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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WEALTH OF ECHINDUL ***

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The WEALTH OF ECHINDUL

By NOEL LOOMIS

Though he carried with him the loot of the ages, who in The Pass—that legalized city of vice and corruption—would dare risk his neck to help Russell, the Hard Luck Man of the Swamps?

He came up out of the Great Sea-Swamp of Venus like old Father Neptune. He was covered with mud and slime. Seaweed hung from his cheap diving-suit. Brine dripped from his arms that hung limp and weary; it ran from his torso and made a dark trail in the sand.



A flash of intuition hit Russell. He knew now how to win this fight.

Without even looking back, he stood for a moment as if fighting to keep on his feet, while the brine made a small puddle in the green sand. Finally he unscrewed the helmet and took it off. He turned around slowly and looked back across the two hundred miles of deadly swamp, at the flaming craters of the Red Lava Range from which he had come.

With fingers that would hardly function from weariness he took off his diving-suit and straightened up. His stooping shoulders were free of that weight for the first time in forty days. He was a small man, hardly over four feet tall, and not well formed. It seemed incredible that he had crossed the Great Sea-Swamp on foot.

And as he looked back at the distant rim of green fire that marked the mountains it seemed incredible to him too. A great sigh of relief and gratefulness shook his unsymmetrical body, and all the nerve and colossal will-power that had carried him for six months, suddenly flowed out of him in a single wave and left him empty. He forgot about the ordeal that still lay ahead. He forgot everything. He pitched forward on his face in the sand, and slept.

Some hours later a whistling noise awoke him. He rolled over, awake instantly, for in past months his ears had saved his life as often as had his eyes. High in the sky he picked out a cannibal fish from the Acid Sea. It had set its great wings in a dive.

He raised his heat-gun, fired once, saw the feathers burst into blue flame, saw it falling; then he rolled over and went back to sleep. Not even the thud of its heavy body on the sand disturbed him, but an hour later he heard another warning—a rasping sound—and through the stench of the ancient swamp he smelled a fetidness that meant danger.

This time as he turned he rolled to his feet. He saw the huge coils of the Venusian water-constrictor. One lidless phosphorescent eye gleamed evilly at him, but its great jaws were spread and the dead fish was half-way down its bone-plated throat.

Grant Russell relaxed. Ordinarily he would have been scared to death to be within miles of the big saurian. But now for a few hours, with the fish in its throat it would be comparatively harmless.

Grant rubbed his eyes and stretched. How wonderful sleep could be! For six weeks he had been in the swamp where he never had dared to take off his diving-suit even when he was resting on a clump of floating grass, for fear it would suddenly sink and drop him into a hundred feet of brown water; six weeks walking through mud sometimes over his head, with the brown, infested water above that; six weeks pitting all his swamp lore against sudden death in a thousand forms, with only the light gravity of Venus to aid him, and his indomitable determination to keep him going. But now he felt like a million.

No man had ever crossed the Great Swamp alone on foot before. Few had crossed it in any fashion. Few would have tried it but Grant Russell because few wanted to do it as much as he did. In spite of his small size and his scrawny muscles, in spite of Venus which catered to big men and strong men, he had done it.

The food problem alone would have stopped most men, but Grant had spent a lot of time around the swamps of Venus. Often he had gone prospecting with food enough for only one week because he couldn't buy more, and he had stayed four, five, six weeks.

To do that he had had to experiment. He'd eaten all sorts of things. Sometimes he had been ill but he had acquired immunity to certain poisonous plants that contained food values.

The oxygen problem for a diving-suit for forty days would have stopped most men but Grant had solved that too. If he had not, he never could have gone to the Red Lava Range after the fabulous gizzard-stones of Venus's prehistoric echindul.

For oxygen, he had discovered a plant that grew in the bottom of the swamp. You could cut its stalk into sections and put them in a container and they would exude oxygen for several hours. But he had to carry at least one extra stalk all the time, and he had to keep his eyes sharp for more. Sometimes it had been close.

