risk crossing the Excelsiors, especially with the Carbodox Blizzard season due at any time!

"Make it clearer!" Smithy bawled, his gray eyes brightening and his attack of jitters fading before this new interest. "What woman? Where? Use words, you feather-head! You know how!"

Receiving the thoughts, Rope Trick obeyed. He palpitated weirdly, then formed himself like a trick airplane exhaust advertisement. Smithy gazed in blank wonder at the misty message quivering on the dome.

"Earth woman twenty miles from Excelsiors. Senseless. Alone. If the zinrots see her, she's finished. Better come."

"Oke!" Smithy cried eagerly. "Thanks a lot, Ropy! I guess I don't know what I'd do without you to nose around outside."

Rope Trick telescoped into his normal hazy ball and left the glass. At top speed, Smithy clambered back down the ladder and raced across to the space-suit closet.

It was a matter of seconds to scramble into its roomy, automatically heated interior and spin the viltex helmet into place. Then slipping his jet pistol on his belt, he moved through into the valve-chambers giving egress to the surface.

In ten minutes, he had passed through four chambers of successively lower temperature, and so out into the barren rocky landscape of the satellite itself. Immediately, Rope Trick whipped like a sapphire catherine wheel from the higher air and glowed by his side, writhing slowly through the poisonous atmosphere as he clumped along. . . . Odd indeed the

understanding between these two—worlds apart in knowledge and formation, yet held together by the common unity of science.

Gaining the top of the little slope leading to the refueling station, Smithy paused for a moment. Ahead of him, stretching to the near horizon, was the empty plain, coal black under the terrible cold, marred only by pits and craters where the deadly zinrots, second highest form of Ganymedian life, had burrowed underground with their claw nails and scissor teeth.

Touching the eastern horizon loomed vast Jove, visibly turning slowly in the cloudless star- and moon-riddled sky. To the west stabbed the upper peaks of the Mountains of Excelsior, dominated by the Thunder Molar rearing to 3000 feet. Selby, the Earth explorer, had called it that because it had reminded him of the back tooth of mythical Jove, God of Thunder. . . .

These were familiar sights to Smithy as he started to plod on again, but he had the advantage of knowing that the Excelsiors were not really true mountains, but vast glaciers, flung to their great heights by Ganymede's slight gravity. Upon them rested the whole secret of the satellite's small colonization. By electrolyzing the water frozen into their masses and adding to it an element with scant nitrogen content, both Settlement and refueling station—by underground pipes of lanium metal—possessed breathable atmosphere. Jong, the Martian engineer, was responsible for the miracle.

As Smithy clumped onwards, he adjusted the neutral shields in his boots from Earth-normal to Gany-normal. Immediately, his speed increased. Rope Trick twisted constantly in front of him, directing the way.

Ever and again, Smithy sailed clean over the zin-pits, finally covering nearly three miles—then suddenly the Gasbrain veered off to one side. Smithy promptly followed him and quite abruptly came upon a prone figure in the jovelight.

The bright rays slanted through the viltex helmet onto the pale face of a girl, completely unconscious, apparently from exhaustion, since there were no traces of bodily injury.

In a moment, Smithy had her over his broad shoulder and, Rope Trick beside him, began the return trip—but he had hardly covered a mile before he caught sight of perhaps eight squatting, catlike things lined up ahead of him, their wicked faceted eyes glowing with unholy fires in the joveshine.

Smithy stopped and smiled inside his helmet glass.

“Zinrots, eh? Wondered how long they'd be. . . .”

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He tugged out his jet pistol, leveled it, and marched on again. The zinrots held their ground, standing in characteristic fashion with sharply clawed front paws widely straddled.

The ape-like faces filled with a demoniac ferocity and cunning, easily made them the most dangerous looking, hostile creatures on the satellite. Added to this was their keen intelligence, level with an Earthling's, but warped by a queer glandular secretion that stifled all traces of sentiment. The outcome was inhuman ferocity and implacable intellect.

With steady tread, Smithy still moved forward, eyes narrowed menacingly, right arm clamped round the bloated legs of the girl over his shoulder. Then he halted and fired deliberately as the leading zinrot suddenly charged— It vanished in a blinding flash, its basic atoms changed into energy.

That was sufficient for the others. With terrible claws distended in catlike fashion, they hurled themselves on the struggling Earthman. Two-inch steely talons scratched and raked on

the viltex helmet; teeth bit furiously and futilely at the metal mesh of his space-suit. Nothing short of an explosive could get through it, however.

“Damned blasted little devils!” he raged, plowing through the midst of them. He kicked and slammed around with his heavy boots, bringing his jet pistol into action wherever he could, until its constant recoiling kick began to make his arm ache.

