

PAGANINI-MAN OR DEVIL?

SEE PAGE 130

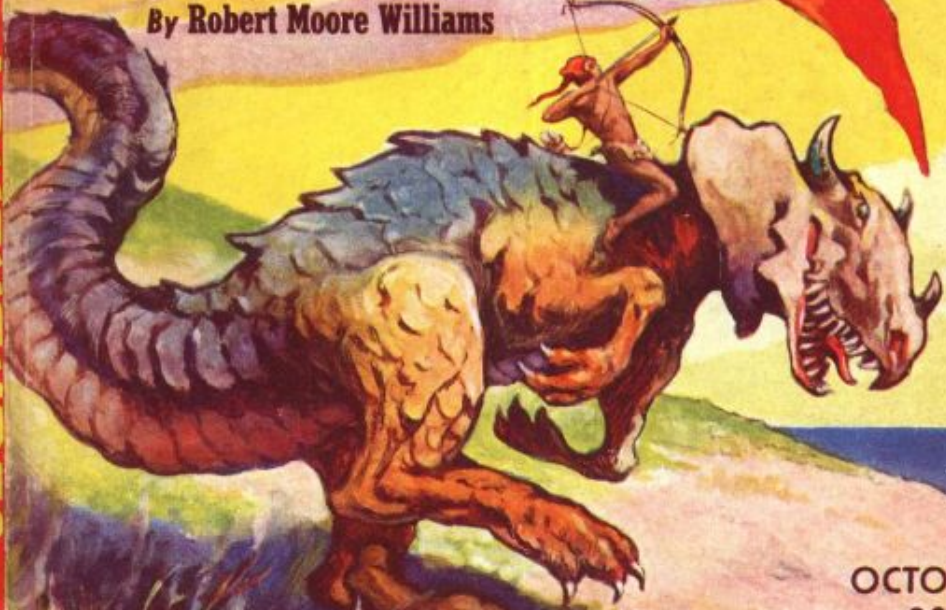
fantastic

ADVENTURES

GRIM DANGER
IN A LOST WORLD

JONGOR OF LOST LAND

By Robert Moore Williams



OCTOBER
20c

FANTASY - MYSTERY - ADVENTURE

THORNTON AYRE ★ HENRY KUTTNER ★ JAMES NORMAN

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

VOLUME 2
NUMBER 8

OCTOBER
1950

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Special Agent to Venus

Date of first publication: 1940

Author: John Russell Fearn (as Thornton Ayre) (1908-1960)

Illustrator: Frank R. Paul

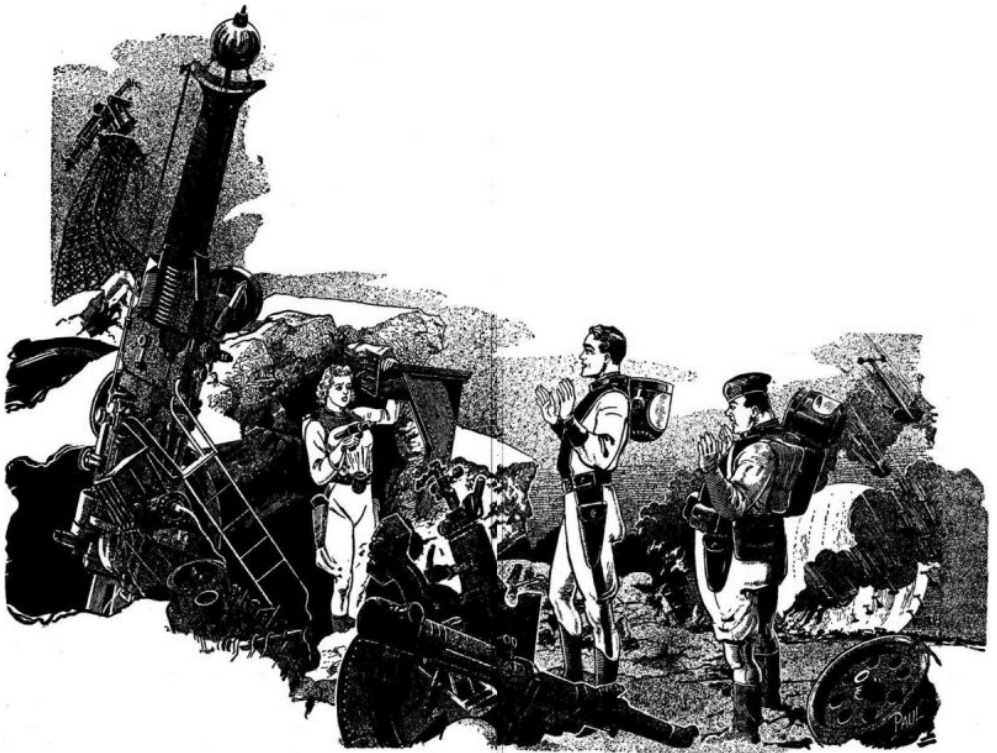
Date first posted: Sep. 5, 2022

Date last updated: Sep. 5, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220913

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/American Libraries.



“Put up your hands, traitors!” she snapped. “Or I’ll shoot you like dogs.”

SPECIAL AGENT TO VENUS

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Thornton Ayre.

First published *Fantastic Adventures*, October 1940.

To Paul Wayne, being wrecked meant only that his comrades faced extermination

Paul Wayne returned the salute sharply from the sentry as he strode into G.H.Q., New York Sector. He waited patiently as automatic rays and devices searched every inch of his massive six-foot body, recording the detail of the notes he carried, the weapons his belt contained; indeed, his whole setup, internal and external. G.H.Q. never took chances.

At length he was allowed to move on. Heavily lined, rayproof doors slid aside as he passed the barrier of the last photoelectric cell and stepped into the waste of robot-lighted maps and monstrous radio-television equipment adorning this, the New York headquarters of the vast Earth armies, engaged now in the bitterest struggle they had ever waged.

Wayne came to a stop at the controlling desk. Seven experts at work on instruments disregarded him—but the eighth and centermost man, gray-headed and square-jawed, looked up sharply.

“Squadron Leader Wayne, you are to be entrusted with an exceedingly delicate and dangerous mission. So dangerous, indeed, that you are permitted to refuse the assignment if you wish.”

The commander waited, and as he had anticipated a grim smile broke over Paul Wayne’s generously hewn countenance. His glacier-blue eyes even looked amused.

“There is no fear of my refusing, sir. What are your orders?”

The commander reflected for a moment, then he said:

“You are aware that in this mortal battle raging between Venus and Earth, our chances of success are jeopardized by the Venusian blockade. Ringing the system, standing between us and Venus, is this barrier of Venusian space forts and rays. Time and again we’ve tried to break it—and failed.”

“Yes, sir; I know.” Wayne recalled his own grim and futile encounters with that impregnable line, hastily but effectively constructed after Earth’s initial expeditionary forces had been landed, and thus preventing the sending of reinforcements or supplies.

“This war, Wayne, as most of you spacemen know, is actually ours to win right now. Our expeditionary armies are on Venus and smashing the Venusian resistance everywhere; while here on Earth we have the situation well in hand.

