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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ONE PURPLE HOPE! \*\*\*

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If I'm going to die it's going to be my way—that was Latham's last thought.

## ONE PURPLE HOPE!

By HENRY HASSE

*Once he had been a tall, straight spaceman, free as the galaxies. Now Joel Latham was a tsith-addict, a beach-comber at Venusport. Maybe he'd get one last chance....*

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His sleep-drugged mind was slow to respond. He was lying face down, he knew that. And he ought to get up. If he didn't get up he would drown. Something hot and heavy, like a huge hand, was pressing him deeper into the brackish mire. He pondered. Perhaps it were better to drown. For a moment he allowed himself the luxury of the thought, then decided against it. Plenty of time later for drowning. First there was something he had to do!

So it was that Joel Latham, Earthman, age thirty, occupation space drifter, avocation tsith drinker, awakened on this most momentous of mornings.

Moaning in protest, he slowly rolled himself over. The sun slapped him hard against the eyes. He blinked against the pain and saw that he was still in Venusport; rather he was at the edge of the swamp near the sprawling compound. Overhead the ionic field was aglow, humming softly, beating back the obscurant mists.

He managed to stand up. Some of the pallid-faced gweels, out in the swamp, stopped their work to stare at him. Latham grimaced. Every fiber of him, especially his brain, seemed to have been squeezed dry. Then it came. He felt it coming and there was nothing he could do to stop it. The hammering nausea took him suddenly about the middle, bending him double.

"I'm an Earthman," Joel Latham groaned aloud. That was invariably the first reaction of the tsith hound, at least with Terrestrials who indulged in the deadly stuff; a piteous protest half in defiance, half in despair. The nausea reached up through his stomach, through his chest and into his throat. It became more than nausea. It grew thorns that stabbed inwardly, jagged edges that sawed away at his brain with a terrible need. He fell forward on hands and knees ... and that's when he saw the little Martian who crouched a few feet away, watching him.

"I went through mine a few minutes ago," the Martian said in a monotone. "Yours will go away presently."

"I know ... it will. Been through this ... before."

"You obviously have. Many times."

Many times was an understatement, Latham thought wretchedly. But this was one of the worst ones, even worse than the time on Callisto. Thinking about it didn't help.

He turned his gaze back to the Martian. That didn't help either.

Most Martians are lean and brown and ugly. This one was that, and more. What had once been clothes were tattered and spattered with swamp mud. The hair was a wisp, the teeth only a memory. The skin was tight and leathery across the bony structure of the face, the eyes distended and yellow, the unmistakable sign of a tsith hound.

Latham grimaced, managed to grind out: "Do I look as bad as you?"

"Worse," the little Martian was matter-of-fact.

"I believe you." He looked long and hard at the Martian. "I remember you now. Name's Kueelo. You were with me last night—"

Kueelo grinned, showing the stumps of yellowish teeth. "Correction. Four nights ago. That's when it began."

Latham climbed to his feet. The reaction was going away but there was still a dull apathy about his brain. Just to think was an aching effort.

"Four days," he muttered. "How'd I come here?"

"So you don't remember that? You came on the pleasure yacht. The one from Turibek."

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"Turibek—" Latham was remembering now. Turibek, capital city of Venus, far on the other side of the planet. He'd had a small stake and was lucky at the gaming tables. Before that it was Callisto, where he had struck it rich in the iridium fields; anyway, rich enough to keep him supplied with tsith for a year. Before Callisto it had been Mars. He had worked the rocket rooms of Jovian freighters, he had served as tourist guide in the dark little streets of Ganymede City, and when fortune was lowest he had begged in those streets and done worse things than begging. Before that he couldn't remember. He went wherever whim and fortune took him, but the whims were short-lived and the fortune invariably ended at the bottom of a glass. The deadly tsith twisted his brain awry and took its toll and drove him on. He had been "on the beach" on half a dozen planets. Earth he shunned. He hadn't set foot there in more years than he could remember. At first it was because he was ashamed, but even that was gone now. Only a cold sickness was left in the soul of Joel Latham.

He stared at this fellow tsith hound, this shell of a Martian, and said, "What happened last night?"

