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STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

# PLANET stories

A.N.C.

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**BIG PILL**

## By RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

*Child, it was, of the now ancient H-bomb. New. Untested. Would its terrible power sweep the stark Saturnian moon of Titan from space ... or miraculously create a flourishing paradise-colony?*

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### U

nder the glow of Saturn and his Rings, five of the airdomes of the new colony on Titan were still inflated. They were enormous bubbles of clear, flexible plastic. But the sixth airdome had flattened. And beneath its collapsed roof, propped now by metal rods, a dozen men in spacesuits had just lost all hope of rescuing the victims of the accident.

Bert Kraskow, once of Oklahoma City, more recently a space-freighter pilot, and now officially just a colonist, was among them. His small, hard body sagged, as if by weariness. His lips curled. But his full anger and bitterness didn't show.

"Nine dead," he remarked into the radio-phone of his oxygen helmet. "No survivors." And then, inaudibly, inside his mind: "I'm a stinkin' fool. Why didn't we act against Space Colonists' Supply Incorporated, before this could happen?"

His gaze swung back to the great rent that had opened in a seam in the airdome—under only normal Earthly atmospheric pressure, when it should have been able to withstand much more. Instantly the warmed air had rushed out into the near-vacuum of Titan, Saturn's largest moon. Those who had been working the night-shift under the dome, to set up prefabricated cottages, had discarded their spacesuits for better freedom of movement. It was the regulation thing to do; always considered safe. But they had been caught by the sudden dropping of pressure around them to almost zero. And by the terrible cold of the Titanian night.

For a grief-stricken second Bert Kraskow looked down again at the body beside

which he stood. You could hardly see that the face had been young. The eyes popped. The pupils were white, like ice. The fluid within had frozen. The mouth hung open. In the absence of normal air-pressure, the blood in the body had boiled for a moment, before the cold had congealed it.

"Your kid brother, Nick, eh, Bert?" an air-conditioning mechanic named Lawler said, almost in a whisper. "About twenty years old, hunh?"

"Eighteen," Bert Kraskow answered into his helmet-phones as he spread the youth's coat over the distorted face.

Old Stan Kraskow, metal-worker, was there, too. Bert's and Nick's dad. He was blubbering. There wasn't much that anybody could do for him. And for the other dead, there were other horrified mourners. Some of them had been half nuts from homesickness, and the sight of harsh, voidal stars, even before this tragedy had happened.

It was Lawler who first cut loose, cursing. He was a big, apish man, with a certain fiery eloquence.

"Damned, lousy, stinkin' obsolete equipment!" he snarled. "Breathe on it and it falls apart! Under old Bill Lauren, Space Colonists' Supply used to make good, honest stuff. I worked with it on Mars and the moons of Jupiter. But now look what the firm is turning out under Trenton Lauren, old Bill's super-efficient son! He was so greedy for quick profits in the new Titan colonization project, and so afraid of being scooped by new methods of making these fizzled-out worlds livable, that he didn't even take time to have his products decently inspected! And that, after not being able to recognize progress! Hell! Where is that dumb, crawlin' boob?"

There was a moment of silence. Then somebody muttered: "Speak of the devil!..."



W

With eyes that had grown quietly wolfish, Bert Kraskow saw Trenton Lauren arrive at last from the administration dome. He was plump, maybe thirty-five, and somehow dapper even in a spacesuit. That he was here on Titan at all, and

not in a pressurized settlement on Mars, or at the main office of his firm in Chicago, was a cocky gesture of bravado, a leaf torn from the book of his more worthy sire, and perhaps more particularly an attempt to counteract the consequences of his bad business judgment, personally.

The fear of one who sees how his haste and greed can be called punishable criminal negligence, was in his face. The things that had been human, sprawled stiff before him, accusing him. But the worst was the presence of those grim, silent men, who might add him forcibly to the death-list. That moment held crystallized in it the conflict of an urge to win vast profits, with the payment in human lives that had been exacted this time.

Near-dead Titan was the present step in mankind's outward march of colonial dominion toward the stars. Titan itself was rich in the radioactive ores that has become the fuel, the moving force, not only of the rockets of Earth's expanding space-commerce, but of the wheels of industry and comfort at home. And richer in those elements were the Rings of Saturn, nearby, those stupendous, whirling bands of dust, wreckage of a broken satellite in which, as in any other planet or moon most of those heaviest, costliest metals had originally sunk to its center, far out of reach of mining operations. But in the Rings, all this incalculable wealth of uranium, radium, osmium, and so forth, not to mention millions of tons of useless gold, was uniquely exposed as easily accessible dust.

Oh, yes. And the S.C.S.—Space Colonists' Supply—wanted its cut for providing equipment, as received elsewhere in the past. Bert Kraskow knew that this must remain dapper Trenton Lauren's aim, in spite of a vast and possibly ruinous investment in manufactured goods that could turn out to be obsolete and unmarketable, in addition to its poor quality.