Grant looked at the Red Lava Range and felt the precious leather bag inside his shirt and smiled. Yes, he'd done it. He'd found one of the fabulous nests of the echindul—and it had been loaded with stones, just as ancient Venusian legend insisted.

The extinct echindul had been a sort of flying lizard that had nested in the mysterious, almost inaccessible Red Lava Range. Every echindul had had two gizzard-stones, and each matched pair of stones had an unusual property.

Grant reached in his watch-pocket and brought out the one he had kept out of the bag. He held it up and watched the sunlight, filtering through Venus's thick clouds, and the firelight, reflected from Red Lava Range two hundred miles away, play on the chatoyant interior of the stone as if they were chasing each other.

Those stones would be worth forty thousand Earth dollars a pair if he could get them to a reputable dealer in Aphrodite, Venus's largest city. Therein lay Grant Russell's next problem, and in spite of the satisfaction he felt at emerging from the Great Swamp, he knew that getting safely to Aphrodite might be an even more serious problem.

Aphrodite's only approach over the Lead Vapor Mountains from the southern hemisphere was through The Pass, a legalized city of vice. On one side The Pass was flanked by the Bubbling Zinc Pits and on the other side it was skirted by the Fluoride River, and man had not yet devised any way to navigate either of these. It was doubtful, even, that any species native to Venus could cross those two areas, but on this authorities did not agree for in the year 2542 Venus and its natives were still largely unknown.

Not so far unknown, however, that Grant Russell failed to recognize the single luminous eye that had risen out of the water on a long, slender stalk. "A fish," he thought, or as some would have said, a Venusian. It saw that he was looking at it, and it dropped out of sight. There was the swirl of brown water that marked its under-surface progress. It swam like a fish, but it wasn't really a fish. It was one of Venus's four dominant species and the most "human" of all.

The swirl moved fast across the surface of the water and disappeared in the direction of Aphrodite but Grant knew that its place would be taken within a few minutes by another. And if Grant had had any forlorn hope that he might be able to slip through The Pass, he gave it up, for he knew now that his movements were reported hourly and that his possession of the fabulous stones was undoubtedly known to Relegar, the Uranian.

Relegar was the master of The Pass. He was no human and he had no human feelings. Killings and stealing were a business to him, and he had the most efficient spying system on any planet. It was well known unofficially that he kept an underground factory busy extracting a drug from the stamen of the swamp-orchid. The drug was labeled "Venus-snow," and Relegar found it highly profitable to trade it to the fish in the Sea-Swamp on the southwest and to the semi-aquatic people in the great Gallium Bogs to the southeast—some called them "frogs"—for information.

Relegar's spy-system was a monopoly by reason of a peculiar fact: the fish-people talked in a high sound-range that no solar being but a Uranian could hear; no Uranian trusted another Uranian, and so Relegar was the only entity in The Pass who knew the dialect of the fish-people. Seldom did any person or any entity find anything of value in the bottom half of Venus that was not promptly reported to the Uranian.

Therefore Grant Russell did not dare enter The Pass with the stones on his person. This was a quick way to lose them—and perhaps his life. Some day, thought Grant wishfully, some big-shot would come along and clean out The Pass and then the little honest men would be safe. On the rare occasions when a prospector did find something of value and get back to land he would be allowed to keep it. Grant wished he had a lot of power or a lot of money. He'd take over the clean-up job. But a fellow like him, without friends, without influence, without money, didn't have a chance.

Grant had thought about that a good many times on his long trip across the swamp, but he had worried more about how to dispose of his own stones before Relegar got hold of him. He would of course have to use deception. But how? If he could hide the stones some place he

could go on into The Pass empty-handed and pretend that he'd had the usual lack of luck. Then he could see Netse, the Jovian fence, and make a deal for protection. He'd have to give up half, but that was the easiest way out, for Relegar would keep hands off if Netse got there first.

But where could he hide the stones? There was too much continual volcanic subterranean activity in the swamp, and on what little dry land Venus had it was doubtful that any hiding-place could be called permanent. It might be solid today and swallowed by an earthquake tomorrow.