"What always happens," Kueelo said wearily. "We used up all our credit. Penger kicked us out."

It took Joel Latham a full minute to absorb that piece of information. Mixed up with the agony in his eyes was a pensive look, but no resentment; his need just now was too dire for resentment. He stared across the swamp at the outpost's straggling street. Jake Penger was the law here, and he owned the only supply of tsith. Latham recalled him vaguely, a huge man, inscrutable, uncompromising.

"Penger," he muttered. "That's it. I knew there was something I was going to do."

"What were you going to do?" Kueelo moved in closer, a sudden light of interest in his eyes.

"See Penger, of course."

"Why?"

"I need tsith! And I'm going to need it worse before this day's over."

Kueelo's eyes went dull again. "We both do. How do you think you're going to manage it?"

"I'll show you. Never let it be said that Joel Latham was helpless in face of an emergency." With unsteady fingers he began a search of his clothes. And that's when the final realization descended upon Joel Latham. These weren't his clothes, not the ones he had when he came here.

He stared into the Martian's mango-like face. "I had a lucky piece. An ancient Deimian jewel set in platinum. It's always been good for credit."

Kueelo's sigh was like a wind through withered leaves. "That," he said, "was used up two nights ago."

"I had a dis-gun, too! What happened to it?"

"We used that up last night. Penger allowed us four drinks apiece for it."

Latham nodded miserably. "The space yacht. I guess it's already gone."

"Two days ago. Your fine feathered friends shunned you when they learned you were a tsith hound. But I stuck by you," Kueelo added cunningly.

Latham sank heavily onto a clump of swamp grass. He stared at his right hand. It had started trembling. He couldn't stop the trembling. He wondered dully if he was frightened, or if that was a result of the terrible craving that twisted and writhed within him. He stared up into the Martian's face.

"Stranded," he said weakly. "But I'll get out of here. I'll hire out on one of the freighters—"

"You won't." Kueelo's voice was matter-of-fact again. "Not when they learn you're a tsith hound. And Penger will let them know, you can bet on that. He's a devil, that Penger."

"But he's an Earthman, and I'm an Earthman!" Latham's voice was almost a wail. His soul was withering within him.

"Tell Penger that and see what he answers you. You're on the beach, my friend. You've been there before, but this is the final beach—the swampside of Venus. And here you'll stay until Penger is ready to let you go. I've been here five years."

Joel Latham put his head in his hands and tried to think. Kueelo's voice droned on:

"You'll work for Penger. You'll work in the swamps. An Earthman, a Martian, a Ganymedian can do ten times the work of one of these gweels." He gestured at the pallid-faced low-Venusians who moved listlessly through the mud, pulling up the draanga-weed. "You'll work for the amount of tsith Penger portions out to you, and glad to get it."

At the word *tsith*, Latham's head came up. The dawning fear was gone from his eyes.

"All right! I'll do it, but only for a while, mind you! I'll find a way out of this. I'm getting back to the iridium fields on Callisto."

He plunged wildly into the mud and sank to his waist. But it was the thought of tsith that drove him on, not Callisto. Kueelo stood by and watched, a thin, knowing smile creasing his leathery lips.

A sort of frenzy had come upon Joel Latham. He tore at the stubborn draanga-weed and brought it up dripping, tossing the long lengths across his shoulder. He knew of this stuff.

When properly synthesized draanga-weed had a medicinal value on the various planets. Penger shipped it out four times a year, at a neat little profit.

Latham moved on. A yellowish fog had come down, the dreaded igniis fatui. Unless one kept moving, decomposition of the blood set in, essential salts within the body were dissolved and cellular activity ceased. Latham grinned wryly. He doubted if it could touch him! There was too much tsith within his alchemy. Nevertheless he moved and worked ceaselessly. He could see that caricature of a Martian standing back there watching.

Then it happened; the thing happened which was to prove both a promise and a despair. Joel Latham felt a hardness at his heel, an irritating lump inside his neoprene boot.

He moved back to higher ground, lifted his foot from the mire and removed the boot. He shook something out into his hand. It was round and hard and shiny, perhaps an inch in diameter. He held it aloft between thumb and forefinger. The filtering sunlight struck it and sent back lambent fires.

