

PLANET STORIES



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But that blast gave Jay his chance.

ANIMAT

By BASIL WELLS

Battling Venus' slime and vicious frog-apes, J46 yet found time to wonder: Was he a man or an android?

FOR TOO LONG HAD THE *Sun Maiden* been plunging sunward, her meteor-crushed jets and warped plates feeling the relentless chill of space eating swiftly inward.

Past the orbit of Mars; down past Earth's sector of space, and into the pull of Venus she flashed, her pace quickening. And crew-members, sweating and hollow-eyed within the foul closeness of space

suits, worked desperately to repair that all-but hopeless damage.

Abruptly the forward jets flared raggedly. The great ship faltered; its course shifted planetward, and even as the clouds swallowed the *Sun Maiden* the first of the patched jets exploded.

The remaining rockets flared briefly and died. The captain jettisoned cargo and equipment before releasing the eight un-

damaged emergency vanes. The shrieking solidity of the Wet Planet's air ripped the sturdy blades away as though they had been tinfoil and the ship's fall remained unslackened.

The slanting plunge ended at last. The nose plowed down a rocky mountain slope, crumbling with the impact, caromed off a boulder-strewn bench, and ripped through a tree-clad lower level into a mossy-grassed meadow. There, in a soggy treeless hollow, the scarred hulk that had been the *Sun Maiden* came to rest . . .

JAY FORSIX turned puzzled eyes on the little knot of survivors beside the ship. His fair-skinned face was square, like his powerful short body, and there was red hair sprouting from beneath the gray plastin of his control case's helmet.

Jay looked like a man; he even talked, in a meager jerky fashion, like a man, but he was actually an android robot. Animats, Inc. turned out thousands of superior robots for the industries of Earth and Mars — durable, foolproof *expensive* machines they were. But for the uranium mines of Jupiter's moons they also had begun to create these inexpensive living blends of animate flesh and bone, synthetic moronic creatures.

"There are six animats—and us!" choked the little blonde haired girl. Already the constant moisture of the atmosphere coated her skin with shining dampness.

Her companion, a tall dark-skinned girl, rubbed a bruised elbow thoughtfully. Her teeth flashed in a rueful smile.

"Bottle the tears," she snapped at the blonde girl, slapping her shoulder, "we got plenty water without them."

The smaller girl drew herself up.

"Perhaps you don't know who I am. I'm Thela Draper. My father owns most of Animats, Inc."

The tall girl laughed. "X with me, Thela. We're in the same fix. No putting on a front—all we'll be doing is keep alive until help comes."

"If it does come." Thela Draper's lips quivered. "I want . . ."

"Will you shut up! I'm taking charge. You're a spoiled empty-head even if you are atomic-plated. I'm not dumb even if

I do dance for a living in dives you'd blast clear of.

"Someday Ina Haan's name will be in all the lights of Mars and Terra."

Jay Forsix shook his head numbly from side to side as he heard the women talking. Strange thoughts and sensations were crowding into his brain. His hand went up to the bulky helmet that was designed to keep his synthetic body under the control of humans.

He gasped. The battery compartment was empty, its cover gaping. No wonder his uncontrolled senses were so active and his brain alive.

"Gone," he said to Ina Haan. He recognized her as the dominating character of the group.

Ina pulled out a trim platinum-washed expoder and leveled it at the animat. But her finger did not depress the little stud that would send the explosive needles of biaton into his body.

"Maybe an animat is dangerous without his controls," she mused aloud, "and then again . . . We'll see. I can always kill it later."

"Thank you, Ina Haan," Jay Forsix said clumsily.

Ina's dark eyes widened. It was rarely that a robot spoke without being addressed, and then it used the term Master or Lady.

"Get to work," she commanded, "salvaging food and clothing."

The animat nodded. He turned toward the battered port.

Ina was studying the serial plate on Jay's helmet. "Take the others along, J46," she said. "You are in charge of them."