Bert studied Lauren from between narrowed eyelids, weighing his qualities further, judging, ever predicting. Trenton Lauren might hate himself some for the deaths that were his responsibility. Yet Bert bet that he hated himself more for having to explain the failure of one of his airdomes to these crude colonists. It hurt his ego. Lauren was full of fear; he was a stuffy, visionless conservative, but he was wily, too.

Bert saw his lips tighten, as he marshalled his forces to smooth down the fury of the men before him.

"I'm deeply sorry that these people had to die," he said in his high-pitched voice. "But chance-taking is part of any new space-venture. And all who use airdomes,

spacesuits, or other S.C.S. equipment, are insured against its defective performance. Ten thousand dollars, paid in case of death, is still a lot of money. S.C.S. has made fine products for over forty years. No dangerous, new-fangled ideas can yet replace them. Considering the risk inherent in space colonization, occasional mishaps can hardly be avoided. You all know that. Business—life—everything—is a gamble."

Sure. About chance-taking there was truth in his pompous words. But did one buy a life with a few thousand dollars, or call money a just penalty for obvious and deadly neglect?

Knots of muscle gathered at the angles of Lawler's square jaw. Old Stan Kraskow stared at Lauren as if he didn't believe that anybody could talk so stupidly.

Bert Kraskow's savage blood seethed. But when he was really sore his tendency was to be coldly and quietly logical in his speech and actions. The plans to change things were made. He was in on them. And what was the use of getting into arguments that might give the enemy a hint? Or set off violence that might spoil everything?

"Easy," he whispered. "Dad! Lawler! Don't talk. Don't start anything."

But Alice Leland Kraskow, Bert's wife, had arrived on the scene. She was little and dark and fiery, one of the few feminine colonists yet on Titan. In another airdome, where Bert and she had their cottage, she had been awakened by the shouts of those who had seen the accident take place. Donning a spacesuit, she had followed the crowd.

Being at a little distance from her, Bert had no chance to shush her outspoken comments. And to try might have done no good, anyway. She had truth to tell, and a woman's tongue to tell it.

"Yes, Mr. Lauren," she said pointedly. "We're all gamblers. Granted. But you started to cheat even before you were afraid of losing. Maybe it's time we did something about it."

Trenton Lauren looked more scared than before. But now, as two Space Patrolmen in their silvery armor, arrived from their quarters and stood beside him, he smiled a little.

"Madam," he drawled, "maybe I know what you mean. You want to defy the law.

Someone around here has been hoping for word from Earth that an okay has been granted by the Safe Products Approval Board, for, shall we say, a radically new product? Well, the optimists will wait a long time for such approval at the S.P.A.B. The action of this invention is, to say the least, extremely dangerous. So, if they're that foolish, those optimists might as well go ahead with their alternate course: To bring their deadly and spectacular innovation dramatically into use without the stamp of safety!"

Bert's concern about his wife's outspoken challenge to Lauren was thus suddenly diverted. His jaw hardened further. A nagging suspicion that Trenton Lauren had found things out, was confirmed. It meant, perhaps, that Lauren had already taken counteraction secretly.

Bert Kraskow longed to beat up Lauren in spite of the presence of the two space policemen. But the need for immediate and better action denied him this extravagant luxury. He went to his wife's side and took her arm.

"Lauren," he said. "I've got a brother to bury. So discussions are out, for now. Guys, will you bring Nick's body to my cottage? Come on, Allie...."



## B

Bert was trying very hard to slip away unobtrusively when Lauren grinned mockingly. "Hold on, Kraskow," he snapped. "You're tangled up in this matter, somehow. I've learned that you've already broken a minor law by landing a ship quietly out in the deserts of Titan without declaring its presence; a ship that can be assumed reasonably to be freighted with lethal materials. As a dangerous individual, you can be put under an arrest of restraint. Legal technicalities can be disregarded in a raw colonization project where people are apt to show hysteria, and where something like military law must be enforced for general protection. The say-so of an old and honorable firm like S. C. S. that you are a menace, can, I am sure, be accepted. Patrolmen, take him!"

The cops were puzzled. They offered no immediate objection as Bert, leading his wife, tried to pass them. But Lauren got in Bert's way to prevent him from slipping into the glowering crowd.

Against a man in space-armor, fists weren't very effective; still Bert had the



satisfaction of giving Lauren a mighty shove that sent him sprawling. A terrible fury was behind it. The desperation of a last chance. Here was where he had to become completely outlaw.

Alice and he threaded their way through the crowd where the cops could use neither their blasters nor their paralyzers, in spite of Lauren's frantic urging to "Get them!"

Once in the clear, Bert ran with his wife. There was no question of destination. They came to a metal shed. Inside it, beside the small spaceboat, they found Lawler who had anticipated where Bert would go.

The two men spoke to each other with their helmet radios shut off to avoid eaves-dropping. They clasped hands so that the sound-waves of their voices would have a channel over which to pass, in the absence of a sufficiently dense atmosphere.