Joel Latham stared and gasped, felt his senses reeling.

"Purple!" he sobbed. "A purple Josphian!"

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**H**e was clambering back toward Kueelo. Forgetting the sweat in his eyes and the insufferable heat, he held the thing aloft.

"Look at it!" he sobbed again. "Look at it shine! Look at the size!"

Kueelo was indeed looking. His yellowish eyes bulged. "A Josphian," he whispered. "We've struck it rich!"

Joel Latham regarded the little caricature with astonishment. Something of sanity came back to Joel Latham. "We?" he said. "I found it. It's mine. I never knew you until four days ago!"

"But I stood by you," the Martian wailed. "Your friends deserted you, but I stood by. Aren't we partners?"

Latham considered that. "No," he decided. "You stood by me as long as I had credit for tsith! Until my money and lucky piece and dis-gun and clothes were gone. Did you offer to help me out there?" he waved at the swamp. "This Josphian is going to get me back to Callisto! Penger ought to give me plenty for it."

What happened next was too swift for Latham's reeling senses. A claw-like hand darted out, and Kueelo snatched the Josphian; his other hand swung around and caught Latham hard across the throat, sending him back into the swamp where he staggered for a moment and sat down abruptly.

"Hey!" Latham protested. "Hey, look here—"

But the Martian was scuttling away like a huge fiddler crab, the Josphian clutched in one scrawny fist.

Joel Latham came slowly up out of the mud, shaking his head and grinning stupidly. It was very unkind of Kueelo to treat him like this. He watched the Martian's departing figure. He made no effort to follow—not at once—not until a strange new emotion, part frustration and part despair, rose up in his breast, and close upon that the dawning realization that he was being cheated of a last hope.

Even then he didn't hurry. He followed Kueelo, swinging along in slow loping strides, but not gaining. He felt weak and sick. That jagged need for tsith was again sawing away at his entrails. His feet tangled in the outlying swamp grass, he plunged headlong and picked himself up.

Kueelo was heading for higher ground away from the compound. Kueelo was yelling as he ran. Latham wondered why the devil he was yelling. Then, some distance ahead, Latham could see a third man lifting himself from the ground. The Jovian! Suddenly Latham remembered him. The Jovian had been with them last night too. Now Kueelo was tugging at the man, yelling, showing him the Josphian.

The Jovian hoisted his bulk erect, turned and waited for Latham, grinning broadly. The grin didn't fool Latham. All Jovians grinned. Some of them grinned while breaking a man's vertebrae. This was one of the big ones, Latham noticed, and he was ugly, with long reaching arms and wiry hair and a face that looked as if he'd slept in it.

Latham stopped just short of him and reached out a hand. "I want the Josphian," said Joel Latham.

The Jovian came a step forward. "You leave Kueelo alone. Kueelo, he's my friend."

"I'm going to have that Josphian," said Joel Latham.

The Jovian thrust out a huge fist with amazing speed. Latham caught at it and hung on grimly. The Jovian brought his other hand around in an arc that caught the Earthman across the face, sent him sprawling ten feet away.

"Josphian belongs to us, now. You leave us alone."

Joel Latham sat there wiping blood from his face, watching the bestial pair as they headed around the compound and into the matted jungle. His last glimpse, just before darkness swallowed them up, was of Kueelo grinning gleefully back at him.

Latham sighed. He stood up. The blow had shaken some of the resolve out of him. He turned east, northeast, east-by-north, like a compass on a binge. Then he saw Penger watching him from

the outer gate of the compound. Apparently Penger had seen it all.

Latham turned and ran toward Jake Penger.

"You saw them!" Latham wailed. "You saw it. They stole my Josmian! You've got to stop them!"

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**P**enger planted his feet wide apart and surveyed the snivelling Earthman. Penger's dark face was hard-cut and impassive. He'd seen these tsith hounds before. They came here and died here. He hated them all.

Penger said, "They did what?"

"The Josmian, the purple Josmian! I found it and they stole it from me. You've got to help me, Penger!"