Jay's heart pounded proudly. The human one had confidence in him. Never, in all the six weeks of his short existence, had men spoken a kindly word to him. To them he had been a stupid machine to be worked out in the radioactive mines of distant worlds.

"Yes . . . Ina Haan," he said.

"Onin Tufor," he ordered slowly, "Zee Fivotu, come . . ."

The animats rose from their mindless squatting and shuffled after him into the *Sun Maiden's* scrambled interior . . .

JAY AND THE TALL shambling animat called Onin Tufor were gathering the small, brown-husked fruit of the balloon-like *kreth* that grew on the slopes above the space ship. The fruit grew at the base of the swollen hollow globe, and on its stubby branches.

In the days since their landing the two girls and the animats had learned to eat, if not like, the edible berries and fruits of the eternally clouded world. And they had made two comparatively unharmed cabins snug and only slightly damp by sealing them with tough sheets of *kreth*.

"Would you boost me up?" asked Jay.

Onin stared at him stupidly. He answered nothing but commands. Jay swore, a habit acquired from the dark-haired human, and twisted open the battery case of the animat. He wrenched out the batteries and sent them hurtling into a nearby thicket of *nik-nik*.

"Ina Haan says we have good brains," he told Onin, "if we do not have them deadened by the control cases."

Onin was sniffing at the warm thickness of the Venusian air, his slowly awakening eyes studying the ten-foot circle of mossy grass and brush visible. His shoulders were straightening and his movements were steadier.

"She says it is peculiar that I know so many words and am so familiar with cities and machinery she mentions. It is as though that knowledge was placed in our brains when we were created."

Onin grunted something and started off into the *nik-nik* brush away from the invisible spacer. Jay followed, his hand on the crude metal club that Ina permitted him to carry.

"The ship's back this way." Jay touched Onin's shoulder. "And you forgot your bundle of roots and fruit."

Onin stopped and faced Jay defiantly. Something trembled on his lips and then he frowned, shaking his bony skull. He clawed at the strap, riveted securely under his chin.

"Off," he gurgled. "Take it off."

"And have your head blown off too? Not much. To protect the controls from tampering the technicians have planted explosives in the helmet. It's suicide."

Onin's fingers dropped away, his eyes thoughtful. When he spoke again his rusty uncertain voice was steadier.

"Let's go back," he said. "Later we may learn . . . how."

"How?"

"How to take them off." Onin was scowling again.

"The humans must not know your batteries are gone."

"No," Onin agreed, his deep-set brown eyes studied Jay. "Without the helmets we could be . . . like them."

Jay Forsix nodded. "I have thought of that, many times. But the women would know. They would tell, and we would be destroyed."

"They die too," the lanky one muttered, scowling. "Why not?"

"No." Jay hesitated. "No, I could not see Ina, or even the sulky one killed. And we know too little."

The lanky animat's brain seemed to be awakening swiftly now. He laughed.

"Already you think of yourself as a man," he told Jay. "You are in love with the tall female."

"Perhaps I am." Jay thumbed the line of his jawbone. "I feel a sort of warmth . . . a happiness . . . when they are near."

Onin snorted out a disgusted exclamation. "Or perhaps you are like a dog worshipping its master."

Jay swung his fist at Onin's jaw. Onin dodged, grinning.

"You are wrong," Jay spat out. "I am a man!"

Onin shrugged. "All X here, *animat*. Call yourself a man."

"We will take all the batteries from the others," said Jay, disregarding Onin's jeer. "Perhaps the searchers will not find the wreck and we can go on living here. There are books and recordings to study."

Onin's mouth twisted. "Small chance. They know the ship crashed somewhere in this area. And with the Draper female aboard they'll spare no expense."

"I heard rocket motors yesterday," admitted Jay.

A sodden thud-thud of approaching feet warned them of another's advance. Jay gripped his club tighter and waited, crouching.

"A *butrad*?" Onin muttered, referring to the gray-skinned froglike natives of Venus.