The only real solution was to have somebody else keep them for a while, Grant thought, and that was a discouraging thought, for whom could he trust in The Pass even if he could reach them? For that matter, who in The Pass would risk his life to help out Grant Russell, the Hard-Luck Man of the Swamp?

He'd been known as a hard-luck man as far back as he could remember. His parents had been killed in a rocket crash on a trip to Mars; he'd been raised by one relative after another and they'd each one gotten rid of him as soon as they could. Finally he had married a nice girl and they had been happy until their daughter was born. Then the mother had died.

Grant had gone to pieces for a while. When he came to, he was broke, hungry, ragged. Then when it was too late he had become frantic over the safety of his small daughter, Beth. He found that she was safe in a child welfare home in New Jersey, but they would not release her to him until he could pay what he owed for her care and have enough left over to establish himself as a substantial citizen.

He had told her goodbye. She was the image of her mother, and she had held onto his hand as long as she could and said between sobs, "Daddy, can we have a farm some day, and raise strawberries, and have just us two? I don't want to be an orphan." He had gulped and said, "Sure," and then he had come to Venus. It was a new planet, largely unexplored, full of opportunity.

That had been three years ago. Things had been tough at times but now he could afford to smile. He'd hit the jackpot—a million-year-old nest of the echindul, with sixteen pairs of stones. He put the one stone safely back in his watch-pocket. He was keeping that one. When he sold the others he would have the dealer pick out the mate to this one, and he and Beth would keep this pair. They would be well able to afford it.

He felt the bag at his side. The stones didn't weigh much, perhaps a couple of ounces apiece, but the famous telepathic stones of Venus were well known on Earth. Wealthy young lovers would carry a pair, if they could get them, so that each could know what the other was thinking.

Scientists said the stones were matched crystals so that each pair, in effect, was tuned in together. They said also that the stones were little more than nature's ultimate extension of man's feeble attempts at radio communication.

Grant Russell knew little about that. What he did know was that those stones were worth half a million dollars. He gathered up his patched diving-suit and packed it, from long habit. He raised his head and saw another eye watching him from the swamp. He watched the eye and listened to the rasping of the bone-plates in the constrictor's throat.

Ordinarily he would have tried to kill the big saurian, for its skin had the property of turning slightly radioactive after death and it was worth a couple of hundred dollars delivered in Aphrodite, but a thought occurred to him. He watched the saurian and began to smile. The constrictor could be worth a lot more than two hundred dollars to him.

He flipped a handful of green sand at the eye in the swamp and it withdrew abruptly into the water. He ran, making a wide circle around the constrictor's powerful tail. He darted in to the head and stood above the lidless eye. Three years ago he would not have walked this close to a *dead* constrictor, but now—well, he'd learned not to be scared until there was need of it. He bent down. The fish was well inside the saurian's mouth. The constrictor's jaws were distended and it was helpless.

Grant whipped the bag of stones from inside of his jacket and tied the leather thong to one leg of the fish. He made sure he had the one single stone in his watch-pocket. That one he had to keep to be able to find the others. He went back to the edge of the swamp and waited until he saw an eye come up, whereupon he flipped another handful of sand at it.

He stayed there for two hours, until the bag of stones was well down the saurian's throat. Then he set out for The Pass. He was painfully hungry now, but he was light-hearted. Never again would he have to risk the death that infested the Great Sea-Swamp. Within thirty days he would be home—home on Earth. He and Beth would get a little house out in the country and have a little garden, and he could relax and watch his daughter grow up. She was only seven now. It wasn't too late.

It was dark when he got to The Pass, the sinister city where he'd seen men killed for a twenty-dollar bill, where girls had been sold over the counter for fifty. He knew better than to go directly to Netse, for the Jovian and the Uranian had a sort of throat-cutting partnership in the underworld, and while Grant was sure Netse would help him directly to get a bigger cut, he knew

also that Netse wouldn't want to be too obvious about it.

So Grant, by this time weary in the shoulders from carrying his equipment, turned down Thorium Avenue toward Nellie's Boarding House. But under the first streetlight he was stopped by a grimy boy. This was notable, because the boy was an Earthman. There weren't too many Earthmen in The Pass.