"All of a sudden I'm a little worried, Bert," Lawler growled. "About the Big Pill. Maybe Lauren is half right about its being so dangerous. After all it has never been tested on a large scale before. And there are two hundred people here on Titan. Well, you know what's got to be done now. When you get to the *Prometheus*, tell Doc Kramer that I'm squeezing my thumbs...."

Lawler sounded almost plaintive at the end.

Bert felt the tweak of that same worry, too, but his course was set. He grinned in the darkness that surrounded them.

"Nuts!" he said. "Even Lauren admits that everything is a gamble, remember? And you can pile all of the people into the space ship here in camp, and blast off with them, and hover at a safe distance from Titan till we're absolutely sure. I'd better hurry now, Lawler. Lauren's cops'll be on my tail any second. Gotta go."

"With your wife along?" Lawler demanded.

"Sure," Bert answered. "Allie's a fine shot with a blaster. Often I wish she wasn't such a good shot with her tongue. But I guess that with Lauren she cleared the atmosphere. Right, Allie?"

With a small hand on the shoulder of each man, Alice had been listening in. "I think so," she answered grimly. "Let's dash."

Ten seconds later Bert Kraskow and his wife went rocketing up into the weird and glorious Titanian night, which was nearing its end. They thought of Doc Kramer, the little physicist, waiting for them out in the desert, in the space ship, *Prometheus*, with its terrible and wonderful cargo. Bert thought, too, of his contact and contract with the new colonists' supply company, which was also called Prometheus. Yeah, Prometheus, the educator, the fire-bringing god of the ancient Greeks. The symbol of progress. At that moment Bert Kraskow felt very right. He'd been hired secretly to help carry the torch against the stiff and smug forces of conservative obstructionism, with its awkward and now antiquated methods.

Alice kept looking behind through the windows of the spaceboat's cabin. She spoke, now, with her helmet face-window open, for there was breathable air around them.

"I was thinking that Lauren might want us to run like this, Bert, so that we'd lead the cops to the hiding place of the *Prometheus*. So far there's no pursuit."

Bert growled, "I'm not worried that the Patrol boys won't be along. What really scares me is that some of Lauren's men may already have found the *Prometheus*. We'll just have to wait and see."

Beneath the spaceboat the desert rolled. Vast Saturn and his multiple moons, hung against the black and all-but-airless star-curtain. Then, all of a sudden, before the eastward hurtling craft, it was daylight, as the tiny sun burst over the horizon. Its wan rays fell on pale, stratified mists of air, all but frozen in the cold of night.

Those mists, cupped between the hills, were the last of Titan's atmosphere. Once, eons ago, when monster Saturn had been hot enough to supplement the far-off sun's heat with radiation of its own, those hills had been, for a few brief ages, verdant with primitive, mossy growths.

Bert followed the dry bed of an ancient river, till he came to the rocky cleft where the *Prometheus* had been concealed.

Just as they glimpsed the ship, Alice gave a sharp gasp, as they saw another spaceboat dart unhurriedly away. Bert landed in the rocky gorge, and on foot they approached the *Prometheus* cautiously, the blasters from the cabin of the spaceboat gripped in their gauntleted hands.

They found the ship's airlock securely bolted. But someone had tried to cut through its tough, heat-resistant shell with a blaster for the metal was still hot.

"A break," Bert breathed raggedly. "We got here just in time to scare them off... Hey!..."

That was when they found Doc Kramer. He lay behind a boulder, a pathetic little figure who seemed to be merely sleeping. There wasn't a mark on him that could be easily discovered. There was no time to figure out how he had died—by poisoned needle, overstrong paralyzer beam, or whatever. His body, within its spacesuit, was just beginning to develop rigor mortis.

Alice's eyes were wet, her small jaw set hard. "Your brother's death was at least an unintentional accident caused by carelessly made equipment, Bert," she said. "But Doc was murdered."

"Yeah," Bert grated thickly. "Only murder is awful hard to prove as far from civilization as this. Come on, we can't do a thing about it right now."

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## D

ouble rage and grief drove him on toward what he must do with greater insistence than before. With a key from his hip-pouch, he opened the airlock of the *Prometheus*. With great caution they went inside but found no one in the ship.

The mood of its interior was brooding and sullen. Every cubic foot of space not taken up by its machinery and fuel was packed with black ingots of an alloy, a large proportion of which was fissionable metal, quiescent now, and harmless, but under the right kind of primer, capable of bursting into a specialized hell of energy. Five thousand tons of the stuff, Earth-weight!

But even all this was the secondary part of the purpose for which the *Prometheus* had been fitted. Bert and Alice followed a narrow catwalk to a compartment along the keel of the ship which was fitted like a huge bomb-bay. And the monster that rested there, gripped by mechanically operated claws, would certainly have fitted the definition of a bomb as well as anything that had ever been made by Earth-science. Child, it was, of the now ancient H-bomb.