"So far we've seen none of them," Jay whispered. And he found time to puzzle about the knowledge possessed by animats.

"Jay Forsix," called Ina Haan's deep voice guardedly.

The animat's weapon dropped. "No talking," he warned Onin.

"Yes?"

"Come back to the ship at once. There are frog men lurking around and they may try to rush us. I killed one."

"Killed one! That was a mistake, Ina," Jay told her. "If we could have made friends with them . . ."

The woman's dark eyes narrowed savagely. "I'm in charge of our party, animat," she snapped. "Remember what you are and who are your masters!"

Jay's blood ran hot. His nails bit deep into the palms of his hands as he bowed his head stiffly. His eyes were trained on the ground at the woman's slime-crust-ed boots. He swallowed with an effort.

"I remember," he said slowly, his voice colorless as a true robot's.

Ina's lips smiled triumphantly. Her eyes softened as she patted his shoulder possessively.

"You *are* a handsome brute," she said softly. "I could easily . . ."

Onin grinned at Jay sardonically and winked. Jay shifted uncomfortably. Her hand dropped and she pushed at his naked chest.

"Back to the ship!" Her voice snapped crisply as she led the way.

THEY reached the ship without incident and dumped their loads in the kreth-patched airlock that served as a warehouse. Then the two animats went along a dripping short corridor past the humans' cabin to their own quarters.

The other four androids were lying on dank heaps of nik-nik brush half-asleep. Two of them were huge-chested, brutal-featured animats, patterned after the sturdy peasant stock of Earth; the others were pale-eyed, sharp-nosed little men. One of the little animats sat up.

"I am awake," he said, his high nasal voice carrying a note of hysteria. "The hum that hurts my head is gone. I can think."

Jay looked at Onin and nodded. "Dampness must have finished the cells. Maybe a short circuit."

"They'll all be like this shortly," Onin agreed.

Jay released the battery case's cover and snapped out the compact square batteries. The sharp-nosed animat, D601, scrubbed filthy fingers across his chin. His pale eyes darted furtively around the ruined cabin.

"I'm hungry," he whined. "I'd like a powdered steak dinner and a glass of *blika*. I got plenty of starshine in my straps."

His eyes widened as his fingers searched his ragged trunks.

"Took me off," he shrieked. "All gone. Every credit."

Jay shook the screeching little man. "What do you mean—all your credits gone? How would an animat have anything of value?"

Desix Owun frowned and shook his head.

"I—I don't know," he finally admitted. "For a moment it seemed as though—I was not—what I am."

"Try to think; to remember," Jay urged. "I have a wild theory that maybe you remember more than you think. Why would the technicians implant knowledge of finance and credits in a labor robot's brain?"

A grunted oath brought Jay around on his heels. The larger of the two huge robots had Onin's skinny arm twisted up behind his back.

"Start degrading," his deep voice was rumbling angrily. "How'd I get here and who are you? You keeping me doped?"

Jay stepped across the heap of leaves to the giant animat's side. His heavy club of metal was poised ready.

"Slip him free," he ordered sharply.

"Blast me if I will," grunted the animat, giving the bony arm a sickening wrench. Onin Tufor screeched thinly.

Jay swung the club along the blunt-featured animat's skull. The animat bel-lowed like a wild bull. He released Onin

and clawed with dirt-caked fingers at his battered skull. Then he sprang at Jay.

Jay Forsix backed away and slipped to one knee. The blow he had just delivered had dented the big brute's helmet along its base but had failed to down him. He caught the thick body across his hips and flipped the animat's six feet into the side of the cabin.

The giant, Zee Fivotu, rumbled his primitive rage and rebounded from the wall to launch himself again at Jay. Jay swung his club across the brutal forehead and again above the ear. Zee Fivotu's helmet crunched in.

Jay fell backward to escape as much of the blast as possible. But there was no explosion. The helmet with its carefully guarded control case had somehow been rendered harmless by his blows!