“But a new menace has arisen which may smash us! Venus is a strange world, not thoroughly understood even yet, and its unnatural qualities have created deadly plague among our almost victorious garrisons.

“From the latest reports, it seems our men are dying off like flies from marshland fever—and they will continue to die unless a formula worked out by our Earth chemists reaches them.”

Wayne nodded slowly. “I understand, sir.”

“Lack of medical experts on Venus meant that an antidote for marsh fever had to be worked out here on Earth,” the commander continued.

“That has been done; and it must reach our garrisons on Venus, where it can be put into instant effect. To radio the formula—even if that were possible with the Venusian radio-heterodyne blockade—would be to allow it to fall into enemy hands. They could even use it to cure the Earthmen they have captured, and then use those Earthmen as tools for the furtherance of their own schemes.

“So, a formula must reach Venus, through the blockade, through every line of invasion and defense. A fleet stands no chance against the blockade—but one man *might!* That, Wayne, is the position.”

“I’m ready, sir,” Paul Wayne said quietly. “What am I to do?”

“You will reach Venus by any means you care to adopt and will contact General Fletcher at G.H.Q. there. To the best of our knowledge he is stationed now in the foothills of Temperate Mountains. You have got to find him. Should you die, the formula will not fall into enemy hands.

“No, this formula will be embedded into the flesh of your forearm with micro-vibrations, and it will only become readable when subjected to Ray 72/5, which General Fletcher has at headquarters. That system is used anyway for sending invisible messages and instructions.

“The message accompanying the formula on your arm will explain who you are and give you full capacity to discharge your mission. You understand?”

“Perfectly, sir. I’m ready.”

“Good!” The commander motioned to his expert. Wayne took off his tunic and bared his muscular forearm. A hair remover scored a clean path across the skin. Then Wayne waited with jaws damped tight against the burning pain of the micro-impressor, a web of needle-thin rays that pierced into his skin with searing impact.

Actually, in microscopic form, a slide of the formula was impressed magic-lantern fashion into his flesh. The moment it was over, there was nothing visible; all the young spaceman had for indication was a throbbing pain.

“I knew I picked the right man for the job,” the commander said gravely, as Wayne buttoned up his tunic again. “Good luck, Wayne! And remember, the fate of generations depends on your getting through.”

Paul Wayne stood back, saluted smartly, then went out with agile strides.

Wayne’s face was grim as the swift official airway car whirled him over the sprawled labyrinth of the garrisoned city to the spacedrome of the fighter squadrons. For a long time he had suspected that things were not going too well with the Earth army on Venus, and had wondered at the reason.

Now he knew—and he knew too that smashing through that wall between Earth and Venus was going to be an almost superhuman task. There remained for him only the one slim chance that, with his profound knowledge of space tactics, he might find a weak hole and slip through. If he did not. . . .

Wayne’s smile only became a little grimmer as he stepped out of the car at the spacedrome and hurried across to his machine. He paused only long enough to transfer the command of his squadron to his next-of-rank; then he clambered through the double airlock of his machine, closed the opening and spun the sealing screws.

He waited a moment or two as he warmed up his rocket-firing chambers, studied the fuel gauge. All set. He settled himself in the highly sprung control chair, clamped his brown hands on the switches, and pulled them over. With the faint hum of cleaving atmosphere Wayne started to rise—swiftly, resistlessly, building up to that vital eighteen miles per second necessary for the initial take-off from Earth's gravitational pull.

Faster—faster— Out into space it hurtled like a giant shuttle. The take-off was always an agony; a grinding strain on heart, brain and nerves. It left Wayne as always with his mouth open, as though after a power dive, his nostrils trickling blood—

But now he was beyond the stratosphere mine field sown at Heaviside Layer by Earth's armies, a mine field anchored to Earth below by enormous attractor towers. Carefully Wayne nosed his ship through the last open mine lane, then tore outward into the vast open freedom of the void. He began to breathe a little more freely.

Rockets blazing, still thrusting the ship further away from Earth, Wayne raced onward. He passed giant space cruisers with ray guns snarling at the ready; tight little squads of single fighter machines; great spatial arms dumps and refuelling centers interlinked by their gravity beams.

Yes, the whole setup of this merciless war of 2140 was here—but there was at least a measure of peace since the main onslaught of the original Venusian onrush had been broken.

Everything now depended on whether the Earth army on Venus could master the situation. Which they would, *if* they could be saved from marsh fever.

Wayne's jaw set again as he thought of that; he increased his speed. He progressed at a flogging rate, taking far more punishment from the acceleration than was normal. An hour passed, two hours, three. He took five restorative pills, gave himself a little shake, and hurtled on.

At last, hours later, like a line across infinity midway between Earth and Venus, the smudge Paul Wayne had seen from Earth began to revolve itself into a seemingly endless gray chain of armored Venusian space forts, the cleverest and most invincible blockade in history.

It stretched for nearly four thousand miles across space, a wall of death against which Earth fleets had time and time again smashed themselves to destruction in an effort to break it.

Some troop transports, true, had gotten through and had landed the expeditionary armies on Venus. Since then the blockade had been made even more stringent.

As he swept nearer and nearer the barrier, Wayne studied his maps carefully, noted exactly the lay of space ahead. To get round the ends of the barrier was impossible, since it meant exposing himself for a dangerously long time to the guns of the forts.

But according to counterespionage work, the forts had a division between each of them, through which a ship might pass if it was prepared to meet the network of defense ships beyond.

Again, the forts had an unpleasant habit of closing up to nip any invading ship between their ponderous masses.

Wayne's eyes narrowed. The only chance was speed—a terrific burst of impetus to defeat the focus of the ray guns, then an ultimate dive between the forts before they could close on him. Afterward— Well, fight it out!

His plan decided, the young space fighter set the automatic sights on his guns, by which they would fire their devastating charges at whatever crossed their magnetic paths. Then he

built speed upon speed and was crushed back into his chair by the frightful velocity, his eyes glued to that ever-spreading, ever-widening gray wall in front of him.

The ultimate dive he intended taking was directed toward one black line cutting right ahead of him. Seven miles of it, with death for the reward if he miscalculated!

Faster—faster! Then the void around Wayne was ablaze suddenly with disintegrator beams. He had been sighted; but by now his speed was so tremendous, even the fast-sighting guns of the enemy had their work cut out to focus upon him.

Wayne heard two outer projections on his ship snap and bang as rays struck home. He depressed the release switches on his own guns immediately and hurled a barrage of crackling death on either side of him—literally blasted his way like a living torch through the squad of Venusian fighters that swept forward to meet him.

The gap between the space forts was dead ahead now. Wayne dived for it; and even as he flicked past those deadly walls, he saw them moving ponderously inward. With only a few feet to spare he was through, fighting madly now with a boiling scum of defensive machines.

His guns still rattled away furiously, taking up their automatic feeds and giving the full blast of their neutron-firing chambers. Wayne saw several of the enemy ships glow, then explode violently. He twisted and dodged and swung, up and down, right and left, his eyes fixed right ahead of him. He was being outmaneuvered, and knew it. Little by little he was being forced aside from his direct route.