"Where you been, Hard-Luck Russell?" the boy asked insolently.

Grant's throat was dry. He knew what that meant. Nobody who knew Hard-Luck Russell would bother to stop him unless they had orders to do it—orders that came from Relegar.

"In the Swamp," Russell said, swallowing hard.

The kid stared at the diving-suit in Grant's hand, stared at Grant's face with a sharp, penetrating, unashamed inquisitiveness that made Grant use all of his will-power to stare back. The kid suddenly disappeared.

Grant forced himself not to walk faster. The kid had put the finger on him. It was the first time Relegar had ever done that. Those damned eyes! Relegar must know what Grant had found, and the knowledge that the Uranian knew about the stones made him weak. Relegar was a bad spider.

Grant's impulse was to run but he forced himself to be steady. Now he didn't dare go straight to Netse. He went on to Nellie's place and hammered on the door. "Oh, it's you. Come on in." Nellie opened the door. Nellie was a Martian, a century-plant, and nobody knew whether it was he or she or whether it made any difference, but they called it "she" and they called it "Nellie."

Grant went in. Nellie's leaves rustled and that queer whispery voice came from her. "Do you want a cot?"

"I'll have a room this time," said Grant. "How much?"

"A buck," said Nellie's leaves. "Pay now."

She collected. He took his diving-suit to the room. He didn't like the smell of cabbage and garlic, and the fumes of chlorine were so strong he nearly choked. A Saturnian must be pickling insects somewhere up on the second floor. He sat down. He was starved but he didn't want to go outside until he had a chance to figure things out. He thought maybe the first thing to do was to see Netse.

From the sounds he thought the two girls across the hall were getting ready to go out. He lay down on the bed to rest.

At ten o'clock they left, jabbering. It was good to hear Earth-people talk, even if it was French, which he didn't understand. As soon as the front door closed after the girls he tiptoed across the hall and tried the doorknob. It was locked. He opened it with his skeleton key. The room was dark and he did not turn on a light. He opened the window and dropped softly to the ground in a narrow space between two buildings.

A grating voice said, "Where you going, punk?"

Grant froze. He wanted to run but couldn't. He turned. Back at the alley, in the light, was a medium-size, solidly built man with black hair and a long scar on his left cheek. Grant wheeled, but stopped short. In front of him, at the street end, was a huge Neptunian. It was ten feet high. Grant shuddered. He didn't want that thing too close to him with its razor-sharp teeth and its fondness for blood. He walked toward the Earthman.

They took him into a snow-joint over on Chloride Street. The man led, the Neptunian followed. They went down many flights of stairs carved in the solid purple lava and finally into an elevator. They went farther down.

This, then, was Relegar's headquarters. The Uranian couldn't stand radiation for any length of time. Out on Uranus they had almost none, and so Venus, with its very heavy clouds that filtered the sunlight, was one of the few planets where a Uranian could live. Even so, the Uranians on Venus, having an instinctive dread of sunlight because sunlight usually meant radiation, preferred to stay underground. Perhaps it was more like their native world that way, for they lived underground even on Uranus.

They got out of the elevator in a rock cavern and walked a hundred feet. They passed two guards and went through a steel door. They were in a big room, dimly lighted by red bulbs. Grant didn't like the dimness and he didn't like the smell. He tried to see.

"Here he is," said the man.

There was an odd bass rambling which Grant recognized as the voice of a Uranian. He shivered. Then there were words, and Grant knew the Uranian, wherever he was—maybe in a different room—was using a modifier to turn his sounds into Earth-language: "Walk closer," ordered the queer voice. "I want to watch your face."

It scraped the marrow in his bones, that queer voice. He saw a big tunnel, and at the far end of it, barely discernible in the dim light, was Relegar. Grant stared, chilled. His eyes became used to the queer light, and then he began to make out details. The tunnel was round and big enough so that a man could have walked into it, and at the far end the big Uranian seemed to be standing on his side, with his sixteen huge jointed legs supporting him, half of them on the floor and half on the ceiling. His purple, hairy body was supported in the middle almost as from a web. His two semi-globular eyes, seemingly opaque, were surrounded by six smaller ones. Grant knew the smaller ones could detect infra-red, and now he felt his face growing warm and knew they had on infra spot on him.