He rolled over and to his feet—to see Zee Fivotu's back disappearing out the cabin door. He lunged after the animat but the giant android was out the lock before he could reach it.

HE was conscious of another presence in the outer airlock as his shoulder brushed something yielding.

"What?" demanded Thela Draper angrily.

"Zee went blot," gasped Jay. "Tried to kill Onin. And me."

The girl's small exploder snapped out of her wrist holster into her hand and she sent a stream of mosquito-sized explosive bullets after the animat.

A second later the all-pervading sea of fog had swallowed the apelike shape and she released the button. She jammed the weapon against Jay's middle.

"I knew we should have killed all of you animats," she said coldly. "Without controls you are unpredictable—less than beasts."

Jay's muscles tensed for the miniature bomb blasts that the pellets' impact would bring. Then he relaxed, laughing quietly.

"You know," he said, "you should be at least four feet away before you fire. And before you can get that far I'll have the gun."

6—Planet—Spring

The muzzle dropped away. Thela started to inch backward. It was common knowledge that a biaton needle's explosion nearby was dangerous. The whole magazine *might* explode in her hand—a blast as devastating as a case of ancient dynamite.

Jay's hand chopped across the girl's wrist. Her cry of dismay choked off abruptly and her eyes sparked contempt.

"Go ahead," she cried. "Kill me. That's all you animats know how to do. Work, eat and destroy."

Jay tucked the tiny wrist exploder into his soggy trunks' waistband.

"Not interested," he told her. "You better go back to your cabin and get another exploder. I'm keeping this one."

"No," Ina Haan's voice cut across the hostility of the tiny chamber laconically. "Give."

Jay shook his head. "I'm keeping it. And you better get another for Onin Tufor. I think we're about to have trouble."

As though to emphasize his words a prolonged ghastly shriek came from the fog. They heard broken shouted phrases, human words but with something bestial and terrible in their anguished pleading. The screams rose higher and higher—and choked off until almost inaudible.

The women's faces were pinched and terrified. They pressed close to Jay, forgetting that he was a man-made creature—a robot of living flesh—in their instinctive urge for the protection of the male.

"That was Zee Fivotu," he said soberly. "The Frogs have him. Probably tore him apart . . ."

"We'll be next," said Ina Haan, her voice thinned.

"Guard the lock, Ina," ordered Jay. "I'm going back after the animats. We'll need them all."

Ina Haan made no protest to Jay's assumption of authority nor did he think it strange that he should take control. From somewhere in his acquired memories he had dredged up adequate knowledge of the butrads' methods of attack.

He raced back through the corridor to the animat cabin. Onin was grinning, his long bony face alight.

"I've found how to remove the helmets,"

he cried, "by inserting a small rod that locks the lever resting against the skull. We . . ."

"No time for that now," he told the animat, paying no heed to the battered control case Onin held gingerly in his long fingers. "The Frogs are attacking!"

THEY sprawled atop the wreckage of what had been the *Sun Maiden*, their puny expoders sending their explosive needles at the blurred shapes that crept out of the fog's pall.

Down below the two women guarded the airlock with the two other expoders, and with them waited the club-armed animats.

"Y'know, Onin," Jay said, touching the button that sent a short burst into the butrads crawling closer, "I'm beginning to believe that we're not animats."

The lanky animat gulped. "Huh? You think we're human?"

"Sounds reasonable. Your knowledge of the control case—of which I'd know little or nothing. And I know about the butrads, all their little strategies. Even Venus seems familiar."

"But we don't know our own names. Just numbers. I'll confess I know little about Venus or its fauna. But I remember Blake City on Mars. I can describe the laboratories of the university."

Jay stitched a burst of needles across a trio of the grotesque froglike natives. Two flattened where they lay to move not again and the third raced for the fog's shield.

"In other words our acquired memories are different." Onin thumbed his huge nose leaving a mossy green stain. "But, of course, we may have been subjected to different training schedules before our—'birth'. Perhaps we had instructors with different backgrounds transmitting through the mentamit."