It was a tapered cylinder, a hundred feet long and thirty feet thick. For one grim, devilish moment Bert Kraskow paused to pat its flank, to feel the solid metallic slap of its tremendous shellcase under his palm, to be aware of the intricacies of its hidden parts: The forklike masses of fissionable metals that could dovetail and join instantly; the heavy-water, the lead, the steel, the beryllium.

Here was watchlike perfection and delicacy of mechanism—precision meant to function faultlessly for but a fragment of a second, and then to perish in a mighty and furious fulfillment. Here was the thought of man crystallized—trying to tread a hairline past inconceivable disaster, to the realization of a dream that was splendid.

In that moment this thing seemed the answer to all the fury of wrong and sorrow that burned in Bert Kraskow. And the vision soared in his mind like a legend of green fields and light. For a few seconds he was sure, until doubt crept up again from the bottom of his brain, and until Alice put that uncertainty into words.

"Doc is gone," she said. "Even with his expert help, using the Big Pill would be taking a chance. Bert, do you think we can do it alone? Will it be all right? Are you certain, Bert?"

Her large, dark eyes pleaded for reassurance.

He sighed as the strain plucked at his nerves, in spite of what he knew of Doc Kramer's careful small-scale tests. Maybe what he felt was just a normal suspicion of anything so new and so colossal.

"No, Allie, not *absolutely* certain," he replied. "But how can anybody ever be sure of anything unless they try it? Doc died for an idea that holds tremendous hope for the good of all people who make their living in space. He was the principal inventor, and much more than just the boss of a new company. We aren't going to let him down. What we're going to do is for Nick, and for everybody who ever died violently on near-dead worlds. Lauren, and what he stands for, won't stop us. We can radio another warning and instruct everyone on Titan to blast off for a while."

Alice seemed to draw confidence from her husband's words. She smiled a bit wanly. "Okay, Bert," she said. "This is also for the folks who have gone nuts, or have just gotten terribly homesick from seeing too much black sky of space for too long. Let's go!"

They strapped themselves to the seats in the *Prometheus*' control room. Bert depressed the throttle. Rocket jets flamed. The rebuilt freighter lifted heavily and gained momentum toward a speed of miles per second. In the rear-vision screen the Kraskows saw two police spaceboats flashing the blue signal for them to land.

Bert set the *Prometheus* in an orbit around Titan, about a thousand miles above the bleak and dried out surface of this Saturnian satellite. Thus the ship became a little moon of a moon.

Alice was shouting into the mike of the large radio transmitter: "Colonists at Camp Titan! Enter your ship! Blast into space for safety! We are about to use the Big Pill! Colonists at Camp Titan! Blast for safety!... Police boats, give us room! Don't interfere!..."

This was the start of wild drama. When Alice switched from transmission to reception, the calls from the patrol craft were stern: "Freighter *Prometheus*, this is the Space Patrol. Proceed to a landing or we blast."

But these calls still seemed secondary, compared to other words also coming from the receiver, like another, overlapping radio program. It was Trenton Lauren's scared voice that spoke:

"Space Colonists' Supply, Incorporated, calling deep-space units of patrol! Send more help to Titan! Maniac named Kraskow amuck with freighter *Prometheus*, known to contain huge bomb! Destroy on sight: Bomb supposed to be invention of group headed by one, Emil Kramer, renegade scientist believed to have a grudge against S. C. S. Claims for invention wholly extravagant and unbased. Hurry, deep-space units of Patrol. More help! Or all of Titan will be flooded with heat and deadly radioactivity! Hurry.... Hurry.... Hurry...."

Just then the *Prometheus* rocked from the impact of a blaster-beam; and though the Kraskows could not see the effect of the weapon, they knew that there were glowing spots on their ship's tough hull. If the Patrol boats could bear down with their beams on a particular area for a few seconds, a mighty episode could end violently before it had a chance to start.

Alice's small hands were on the complicated aiming and firing mechanism of the heavy blaster, mounted externally on the hull of the *Prometheus*.

"I'll keep the cops at a distance with a few near-misses," she said. "Maybe they

aren't too anxious to take the chance of setting off the Big Pill, anyway. Let me worry about them, Bert. Just do what you've got to do...."

They had shut off their radio. There was no need to listen to the somewhat hysterical repetitions of what had come through before.

Every few moments there was a burst of humming sound as Alice fired. Bert put additional power into the rockets to surpass fixed orbital speed; but he held the ship to a tight curve around Titan. It was best to cover distance as quickly as possible. In his speeding course, he passed almost over the camp. But his purpose was to bomb a point at antipodes from it, halfway around this Saturnian moon.