Flame cannons pumped destruction toward him. Wayne switched on the robot control and scrambled hurriedly into his space suit, then resumed his seat at the controls. His action had not been a moment too soon, for an upper plate of his machine suddenly ripped away violently under a direct ray hit.

The air pressure sank instantly to zero. Safe in his space suit he drove onward, or tried to; but by this time the enemy had beaten him. More and more he was being forced to one side. His anxious gaze found itself looking now not at Venus but at the artificial asteroid X/47, better known as “the Pimple,” the much-beleaguered outpost where a few Earthlings still held a vital space communication line. Down there he might stand a chance of sorting himself out.

He started toward it—then a battering onslaught from the Venusian machines caught up with him again, and his ship cracked clean in half! The front half of the machine was torn apart as the wrecked pursuit ship hurtled piecemeal down toward the asteroid.

Paul Wayne twisted around and clamped on his life-preserving mechanism; then he leapt for it. The preserver’s ray-recoil system knocked him free of the falling debris and allowed him to sink, as in old-time parachute fashion, to the nearest center of gravity. He fell swiftly, using the old trick of keeping the ship’s debris between himself and the enemy to avoid further attack.

It seemed the Venusians had assumed he had been killed in the final wreck of his ship, however, for they were now heading away swiftly back to their bases.

Below, the lush green of the asteroid rose to meet him, spreading ever larger under its blanket of artificially created atmosphere. At the precise moment Wayne gave his foot clips the recoil and saved himself a violent landing. He dropped in the midst of dense fernlike vegetation, switched off his apparatus and gazed upward with a look of prayerful relief.

CHAPTER II

Doomed Outpost

Almost at once Paul Wayne became aware of the lightness of slight gravitation. Through the tree-tops he could see that invincible wall of gray in the blue-black sky. Carefully he unscrewed his helmet and sniffed the air. It was thin, but breathable.

Two things were uppermost in his mind right now. He was alive and unhurt and he was behind the blockade barrier. Somewhere on this asteroid, an Earth unit was still holding out against repeated onslaughts from the Venusians. If it were possible to reach it and get another space machine with which to continue his urgent mission—

“Hi’ya, pal! Waiting for an airbus?”

“Huh? What?” Wayne whirled around as the gruff voice reached him. In a moment his hand was at his ray gun, then he relaxed a little and waited.

A man in a tattered, vegetation-juice stained uniform was ambling into the clearing. He had unkempt brown hair, a big red face that looked entirely unconcerned, and a big paunch in front. He was quite without weapons and walked with his hands in his pants pockets.

“Relax, lad,” he invited, fixing a blue eye on the gun. “What do you think I am? A Venusian?”

“Just who are you, anyway?” Wayne demanded, eying him. “From your uniform, you’re from an Earth unit—”

“Yeah—sure! ‘Least I was until the war caught up on me and I got taken prisoner. I rayed my way out of a convict ship and escaped in a safety machine to this Pimple. Since then—”

He eyed the sky reflectively. “Well, since then I’ve just wandered around, neither going back to a garrison or being taken prisoner. I’m a nomadic sort of guy, see? Gilby’s the name—but you can call me ‘Paddles.’ Most folks do.”

“In other words,” Wayne said grimly, “you’re a deserter. I’ve seen your face posted up at G.H.Q.”

Paddles beamed. “Guess my fame’s spread, eh? S’pose I am a deserter, but it’s more interesting wandering around as a space tourist than firing a ray gun at a collection of Venusians. So I paddles around where and how I pleases. You’re sorta lucky, joining up with me.”

“Yes?” Wayne was unconvinced.

“Sure! I saw you take that dive from beyond the line up there, and I don’t have to be a telepathist to figure you’re trying to reach Venus. You won’t—not in half a ship,” and his blue eyes wandered to where the wreckage had fallen.

Wayne said briefly, “I’m on an urgent mission. What I’ve got to do right now is contact the one remaining garrison on this asteroid.”

“Then you’re nuts,” Paddles sighed, leaning indolently against a tree. “The garrison’s been besieged by Venusian raids for weeks now, and so far it’s held out. But the latest I hear is that two Earth traitors are scheming with the Venusians to make a complete raid.

“You’d never get anywhere near that last outpost without being shot down.” Paddles shrugged, spat idly. “Seems to me kinda silly, holding onto that bit of metal citadel. A few soldiers, the governor and his daughter. . . . So what? Might as well hand things over and save their skins.”

“Maybe they’re loyal, and you’re not!” Wayne snapped, dragging Paddles upright from the tree. “You’ve gotten the wrong guy to preach that sort of defeatism to, Paddles. We’re going to that outpost, and quick. Since you know where it is, you can take me there.”

Paddles shrugged, his eyes on the gun again. He ambled toward the forest with Wayne beside him.

“Okay, if you want to get shot,” he growled. “And watch where you’re going. Place is full of ground traps. I told you that you were lucky to meet up with me.”

Wayne found out what was meant by ground traps as they went along. Venusian mines were everywhere, cleverly laid and able to deal out instant death, had not the indolent Paddles known the forest trail so intimately.

Now and again, trained as a ground soldier, Paddles would stop and glance quickly up and down the dim-lit forest, then he would duck and drag Wayne down with him. Sure enough a party of Venusian guards, heavily armed, would come clumping past. They were queer creatures anyway—eight feet tall, somewhat like Earth people in build, with gaunt cadaverlike faces giving them an anything but wholesome appearance.

“Seems like we’re none too safe around here,” Wayne murmured, as they went on again.

“Safe!” Paddles gave a snort. “You don’t know it, lad, but we’re right in enemy territory. Everything but that one north outpost belongs to ’em. But don’t worry; I’ve monkeyed around on this Pimple for a month and never been seen. We’re safe enough . . . But I still think you’re crazy!”

Owing to the dim light, they escaped molestation and covered the distance to the outpost in double-quick time, thanks to the light gravity permitting them to leap over every obstacle. The outpost citadel appeared suddenly on the horizon, as things always do in a world of infinite smallness. Paddles came to a halt in the clearing facing it, and seemed to reflect.

“Notice it’s not being surrounded by ground forces?” he asked. “That means it’s armed to the teeth. All the raids are made by air. If you want to risk going up to it, you try it—I’m out!”

Wayne studied it. It was rather like a vast metal cube, with a wall of defensive weapons all around it. On the roof of the cube were more ray cannons, grimly ready.

“Think they’re likely to have a space ship?” Wayne asked briefly.

“Search me!” Paddles shrugged fleshy shoulders. “I guess—”

He broke off, tensing at the sudden deep thunder of rocket tubes. In a few seconds it became a devastating, inhuman roar.

“Down!” he gasped, flinging Wayne flat. “Warships! A raid!”

Pressed to the ground, they lifted their heads slightly and watched some twenty massive Venusian warships head straight for the solitary citadel. What happened afterward was the quickest and most deadly onslaught Wayne had ever seen.