Jay snorted. "Individual instruction? No! Uniformity is the rule for all robots. Any deviation is avoided. A mentamit recording is more probable, teaching the simplest rules of behavior and obedience."

Onin's weapon spat its lethal needles in short steady bursts. Jay shifted so he could help his comrade stem the approach-

ing rush of butrads. They came on, out of the grayness, an undisciplined mob, waving clubs and spears as they ran, their purple-rimmed mouths croaking insults.

The two expoders slashed at them. Twenty of the hideous brutes fell, writhing and crying out thickly in pain, before the attack fell apart and disintegrated.

"Last attack they'll make today," said Jay. He examined the meager supply of needles in his magazine and shook his head. "It's almost night and they stick close to their nests with darkness."

Onin looked up from checking his own ammunition.

"Almost gone," he said glumly.

"Jay," a voice called from below.

"What is it, Ina?"

"Water's coming into the ship. We're in a foot of water now."

Jay turned to the north where the river's invisible course snaked. A brook had rolled muddily past the ship and through the hollow where it lay before from the western mountain slope but now a swollen water stream had joined it.

"The Frogs have breached the river and are flooding us out!" he shouted. "Probably they've damned the lower outlet. We'll be under water by morning!"

Onin swore in amazement. "They can swim underwater and attack. And with our guns empty . . ."

"We could make a stand up here," Jay mused, "but they'd starve us out. All we can do is slip away in the darkness and hide."

Onin looked over the side, gauging the height of the water.

"By another hour," he said, "we'd have to wade through ten feet of water." He stood up, flexing his skinny arms. "Better go now."

"And have them see us? We've two space suits left intact. They'll serve as diving suits. Using them we can escape unobserved."

"I'll get them ready," Onin offered. He started to climb back through the shattered spacer's gaping plates.

"Better get the biaton out of that helmet," Jay suggested. "We can make a few hand grenades out of it. We'll probably need some."

"We will," agreed the lanky animat. "Our own helmets will supply some more. I'll bring a rod up and we'll get rid of them."

THE dirty gray dawn of Venus caught the little party of humans and animats high up on the slope of the mountain. The fog was thinner here and as the light increased they had come upon a shallow fairly dry cave that opened above a narrow brush-covered bench.

Their escape had been without incident, a series of weary walks underwater, two going out and one returning dragging the empty suit. The heavy suits they were forced to abandon at the water's edge before starting the climb upward along the rain-washed ledges.

Tired though she was Ina Haan's eyes were bright.

"It's wonderful," she told Jay, "to learn that you are not an animat. This is the break I've always been looking for."

Jay was puzzled by the girl's excitement. He could not imagine why she was so pleased. Maybe she had fallen in love with him. At the thought he felt his heart pound faster. She was very desirable despite the tattered wisps of garments that half-covered her firm breasts and shapely woman's body—or perhaps it was because of them.

He took her in his arms and kissed her. She did not resist him, but surrendered her lips at once. Her eyes were dreamy.

"You love me," he said. "We'll be mates!"

Ina smiled mysteriously and leaned back against his chest.

"We must take the expoder from Thela," she said. "She might try to kill you to keep the secret of Animats Incorporated from the public. She'd want to protect her father."

Jay nodded, looking back into the cave where the other girl slept. "He'll probably go to prison or be shipped off to the asteroids," he agreed, "when we report this affair."

Ina's eyes narrowed.

"You must say nothing to anyone if we are rescued," she told him. "The company would probably have you murdered

before you reached the government heads of Earth or Mars."

"What's to keep her from telling them, then?" demanded Jay.

"I think she's going to keep quiet," Ina smiled. "Just let me handle it my way."

Jay stared down into the foggy plain that extended outward for perhaps fifty feet from the cave mouth before it merged with the eternal gray blanket. Somewhere down there the Frogs would be swimming to the deserted space ship—searching it.