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## U

nder full acceleration, the *Prometheus* was soon nearing this destination. To allow for the Big Pill's forward motion, imparted to it by the ship's velocity even after release, he pressed the lever that opened the bomb-bay doors, and then jabbed the single button that controlled both release, and the firing of the gigantic missile's own propulsive jets. Without those jets, considering the centrifugal force of its vast velocity in a circular path around Titan, much overbalancing the feebler gravitational pull of the moon, it could not have started its fall at all. It needed jets to drive it down.

Bert jabbed the button with his eyes closed since he had no precise target to hit. His teeth were gritted.

With the sudden loss of mass, the ship lurched. Bert had to struggle for a moment to adjust the angle of its flaming stern-jets, and bring it back on course. In another few seconds he cut the stern-jets out entirely, and opened the fore-nozzles wide to check excess speed, and reestablish the *Prometheus* in a stable orbit around Titan. One that could last forever without additional thrust.

"Well, the Big Pill is on its way—for better or worse," Alice remarked. "Half of our job is done."

But time had to pass before that metal colossus could drive itself and fall the thousand miles to the bleak, dried-out hills below. And the space ship hurtled on,

to leave the point of coming impact far beyond the horizon. This, the Kraskows knew, was fortunate for them. The solid bulk of Titan would be the shield between them and holocaust. No human eyes could have looked directly on such a holocaust, at a range of a mere thousand miles, and not be burned from their sockets.

Bert and Alice noticed that the Space Patrol craft were no longer pursuing them. Alice switched on the radio again but only jangled sounds came through.

"Now for the last half of our job, Allie," Bert said. "First we attach shoulder-pack jets to our spacesuits."

This was accomplished a few seconds before the stupendous flash of the Big Pill's explosion blazed beyond the horizon. The dark curve of Titan's bulk was limned against thin white fire that streamed outward toward the stars like comet's hair. The spectacle looked like a much-enlarged color-photo of a segment of a solar eclipse. The glare on the other side of Titan was so intense and far-reaching that the night-portions of huge Saturn and his other satellites, and the shadowed part of the fabulous, treasure-filled Rings, all hundreds of thousands of miles away, registered an easily perceptible flicker. But in airless space, of course, no sound was transmitted.

Alice's face went pale. Bert did not stop doing what must be done—adjusting the timing system in the black case beside his pilot seat, and looking with a final, intense glance along the cable which led back through the hull of the ship to a silvery, pipelike thing around which the thousands of tons of sinister black ingots were stacked. It was the primer-cap of another kind of subatomic fury.

About the white fire beyond the horizon, hardly dimming at all after its first dazzling flash, neither Alice nor Bert said anything. Maybe their awe and concern were too great. But already long fingers of incandescent gases were jetting and flowing over the hilltops, as if to catch up with the speeding ship.

Bert Kraskow knew pretty well what was going on where the Big Pill had struck the crust of Titan. First, there had been that stupendous blast. Then, inconceivable blue-white incandescence, like the heart of a star, began gnawing more gradually into the walls of the gigantic crater that had been formed. A chain-reacting process was now spreading through the silicates and other components of Titan's crust. It was a blunt and terrible inferno.

But to the scientist's view, chemical compounds were being broken apart; atoms

were being shattered, and recast in new forms, as floods of neutrons, and other basic particles raced like bullets through their structure. On a small scale, here was something that was like the birth of the universe.

Bert found his voice at last. "The ship is firm in its orbit around Titan, Allie. The primer is set for thirty minutes from now. And we're approaching position above camp again. So here's where we bail out."

The Kraskow's closed their helmet face-windows and jumped from the airlock together. Flame-propelled by their shoulder-pack jets, they darted downward toward the sad, rolling hills that curved away under the weak light of the distance-shrunken sun. It was hard to believe that eons ago, before most of Titan's air and water had leaked away into space, those hills had been green with life.

Even with an ugly, red-lit vapor pouring and spreading over the arc of Titan's edge, they thought of such things.

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## T

heir helmet radiophones were full of static from intense electromagnetic disturbances, so that it was hard to converse.

But presently Alice shouted: "Bert! It's funny that we don't see the ship from camp anywhere in space. They must have gotten our warning to blast off with everybody. Radio reception was clear as a bell, then!... Wait! Somebody's trying to call us now...."

Bert strained his ears to penetrate the scratchy noises thrown up by the atomic holocaust that he had set off, and hear the words spoken blurredly by a familiar voice:

"... Bert ... Alice.... This is Lawler.... Rockets of ship won't function.... So ... can't leave ... camp.... Two Space Patrol boats cleared Titan with some ... women.... Too small ... few passengers.... Most ... stranded here.... Bert—what?... I think ... Lauren...."

The rest of the words were drowned in a cataract of static.



Bert gulped. His mouth tasted suddenly sour with near-panic. "Lauren," he grated, his voice like a file. "Again. It would be a long chance that the ship broke down just by coincidence. He doctored those rockets and probably got clear in his own spaceboat. Leave it to him to make the use of the Big Pill look like disaster. And it can be that, now, with people left in the danger zone, losing their heads, acting foolishly."