He changed his tactics suddenly, put the gun back and flicked a button inside his huge glove. Immediately, a curved scimitar blade sprang from its sheath on his arm. He gripped the handle tightly and slashed with ruthless malevolence, literally hacking his way forward. He sliced the blade through the neck of a nearer zinrot and glimpsed the savage head jump clean from the body, which immediately spouted fast-freezing humor.

Another one he carved in the belly and hurled it writhing to the ground; still another he kicked in the face and sent spinning fifty yards. . . . And all the time Rope Trick writhed in impotent fury, a blue fog, unable to lend assistance for the simple reason that the two major life forms of Ganymede were so utterly opposite in physical properties that they could not attack each other. . . .

Further decimating sweeps finally cooled even the inhuman courage of the zinrots; this raging Earthman was too dangerous. The survivors turned and fled in vast leaps, vanishing at last down the nearest zin-pit half a mile away. Smithy breathed hard and watched them go, then resheathing his scimitar he went on again, weary and drenched in perspiration.

“Wish I could figure those damn things out,” he muttered, and his thoughts impacted to the rolling light beside him. “They’ve got the brain of a man and the savagery of a tiger. The two make a hellish combination. . . .”

Rope Trick did not essay any written response. Going ahead, he curled up in a palpating haze outside the external valve of the refueling station. Smithy came up at last and twisted the lock-switches. In five minutes he was back in the warm interior and laid the girl gently down on his own bed.

Once he was out of his space-suit, he began to unscrew her helmet, soon had the heavy protective suit sinking like a pricked balloon on the floor beside him.

## LONELY JITTERS

She lay very still as he bathed her white face and tried to force a draft of vita-acid between her pale lips. She swallowed hard and stirred as the strong fluid went down her throat.

Smithy sat down on the bed edge and contemplated her. She was blond, with regular but not beautiful features and a slim, well-built body—obviously refined, he decided. He couldn't recollect having seen her before on his rare visits to the Settlement.

At length, the vita-acid had the desired effect. She threw a well-rounded black-clad arm over her forehead, moved weakly. Then her blue eyes opened suddenly and settled on Smithy's lean and puzzled face. The sight of him jerked away the last traces of lethargy.

"You're—you're Smithson, aren't you?" she asked, with the noticeable accent of a New Yorker.

"Yeah. I suppose you're one of these confounded Ganymedian tourists who lost your way?"

His laconic tone did not nettle her; she sat up with a serious expression.

"I'm no tourist; I'm Evania Dodd, daughter of Commandant Dodd of the X-16. I—er—You rescued me, I suppose?"

Smithy laughed shortly. "What do you think? You were out there on the plain as flat as a Plutonian buzzard. How the hell did you get there, anyway?"

"Walked," she said naively. "How'd you come to find me?"

"Rope Trick did that."

"Whom?"

"Skip it." Smithy rose to his feet and plunged his hands in his pockets, scowled down at her.

"Mebbe you'll tell me what you're doing away from the Settlement?"

"You're not very sociable, are you?" she pouted, lifting her slender legs and planting her feet on the shiny floor. "What's wrong with you? Jitters?"

"Perhaps," he admitted briefly. "Chief snag is that women aren't allowed at this refueling station. You ought to know that by now. The 68-Y will be here soon and Dawlish is a stickler for rules. You'll have to be gone by then."

She smiled oddly at that, watched him as he prowled around her.

"Where'll I go?" she asked slowly.

"Where? Back to the Settlement where you came from, of course!"

She said quietly, "There isn't one any more, Smithson!"

That halted him with an amazed gasp. Twirling around, he gripped her slim shoulders.

"Isn't one!" he shouted hoarsely. "What do you mean? Quick! Tell me!"

Again she brushed the arm over her forehead.

"I guess I'm still a bit rocky," she whispered. "Had nothing to eat for ages. . . ."

Smithy cursed his forgetfulness and strode to the provision chamber. He held his patience as he watched the girl eat and drink avidly. The color slowly returned to her features.

"I'm the only survivor," she said after a while, between munches. "Something happened. Something queer came into being under the Settlement floors—clean through six feet of lanium metal. The stuff came up in frozen spires and produced terrific explosions by the

fusion of cold and warm air. . . . Somehow I got away, though I hardly remember how I managed it. I'd no time to bring food, gun, or—or anything.”

Smithy stared at her fixedly. “You mean that every scrap of the Settlement was destroyed?” he insisted incredulously.

“Yes. Space-machines and everything. Four explosions finished the business. . . .” She regarded him with a level, half-challenging gaze. “Maybe you’ll apologize for being so rude to me when you know that I tried to get here in order to warn you. Your air supply comes from the Settlement; your reserve cylinders will exhaust themselves any time.”