Indeed, so quick was the attack, the automatic weapons guarding the place had hardly a chance to focus before there descended from the raiders a withering fire of beams. The metal defensive walls flowed and exploded outward; masses of metal went flying to an enormous distance in the light gravity. The whole mass of the citadel became suddenly the center of the most incredible vortex of destruction and flame.

Debris raining upon them, Wayne and Paddles lay flat on their stomachs. Then gradually the onslaught died away. Paddles looked up, his big face grim.

“So they finally got it,” he muttered. “And I guess they could only do that if they knew exactly what spot to approach from, to avoid the defense. Those two damned Earth traitors must have given the Venusians the right dope. Well, there’s your citadel for you, lad! Now what? The Venusians will close in their ground forces and take it.”

“Say!” Wayne gripped his arm and pointed to the ruins. “Who’s that? I thought I saw somebody moving— Yes! It’s a girl!”

Paddles looked surprised for a moment, then he followed Wayne as the pilot hurried across to the remains of the outpost. The solitary girl, dressed in defense service kit, swung around sharply as she heard the footsteps. Instantly her hand whipped out a ray gun and held it steady.

“Stand right where you are!” she commanded. “I want a few words with you two rats before I finish you off. You filthy, rotten, despicable traitors!” she finished venomously.

Wayne looked at her grimly. Her voice was shaken with anger and grief, her violet-blue eyes misted with tears. She was a healthy, attractive girl, with blond hair that curled at the ends and a firm little chin.

“Listen, kid—” Paddles began, then he jumped back and looked rueful as she flashed her gun toward him.

“Shut up, you lumbering pig! Dad and I—in fact, everyone of those now lying dead in this ruin—knew you two traitors would get the place in the end. I alone escaped. You two signalled the attack and came to see what happened, eh? Well—look! Enjoy yourself, in the few precious seconds you’ve got left to you! You killed my father, and the soldiers—so I’ll kill the pair of you!”

Wayne waited in silence for a moment, amazed at the cold intensity of her hate, then with a sudden lightning movement he snatched the gun out of her hand. She nursed her fingers for a moment and eyed him contemptuously.

“Well, go on!” she snapped. “Why don’t you shoot? I might have known I’d be no match for a hefty brute like you!”

“You’ve got this all wrong,” Wayne said grimly. “Neither of us are traitors. But I’ve no time to explain that now: the Venusian ground forces may close in at any moment. What I want is a space ship, if you got one.”

The girl’s only response was to fold her arms and smile cynically.

“Now listen—” Wayne began urgently. Then he stood rooted in amazement as Paddles abruptly snatched the gun from him, whirled it around and fired twice with deadly accuracy. Two men suddenly toppled from above the ramparts of a nearby mass of debris, crashing nearly at the trio’s feet.

“Lucky I spotted ’em!” Paddles grinned, handing the gun back. “As for you, young lady, I guess your traitors are right here.” He turned the corpses over with his boot. “Yep! Earth uniforms!”

The girl stared down at them speechlessly for a moment, then swung back to Wayne. He gave her a grim smile.

“Saves me having to convince you, anyway,” he said briefly. “I’m Squadron Leader Paul Wayne of New York Space Squadron. You can call this guy here Paddles.”

“I—I—” She hesitated. “I must have gotten it all wrong! Only it *looked* so bad—I’m Ethel Waldon, daughter of the governor of this asteroid,” she hurried on. “Or rather, *late* governor —”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Wayne said quickly, gripping her arm. “You have my deepest sympathy. But right now, it’s important we get out of here. Have you a space ship or not? I’ve got to reach Venus somehow.”

“Venus?” Ethel Waldon looked briefly surprised, then said quickly, “There is a space ship, yes. Dad was saving it for personal use if all our defense efforts failed. I don’t know if we can get it free after this raid—”

She turned, and Wayne and Paddles followed her quickly through the ruins of the citadel to where a fairly large space flyer lay, half buried under a wilderness of smashed girders and melted lumps of metal. Wayne eyed the ruins for a moment or two, then pulled his largest disrupter from his belt and went to work. By degrees he blasted a clear tunnel through the debris to the ship’s airlock.

“Inside,” he said, catching the girl’s arm. “We’ll shake this lot off by our own power if we’re all fueled up.”

“Everything’s set,” the girl said quickly. “Dad took no chances. There are even disguises aboard.”

Paddles waddled into the control room behind the two and glanced around in approval.

“Hmm— Not bad! And this is where I say ‘good-by’ to the Pimple. Too bad; I was beginning to enjoy it.”

He turned and slammed shut the airlock, then waited as Wayne settled himself at the control board.

The rockets roared, but for a moment or two the ship trembled and staggered helplessly in its efforts to free itself. Then all of a sudden it succeeded, and with a mighty *swoosh!* that hurled Ethel and Paddles to the floor, it tore free and whizzed upward in a wild arc. Instantly Wayne got it under control, gazed back at the disappearing Pimple in the void.

“Rough, but necessary,” Paddles commented, helping the girl up. Then he frowned. “It’s what we’re going to get into that worries me. We—”

“You say you’re heading for Venus?” The girl went over to Wayne and regarded him anxiously.

“Yeah. Any objections?”

“I haven’t—but do you know what you’re getting into?”

“Sure; but it can’t be any worse than the blockade, and I got through that.”

“It can be far worse!” she retorted. “Space is infested with Venusian examination squads all the way to Venus. There’s only one way to defeat them, and that’s by the plan Dad and I devised for just such an emergency as this.”

“Well?” Wayne stared ahead. In the dim distance he could already see several Venusian guard ships hurtling through the infinite, obviously intent on impending examination.

“Disguise,” the girl said. “There’s a Venusian disguise aboard, and an Earth disguise too. The Earth one is no use to us in this case, of course—but if you became a Venusian and Paddles and I became your apparent captives, we might make it.”

“Have to be a damn good disguise to make me look like an eight-foot cadaver,” Wayne grunted.

“It *is* good! See—I’ll show you! The idea of captives and captor should swing things in our favor. That was how Dad and I reckoned it, anyway.”

CHAPTER III

Perilous Flight

Turning aside, the girl opened a locker and drew forth something that looked like a deflated balloon effigy from a fête day. As it lay on the floor Paddles and Wayne stared at it amazedly.

“What *is* it?” Wayne demanded. “Looks like a Venusian without his insides!”

“It is,” the girl said quietly. “Dad was a scientist as well as a governor: he had to be, in order to be governor, anyway. Old-time taxidermists used to dry pelts of animals. Modern scientists stuff human beings in the place of wax effigies; we know that. This skin was once owned by a Venusian soldier.

“All you’ve got to do is get inside it as you would into a space suit and let me fasten you up. Easy, isn’t it? Framework will attend to the lower part of the legs where you lose stature. Dad had it all worked out.”

“Good for Dad!” Wayne murmured, still wondering. Then he glanced sharply at Paddles. “You drive this crate, Paddles?”

“Sure!” He took the seat Wayne vacated and gripped the controls.

Wayne clambered into the skin and the girl closed up the various zipping devices. He found himself perched on two artificial feet at the leg extremities, and his eyes peered through the eyeholes in the face.