"What did you find in the swamp?" asked that dissonant voice.

Grant swallowed and licked his lips. "Nothing," he said finally.

The great maw of the spider, rimmed in red, opened wide as if the Uranian was yawning. It showed long, curving white fangs. Then Relegar said, "You found stones of the echindul."

"I have only one," said Grant, and held it out fearfully.

A curious red began to creep over Relegar's body. His next words were deadly: "One is no good. You found many. What did you do with them?"

Grant watched the great, gray poison-mandibles lift, and he was terrified. He wanted to speak but he could not.

"You've hidden them somewhere," said the horrible voice. "You intended to go back after them. Well, I am going to let you do that. But I shall be after you. I, in person, shall be on your trail. How will you like that?"

"I—I haven't got them. I don't know where they are," Grant insisted, which, in a manner of speaking, was true.

Relegar's two big bulbous eyes seemed to grow bigger and bigger, but still the light was reflected only from their surface. Grant took a step backward. Relegar swayed his body toward him, but the legs did not move. "Go get your stones," he said. "But whenever you do, I'll be right behind you. And don't try to go to Aphrodite."

The lights went out. The giant Neptunian was at Grant's side. Grant felt the leathery skin against his hand. They took him up and kicked him out on the street.

Grant got dazedly to his feet. He had to see Netse the Jovian, quick. Netse would exact a steep price as soon as he found out that Relegar had threatened, but even one-third of the money would be better than nothing. And he knew what it meant to be trailed by Relegar. No being from any planet had ever come back sane from being hunted by Relegar. Most of them didn't come back.

He stopped at the big jewelry house over on Curium Avenue. He saw that it was now nearly one o'clock in the morning, and of course the jewelry store was closed, but he knew that Netse seldom slept and that the Jovian probably did more business at night than during the day. He pressed the night button and waited.

The square of sidewalk dropped. Grant walked between X-ray scanners and remembered to deposit his heat-gun. He was met by an Earthman who took him up a long escalator. They went into a well-lighted room hung with rich tapestries and golden drapes. The man escorted Grant to a pedestal in the center of the room. The lights went out and it was inky black.

Then suddenly there sprang into sight on the pedestal a transparent dome the size of a small goldfish bowl. It was lighted by ultra-violet from the bottom. In the center of the dome a small golden ball hung by a platinum wire, and on the ball was a tiny butterfly—Netse the Jovian. Netse's wings moved slowly as he walked around the ball, and the violet light brought out the delicate green luminous tracery in his wings. Grant involuntarily stepped back.

There were whistling words and Grant was aware that they came through a speaker and amplification system. He knew the dome that protected the Jovian was almost indestructible. "You wished to see me?" The wings moved slowly back and forth. Each one had a purple spot in the center like an eye.

Grant gulped. "Yes. I—I have something to show you. I need your help." He wondered if the purple spots actually were eyes.

"Most people do," said Netse dryly.

Grant, inordinately ill at ease, fumbled in his watch-pocket. It was incredible that this tiny butterfly that would hardly outweigh a cigarette paper should have the brain to conduct a ramified business such as this one, and it was even more incredible that men and everything else—except perhaps Relegar—would yield to its will. Will, of course, was the key factor. Will was dominant and men obeyed.

Grant held out the echindul stone. "This is one of a pair," he said. "I found the other one too."

G "You have just come back from the Red Lava Range," said the whistling voice. "How many pairs did you find?"

Grant stared at the butterfly. Some thought the Jovians could read minds. Grant wondered. Then he decided to be honest. "Sixteen."

Netse's wings quit moving for a minute. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to assure me safe passage to your office. I will give you three-fourths of them," Grant blurted. He had not meant to make an offer like that. He had intended to let Netse ask but the delicacy of his situation hit him abruptly and fully and he was weighed down with sudden desperation.