“Suppose we call it quits, since you had no place else to go?” he suggested; then smiled. “Thanks all the same, Eva. . . .” His brow furrowed and he stroked his chin. “This is damned serious!” he declared finally. “We—”

“There’s something else too, though it may not be important,” she interrupted him. “After the first explosion, I ventured to look at the spire that caused it, and believe it or not, I got the worst attack of lonely jitters I’ve ever known! Gosh, I wanted to kill myself right there and then.”

Smithy’s eyes had a far-away look. “You did, eh? I’m just beginning to wonder if solitarius melancholia is all the experts claim it to be. They say it’s the planet’s frigid climate; now I’m thinking it may be deliberately induced depression. Maybe those damned zinrots are trying to make us kill ourselves; maybe it was they who blew up the Settlement—”

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He broke off suddenly and gazed with the girl through the open doorway of the adjoining power room. From within it had come a slight sound—a low, subdued crackling that was something quite different from the usual rhythm of the engines.

“What the hell—” Smithy began, then he jumped to his feet and strode forward. The girl came quickly behind him, but before they reached the doorway, they were both suddenly hurled into the center of the living room by the blast of a tremendous concussion.

Superheated air gushed momentarily around them; for an instant their eyes were blinded by intensely brilliant light. Smithy picked himself up with a throbbing head and twitching eyes, wiped a trickle of blood from his gashed cheek. Quickly, he hauled the alarmed girl to her feet.

“Hurt, Eva?”

She shook her head quickly. “What happened in there? Sounded like—”

“Like a frozen spire, eh?” He looked at her grimly for a moment, then went forward again. Standing on the threshold of the immense pump room, he stared at a solitary spire of slate-gray material, innumerable faceted, projecting through the midst of the shattered center-aisle floor. Even as he watched, he could feel intense waves of biting cold ranging from it; at the same time a crushing conviction of lonely jitters descended upon him.

“It is a spire!” the girl cried, coming to his side, “the same sort of thing that blew up the settlement. . . . You—you feel the jitters?”

“And how!” Smithy’s eyes narrowed; he found it an effort to control his will. “This sort of thing is deliberate, Eva; I’m convinced of it.”

He turned abruptly and snatched his jet pistol from the rack. The girl shook her head moodily.

“No use. We tried that at the Settlement. You’ll only slice off a bit of the stuff, at the most —”

“That’s all I need,” Smithy answered, tight-lipped, and leveled the pistol at the spire. The jet snicked off a small lump and sent it clattering to the floor, but before Smithy could move towards it, another devilish spire suddenly burst into view with a thunderous explosion at the far end of the place, toppling over a massive generator and instantly stopping the main power supply of the pump room.

Smithy gazed for an instant in alarm. He found himself suddenly drawing breath only by extreme effort. Twisting around, he found Eva slumped wearily against the doorpost, her breast heaving frantically in the struggle for air, her face suddenly shining with perspiration.

“Air—air supply stopping!” she managed to gasp out. “Your reserve tanks must be . . . be empty . . .” She gulped, reeled dizzily. Instantly Smithy caught her in his arms.

Half-dragging her, he moved to the space-suit closet, lifted her limp body into one of the heavy coverings and screwed the helmet into position. The moment the air cylinder was switched on, she began to recover.

Scrambling into his own suit, he linked up his outer microphone and spoke quickly.

“Better?”

His words came clearly in her earphones. Her head nodded behind the viltex glass. “I’m all right now, but what are we going to do? You realize that this place is as doomed as the Settlement, I suppose?”

He nodded. The dull heaviness of the jitters was still in his eyes.

“Yeah, I realize that, but I’m not leaving here without taking a closer look at these spires.”

With that, he returned to the power room and picked up the lump of material he had sliced earlier on, lifting it carefully in insulated clampers. Back in the living room, he thrust the substance into the super-microscopic analyzer and switched on the current, gazing intently at the reflecting screen.

Eva’s eyes widened in surprise as she watched.

“Why, it’s electrical! Internally, anyhow.”

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Smithy nodded quickly. “These darn things are connected somewhere underground to powerful electrical engines. Quite a good device for destroying anything made of lanium. Lanium’s molecular constitution is such that it breaks down before intense electrical fields. By the same token, these things radiate electrical waves which have a dampening effect on the slight electric constitution of the brain. Result—jitters.”

The girl stared at the magnified metallic fragment.

“But—but jitters were here long before these things put in an appearance,” she pointed out.

“I know, but the dampening effect, with the correct machinery, could easily be generated without these devices. This is simply a prize idea to cause destruction. Only one explanation is possible. The zinrots are at the bottom of it. They live Heaven knows how far under Ganymede’s surface; they’ve got an intelligence easily level with a human’s and they’re fiendishly jealous of anybody invading their territory. Our mineral fuel-bores have driven deep and perhaps caused them plenty of upset. Now they’ve gotten rid of everybody on Ganymede except us. . . .”