Penger said, "You're crazy."

"But I found it, I tell you! A big one. I'll sell it to you, Penger. I'll—"

Penger said, "You're crazy with tsith. There hasn't been a Josmian found in this swamp for ten years."

"Penger, listen to me—"

Penger said, "Forget it. You want tsith? You'll have tsith. But you'll work and you'll work hard. You'll get the draanga-weed out."

"Penger, I'm an Earthman! I'm asking you as one Earthman to another—" Latham stopped. He shivered. He looked into Penger's colorless eyes and what he saw made his soul curl up within him.

"You're a what? An Earthman? You *were* an Earthman! Now you're a grubby little specimen of the genus tsith! You're a miserable, whining little speck of matter wriggling toward the final transfixation! In another year you won't even be that. You'll be dead and forgotten. Don't come crawling to me talking about Earthmen!" The voice scraped across Latham's naked nerve-ends. Penger's eyes blazed, and in his trembling anger he almost raised a fist.

Latham cringed away. From out of his forgotten past something came to Latham. He stared at the loom of jungle where Kueelo and the Jovian had disappeared.

"I've seen the day," he complained miserably, "when they wouldn't get away with this!"

"You've seen the day—period!"

"I'm asking you once more, Penger. Help me! At least give me back the dis-gun."

"The dis-gun? Now what would you want with the dis-gun? You'd only come trading it back to me. You bring in the draanga-weed, that's all I'm interested in! And if you work especially hard, there'll be some tsith—enough for your needs."

Latham's eyes went fever-bright. His lips writhed back, a fit of trembling took possession of his limbs. Almost, he succumbed to the immediate vision of the tsith; almost, he forgot about the Josmian. But somewhere deep in his alchemy was a well of stubbornness he never knew he possessed.

He clutched at Penger's sleeve as the man turned away. He found himself screaming, "Then I'll go without the gun! I'm going to get that Josmian, do you hear? You'll believe me then! You'll believe when you see it, Penger!"

Penger shook him away. "Sure, sure. You bring me a Josmian. Then we'll talk a deal."

He wanted to ask for a drink, just one drink of tsith right now, but Latham had learned the essential fact that there could be no compromising with this man. He reeled away. His brief outburst had left him weak and trembling. Nevertheless, he went stumbling toward the looming wall of jungle.

He heard Penger's voice, a little annoyed: "Where are you going?"

Latham stumbled on.

"You fool, you don't know these jungles! You'll die in there! You won't last an hour!"

Latham didn't look back. Penger didn't call again. Latham could almost imagine the man's shrug of indifference.

Vision stopped five yards away. A soft glutinous muck, worse than the outer swamp, tugged at his ankles. Corrupt fungi-growth and giant spiked ferns reached far above him in the blanketing fog.

Penger was wrong! He wouldn't die in here. Latham knew where he was going. Kueelo had told him of the gweel village a mere few miles away, where the foothills came down to touch the jungle edge. Kueelo and the Jovian had undoubtedly headed for there and planned to lie low for a while; when the time was propitious, they would sneak back to the outpost and make a deal with

Penger for the Josmian.

The route was long and circuitous, hugging the fringe of jungle. The gweels traveled it every day. But Latham had a better plan. By cutting directly through the morass, he might just arrive there ahead of them!

He would arm himself somehow and wait ... the element of surprise ... that's all he could hope for now.

He left the glutinous path, and to his surprise it wasn't so bad. The growths towered many times higher but were not so dense. Occasionally the sun evidenced itself against the paling of mists hundreds of feet above. Lusty, primeval odors were almost an opiate to his senses.

He plunged on for some ten minutes before he began to doubt. Gradually the gloom came alive with motion and sound and unseen terrors. He tried to segregate those that might mean danger. There came first a gentle whirring of wings through the mist, sweeping close above him and away. There came a gentle ripple through the foliage beside him, a slither of sound that kept pace endlessly.

Was this what Penger meant? Still Latham had seen nothing. He wished he had his dis-gun, though.