"How can you find the others?" asked Netse.

"I—" Grant got cautious. "I have provided for that."

The butterfly fluttered to the top of the dome and hung upside down for a moment. Then the whistling came again. "I am sorry. I do not see where I can be of any assistance."

Grant was stunned. He held out both hands. "But—"

The lights went out. The Earthman was at his side, leading him out. He was given his heat-gun. "But what—why?—I don't understand," Grant said, bewildered.

His escort looked at him, opened his mouth, and showed Grant he was tongueless. He positioned Grant on the square and a moment later Grant was back on the sidewalk.

Discouragement was on him like a great weight. It deadened him. It smothered him. He paced the streets and eventually found himself before a restaurant. He remembered then that he had not eaten for a long time. He went in and ordered oysters. That was about the only meat you could buy in The Pass and be sure of not eating some sentient being. Then, waiting, he sat in a booth with his head between his hands.

It was apparent they didn't want him to have any part of his stones—the stones he had spent six months and risked his life for—the stones that meant so much to him and to Beth. They wanted all of his stones. The dirty Shylocks. They weren't willing to take half, or two-thirds, or three-fourths. They wanted all. They weren't willing for him to have any part of them. He would have settled for ten per cent, which would have been over fifty thousand dollars, but they didn't offer him ten per cent. They offered nothing. They wanted all.

Netse must have been contacted by Relegar and told to keep hands off. That was why Grant had wanted to see Netse first. But he had not dreamed that Netse would refuse him entirely. He had thought it would be merely a matter of the price.

Now what could he do? He didn't dare let the constrictor have more than three day's head-start, for the saurian would finish digesting the fish in about five days. That meant Grant would have to start back to the swamp tomorrow. But Relegar's spies would report every move. The minute he set out, Relegar would be notified. And Relegar would come after him. Grant shuddered. Where his hands touched his face his finger tips were cold.

Relegar would find him. The spider had a locator sense that was infallible. He could set out days later and find Grant unerringly. And how could one fight the Uranian when they met? Relegar's nervous system was so constructed that he was practically impossible to kill. You could boil him or freeze him without injuring him. Uranians had been boiled alive in prussic acid for forty hours without ill effects. You could cut off legs and even sever the head and they would still live. So what could a man do?

There was only one thing Grant knew. That was to go after the stones. They were his and he would never give them up. They might take the stones away from him, but he would never give them up.

So the next morning he overhauled his suit and patched it. He got fresh oxygen and bought a meager supply of food. He had one more good meal and started out south again with the single stone in his watch-pocket.

It took him seven hours to reach the place where he had left the constrictor. It was gone, of course. How far, he could not know. He took the one telepathic stone from his pocket. He found a spot where he could sit in the open, cross-legged, with his eyes fixed on the stone. From the corner of his eye he saw a brown detached eye on a stalk pop up from the surface of the water, but he paid no attention. He concentrated on the stone.

The stone had a fair polish. He looked at its surface and shut out all the normal sounds from his ears. The stone seemed to be in motion on the inside, and presently that motion communicated itself to his mind. He had a picture of a constrictor, lying sleepily in a pool of brown water surrounded by heavy, deep grass that hung over the banks and grew down into the water.

He heard now the distant bellow of a swamp-ox, the buzzing of aquatic bees. Slowly he turned the stone on its edge and revolved it carefully. When the picture was clearest in his mind he picked out an orientation point in the distant mountains. Then, well pleased, he put the stone in his pocket, got into his diving-suit, screwed on the helmet, adjusted the oxygen, and stepped off into the brown water of the swamp.

The bottom here was steep but it was good. It was hard and not more than knee-deep in mud. He traveled carefully, freezing on occasion when huge shadows moved above him. He was in fifty feet of water and he liked that better because it was easier to go unnoticed. He avoided a patch of electric cactus, for the spines would have electrocuted him even through the suit, and he went far around an area of white bull-root, shaped like women's legs, because he knew the bull-root was always infested with swamp-razors that would cut through the seams of his diving-suit.