Certainly to the two surveying him he looked like the real thing, completely Venusian-suited, towering eight feet high, his breadth of shoulder minimized to normal by the extra height. At length the girl fixed the ray gun—the special Venusian type—in his artificial fingers.

“You’ll do,” Paddles commented briefly, then gazed ahead again.

“One thing,” the girl said, as Wayne moved clumsily. “Keep away from all sources of heat—those rocket chambers, for example. The tanning preparation melts easily; that’s its one fault. So remember! Otherwise you’re quite safe.”

“I hope!” Wayne muttered. Then he glanced around with a start as a violet beam suddenly bathed the ship in its radiance. He knew what that meant. It was the universal STOP signal used throughout the void.

He signalled Paddles briefly, and in response Paddles gave a thrust to the forward rockets that gradually brought the machine to a standstill. A guard ship came cruising up, drew alongside.

“Open your airlocks!” commanded a harsh Venusian voice over the space radio, permanently open for messages. “Stand by for examination!”

The airlocks were opened one after the other so no air could escape. Three giant Venusians, complete with leveled ray guns, entered and gazed around.

“Who are these two people?” The narrow-faced, cold-eyed officer looked at Wayne sharply as he spoke in Venusian.

“Prisoners,” Wayne replied briefly, choosing the words in the language he could best pronounce. “Asteroid X/47 has fallen to our gallant forces and these were the last two Earthlings remaining there. I shall take them through to Venus.”

“I see.” The officer’s tawny eyes studied Wayne keenly, with such intensity that Wayne began to feel his scalp prickle. Then with sudden curttness the officer snapped:

“What detachment are you from?”

Wayne hesitated only a split second.

“Asteroid Detachment, of course. This ship belonged to the last of the Earth forces.”

“Hm—!” The officer moved forward, and perforce Wayne moved back toward the window. He hesitated as he felt the pouring sunshine warm the back of his head through the skin. He saw Ethel Waldon’s face become suddenly drawn and anxious.

“Suppose,” the officer said, his eyes still narrowed suspiciously, “we go into this more thoroughly. I want the details of this capture for one thing; your own number and name, for another.”

He broke off abruptly, his eyes suddenly sharpening. Wayne felt ever-increasing heat on the back of his neck and head, then the sting of hot wax preparation as it melted inward.

“Disguise!” the officer barked out suddenly. “I thought so!”

He got no further than that, for with one mighty uppercut of his false fist Wayne lashed the Venusian under the jaw and sent him sprawling. His gun sailed through the air and landed in Paddles’ outflung hand. He bundled Ethel out of the line of fire and aimed at the guards. But they fired first, and the ray from one gun shot the weapon clean out of Paddles’ fist.

But in those precious seconds of diversion, Wayne had blundered across the control chamber. He hurled himself forward in a mighty dive, sending both men—their attention on Paddles—reeling toward the air lock. They went through it helplessly into the space beyond, came up sharp against the outer lock.

Ethel snatched up the gun Paddles’ hand had released and forced the remaining officer to his feet.

“Out!” Wayne ordered curtly. “Join your pals in the safety gap and be quick about it!” He administered a kick to help the Venusian on his way, then shouted after him, “You guys have twenty seconds to get on your portable space suits. Then I’ll open the second lock to space!”

With that he slammed the inner lock, scrambled out of his disguise and hurried to the control board. With a roar he sent the ship jolting forward, and as he had hoped, the waiting guard ship, unaware of what was transpiring, was simply left standing. Wayne waited the twenty seconds, then threw the switch that opened the outer airlock.

He looked back with grim eyes as three space-suited forms were projected into space by the outflowing vortex of air release. They began to float slowly toward their own now slowly moving guard ship.

“Guess you only hit out just in time, lad,” Paddles murmured, shaking his head reflectively. “That disguise was melting like hell. Write me down as a killjoy if you like, but I don’t see we’re much better off. They’ll follow. To quote the twentieth century, the heat’s on!”

Wayne gave a grim nod. “Yeah, they’ll follow us—but they’ll be way behind. They’ll have to collect those three guards first and then catch up on us.”

He built up speed gradually, stared at the glowing ball of Venus ahead.

“We’ve broken the second barrier, anyway,” he said. “This time we get through to Venus—or crack up. But I guess I’m selfish. I’ve no right to ask you to take this risk, Miss Waldon. You’d still have a chance as a prisoner of war. Tagging along with me, you’ve got none.”

The girl smiled faintly. “None? You seem to think you can reach Venus; so forget all about me.” She turned to the radio instruments. “I’m going through with this, now we’ve gotten started. And I’ve an idea too. Those guards will radio the other forces around Venus to block us. At least they’ll try to. A heterodyne beam may fix ’em. We can use it effectively too, since we’re between them and the receiving end.”

She settled herself before the radio apparatus and busied herself with its intricacies. The humming of a small but massively strong power engine pervaded the chamber as she went to work. At last she turned with a smile of triumph.

“That fixes our friends!” She glanced back at the far distance where the guard ship had now taken up the chase and was spinning through space at top speed. Even so, the gap was not narrowing as Wayne built up his own acceleration inexorably.

It crushed Paddles and the girl back in their chairs with its awful force, dewed their faces in perspiration, gripped their hearts and lungs in an iron band. At such a frantic pace, the mighty globe of Venus soon began to assume space-filling proportions, changing from a globe to a landscape of blinding white cloud. Out of the cloud, shooting like salmon from an ocean of cotton wool, came the investigating ships of the Venusian defensive fleet.

Wayne set his jaws and glanced at the taut faces on either side of him.

“We’re going through!” he announced grimly. “You’re sure that heterodyne will cut off the radio from the guard behind us?”

“Certain!” The girl’s voice was laboring under effort. “These boys ahead can only *think* we’re fugitives; they can’t be sure. If we drive right through them, we might stand a chance—the *only* chance, I guess.”

“Okay! Paddles, if you know anything about guns, chuck your two hundred and seventy pounds in front of those two there!”

“*If* I know!” Paddles gave a contemptuous sniff, then heaved his vast bulk over to action station. Presently he grinned with boyish delight as a trailing stream of six ships crossed the gun-sights. Wayne saw them too, turned swiftly in a left arc and dived like a plummet for the cotton wool far below. Faster—faster—until the outside of the ship began to scream like a top with the impact of sudden atmosphere.

To Ethel, that dive seemed like a plunge to hell. She hung onto her seat, her eyes fixed on that fast-rising sea of white, her head reeling from the headlong fall. Her left ear was numbed suddenly, as Paddles swung his automatic guns to action and hurled a withering protective fire of neutrons on either side of him.

Two of the pursuing craft caught the blast amidships, that much Wayne knew; then, like a falling meteor their ship plunged through the rest of the scattering defenders and into the clouds. Thick white mist instantly blanketed everything.

Eyes flashing over his instruments as he flew blind, Wayne swung the ship around, followed the astromap immediately under his controls. By its aid he knew almost exactly where he was, and in a moment or two the escaping ship burst from below the clouds onto the dense verdure of the Venusian super-tropical forest.