He straightened up from the screen. “Guess they’re too smart to deal with single-handed,” he muttered. “I just wonder how they generate their electric power. . . .”

He stopped and glanced quickly across the pump room. Two more spires had explosively appeared. Then he started violently as a sudden thought struck him.

“Outside—quick!” he yelled hoarsely, and spinning the bewildered girl around in a fierce clutch, he whirled her to the inner valve, snatching his provision satchel and jet pistol on the way.

As the valve opened, the lights suddenly expired; the power had stopped. Smithy flicked the button on his belt battery and his head-lamp came into action. With frantic speed, he dragged the girl through the locks, left them open behind him, and, with boots tuned to Gany-normal, they vaulted away from the refueling station in wild, desperate leaps, hardly noticing the fact that Rope Trick uncurled from the ground nearby and kept them company.

At two miles distance from the station, Smithy at last came to a halt, listening to the whistle of the girl’s hard breathing in her microphone. She looked back with him, rather wonderingly.

They had not long to wait. Abruptly the distant dome of the station vanished in a blinding sheet of flame; a deeply reverberating concussion shook the black ground. . . .

Smithy smiled bitterly. “Exit!” he commented shortly. “There goes ten years of good American construction.”

“But what happened?” the girl asked mystifiedly. “The place went up like a powder magazine.”

“What else did you expect? I happened to notice that that latest spire was pushing itself upwards directly towards one of the seven fuel storage tanks. Once its point punctured the tank, the itterbim inside would immediately explode. We’d have gone too if we hadn’t scrammed out as we did.”

“I see. . . . Guess that makes us quits, doesn’t it?”

“Quits?”

“Certainly. I saved you and you saved me. Now, where do we go from here? We’ve no space-ships and no friends—all nice and peaceful with a million enemies under our feet.”

Smithy didn’t answer her. He stood looking around him in the weak light of the risen sun, well above the horizon like a bright star. On the opposite horizon, vast Jove still loomed in all his frightening majesty, part of his disk hidden now by the ridges of the Excelsiors.

At length, Smithy turned. His face was curiously set.

“To reach me you came through the Excelsiors, of course?”

“You bet I did! Why?”

“I was just thinking it’s a good thing you have mountaineering knowledge, because you’re surely going to need it. Our only chance of escape from this infernal place lies in our reaching the table top at the summit of Thunder Molar!”

“What!” She stared at him incredulously. “Why— You’re crazy! It’s three thousand feet up, and absolutely sheer!”

“It isn’t sheer; pioneers have made steps and acclivities all the way to the top. Don’t you see, Eva, it’s the only way? We’ve no space-ship to get away in. In roughly twenty-four hours, at 39-12, to be exact—Gany time, that is—the 68-Y will be here for refueling. We’ve got to be somewhere we can signal, and the only place is on top of Thunder Molar, if we can make it in time.”

“But why not stay by the demolished fuel station until the 68-Y lands?” she demanded.

“Because the zinrots will be after us. Don’t you see that the moment they find they haven’t bumped us off in the station, they’ll turn out in force to get us?” Smithy glanced up at the beclouded Molar. “It’s the only way,” he muttered. “We’ve got the necessary rope cable and boot-spikes in our space-suit kit, so there’s nothing to stop us.”

Eva shrugged. “O. K. Since we’re liable to be killed in any case, we may as well make it spectacular.”

She turned and began to clump along beside him. Ahead of them, Rope Trick twirled and writhed uneasily, suddenly formed into a written question and hovered in the now slightly windy air.

“What about the Carbodox Blizzards?”

“Got to chance it,” Smith mentally returned.

“They’re due any day. You’ll never make Thunder Molar.”

“We’ve just got to, Ropy—unless you’ve a better idea?”

Rope Trick hadn’t. He elongated into a streamer again and kept the two company as they moved along.

## A HOSTILE WORLD

After a while, Rope Trick went on a little distance ahead, came back again at top speed, twirling into a further message.

“Zinrots closing in on you in a circle!”

Smithy came to a stop, lips compressed. He stared at the girl’s anxious face.

“Just what I expected,” he muttered. “If they make a really determined effort to wipe us out, we’re sunk. All the jet pistols and scimitar knives on Ganymede won’t avail us anything. . . . And you’re unarmed, too. . . .”

The girl looked quickly around her. At the moment, the barren unimaginably cold plain was deserted, but that did not fool her. Years on Ganymede had taught her, as it had Smithy, all the answers with regard to the zinrots—their crafty methods of approach, their almost non-reflecting black bodies against the barren ground. Rope Trick had seen them, and he was to be implicitly relied upon.