When he came out of the water he found his orientation point and kept going. He came to a wide stretch of water, and with the wind at his back, made fast time by climbing on an island of floating grass and going straight across. This was important. He needed to find the constrictor by the time Relegar started after him.

The spider could travel much faster than Grant for it walked on water where Grant was forced to wade on the bottom. But Relegar would wait a while. He wouldn't want to be on the surface of Venus any longer than necessary, even for half a million dollars, so he would give Grant plenty of time, since there was no danger of his getting away.

Grant was encouraged by the fact that the constrictor did not appear to be far away. Everything here depended on his reaching the saurian two days ahead of Relegar. Not that he expected to run. That was hopeless. But he did have a partial plan. He thought he knew how to recover the stones and to face the Uranian without being immediately killed. And he hoped for some now unforeseen development that subsequently would help him to get through The Pass.

That last item was a weak point, a very weak point, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He could not wait for a plan. He had to go ahead and trust his own ingenuity to devise a means of getting to Aphrodite later. If he could keep Relegar from going back to The Pass until he himself could get through The Pass, then he would be unmolested, for Relegar was master of The Pass, and no entity of any sort, not even as powerful a one as Netse, would touch any being in whom Relegar was interested unless Relegar himself should order it.

If Grant could get through The Pass and across Division Street he would be safe, for Aphrodite proper was under the jurisdiction of the Planetary Police, and even Relegar respected them.

Grant found the constrictor on the second day, lying in a shallow pool with only its dorsal spines showing. Working slowly and carefully and entirely under water, he located the saurian's head, concealed in a clump of floating grass. The reptile was still in something of a torpor from its meal, and Grant had no difficulty in approaching it through the water and attacking it with the heat-gun on the soft part of the neck below the head.

The first bolt must have gone through and severed its spinal column, but Grant risked destruction from the thrashing body long enough to burn the head off entirely. He got out on solid ground and waited until sundown for the monster's contortions to die. Then he worked fast. The flying scavenger-foxes were already settling on the constrictor's back and tearing out great chunks of flesh. He went back under water and cut out the saurian's gizzard with the heat-ray. He dragged it off to one side and tremblingly cut it open with his knife, and he was relieved and exultant when he recovered all fifteen of the stones. The bag had disintegrated, but he put the stones carefully in his pockets.

Then he went back once more. He cut off a piece of the hide two feet square. He took only the outer hide, which was dry and which held the great iridescent scales that formed isotopes after death. From some marsh-bamboo and some wire-vines he formed a shield. By that time it was midnight. He turned his light on the pool where the saurian had been, and shuddered. The water was dull red, and alive with creatures fighting each other to get to the carcass. The surface was covered with flying things, some small, some huge, all fighting, fighting. Life on Venus was an eternal, bloody fight. This slaughter, once started, would go on for weeks, until the fighting creatures in this immediate area of the swamp were exhausted.

Grant snapped off the light as clouds of flying things arose. He started down the neck of dry land and walked all night, going as far as he could without submerging, getting out of range of the holocaust around the dead constrictor. Eventually he came to a lavawood tree. He examined it carefully, then climbed it. He found a crotch in the limbs. He lay down and hung his arms and legs over the limbs, pulled the shield over him, and went to sleep.

From the brilliant, blinding light of the sun even through the clouds, and the vapor arising from the surface of the swamp, he knew it was mid-afternoon when he awoke. He started up, but long habit stopped him almost as soon as he moved. He opened his eyes and was fully awake, listening for the sound that had awakened him. He heard it, a rasping noise like the sound of a knife-blade scraped against the grain of a fresh hog-skin. He looked across the swamp. Less than fifty yards away was Relegar, walking toward him on the water. The sound came from the scraping of his gray poison-mandibles against each other.

Relegar's mouth, as wide as his body, was open. The two bulbous eyes gleamed like pieces of polished metal. They saw Grant. The spider's sixteen jointed legs, that held his purple body three feet above the water, moved too fast for Grant to follow them. The Uranian skittered across a hundred feet of water and walked out on the land.