Wayne’s speed slowing down, he whizzed over the top of gargantuan trees, across marshes and interlaced streams of steamy water, across brackish wilderness, and so at last to an immense clearing in the forest itself. He twisted and turned, shot between vast trees with inches to spare, then landed with a crash that sent soil and subsoil spouting upward in a fountain. The ship rocked to a standstill.

“Wow!” Paddles breathed, relaxing and drawing his torn cuff across his brow. “Was that something! Lad, you’ve not much to learn in driving a space tub, I’ll tell you!”

Wayne got up hastily, massaged his stiff limbs.

“We’ve got to get moving as quickly as we can,” he said briefly, tightening his weapon belt. “That guard ship will catch up on us at any time. The rest we do on foot. Temperate Mountains are ten miles to the north and that’s the spot I want. Let’s go!”

He turned and flung open the airlocks. They bundled outside into the crushing heat, began to move swiftly under the eternally clouded sky of the planet. Using his smaller ray gun, Wayne blasted the way ahead of them, withering the tangled mass of vines and interlaced undergrowth that sought to bar their progress.

Presently Ethel said, “Wouldn’t it have been easier to land near Temperate Mountains and get this business over with?”

“No. For one thing, there’s no clearing, according to my map; and for another a ship would attract attention. On foot we can probably make it. ‘Least I can. Somehow I’ve got to reach General Fletcher—”

Wayne broke off and glanced upward. The trees had thinned here. He frowned at a flock of circling creatures like pterodactyls against the drifting white backdrop of sky.

“Carriion moths,” Paddles growled, eying them too. “Hoverin’ up there in the hope we’ll drop dead, then they can come down and pick us clean. These Venusian vultures give me the willies.”

“And a catastrophe for us!” Wayne snapped. “Those damned guards know where we are from, watching the birds! The Venusians naturally know their own planet inside out— We’ve got to hurry! Come on!”

They advanced, but not hurriedly. That was impossible. The awful oven-like temperature crushed them into leaden weariness.

It was perhaps an hour later when they heard the rumble and thunder of distant battle. Here in the jungle all was quiet enough; but as they well knew, the final conflict for the triumph of Venus or Earth in this war was being fought out in the Hollands of this strange planet with mammoth instruments of steel and destruction.

The nearer the trio moved toward the mighty range of Temperate Mountains, marking the barrier chain between the temperate and Hotland zones, the louder became the din, until it was an incessant roll that made the ground shake.

“Guess we’ll stop here awhile,” Wayne said at last, throwing down his pack thankfully. “We ought to be safe until dusk, anyway, and when that comes I can strike north through the jungle here and so across the enemy-occupied territory to General Fletcher’s headquarters.”

Paddles leaned back against a tree and rolled a tabloid concentrate around his tongue.

“I s’pose you won’t tell us just *why* you’re taking all this risk?”

“I can’t. But believe me, it’s urgent!”

“It must be, to risk cracking the blockade and defense lines,” the girl said seriously, putting down her water flask. “You’ve plenty of nerve, Mister,” she added, smiling.

Paul Wayne shrugged. “Nerve enough to try and save an army that’s being slaughtered by marsh fever instead of enemy rays.” He leaned back and gave a tight little smile. “You’ll get me talking if I’m not careful, and there’s got to be none of that. What worries me really is the danger to you, Ethel—I mean, Miss Waldon,” he stammered. “You may get killed.”

“I liked ‘Ethel’ much better,” she said naively; then shrugging, “As for my perhaps getting killed, so what? If I can help you, I may have something to live for. If you fail, I might as well be dead anyway as at the mercy of a Venusian conquest.”

“Philosophy of diamond brightness,” Paddles opined lazily.

For a while silence fell between them, then Wayne unfastened his portable radio and switched it on.

“May as well see if the garrison’s sending out any news,” he said briefly, and after a second or two a voice came in, in mid-sentence.

“. . . and we shall continue to maintain our resistance to the last man! Despite the virulence of the fever that has struck so many of us down, an ace space pilot from Earth is even now on his way with an antidote which can save us. Men, maintain courage! We shall yet win! We shall—”

Wayne switched off, his face grim.

“That was a private message to the Earth forces,” he muttered. “My radio is tuned to that one wavelength. But if the Venusians have by now tapped that wavelength, as is more than probable, they’ll know just what I’m aiming at! That makes things more urgent than ever—Come on, we’ve got to move again, quick!”

They all got to their feet hurriedly, then stopped buckling on their kit as a harsh voice rang out in badly accented English:

“Stand right where you are, the three of you!”

CHAPTER IV

To the Death

The trio turned very slowly and saw the Venusian officer they had tricked aboard the space ship, together with his two companions. He came forward slowly, his ugly face set and resolute.

“Better not try any tricks,” he advised briefly. “My job is to take the three of you—dead or alive. And I’m going to do it! You can thank the carrion moths for showing me where you were—”

That was as far as he got. He had advanced slowly while talking, ray gun in his hand; and in those moments Wayne had clearly realized that Paddles, the girl and he himself were face to face with death. He lunged suddenly, regardless of peril, in a long flying tackle, relying solely on his lesser height to dodge the beam of the ray gun—

And he succeeded, bringing the officer crashing to the ground! Wayne tried to fire his gun, but at the identical moment the girl’s heavy bootheel accidentally crashed down on his hand and brought a howl of anguish from him.

In those seconds Paddles moved too, snatched Wayne’s gun from his belt and swung it savagely at the other guards. He got one of them clean in the face, dropped him with a cinder for a head. The other Venusian fired, gouged the ground a foot from Paddles’ massive body.

Paddles fired again—but no ray-flash came forth. The gun had jammed at the vital moment. In a second he flung himself flat, and just missed the vicious beam that flashed past his ear. He knew it was only a matter of split seconds to death—

Then something else happened. The clearing suddenly became a fluttering hell of wings.

“Carrion moths!” Ethel shouted, shielding her face from their wild swervings and buffetings. “Are they quick to nose out a dead body!”

Paddles got up and covered her protectingly, backed away as the birds whizzed downward on the corpse of the dead officer. The remaining Venusian with the ray gun turned away from the onslaught and headed for the safety of the thicker jungle. Wayne for his part got to his feet immediately and left the officer he had knocked out sprawled in the loam. He came hurrying across the clearing with arms upflung across his head.

“Out!” he shouted. “Quick! Those moths don’t attack living things as a rule, but they might make mistakes in the confusion.”

The three of them turned and went hurrying on through the jungle, pack left behind them. They hacked and blazed their way, moving ever nearer to the rumble and thunder of battle that marked the situation of Temperate Mountains.

Then suddenly, with the devastating swiftness common to that second world, night fell. No twilight. Just an instant change into the 720-hour moonless dark of Venus. Paul Wayne came to a halt in the pitchy black, blinking.

“You two okay?” he demanded.

“Yeah,” came Paddles’ laconic voice.

“I’ve got Miss Waldon.”

They waited a moment, accustoming their eyes and gazing toward the intermittent flashings from the mountain range visible through the trees—volcanic lightning. Then, torch in hand, Wayne started their march again.