Bert felt much more than just bitter, furious chagrin. His fellow colonists might lose their lives. He was responsible. He had launched a gigantic experiment recklessly.

"All we can do is get back to camp as fast as possible," Alice shouted above the static. "Come on, Bert! Bear down on the jets!"

So they hurtled at even greater speed toward the surface of Titan below. Meanwhile, faintly luminous vapors continued to pour over the hills from the direction of the terrible glow that fringed the horizon. Minutes before they reached the ground, hot, dusty murk thickened around them. It blew against them like a devil's wind.

They began to use their jets to brake speed. The camp was all but lost to view in the thickening haze. They landed heavily a mile outside it and went rolling for a few yards after the impact. Dazed, they staggered up.

For a while their impressions were blurred, as if they struggled through some murky, cobwebby nightmare. Once more on Titan, silent as death for unthinkable ages, there were howling wind-sounds that found their way to Alice and Bert dimly through their oxygen helmets. Often the hot blast bowled them over, but they arose and kept on toward camp.

Bert took a Geiger counter, pencil-size from his chest-pouch. In it, flashes of light replaced the ancient clicking. It flickered madly. This meant that outside their shielding spacesuits was radioactive death. The gases of the wind that howled around them, had been in part released from chemical compounds, but more had been transmuted from other elements of the rock and dust in the crust of Titan, in that atomic vortex where the Big Pill had struck. Those gases were so new that they were tainted with the fires of their birth—saturated with radioactivity.

"It's nothing that we didn't expect, Allie," Bert grated into his helmet-phone, as if to reassure himself as well as his wife. "We knew beforehand."

His arm was around Alice, supporting her unsteady steps. Through blowing clouds of dust and gas that had surpassed hurricane force, they reached camp. Through the murk they saw that the wind had flattened and scorched every airdome. But there was no one in sight.

"The people must be inside the ship!" Alice shouted. "Even if it can't fly, it can protect them! There it is, undamaged!..."

"Yeah," Bert agreed, but he knew that her cheerfulness was a little like grabbing at a straw.

Then Alice had another thought, "By now there isn't anymore Space Ship *Prometheus*," she said. "It has melted to a globe of incandescent metal, kept hot by a slow atomic breakdown in its substance. But it's sticking to the same tight orbit around Titan."

They hadn't seen it happen because by then the *Prometheus* had passed beyond the horizon. But the globe would circle Titan and return.

Alice kept trying to be cheerful. Bert felt a flicker of that same mood when he said, "Sure, Allie." But then his mind dropped the subject of the *Prometheus*. For there was too much terrible uncertainty and human confusion to be dealt with.

Bert led Alice to the small, seldom-used airlock near the stern of the camp ship. He had a logical hunch that Lawler would be waiting just inside to tell them what the situation was on board.

The hunch proved true. The lock's inner door slid aside stiffly and there was Lawler, a finger to his lips.

Quickly the Kraskows removed their radioactivity-tainted spacesuits. Bert spoke softly.

"Well, Lawler, how do the gases that are spreading over Titan test out chemically?"

"As was expected, Bert. Plenty of nitrogen. Some helium. Plenty of hydrogen. A lot more oxygen. So that, as all of the hydrogen burns—combines with it to form water-vapor—there still will be lots of oxygen left over, floating free. Of course these gases are still so radioactive that half a lungful would kill. Only time will tell if Doc figured things straight. By the way, where is he?"

"Dead," Bert answered. "Murdered."

Lawler's lip curled, but he showed no surprise. "Uhunh," he grunted. "We can't prove the sabotage of this ship's rockets, either. When we tried to take off they just fizzled out their insides."

Then Lawler's eyes gleamed. "But," he said, "I foresaw funny business, so I doctored the jets of Lauren's private spaceboat as a precaution. He's still here with a couple of his stooges. He just about had hysterics when the space cops couldn't find room for him. He's been yelling accusations and promises of court action ever since while trying to repair his spaceboat."

"How are the colonists taking what happened?" Bert cut in.

Lawler shrugged. "Not bad. Not good. What you'd expect. Lots of those people are new to space. That was hard to take in itself. Add some messy deaths, and now this. And with Lauren yelling—well—plenty of them don't like us."

"Did anybody get hurt, yet?" Bert demanded.

"Not yet. Want to see the bunch?"

"Sure," Bert answered.

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## H

e thrust Alice behind him as they approached the main lounge of the ship where most of the colonists were assembled.

Trenton Lauren's voice burst on his ears. "There he is! Kraskow, I'll see that you spend your life in prison! A Patrol ship is coming out from Mars right now to get you! You may even hang! Out there in camp are ten million dollars' worth of equipment—property of my firm—which has been destroyed by your malicious action. And you've made a whole world useless for colonization for centuries to come! It's poisoned with radioactivity! Maybe we'll all die! Do you hear me, Kraskow? Die!"