At last Smithy strode forward again. “Have to keep going and fight for it when the time comes, that’s all. Come on!”

But he stopped once more as Rope Trick became a sentence.

“Don’t advance. Stand still. I’ll fix this. Wait.”

Then he was off towards the Excelsiors like a luminous air serpent, traveling with the demoniacal speed for which, when under stress, he was phenomenal.

Smithy frowned and looked at the girl.

“Can’t see what he can do. Gas-heads and zinrots are as apart as Mercury and Pluto; can’t harm each other. . . .”

She said nothing, then after a while her gloved hand gripped his arm. She pointed quickly. Straining his eyes in the various lights, Smithy could discern a distant circle of black moving slowly inward on every side. He caught the jovelight reflecting from deadly claws; here and there the facets of merciless eyes flashed like transitory diamonds. . . . The advance of the zinrots had come very close, moving with the implacability that spelt certain death.

Smithy tugged out his gun. His lips were a tight line.

“Guess Ropy can’t sort this one out,” he breathed. “Here goes!”

Dropping on one knee and pulling Eva down beside him, he leveled his gun at the approaching line, but as his finger quivered on the trigger-switch, he stopped and looked up in amazement. The Jove-filled sky was suddenly thick with clouds of twisting blue vapor. Not one Rope Trick, but literally thousands were writhing and twisting there in a gyrating scum, oozing and flowing downwards with gradually thickening density.

“I get it!” Eva cried, jumping up so swiftly that she nearly overbalanced. “Ropy and his comrades are changing into a fog—a smoke screen. Zinrots can’t see through fog.”

Smithy grinned happily as he scrambled up beside her. “You’re dead right! They’re sunk!”

They stood waiting eagerly, and at length the vast conglomeration of interwoven Gasbrains had enveloped the zinrots entirely, leaving one long corridor stretching across the plains to the foothills of the Excelsiors.

When that happened, Smithy and the girl started to run, covering the ground in huge flying leaps, listening to the wails and subhuman shrieks of the vicious creatures from the murk as

they traveled. Now and again, a piece of fog detached itself from the main bulk, formed briefly into a directional arrow, then reassembled into mass unity.

At the end of forty-five minutes of frenzied effort, they covered the length of the corridor and gained the lowest foothills of the Excelsiors, emerged from the clinging vapors and looked back on a blue opacity stretching for a vast distance over the plain. Then as they went on again, the Gasbrains began to disperse.

The zinrots, courageous and jealous though they were, would never risk the slippery foothills; they were physically unfitted for the task.

The way now lay ever upwards—first through Echoing Pass, then into Whirlwind Canyon, and so up to the defiles and tortuous ascents of Thunder Molar. It towered above the two as they stared up at it. Its white frozen escarpments glittered in the faint sunlight and stronger joveshine.

From this point, the acclivities were invisible, but Smithy knew that indomitable Earthmen had found a way to the top of the mountain—a top which was invisible from below. Clouds were writhing around it, hurled from the range's opposite side where the Twin Winds gathered. They gave promise of the Ganymedian season of the Carbodox Blizzards, smothering downpours of frozen carbon dioxide from which the abbreviated name was derived.

Smithy's face was grim as he stared up.

"Excelsior is right!" he murmured feelingly, then he looked up sharply as Rope Trick, detached from his fellows, floated into view.

"Thanks a lot, Ropy. You got us out of a hell of a jam."

The Gasbrain made no effort to form an answer. He kept up with the two as they resumed their careful advance along the glassy ground.

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By the end of two more hours of rough, hard going, they reached the outskirts of Echoing Pass and, from common knowledge, headed for the nearest cave for rest and food.

They found one easily enough and experienced no discomfort. Their space-suits were perfectly warmed and regulated; the food traps in the helmets functioned faultlessly and provided them with all the food and drink tablets they needed.

Outside the cave, Rope Trick curled into a ball and slept. Beyond him was the view of the mighty sheer-faced North Glacier, its upper notches lost in the swirling clouds. Jupiter was out of sight; the Carbodox was about to break.

The moaning of the Twin Winds came back from the nearby Echoing Pass in a million forms, and as usual, owing to the eternal caprices of the air currents, the sounds were never reflected in the order received. Sometimes they were utterly reversed. Men in the pioneering days had been known to go insane when they lost themselves in Echoing Pass; its weirdness unbalanced the brain. . . .

Smithy and the girl slept many hours. Weak sunshine sifted through the clouds as they "breakfasted," but by the time they had fitted the spiked clips to their boots in readiness for the ascent of the Molar, the brightness of day had gone. Instead, the first big whirling flakes of the Blizzard were whisking past the entrance to the cave.

Once outside, the flakes plastered to their glass helmets, flakes of frozen carbon dioxide driven by a raging tempest that was steadily growing stronger.