In and out, out and in they went, stumbling here, crawling there, through pits of Stygian dark, leaping gurgling streams, wading knee-deep through weed-choked morasses fetid with feverish miasma—and so on to more solid ground again. Ever nearer came the rumble of battle from beyond the mountains, and above it now the thin eternal hum of the hurricanes raging perpetually at the heights of the barrier, where the conflict of heat and cold twisted itself into nameless fury and roared in bolts of lightning through unsealed clefts.

At the last river barrier Wayne went first, edging his way across, keeping his feet with difficulty. Halfway across he stumbled and went to his knees, his torch flying out of his grip. It was disaster in more senses than one.

Behind him, plunged into dark, Paddles lost his balance and released the girl's arm. Her desperate cry sounded for a moment, then was drowned out in the furious roar of the waters as they boiled away to a none too distant cataract.

"Ethel!" Wayne screamed desperately, bracing himself against the flood. "Ethel!"

He peered helplessly into the absolute darkness, but there came no answering shout. He turned, started to move further downriver, then Paddles' grip pulled him back.

"Easy, lad!" he panted. "You can't make it! You'll waste hours trying to find her—and anyway, it's a cat in hell's chance with that Niagara ahead. Face up to it!"

"What in hell are you talking about?" Wayne blazed. "I can't let her just—"

"You've got to go on! You've your duty to do! You keep going and I'll look around for her. Go on! I'll find you later, somehow. . . ."

Wayne hesitated a moment, then he got a grip on himself.

"Okay," he said bitterly. "For God's sake, don't leave here without finding her! If all goes well I'll see you at G.H.Q. If not— Well, deserter or otherwise you're okay by me."

He gripped the fat hand warmly for a moment, then turned and floundered across the waters to firmer ground.

As he blundered onward through the jungle again, Wayne was surprised to find himself so concerned about the girl, considering the brief time he had known her. Now he realized that she had been something more than a friend and a comrade in danger. She meant far more than that . . . He shook all romantic thoughts out of his mind, concentrated on nothing save the duty he had to fulfill.

Two things began to impress him as he went on. For one thing, it was pretty certain that General Fletcher would be awaiting him; that would make his approach to Temperate Mountains G.H.Q. much easier. For another thing, he was puzzled by the lack of pursuit by the Venusian guard he had beaten up. The carrion moths would not have attacked the man while he still lived.

"Must have knocked him colder than I thought," Wayne muttered to himself; and then began to hurry his pace, as he found the jungle thinning at last and saw for the first time clearly the stupendous luminescent mass of Temperate Mountains, right before him on the short rocky plateau.

They were impressive, awe-inspiring, lit up and down their upper reaches with the play of atmospheric lightning. The noise of battle from beyond them was now like the growling of hell itself.

Wayne stopped a moment, eyes straining ahead through the flashing glow. After a while he could dimly distinguish the solitary metal blockhouse, where his maps back on Earth had

shown him General Fletcher's headquarters were situated. There were no guards—but that did not surprise him. The place was undoubtedly riddled with automatic defenses.

Finally he switched on the tiny portable emergency radio he had in his belt, an instrument only useful over short distance. In the earphone there was an instant response in the Universal language.

"Pilot Paul Wayne reporting, sir," Wayne said briefly. "I have a vital message to—"

"Yes, yes!" the voice of the general broke in quickly. "You will have free entry into the headquarters. Come immediately."

"Yes, sir."

Wayne got up and went swiftly across the darkened plateau, glancing from right to left. An absence of units going to and fro from headquarters puzzled him for a moment; then he dismissed it and hurried on, straight past the automatic guard, its fire withheld since it was controlled from inside G.H.Q. The rayproof door of the place opened automatically and Wayne strode thankfully into the great office beyond.

To his surprise only the general himself was present, seated at the map-strewn desk. The lights were so placed that he was mainly in shadow.

Wayne came to a halt, saluted, eyed the man steadily.

"I was instructed to find you, sir, by Earth G.H.Q., New York Sector—"

"Yes, yes, I know," the general, snapped. "You have a fever antidote. Very well—hand it over!"

Wayne hesitated. This was hardly the welcome he had expected; and besides, there was something queer about the general's expression—an immobile, frozen look. Again, the general's face where it was nearest the warmth of the desk light looked oddly greasy, while the other side was perfectly normal.

Wayne moved his hand, as though to reach inside his tattered tunic, but instead he made a lightning movement. He knew full well the consequences of his action if his guess was wrong, but it was worth the risk. He slapped the general clean in the face! At the same moment he doubled his fingers inward and pulled—

The general's face *tore!*

"Just as I figured!" Wayne snapped—but before he could reach his belt, he found the "general's" gun directed at him steadily. With his free hand the "general" tore away the rest of his disguise and revealed himself as the Venusian officer who had been knocked out.

"You're no fool, are you, Earthman?" he asked grimly, rising to his full immense height. "Let me explain this little surprise. I recovered from your attack upon me and returned to my ship. In the interval, your ship had been examined and a Venusian disguise found.

"Also, a radio message had been picked up from Earth G.H.Q. on Venus here, before it fell into our hands. I knew for the first time that your aim was to get a serum formula through for marsh fever. I knew you would come here, so I came on ahead in my space ship, disguised. I fancied I might obtain the formula from you without trouble. As it is— Well, you have compelled me to violence, after all."

Paul Wayne smiled crookedly. "And General Fletcher?"

"General Fletcher is—elsewhere. Earth G.H.Q. here was captured by us many hours ago . . . Hand over that serum formula quick!"

Wayne shook his head. "You can shoot me first. In fact, I don't see why you haven't done so already. All you want is to stop me getting through to General Fletcher, isn't it?"

“I want that serum formula for our own use!” the officer retorted. “When we have won this war and have subjugated Earthlings to our will, we want them to work, not die like flies. My commander requires that formula in order to make Earthlings capable of working for us. Your own chemists—obstinate fools—would die rather than reveal the secret of the formula. Upon you therefore depends everything. *Where is it?*”

Wayne’s eyes narrowed. “You know my answer!”

“Very well; sit down!”

Wayne obeyed slowly and the officer turned to a bank of instruments.

“Among these,” he said grimly, “is a lethal probe. You know what that can do. It can *make* you talk and—”

“And what?” asked a languid voice from the doorway; then curtly, “Put ’em up, death’s-head! I’m in no mood for games!”

Wayne twisted around joyfully, leapt from his chair as he beheld Paddles standing behind them, a ray gun in each hand—though heaven knew where he had obtained them.

“Outside, Wayne,” he said briefly, jerking his head. “I’ll join you.”

Wayne obeyed, waiting in the dark for five minutes until Paddles came out and joined him. Without a word Paddles hurried him beyond the reaches of the headquarters. Then he relaxed a little.

“Tied him up and socked him once; it’ll keep him quiet for hours,” he said briefly. “Kind of lucky I turned up, eh? I still don’t know how I got past the automatic guard—but I did.”