He wished it desperately, as a heavier sound came near. A grayish bulk charged directly across his path. It was monstrous, semi-reptilian, with wings arched sinuously along its spine as it half reared toward him. Latham fell back against a tree bole and stood motionless, staring into glittering feral eyes. The beast coughed raucously and went thrashing back into the welter of jungle and mud.

Latham stepped away. His foot caught in a root and he fell headlong. Instantly, tiny spheres of diaphanous substance showered about his head, to burst in a scatter of violet spores. Those that touched his skin turned instantly blood-red, and seemed to grow, burrowing deep. Frantically he pulled them from his flesh, leaving raw red sores.

There was no trail to guide him now, but he did not immediately mind that. He trekked the South Mars Desert and he had weathered the jungles of Io. Tsith hound or no, he had an unerring instinct for direction. He was sure the foothills couldn't be far ahead. But he must have a weapon!

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A silent dark shadow floated down. He glimpsed a razor-clawed reptilian body, ten feet from wing to wing, its serpentine neck darting wickedly. Latham threw himself aside as the tremendous whirr of wings beat the air above his head. Close upon it came three others, and Latham hit the mud. Looking back, he saw that one of the creatures in its mad rush had hurtled into a giant fern, impaling itself upon a four-foot thorn where it hung, screaming raucously as its life-fluid ebbed away.

Latham crawled from the spot. Reaching another fern, he managed to climb high enough to tear away one of the thorns. It was crude, but it would serve as a weapon!

He was realizing his error now. He should have gone by the outer route. He would never reach the gweel village ahead of Kueelo and the Jovian, if indeed he reached it at all! Danger and death lay everywhere about him. Time and again those serpentine shapes winged down, silent and unwarning. He fended them off. Twice he speared them, saw ocherous blood spill from their shiny integument. Other times he wasn't so lucky, as sharp claws left a row of furrows in his back. The miasmatic yellow fog bit deep into his wounds.

Hours resolved into a nightmare of mud and heat and battle. Other creatures crossed his path or curved at him from out of the tangled fronds. He was becoming awfully weak, but a terrible madness lay across Latham's mind like a patina, driving him on. Through feverish turmoil, through waves of heat and pain and nausea that encompassed the universe, Joel Latham pursued his course.

He never remembered the end. He never remembered coming out of that deadly jungle. He pressed with his palms against moist earth, and thought he must have been lying there for some time. His left arm was shredded. His back was shredded. Inside his clothes he felt the warm stickiness of his own blood. Outside his clothes was other substance which he knew wasn't his blood.

Something long and shiny lay beneath his hands. The thorn! He clutched at it frantically.

He felt if he could just lie there a moment, strength would come back to him. But he didn't lie there. He tottered to his feet, and just a few yards ahead the foothills sheered up and away from the jungle.

Every step was an agony. He followed along the foothills, trying to find the gweel village. He had to find it! That much he remembered. A tiny Martian and a brute of a Jovian were there, and they had something that belonged to him. He had quite forgotten now what it was, but it meant something to him, he knew, it meant a great deal.

He came upon the village, a cluster of clay huts high upon an escarpment. Latham began climbing. He had to be careful now, something pounded that warning into his brain. He saw groups of frail, pallid-faced gweels moving about. They were harmless enough, Latham knew that; but if those other two were here—

He reached the level of the village and moved nearer, staying behind rocks and clumps of growth. Then he saw Kueelo! The Martian huddled beside an open fire, stirring some substance in a huge gourd. As Latham watched, Kueelo opened a leather pouch at his waist and took something out. The Josmian! He held it up to the flickering firelight, and the purple sheen of the gem was no more brilliant than the gleeful look that appeared in Kueelo's yellowish eyes.

In that instant Latham almost leaped forward, but a tightness in his temples stopped him. The distance was too great. And the Jovian must be somewhere about! Quick surprise was his only chance. His gaze roved up to the steepening cliff behind the village, and he saw the way.

Still clutching the thorn-weapon, he followed a little ravine up to a rocky abutment. Thence along a ledge, to a spot just above the hut near Kueelo. He judged the distance, decided he could make it in two leaps; first to the roof of the hut, then to the ground.