Drawing his cable-steel rope from about his waist, Smithy knotted it loosely around the girl's waist. He caught her faint smile in the dim light.

“All set?” he asked, purposely refraining from mentioning the dangers ahead.

She crossed two begloved fingers. “All set!”

Turning around, he started the advance, digging his spiked boots hard into the glassy ground, sole-shields fixed to third Earth normal to give his feet added weight on the treacherous surface. By his side, ragged tendrils of mist whipping in the wind, came Rope Trick, expanding and contracting weirdly as he drew in the poisonous atmosphere for his nourishment.

In twenty minutes, they reached the center of the Pass, high atop a rocky ledge leading around to Whirlwind Canyon three hundred feet higher up. And it was here that the first mishap befell them.

Eva, in endeavoring to make a small leap, suddenly slipped. Her wild scream re-echoed strangely in the chasm and the steel rope suddenly tautened as the noose slapped up under her armpits. The jerk sent Smithy sliding to the edge of the glassy defile.

He dug his heels savagely, clamped his hands over the rope with despairing effort. The ice shaved into brittle shards under the digging rip of his spikes—but for all his frantic effort and tension, he wasn’t quick enough to save the girl.

She vanished over the edge of the defile, dragging him after her. . . . He dropped slowly, thanks to the slight gravity, felt himself torn and whipped by the gale until he finally landed on a broad ledge some distance below.

In a moment he was on his feet. “Eva! Are you hurt?”

“Hurt you . . . Are Eva . . .” flung back at him from the unseen walls of the Pass.

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He stumbled forward in the whirling scurry of flakes, following the length of rope backwards until he came upon the girl getting to her feet. Her face was white in the dimness; she laughed nervously.

“Darn silly trick, wasn’t it?” she asked shakily. “I sure thought you’d have to send me flowers that time.”

Smithy gripped her ballooned body tightly to him. Somehow he hadn’t realized until this moment that that body was very precious to him. He stared anxiously about him. The sheer face of the cliff loomed in the smother, utterly unscalable.

“We’re stuck!” he whispered hoarsely. “No way up and no way down!” He stopped, aghast at the discovery, then struck with a sudden thought, he adjusted his outer microphone to full volume and yelled, “Hey, Ropy! Where are you? Rope Trick!”

“Trick Rope . . . Eerope!” cackled the Pass. “Eerope! Are you where . . .”

Nothing happened. The echoing ceased. The Gasbrain didn’t appear. Smithy fumed and stared down into the wild Carbodox flaked chasm. Time and again he called; fifteen minutes slid by.

“Damn!” he swore at last. “He would do this just when we need him! Where in hell can he have gotten to . . .? Hey, you slithering, catherine wheel, give us a hand down here!”

“. . . here down hand. . . . Slither here. . . . Earslith. . . .”

“Blast these echoes!” Smithy glared around him. “About the most idiotic thing on an idiotic world. Might tickle a tourist pink, but I’m no tourist. Ro-py!” he bawled.

And suddenly the Gasbrain appeared, shooting out of the snowstorm along the ledge from some distance ahead, apparently emerging in the first place from the solid cliff face.

Smithy blinked in amazement. “Now how in hell did you . . .” He didn’t finish his sentence but watched as Rope Trick, hiding from the direct force of the wind in a slight curve

of the wall, conveyed a tattered message.

“Way through cliff! Tunnel. Leads to Whirlwind Canyon. Safe way out. Follow. . . .”

Without hesitation, the two complied, clinging to each other and picking their way carefully. To their amazement, Rope Trick was right. They moved into a fairly wide tunnel entrance some distance further on. Flaking the snow from their helmets, they studied the place in the light of their lamps.

The tunnel went on an obvious rise for nearly a mile, then its ragged floor was suddenly broken by a pit perhaps fifty feet in width. When they reached it, they peered cautiously over its smooth, obviously machine-made edge.

Just for a moment, they could hardly credit the thing they saw. The pit went down into bottomlessness, an immeasurably deep shaft at the base of which reposed the unmistakable outlines of some sort of city. Tiny though it was, the biting thinness of the air rendered every detail crystal clear. It was possible to see a certain ordered symmetry of buildings, floodlit from a source unknown, together with streets and squares.

Smithy drew a deep breath from his cylinder. “Now I get it! That city must be where the zinrots hang out; this thing is some kind of ventilation shaft. Nobody has ever been able to find how deep down they live. That city is proof alone of their human intelligence. No doubt they resent our interference in drilling for mineral as much as New Yorkers would resent an air raid. . . . Bet they use the water of these glacier mountains for their electricity generation.”