Bert Kraskow moved quietly forward, past faces that glowered at him. Then he struck. There was a vicious thud. Lauren went down, drooling blood, his eyes

glazed. Bert did not lose a motion as he stepped forward, and laid Lauren's two henchmen low with equal dispatch.

Minutes passed before the trio was awake again. Before Lauren could spout more venom, Bert stopped him with a growl. "Get out of my sight," he said. "Say another word and you'll get more of what you just got."

They went, Lawler following to watch out for possible mischief.

"None of us are hurt, yet," Bert told those near him, "though some things have gone wrong. Let's sit tight and see how matters turn out."

As he looked around him Bert felt that most of the colonists didn't really care to listen to him. Maybe you couldn't blame them. They'd all heard and seen too much. And, in a sense, Bert felt little different than they did. There was fear in him, and tension. He had released a colossus. Calculations and minor tests might call it a genie of benevolence. But this remained still unproven.

Outside, the wind howled, making the ship quiver. The glow from the Big Pill continued to paint the now murky sky. Bert and his wife waited grimly and silently in the lounge with the others. Hours passed without much change. Once, briefly, it was red-lit night. Then this changed for a while to daylight that was blurred, but far stronger than that to which a Saturnine moon was accustomed.

A little later Lawler came back to the lounge. "Trenton and his bums got their spaceboat patched up," he announced. "I watched 'em do it. They went out protected by spacesuits, of course. They did a botch job, but I guess it'll hold. Now they're taking off."

Through the leaded glass of the window-ports, the colonists watched the craft vanish into the steam-filled wind.

A minute later disaster struck the colonists.

The explosion was not heavy against the roar of the storm, but a jagged hole, a yard across, was ripped in the ship's hull. Into the hole rushed the hot, radioactive wind. Automatic safety doors failed to close properly. Maybe they had been sabotaged, too, by Lauren.

Many of the colonists were wearing spacesuits. They were the lucky ones, only having to slam their face-windows shut to be protected sufficiently from radiation. The others had to scramble to armor themselves. Bert and Alice

Kraskow, and Lawler, had been outside. The outer surfaces of their suits had been contaminated, so they had had to remove them inside the ship to avoid tainting their surroundings. And in the press of events they hadn't thought to put on other spacesuits.

In the lounge and elsewhere, fastened against the walls, were such armor for emergency use. Bert tried to help his wife get into one. But she ordered sharply: "I can do this! Take care of yourself, Bert."

He didn't do that. Nor did Lawler. They ran down a passage toward the rent in the ship, intent on stopping the gases that were flooding the craft's interior. Seconds were important. The radioactive wind, much cooled during the long journey from its point of origin, but poisoned by invisible emanations, struck their unprotected bodies. Yet they kept on. They dared not breathe or speak; still they worked together with an efficiency of terrible need, stepping over the forms of men who had already fallen.

Bert found a flat sheet of metal to use as a patch. He fitted it over the rent, and, while Lawler piled boxes of supplies against it to hold it in place, sealed the edges with a thick, tarry substance.

When the job was done they staggered back to the lounge. Blotches of color danced before their vision. Many corpuscles in their blood had already been destroyed by radiation. They sank to the deck.

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## B

ert had a jangled impression of Alice, now in a spacesuit, holding his head. He saw her lips mouthing endearments.... Game little Allie.... His mind wandered off. He was going to die. Maybe everyone on the ship was going to die. Lauren's last move had been meant to provide a real disaster, with many deaths! Prove the Big Pill a failure. Make sure that it would be banned for good by the Safe Products Approval Board. Put the stamp of crime on Doc Kramer, the gentle little scientist who had been murdered! And on him, Bert Kraskow. And where was the rat, Lauren? On his way to the colonized moons of Jupiter, or even Mars, yelling and accusing by radio all along the line?

As consciousness faded further, Bert stopped thinking unpleasant things. His

mind drifted into Doc Kramer's dream—of the changes which would make the near-dead worlds of space really habitable and homelike, fit for human colonists. It was a beautiful, lost vision.

He was out cold, then, for several Earth-days, and only dimly aware for many days afterward. He knew that he was in the ship's sick-bay, and that Lawler and other men were there, too. He heard their voices, and his own, without remembering what was said. Alice often came to see him. Often he heard roaring, watery sounds, as of vast rains.

Gradually he came out of the dream-like period, learning of what had happened. Until the time when he walked from the sick-bay, unsteadily, but on the mend.

Alice, at his elbow, spoke: "It was like Doc Kramer planned, Bert, solving the hardest problem."

He knew what this meant. Transmutation, or any atomic process, must involve the generation of much radioactivity that can destroy life. In the Big Pill, the problem was to make all the atoms break, and rearrange their components into new elements as cleanly and sharply as possible, so that residual atomic instability—radioactivity, that is—would not linger for years, but would disappear quickly.