“Simply explained,” Wayne said. “The officer switched off the automatic guard to let me through and didn’t switch it on again! Whole setup was a trick, as you’ve probably gathered. But look, where’d you spring from? How did you get your guns?”

“Easy. After I’d gotten out of the river, I ran into a Venusian guard. I got him first tackle and frisked his guns. Did more’n that too! He told me just where General Fletcher really is—seems he and most of the garrison escaped—and I figured you had walked into a whole packet of trouble. So along I came.”

Paddles pointed to a distant dimly lighted stronghold in the foothills. “Fletcher’s over there! His temporary headquarters.”

Wayne glanced, then caught Paddles’ shoulder.

“Look, about Ethel Waldon. You mean you didn’t—”

“I didn’t find her, lad,” Paddles said quietly. “And further down the river it was a hundred percent rocks. Don’t see how anybody could survive it.”

For a long time Wayne was silent; then he shrugged resignedly.

“Okay; you did your best, I know. Let’s go!”

They went on together, stopping ever and again to dodge an alert Venusian patrol, gradually working their way past the massive boulders of the mountainside until they were directly within the Earth-zone. No sooner were they in it completely, however, before the defensive units came to life, actuated by photoelectric cells. As though from nowhere a party of armed Earthmen appeared, led by a single sharp-faced officer.

“What’s your business here?” he asked shortly, eying the two tattered men keenly.

“I’m Squadron Leader Wayne, New York Sector,” Wayne said quickly. “The general’s expecting me. But it’s a private mission, so you probably won’t know anything about it. I’ve got to see General Fletcher!”

“Yeah?” The officer’s eyes narrowed in the flood of lights that came up. “I know you,” he went on, studying Paddles. “Deserter from the Earth army; your face has been circularized to all headquarters. Penalty for desertion is death! As for you, Pilot Whatever-You-Call-Yourself, you’re in the same spot for aiding him!”

Wayne started. “Now wait a minute, man, I’m in earnest! This is a matter of life and death! I *demand* to see General Fletcher!”

“The general isn’t interested in deserters. I can attend to this quite adequately. Guard, move these two men over there. . . .”

The more Wayne protested, the worse his position seemed to get. Even his ripped tunic provided no evidence for his words, and since Paddles was a known deserter—

“Looks like I got you in a spot,” Paddles said glumly. “Serves me right. I should have stopped back on the Pimple and taken my chance—”

“Silence there!” the guard snapped. Then the officer called a halt and came forward. The two prisoners glanced rearward and found they were ominously near a metal wall.

“My orders,” the officer said shortly, “are to shoot all deserters out of hand. We cannot afford to take chances. Too many spies and traitors around, and our position is desperate.”

“Listen, I’ve got to see the general!” Wayne shouted desperately. “On my forearm is a formula which—”

The officer did not allow him to finish. He raised each of Wayne’s strong arms in turn and eyed them, dropped them and smiled grimly.

“Formula, eh? You take me for a fool?”

“Invisible micro-writing!” Wayne insisted. “You’ve got to listen, man! The fate of our whole force on this planet depends on it! I’m a special messenger!”

“And you want to get in to the general and take a pot-shot at him? Or better still, scratch him with poisoned fingernails? All that’s been tried by deserters and traitors before. *This* time it won’t work! My orders are to stop all and everybody from entering. One in company with a known deserter makes two. Guard, to attention!”

They drew up sharply, their ray guns leveled—but before they could fire, there was a sudden commotion in their ranks and the clanging of alarm bells. The officer glanced around as a slender figure came dashing into the light, a mud-stained figure in clothes ripped and torn.

“Ethel!” Wayne shouted hoarsely. “By all the fates—”

“Who are you?” The officer grasped her arm and whirled her to him.

“Ethel Waldon, daughter of the late governor of Asteroid X/47!” Her words came in a rush. “Don’t you realize who this man is?”

“Yes, a deserter!” the officer retorted. “And you are, too, from the looks of things. We know Asteroid X/47 is in Venusian hands. You can’t get away with this—”

“Oh, you *fool!*” the girl screamed hysterically; then before the officer could tighten his grip on her, she wrenched herself free and tore across the square to the doorway of the new G.H.Q. A hail of ray gun charges followed her. She fell, got up again holding her shoulder, staggered to the door and fell again.

Fists clenched, faced by those guns Wayne could only wait. He saw the headquarters door open suddenly. A broad-shouldered figure outlined against the light from within stooped and lifted the girl up. He carried her inside, then came hurrying out. It was General Fletcher himself, his voice hoarse with fury.

“What blasted infernal dolt rayed that girl?” he thundered. “Don’t you know she’s the daughter of my late friend the governor of Asteroid X/47? Did *you* give the order, Officer Clayton?”

“I—er— You said nobody was to see you, and—”

“Damn you for an idiot! Lower those guns, you men, and get back to your posts! Clayton, report to me in thirty minutes. There’s such a thing as too zealous a soldier. . . .”

Fletcher swung around. “Miss Waldon tells me she can vouch for your being Pilot Wayne of Earth Squadron,” he said gratefully, gripping Wayne’s arm. “I’m glad to see you—damn glad . . . I suppose Officer Clayton was only doing his duty, but dammit— You, there, come with us,” he added shortly to Paddles.

They went into headquarters quickly and Wayne instantly hurried to the girl as she lay on a camp bed.

“Ethel! Did they—”

“Nothing, Paul . . . nothing,” the girl smiled. “Flicked a piece out of my shoulder. Soon be fixed— Go on, get your business finished!”

Wayne stood up, turned to Fletcher.

“I have to report, sir—”

“I know all about that secret radio instructions. Where’s that formula?” Fletcher asked.

Wayne thrust out his arm. “Here. And credentials. I am instructed to tell you to use Ray 72/5. It will reveal the message.”

The general snapped a switch and a blue light trained on Wayne’s forearm. Momentarily the writing in his skin came to view, then faded as the switch cut off again.

“I am satisfied, Squadron Leader Wayne,” Fletcher said quietly. “I’ll have my experts here immediately.” He pressed several buttons. “You are a man of courage, Wayne,” he stated gravely. “This plague can now be mastered . . . But you—” He eyed Paddles menacingly.

“Also a man of courage,” Paul Wayne said firmly. “I vouch for that, sir. Not a deserter, but a staunch ally of the cause. Without him I would have failed.”

“I see . . .” Fletcher coughed. “All right—all right, I’ll take your word for it. You will be returned to service,” he finished, eying Paddles’ relieved face. “No questions asked.”

“Th-thanks, General!”

Wayne turned aside to the girl, spoke to her.

“Ethel, how did you ever get out of—”

“The river?” She shrugged. “A forked tree branch caught me around the waist and I managed to scramble out. I saw Earth soldiers returning to their base, so I followed them. It brought me here—just in time, too . . .”

“I don’t intend to ever lose you again,” Wayne said fervently. “I’ve got something to—”

He straightened up as the experts came in. But while they went to work to photograph his arm, his eyes and the girl’s were fixed fondly on each other.

[The end of *Special Agent to Venus* by John Russell Fearn (as Thornton Ayre)]