Latham paused the merest instant, then launched himself downward. He struck the roof with a force that jarred him to the teeth. He sprang again, and that's when luck deserted him. His feet tangled in the coarse thatchwork. He felt himself going over the edge, spinning wildly off-balance, plunging headlong into the ground as the thorn-weapon was flung far out of his grasp.

With a startled oath, Kueelo whirled about. Latham had a vision of the man's ludicrous face. Then a tiny, shiny tube appeared like magic in the Martian's hand. A power-rapier. Latham had heard that Martians carried them always. Tiny and easy to conceal. A press of a stud released a rapier-like shaft of electronic power that reached perhaps five feet.

This occurred to Latham in a mere kaleidoscopic instant, then he was propelling himself forward. His shoulder took Kueelo squarely in the middle. Kueelo screamed as he went back. He tried to get the shiny tube up. Latham got hold of the Martian's wrist and jerked it sharply against his knee. Kueelo let out another yell and dropped the power-tube.

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**T**he Martian was small, but possessed of a wiry strength. He was squirming like an ocelan, bringing his knees up into Latham's groin. Latham felt fainter every moment. He let go of the wrist and tried to find the power-tube. Kueelo smashed a fist into his face.

"I'll kill you, Earthman, I swear it! I've got to kill you!" The Martian kept yelling that, his little voice going shrill. Then he yelled, "Kraaz! Kraaz!" Latham got a hand around Kueelo's throat and he didn't yell any more. The place was very still. Then Latham heard a sloughing sound of heavy footsteps coming up the slope. Kraaz was the Jovian! That's when the real panic hit Latham and he knew he had to get the power-rapier.

He fumbled and found the power-rapier. Kueelo brought a knee into his stomach and Latham felt sick. He couldn't get the weapon around. Kueelo had hold of his wrist and was bending it backward. Latham thought: *Kraaz is coming! If I don't—*

They twisted and rolled and Kueelo was trying with both hands for the weapon. Latham held onto the weapon. Kueelo was using his knees to keep him down and Latham kept feeling weaker. Kueelo kept coming forward and making noises in his throat and he seemed big and heavy. He kept going forward until he got a knee against Latham's throat. Latham thought: *the Jovian's running now, he's almost here—*

Kueelo pressed with his knee and Latham's head went back. His throat was hurting and blocking the air. The knee pressed harder, and it was bad. Then it was very bad. But he wouldn't let go of the power-rapier. *The Jovian'll be here! I've got to—*

Latham moved his hand beneath him. The hand twisted and brought up the tube and his fingers touched a tiny stud. He didn't know which way it was pointing, it was too late to wonder. His finger pressed the stud and Kueelo was screaming. Then the pressure in his throat went away.

He was on his feet as the Jovian came ploughing through the huddle of frightened gweels. Latham tried to get the rapier-tube up, but his arms were numbed and weary, a red mist swam before his eyes. A powerful blow sent the weapon hurtling away, then the Jovian was upon him; huge arms closed about him. It was useless to struggle. Latham could see the man's lips writhing back in a soundless rage.

Latham brought a knee up in a purely desperate move. Kraaz grunted, stumbled and fell, but he didn't let go. They were rolling together down the slope. The Jovian's arms were a vise crushing away his life. Latham had a glimpse of a cliff falling sheerly away, with those deadly thorn-ferns reaching up from below.

*If I'm to die, it's going to be my way!*

That was Latham's last conscious thought as he surged against the Jovian's braking body; his fingers clung tenaciously, his last ebbing strength carried them both over the edge. Kraaz's arms broke away. Latham lashed out with his feet, then he was twisting, falling, far out into space ...

and that's all he remembered.

Hands were tugging at him. A shrill chatter of voices rang in his ears. Someone was holding a gourd to his lips, trying to pour a hot sticky substance down his throat. Latham sat up and knocked the gourd away. The little group of gweels fell back. Some of them were still chattering, staring overhead with awe-stricken eyes.

Latham looked up and saw Kraaz, the Jovian. The huge bulk hung twenty feet above, tangled in the foliage of a giant fern.

One thorn had entered his chest, another completely pierced his throat. He was quite dead.