“Correct,” affirmed the body of Rope Trick, hovering over the pit. “Zinrots below. This tunnel leads to Whirlwind Canyon. Air current through mountain necessary for zinrots’ city below. They made it. I found this by accident. Come. . . .”

Smithy unhooked the cable from his belt, gathered himself together and leapt the fifty-foot gap with ease. In another moment, the girl had whirled to his side. They went on again, once more in harness, and after a distance of nearly three miles through the twining white tunnel, they emerged into the thick of the storm high on the main acclivity of Whirlwind Canyon, Echoing Pass lost far below in the tumult.

The darkness of the storm had deepened to that of night. Their head-lamps were the only illuminants that reflected on the glassy, frosty wall close beside them. On the other side was the sheer nothingness of that dreadful gulf, lashed by the Twin Winds battering from one side of the Excelsiors to the other, a hurricane so terrific that when it occasionally snatched savagely at them if they moved too far from the wall, it threatened to hurl them into the seething depths.

The Carbodox Blizzard whirled thicker and thicker, plastering their helmets so heavily that they moved as though blind, massive gloves wiping incessantly at the glass to reveal only more hurtling flakes. . . . Time and again the struggling Rope Trick, battling with all his weird form to stay consistent in the gale, descended swiftly and guided them over particularly difficult points.

Once around the corner of the Canyon, they were open to a brief mile of level glass-like plain until they started on the final dangerous ascent to the summit of Thunder Molar.

## FIGHT TO THE SUMMIT

On the plain, the driving blinding cataract of flakes hid from sight the sudden attack of a flock of armobats, deadly vulture-like birds inhabiting the higher ramparts of the Excelsiors, only venturing from their icy homes when the Carbodox season made it unsafe for them to stay any longer.

Almost before they realized what was happening, Smithy and the girl found themselves in the midst of whirling, savage darts of flying fury, things that were a cross between an armadillo and a bat, moving with bullet swiftness and provided with deadly pincer teeth in top and bottom jaws.

Smithy tumbled and fell knee-deep in snow; the pull on the cable dragged the girl down too. In that position, he tore out his pistol and fired desperately, flicked one bird in half and sent a sizzling gust of destruction amidst the descending billows. Another armobat hurtled down from behind and pecked fiercely at his helmet, left a distinct scrape of razor teeth on the viltex glass.

Smithy let out a yell. "Keep going, Eva! If we stop still, these devil's 'll get us!"

He got up and floundered onwards, dragging the girl with him. This time Rope Trick could do nothing. He was not big enough to form into a protective fog by himself, and even if he had been, the Twin Winds would have made the feat impossible. All he could do, and did, was to swirl in and out and confuse the armobats' projectile sweepings.

Two of the flying horrors were split into pieces by the flaying jet pistol; yet another one dashed its head clean into its scaly body by plunging too savagely at Eva's metal-mesh space-suit. The impact left a dent in it and momentarily brought the girl to her knees—then she was up again, battling and plunging through the piling snow.

For an hour, the fearful things whirled and whizzed in the raging storm, then as the plateau was gradually left behind and the ascent of the last Thunder Molar acclivity began, the things became scarcer and finally disappeared.

The two were left alone again—save for Rope Trick—in their whirling world of blinding snow, darkness, and the ever eternal roaring of the Twin Winds. . . .

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For another hour, they struggled onwards, having no idea of what distance they had covered, since everything was enveloped in the same blanketing dark—but at the end of that time, they gained a slightly more protected ledge and paused to rest. Rope Trick curled up behind them, palpitating visibly with the vast strains to which he had been subjected.

"Think we'll make it?" the girl asked, wiping the plastered flakes from her glass.

Smithy looked gloomily at the hurricane. "Mebbe," he said pessimistically. "Our lamps are beginning to run out. The batteries are going down. . ." He stared at the yellow glow of the girl's lamp and fell to thought.

She said nothing. Like him, she was wondering if, even when they reached the top of the Molar—if they ever did—it would prove worth the effort? Suppose the 68-Y didn't come? Suppose the— But what was the use of vain, despondent surmise?

They went on again at last, somewhat refreshed by the rest.

Minutes and hours seemed negligible things in their vast strugglings. They were commencing to feel exhausted, and with every foot they went up, the danger increased by

reason of their almost exhausted lamp batteries.

They became mechanical, slipping and sliding, constantly ascending automatons, plugging up frozen, brittle steps that went higher and ever higher. They almost forgot that the faithful Rope Trick was always with them, doing what little he could in his loyal way to assist them—

Then with amazing suddenness, they were in the midst of clear air with the dense clouds below them! The Twin Winds ceased their fury and dropped to gale strength. Almost overhead loomed vast Jupiter, and, at the zenith, the weak sun. The 7-day Ganymedian day was half-way spent.