His bone-scraping voice came to Grant in the tree. "I'll take the stones now." It was a sinister voice. Grant felt a crawling, instinctive horror as the spider came toward him, its jointed legs moving delicately. "You've saved me some trouble by finding them."

Grant overcame his paralysis and reached for the heat-gun. Relegar saw the motion and stopped. "You can't hurt me with that heat-projector," he said. "You might shoot off a leg, but I'd have you half eaten before you could fire a second bolt."

The knowledge hit Grant with what was almost a shock that there was some way he could get the best of Relegar, otherwise the big spider would not have spoken at all. He well knew that he couldn't kill Relegar with the heat-gun. He could burn off a leg, yes, but he doubted that the infra-rays would affect the spider's body at all. He moved a little on the limbs, got a hold on the snake-skin shield, and dropped to the ground.

Relegar darted forward to meet him. But ten feet away the spider stopped, and Grant knew he had felt the radiation from the snake-skin. Relegar's mouth hung open, his white fangs gleaming in the red maw. The two bulbous eyes were suddenly shot with the red fire of anger. Grant did not hesitate. As he landed on the ground he fired a heat-bolt at one of Relegar's left legs. It smoked. There was an odor of burned hair. The queer material of the leg glowed white for an instant and then burned in two and the bottom part dropped off.

Relegar squealed. His two eyes almost exploded in a rage of red. He wasn't permanently injured—he would grow a new leg—but he was furious because he dared not come close to the shield. The radiation would paralyze him within a couple of seconds. Grant saw his body sag a little on the corner where the leg had been, and then he had one of those flashes of intuition that every being had to have, to live long in the swamp. He knew how to win this fight. He trained the heat-gun on the second leg on the same side and pressed the trigger. That leg burned in two and Relegar's body sagged still more.

Grant started on the third one. A feeling of triumph was growing in him. Then Relegar charged.

Grant hadn't expected that. There was little he could do but hold the shield frantically before him to try to ward off the fangs and the mandibles.

He had had no idea that the Uranian's body was so heavy. It seemed to Grant the thing must weigh three or four hundred pounds. It thundered into him and knocked him over as if he had been a straw. The heavy hoofs galloped over him. He was surprised, but he rolled on over and came to his feet, shooting.

He got the fourth and fifth legs this time. Relegar's body sagged considerably, but the spider, his entire body turning red with rage, spun around and charged again. This time the great mouth was open, the fangs ready, and the mandibles were extended. Grant left himself open until he could feel the spider's fetid breath in his face, then he flung out his shield.

The sharp fangs struck it. Relegar turned into a tornado of fury for perhaps a second, trying to shake the skin from his teeth. But it was too late. The skin came loose, but the radiation had paralyzed the spider. He sank feebly to the ground with the shield under him. His eyes glared with unutterable malignant hate, but that was all. His muscles were impotent.

Grant stood a few feet away, getting his breath, feeling the trip-hammer in his temple slow down to normal. Then he aimed. The sixth, seventh, and eighth legs burned off. He put the pistol in its holster.

"I'm not going to try to kill you," he said. "I suppose that's impossible anyway, short of cutting you up into small pieces, and I don't relish that idea. But I'll leave you the snake-skin. It will have passed the peak of its radioactivity by tomorrow and you can start back for The Pass. But you won't go back very fast. You've got legs on only one side. It's going to be slow navigating, especially on water. In fact, I think maybe you'll have to wait until you grow some new legs."

He patted his pockets filled with half a million dollars' worth of echindul stones. "Long before that I'll be in Aphrodite depositing my stones at the First Interplanetary Bank."

He watched Relegar's eyes turn dead, cold black, then he screwed on his helmet, adjusted the oxygen, and stepped off into the brown water. He felt rather good, wading through the mud at the bottom of the swamp. He was somewhat astonished that it had fallen to him, a nobody, to be the means of breaking up Relegar's hold on The Pass. But it was a very satisfactory feeling. He thought about Beth and New Jersey and strawberries with fresh cream. He sighed happily. His luck had changed.

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