"I wish I knew who and what I was before the company scientists worked on my brain. Was I a criminal or a political refugee? Or did they pirate a spacer I was on?"

"It is a profitable racket," mused Ina. "Taking humans and making robots out of them. Cheaper than creating and educating androids. Probably they made a few of the real article too."

Jay nodded sleepily. He wondered how many human beings had been condemned to the certain death of the uranium mines of Jove's satellites.

Ina went back into the cave to sleep and he sat there on guard. Yet he was weary and his head started to droop. In a moment he would have been asleep.

A soft hand trembled on his shoulder. He turned, thinking Ina had come back. But it was Thela Draper.

"I heard," she said, her voice strained but low. "I want you to know Ina is wrong. If Father's company has been breaking the laws I want it known. I know Father would do nothing wrong."

"You wanted to kill us when we first landed," accused Jay.

"But I thought you were uncontrolled robots—not men!"

"Lucky Ina didn't agree with you," grunted Jay wearily.

"Jay," cried the girl, her eyes moist, "please believe me. I have regretted saying what I did every day we have been marooned here. Animat or man, you are worth a hundred ordinary men."

"Save your flattery for those who want it," said Jay gruffly. "You're not fooling me. Ina knows what you are. Get back to bed."

Thela's eyes flashed. "I hate Ina. She's

cruel and scheming. She's only using you!"

Jay pushed the girl away back toward the damp heap of hastily gathered leaves and brush where she had been sleeping. He heard her sobbing for several minutes before she again dropped off.

And the pale gray light outside strengthened . . .

HIGHER and higher they climbed the mountain slope. The cave where they had rested now lay hundreds of feet below. The fog thinned and the glow of the swollen sun was a brighter blur above them. They could see for more than a hundred feet on either hand and above.

"Spacer should find us easier up here," Onin said. "If we can only find a plateau or wide bench where they can land. And the two rocket flares I brought along should help."

"We might even find an abandoned trading station," Jay told him. "Before the Frogs became hostile several hundred of them were built in the uplands. A few of them are still in operation, or were at the period I seem to recall."

"I hope," said Onin fervently, "we'll find a fort or spaceport."

"Could be, but we haven't stumbled across any discarded dlastin cartons," was Jay's dry rejoinder. "They're stacked buckle-high around most settlements on Venus."

The little man, Desix Owun, came breathlessly up from the rear of the straggling party.

"I saw Frogs on our trail," his high voice shrilled, "hundreds of 'em. Gimme a stitcher."

Jay chuckled at Onin's raised eyebrows.

"Means an expoder," he explained. He turned to the ex-animat. "Ina has an extra gun, the one Thela had. Tell her I said to give it to you."

Desix Owun's shifty eyes gleamed delightedly. He hurried down to where the two women toiled upward.

"I'm going back with the grenades, Jay," the lanky man said. He took a swipe at his huge nose. "Keep climbing while I cover the rear."

"I'd rather go back," objected Jay.

"Some of them may have gone ahead of us," said Onin grimly, "and they'll be pushing rocks and spears down at you. We're trapped here on the slope."

Jay could see the logic of the older man's words. He climbed upward along the broken trail of ledges and watercourses more swiftly.

And emerged suddenly, between two towering walls of shattered pink and black stone, on the edge of a grassy plateau-like expanse—the flattened top of the mountain they were ascending! He turned to call down to the others, and a spear grazed his shoulder.

From below three explosions, raggedly spaced, told of the effectiveness of the crude grenades. Then he turned to face the unknown enemies of the plateau.

They were butrads like those on the trail below, unlovely web-footed batrachians with the spraddled two-legged bodies of uncouth humanoids. Twelve of them were, all armed with spears, clubs and knives of bone.

He fired carefully, husbanding his dwindling store of explosive needles. And they went down, one after another, until only one croaking giant remained on his feet.

It was then that the trimmer key jammed.