The sky at this height was black, scattered with innumerable brilliant stars, dominated apart from Jupiter by the remaining eight moons.

Smithy stopped and drew a deep breath of relief. He and the girl were almost at the top of the Molar; immediately above them, clear against the stars, was the flat table-land summit.

“We made it!” he yelled. “Eva, we made it!”

She turned and looked back on the woolly clouds of the Carbodox Blizzard in the sun and joveshine below. The words she intended to utter were interrupted by another shout from Smithy as he stood directly above her on the slope.

“The 68-Y! There! Help me signal! Do something!”

The girl was just in time to see a vast smooth-sided 500-foot monster of the void, port lights gleaming, go sliding noiselessly over the summit of the Molar, heading direct for the ruined refueling station hidden below the clouds.

A hollow groan escaped Smithy. He waved his arms frantically and yelled through his full-volumed microphone— But it was no use. The giant liner passed on.

Then the girl caught up with him. “Quick! To the top! If the 68-Y goes away, we’re done for. Come on!”

He floundered along beside her, speaking in gasps.

“Even then I’m wondering if it will be of any use. It’ll be like a couple of ants on the top of Everest.”

“We need a beacon, or something,” she said worriedly.

Smithy became silent, flogging his brains for an idea. He was still flogging them when they gained the flat table-land and sank down to rest.

Rope Trick quivered up beside them. The girl regarded his gaseous form speculatively.

“We might get him to make a written signal,” she suggested, but Smithy shook his head gloomily.

“I guess not. It’s not very likely that the 68-Y will come back over the Molar. When Dawlish finds the station’s gone he’ll head for the next nearest on Io and we’ll be left behind. What we need is a flare—something to really attract attention.”

He clubbed his gloved hands together in frantic thought, but ideas just wouldn’t come. He was mentally and physically worn out.

Then suddenly Rope Trick glided forward. In a few seconds he wrote his message.

“Your thoughts tell me you need a signal. Right?”

“And how!” Smithy affirmed feelingly. “Any suggestions?”

“Yes. It is easy when you understand the chemistry of this world as I do. There are plentiful supplies of liquid oxygen on the floor of this table-land, at a temperature of slightly above 300 degrees below zero. You know that?”

“Sure,” Smithy growled, frowning. “So what?”

Rope Trick resumed. “This plentitude of liquid oxygen makes some substances, such as cotton fabric, as dangerous as explosive, if ignited. That’s why your boots and space-suits are made of materials noninflammable on this world. What you have to do is to find a piece of cloth and put it on the floor here. When the 68-Y appears, fire the cloth with your jet pistol. The friction of the jet alone will be enough. There’ll be a tremendous explosion visible for miles—a perfect signal.”

“By gosh, he’s right,” Eva cried excitedly; then her face fell. “But where do we get cotton fabric from?”

Smith grinned and rose to his feet. He withdrew his arms from the folds of his space-suit sleeves and tore a piece out his shirt, putting it in the small external valve of the suit. Once his arms were back in the sleeves, it was a simple matter to extract the fabric from the small trap.

“Like getting out of your vest with a coat on,” he commented, dropping the jagged square on the floor at his feet. Then he and the girl watched in silence as it changed to a frozen gray appearance in that inconceivably cold atmosphere.

They had not long to wait. Fifteen minutes later the huge ovoid of the 68-Y vomited up in the distance through the clouds, pointed directly towards Io.

Instantly Smithy fired the jet pistol in his hand, struck the explosive cotton clean in the center. He had no idea of what really happened after that. The universe seemed to vanish in a sheet of blinding fire.

He was hurled backwards by a terrific blasting explosion, glimpsed Rope Trick vanishing in a blaze of light, saw Eva turning somersaults as she came towards him. . . . Then everything was dark—

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When he moved his aching head again, he found himself staring into the rugged face of Dawlish, commander of the 68-Y. He smiled a little.

“O. K., Smithy,” he murmured. “You and Miss Dodd are all right—nothing worse than a broken leg for you and a broken arm for her. We got your signal all right and picked you up in a safety ship. But say,” he asked wonderingly, “what the hell were you doing on the Molar? Where’s the refuel station?”

Smithy winced, glanced around the cool hospital ward.

“Tell you later mebbe,” he answered, then a sudden thought struck him. “You didn’t see anything of a gas around the Molar, did you?”

“Gas? No; why?”

Smithy made no reply. So loyal old Rope Trick had been ignited and destroyed by the very explosion he had himself suggested! That was loyalty surpassing earth’s own. . . .

Eva? A broken arm? Smithy grinned faintly. Well that would not stop him putting a ring on her finger when they reached the American settlement at Io—if she’d have him.

She did—fourteen hours later.

[The end of *Frigid Moon* by John Russell Fearn (as Dennis Clive)]