"Titan's new atmosphere is clean and breathable, now, Bert," Alice went on. "And likewise the radioactive poisons that made you and Lawler and the others very ill disappeared quickly from your bodies. However, two colonists were beyond saving."

Lawler was with the Kraskows. They went out of the ship without the cumbersome protection of spacesuits. A Space Patrolman hovered like a worried hawk, watching Bert, but the latter seemed not to mind.

Far above, replacing the hard stars and blackness of space, common to the firmaments of all dead and near-dead worlds, were great fleecy clouds and blue sky. The atmosphere, because of Titan's low gravity, was highly expanded and hence thin, but rich in oxygen. The breeze smelled cool and fresh. Overhead was a second sun, seemingly much larger in diameter than the distant central orb of the solar system. It crept with visible motion across the sky. It was the molten globe of what had been the *Prometheus* and its cargo, locked in its sub-lunar orbit around Titan. But it was calculated to provide sufficient warmth and light to a small world such as this, for ten Earth-years, without renewal.

Colonists were clearing away the wreckage of the now useless airdomes, and putting their cottages in order. But they still looked around in awe at the miracles that ended their space-nostalgia, making them feel truly at home here. Down in the valley there was even a great lake of rainwater from condensed steam—one of the end-products of the process that had gone on in the rocks of the great crater on the other side of Titan. That process had died to a sleepy smoking, now; but all over this moon of Saturn there were many lakes.

Big Lawler chuckled gleefully, the sound rumbling deep in his chest. "Rejuvenation of burnt-out spheres on a really progressive basis," he growled. "No obsolete, jury-rigged junk! Expensive? Sure! But we can pay for it! Out there are Saturn's metal-rich Rings!"

Bert was thinking that the same trick could be used on any world with enough gravity to hold down a respectable atmosphere. Half-dead Mars. Jupiter's four biggest moons. Some of the other satellites of Saturn. Mercury.

"The one thing that burns me is that my brother, Nick, and Doc Kramer, and those two colonists, had to die!" Bert grated. "Poor Doc. He was rich from the atomic engines he invented. And I knew long ago that, by his will, all his stock is to be put in trust for the welfare of spacemen and colonists. Should we feel glad or humble?"

Lawler's grin had become a snarl. "Damn Trenton Lauren!" he said.

Alice didn't exactly smile. "I should have told you before this," she offered seriously, "but death always upsets me. By radio report from a scouting Patrol boat an hour ago, Lauren and his stooges were found, smashed and burned in the crash of their craft a hundred miles from camp. Their half-repaired spaceboat killed them."

Bert and Lawler exchanged glances. Their anger faded.

"What's new from the Safe Products Approval Board, Allie?" Lawler asked at last. "You seem to find things out fast."

"Nothing new," she answered. "The latest messages are much the same as those from a while ago. Guarded enthusiasm, and the statement that an okay for the Kramer Methods must be withheld pending complete and prompt investigation. Can't blame them. Caution is important."

"Maybe, if you played your cards right, you could become the new president of

the Prometheus outfit, Bert," Lawler kidded.

But the possibility was certainly there. Bert was proud of what he'd done. Prometheus owed him plenty. Still, looking across camp past cottages and shops to the red mud of the once-dry, frigid hills, and down to the blue lake in the valley, reflecting sky and clouds, he knew that his heart was here in this crescendoing colonial scene. Somewhere a circle-saw screamed. From the metals-shop came the clanging of a mechanical hammer. These were sounds of a great future here.

"Nuts, pal," Bert chuckled to Lawler. "I'll leave the official pencil-pushing to the lab experts. The building and progress are here. You and Allie and I will all be back on Titan very soon."

These three began to be aware that a crowd of still befuddled but happy colonists were gathering around them. Another Space Patrol man approached, and said very officially:

"Mr. and Mrs. Kraskow, and Mr. Lawler: Our large ship leaves for Earth in five hours. Be ready to blast off. As you are aware, certain still valid charges were lodged against you by Trenton Lauren. You used dangerous equipment, not yet legally approved. As you are also aware, you must go to answer these charges. Sorry. But we of the Patrol know the score. In the face of your success I'm sure that this is mere red tape."

Bert scowled until he saw the cop's sly grin.

"Worried?" Alice asked him, smiling. She was pretty. She had courage. She had everything.

"Worried?" Bert echoed. In general he approved the S.P.A.B. "How can we lose on this last gamble with all the cards stacked in our favor. We even win a needed short vacation on Earth!"

"What are you two gonna bring back for me?" an old man, grimed from the forges, demanded, grinning. It was old Stan Kraskow, who had buried his younger son in the camp cemetery.

"Hiyuh, Dad!" Bert greeted happily. "What'll we bring him, Allie?"

"Wildbirds, Pop," Alice answered, her eyes twinkling. "You always liked wildbirds. No world is complete without them."



Bert noticed that the gardens of the camp, planted weeks ago under airdomes that were now being cleared away, were now showing a faint green. The beginning of a new and verdant Titan.



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