He worked with fog-wet fingers, not aided in the least by the sweat that suddenly began to drip down his arm and fingers, to clear the key. It was ticklish work for the exposed speck of biaton might explode at too rough contact.

The Frog raced closer, his ghastly purple-rimmed eyes and mouth strained, and his croaking warcry booming triumphantly.

There was an explosion of rockets overhead, growing more audible with every second; the butrad, hearing the sound, slowed his pace momentarily. That instant gave Jay time to holster his little expoder and snatch up one of the clumsy spears at his feet.

He threw the weapon, scooped up another, and flung it. Both spears found sleek gray flesh, one in the stomach and the other in the batrachian's neckless throat. The giant Frog staggered and

lurched forward uncertainly. Jay's fist swung up, smashing into the broad noseless face, and the native went down.

One by one the three animats and the two women climbed to where he stood. He saw Onin hurl a last grenade downward and then climb upward again. The bony-framed man's breathing was ragged as he reached the level and blood was dripping off his limp left hand from a spear wound in his shoulder.

Onin sank down on the rocky level ground beyond the riven rocks. He groped in his pouch with his good hand.

"The rocket flares," he murmured huskily.

The distant thunder of jets had swelled louder. There were several ships, Jay decided, the cadence of their rockets differed. In a matter of seconds they would be almost directly overhead.

He ran out into the undulating grassy flat, knelt, and twisted off the flare's cap. He adjusted the height for six thousand feet and depressed the firing stud. The rocket flare sped skyward, growling unevenly as its speed built up.

A moment later a mushrooming blossom of orange light rode above them.

Rocket jets hammered, after a long instant of suspense, out a one-three-two burst of fire. The signal had been seen. Jay shouted. He sent the other flare blasting heavenward to guide the ships.

From the rocks at the rim a burst of expoder fire sounded

INA HAAN stood over the three animats, two of them still helmeted. Jay and Onin had not yet found time to free the men from their encumbering explosive-laden control cases. Their bodies were torn open by expoder needles.

"What happened?" he demanded as he raced closer.

"They attacked me," Ina said calmly, "and I was forced to kill them."

"She lies!" Thela cried out. "She shot them down. So they couldn't talk. She's going to blackmail Father—use the money to make her famous."

Jay read the truth in the hard smile the dancer flashed him. She tipped up a de-

fiant chin. And the little expoder in her hand swung to cover Thela and himself. She planned to blackmail Animats Incorporated, once clear of Venus, and their lives meant little to her.

She nodded. "Better throw in with me, Jay. We can both be rich—on Animats credits. After what they did to you it's only right."

"And keep my mouth shut about this traffic in hunted men?" Jay exploded. He shook his head. "I'll rot in prison first."

"You'll not have the chance, Jay." For a brief moment Ina's eyes were soft and pleading. "We could have plenty fun together on all that stardust . . ."

"Even if she kills you," Thela broke in, "I'll talk. I'd rather see Father in prison than . . ."

"You're both fools," said Ina Haan wearily, and the expoder swung up. Her face was twisted now into something not quite human.

Her finger moved to depress the firing stud. There was an explosion on the rocks directly behind her and she spun about toward its source. It was Onin Tufor's weapon that had fired the needle. The dying animat had aroused from his stupor long enough to loose but one ill-aimed shot. And that shot had missed.

The dancer's explosive needles ripped the lanky man's torso into shreds.

But that split second of death gave Jay the opportunity he needed. He sprang at Ina, knocked her expoder spinning, and the edge of his palm smacked hard along the line of her neck. She dropped, unmoving, and Jay knotted her wrists together with a pack strap.

Thela came to him, and not far away the stratocars, surface ships equipped with radar and scanning scopes for work inside the Venusian cloud envelope, were grounding. In a few moments they would be bound for civilization again.

"I meant it, Jay," said Thela softly, her breathing shallow and unsteady. "No matter what comes—I'm blasting along with you."

With his arm around her waist the chunky man who had been an animat awaited the coming of the rescue party.