Wearily, Latham made his way back up to the village. Kueelo still lay there with the blackened hole through him. Latham tore away the leather pouch holding the Josmian; he had fought through hell and swamp and jungle for this, and by all the Redtails of Jupiter, he was taking it back! He thought of Penger, and the tsith awaiting him there. Most of all he thought of Callisto and the iridium fields, which would mean much more tsith. Clutching the Josmian as though it were his life's blood, Joel Latham staggered away from there and began the long route back.

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**T**he men at the compound would not soon forget the night when Joel Latham returned. Penger was there of course; some prospectors from the near-by hills, the crew of a supply freighter, a motley scattering of others whose business was unknown and unasked.

They stared in disbelief at the caricature that suddenly came out of the night to stand in the doorway of Penger's place. Clothes ripped in shreds, mud and blood bespattered, one arm dangling, tangled hair that looked unreal as if sewed to his scalp. An awful whiteness about the lips and eyes that were dark empty pools. Maybe it had once been an Earthman, but it was unrecognizable now! Joel Latham stood there for an instant, seeking out Penger behind the bar. Black exhaustion threatened to take him, but with an effort he hoisted himself up.

He made his way across the room and slumped against the bar. Spacemen moved out of his way. There was something about his eyes.

Penger moved down to him, stood staring in amazement.

"So it's you!" said Penger, and seemed unable to say more.

"It's me, all right." Latham's eyes were searching out the rows of bottles. Martian thasium, Earth bourbon, the potent arack from Ganymede. It all left him cold. He was looking for the deadly tsith, and he saw no sign of it. "It's me, all right," Joel Latham said again, and he placed a closed fist upon the bar. "I've come to make that deal with you, Penger!"

His fist opened slowly, and Penger was staring down at the Josmian.

"So it was true! And you really went after that thieving pair ... you took it from them...." Penger's voice was unbelieving, but he continued to stare at the Josmian.

"It's yours if you want it, Penger. Dirt cheap! One thousand credits. That'll be enough to get me out of here on the first freighter, and set up for another try at the Callisto iridium fields. That's all I want."

Penger nodded, took the gem from Latham's hand and held it to the light. "It's a beauty!" He replaced it in Latham's open palm. "But I didn't promise to buy it! All I said was, I'd make you a deal."

Latham felt his stomach turning over. Kueelo had said this man was a devil! He got the words out: "What kind of a deal?"

"You ask one thousand credits. I offer you one thousand glasses of tsith! That'll last you a long time here."

So that was the devil's plan! Latham felt a cold sickness come over him. He was sick from his wounds, sick from exhaustion, sick for the desperate need of tsith. He found himself saying, "One drink right now! And eight hundred credits—"

"No drinks. Not until we make the deal. One thousand glasses of tsith, and that's my final offer."

Latham stared about him. Any spaceman here would offer five times a thousand credits for such a gem! But they sensed that this was private between him and Penger, and no man dared go against Penger here at Venusport. They watched the tableau in silence.

"I've got to get to Callisto!" Latham cried wretchedly, fighting back the sickness. "Here—it's yours—just one drink now, and enough credits for passage!"

"Why Callisto?" Penger's voice was mocking. "So you make another strike there, and it all ends with tsith anyway!" He reached beneath the bar, brought out a crystal flagon of tsith. For a moment he held the sparkling blue liquid to the light, then placed it on the shelf behind him.

"Damn you!" Latham tried to leap forward, but almost collapsed as waves of nausea shook him.



"So. You see what I mean? In another year you'll be dead anyway, so what does it matter?" Penger leaned forward, smiling thinly. "Earthman, what did you say your name was? Joel Latham, wasn't it?"

Latham swayed and clutched at the bar. He glared at the man, wondering what diabolical scheme he was planning now.

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Penger's eyes bored into him. "Joel Latham, I knew your father years ago before he died on Mars. He was a fine man. A man of courage. I wonder what Carl Latham would say now if he could see his son—"

"People from here to Mars and back," Latham rasped, "are always telling me they knew my father! I'm sick of hearing about it! All I want to know, do you buy this Josmian or not?"

"I may make you another deal. Suppose I give you the thousand credits. But if I do, you don't go to Callisto."

"Where, then?" Latham's brain was throbbing, seeking out the gimmick. There must be a gimmick.

Penger glanced at a tall, angular man who had stayed in the background. A silent signal passed between them.

"They need a chart man at Asteroid Station Three. The work is not hard but it's a thankless, monotonous existence. You're alone on an anchored world a half-mile in diameter. You sign on for three years, and there you stay. You have every need within reason, including technical library and one-way radio. A government ship brings supplies once a year, and they don't include tsith."

Penger paused and peered at Latham, whose face had gone pale beneath the growth of beard. "Your task would be to chart the thousands of rogue asteroids that cause havoc in the spacelanes every year. I understand you once knew ray-screens, co-ordinates and parabolics. You could brush up."

"It seems ... you know a lot about me!" Latham's voice was frightened. It didn't want to leave his throat. He was staring at the glittering blue tsith behind Penger.

Penger motioned to the tall, angular man with the bright eyes. The man stepped to the bar.

"This is George Elston of Interplanet Commerce. He's been looking for months for the right man. Frankly, I don't think it's you"—Latham felt the impact of Penger's scorn—"but he has a cruiser outside, and he can up gravs within half an hour in case you are interested."

"I'm not—" Latham continued to stare at the glittering blue flagon just out of reach.

"I thought not. Well, I've made you two offers. I'll buy your Josmian for credits or tsith!" Penger counted out a thousand credits and slapped them on the bar. He poured a glass of tsith and placed it down gently. "Your choice, Latham! A choice of escape!"

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A terrible quiet had come over the room. Latham's eyes were fever-bright, burning deep in his skull. His stomach twisted like a nest of cold serpents. A choice of escape! There was no choice. There was only tsith. He had only to take it. Penger was right. He would die here within a year, but he had resigned himself to that.

He would die out there on the Station, too; he would die a thousand deaths without tsith. Three years! Latham had heard of a few tsith hounds who tried it. He knew in every detail the agonies of body and mind a man went through, before the absence of the stuff either broke him of the terrible need, or left him a gibbering, mindless wreck. Not many of them ever pulled through it.

Joel Latham thought of all this and made his choice. He slammed the Josmian on the bar; his trembling hand seized the glass.

Penger shrugged and sighed as if this was what he expected. He took up the Josmian. "The deal is closed, Latham! I'd better put this away in my safe."

He walked to the end of the bar. When he came back, the glass in Latham's hand was empty.

Penger met George Elston's gaze. "You'll have to keep looking, Elston. You'll have to look for a man, not a—"

The tall man smiled, stopping the words. He pointed to the mirror where a splash of blue, glutinous tsith was dripping.

Latham threw the empty glass at Penger's head. It missed him and struck the mirror, bringing it down in shattering fragments. He seized the bundle of credits and sent them flying.

"Keep these too, Penger! Keep them all, damn you! I won't need them where I'm going!" Tottering and pale, a fury still upon his lips, he seized Elston's arm. "Come on! Make it quick—"

Elston hurried with him. At the door, he pointed across the compound. "The black cruiser, there beside the freighter. Get aboard. I'll be with you in five minutes—"

Penger was at the door too. They watched Latham hurrying, stumbling, not looking back.

Then Penger did an amazing thing. He opened his fist and he still held the Josmian. He placed it on the floor, put a heavy heel on it and came down with all his weight. There was an absurd little pop as the Josmian shattered.

Elston stared at him, bewildered.

"Not a Josmian," Penger grinned at him. "Glass. One of the cheap glass baubles that sometimes come here on the trade freighters." He gripped Elston's arm. "But don't tell him! Don't ever tell him, at least not for three years."

"But I thought he found it in the swamp!"

"He found it in his boot, where I placed it when I found him lying out there this morning in a stupor. An experiment, a whim—" Penger shrugged. "I didn't know what would come of it."

Joel Latham had almost reached the cruiser. They saw him pause, and then he turned. Joel Latham raised a fist and shook it straight at Penger.

"Damn you, Penger! Damn you, damn you!"

With that he stumbled up into the waiting lock as Elston hurried after him.

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