

# PLANET STORIES



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# LAST RUN ON VENUS

By JAMES McKIMMEY, JR.

*It wasn't love of adventure that forced Caine onto Venus' forbidden Purple Plateau. Oh, no. But there was a wench named Cice—a five-imaged wench—who could make the heart of any pilot leap crazily through the Galaxy.*

**T**HIS was Nicholas Caine's last run and he didn't like it. It didn't look right or feel right or taste right. Even the small jetcopter felt sluggish to his touch. He was getting it down too fast and up too slow. But that, he knew, was really caused by his nerves. Usually he was as cold about these jaunts as a piece of newly chipped ice; this was his business. But today was different.

This was the end of it and tomorrow it wouldn't be his business anymore. A man absorbed so much and he couldn't absorb anymore. He got to the point finally when he kicked it over and he said, "Thank you and to hell with it," and then he left.

And that was what Caine was doing. Only he still had this last run and it was wrong. He knew it. It was all wrong.

He glanced at the mirror that reflected the cabin behind him.

The girl with the brown hair and the white teeth winked at him.

Caine looked away quickly and thin muscles rippled along his jaw. He didn't know which of them was getting on his nerves more, the girl or the insane kid who was with her.

It was certain that between them they were getting him, and he jambed a hand forward. The ship whipped down through the air like an Earth sea gull, skimming the tops of the vine trees of the Venusian jungle.

"Oh, lookce, lookce!" screamed the thin twitching boy with the blond hair. "Swamp and jungle, snakes and lizards! Are there devils down there, Driver? Are there spooks and ghosts and witches? Hey, Driver?"

Caine didn't answer. He looked again to the mirror.

The girl was laughing and shaking her brown hair. The boy was using his camera, leaning over the edge of the open-topped cabin. He was about twenty-one, Caine judged. Six years younger than Caine, but he acted like he was twelve or thirteen. Caine hadn't liked him from the start and he hated him right now. He was just another rich kid who thought the whole system was a playground.

And he kept calling Caine, "Driver." If he did it once more, Caine promised himself, he'd kill him.

Only he wouldn't, he knew. He wouldn't do anything. Caine had asked for this job, taking people with too much money on sight-seeing hops over the wilds of the Venusian country. It was a long way for both Caine and his jetcopter from the days when he was out at the tip of the finger of exploration, when the American Colony had been only a rugged square on the flatland.

Now that was over and he was leaving Venus. And the reason why he was leaving, was because of people like the two in back of him. The stupid, blind, selfish people who had ruined every chance for a decent relationship between the Colonists and the Venusians.

Because the Venusians were kind and honest and good, these people had swept over them like hail hitting flower petals. They had slashed and gouged and broken everything in their way: the earth, the vegetation, the Venusians themselves. Everything went down in front of the Colonist's hand. And then they laughed and spent the money they made and damned near tickled themselves to death with their own superiority.

Caine brought the ship up with a wrench, swearing under his breath. Well, this was the last time he'd have anything more to do with them. Tomorrow, he'd be on a rocket and this time he'd find a place where he wouldn't see another damned tourist the rest of his life. The only good thing about this was that he would use their money to do it. He wasn't a sucker like the Venusian. He knew how to charge six times over for a trip like this.

The boy was chattering and the girl was laughing and Caine made a slow sweeping circle over the yellow and green and purple jungle.

The boy was jerking finished three-dimensional pictures out of the camera and squinting at them. "Oh, Lord," he would say, giggling as he looked. Then he would throw the picture over his shoulder and grab another. "Oh, heavens." And that one would go over his shoulder.

"Hey, Driver!" the boy yelled. "Let's go down again."

Caine set his teeth and spiraled slowly in the cloud-dull air.

He felt a touch against his right arm. He

glanced down and found the girl's small foot beside his arm. She wiggled a sandaled toe and tapped him again with her foot.

Caine saw her small ankle and after that, the neat swell of her calf. She wore no stockings and her skin was tanned the color of golden wheat—from long hours, Caine knew, lying in an artificially sunlit patio.

He looked at her in the mirror.

"Vanny wants to go down again," she said, smiling insolently. She shook the soft brown hair and her eyes danced. She had dark blue eyes, Caine noticed, and they sparkled and flirted. And Caine wanted none of it. He wanted to get this over and he wanted to get away.

She was making him more nervous than the boy was, only it was a different kind of nervousness. It was the kind that got into your blood and found your heart and your breath, and it was more dangerous.

"Down, down!" the boy was yelling.

"All right," Caine said. "All right."

He spiraled the ship toward the jungle.

"You know," he could hear the girl say, "I don't think Driver likes you, Vanny. I don't think he likes me, either. Why don't you like us, Driver?"

Caine concentrated on his flying.

"You know," said the girl in her husky voice, "maybe he doesn't like it because we call him Driver. Do you, Driver?"

Caine accelerated the ship and cut at the tips of the vine-trees. He heard the clicks of the boy's camera and his crazy yelling.

The girl touched his arm with her toe again. "What is your name, Driver?"

Caine looked up at the mirror and stared at the girl's eyes. She bent forward, her smile a quirk at each corner of her red mouth. She wore a thin blue dress that matched the color of her eyes, and its neckline was cut so that, as she leaned forward, Caine could see that she was probably tanned all over.

She smiled her white smile and her teeth were even and small. "Name," she said.

"Caine," he snapped.

"First name."

"Nicholas."

"Do they call you Nick?"

"My friends call me Nic. N-i-c. Pronounced like Nick. My friends call me that."

"That's what I'll call you, Nic."

He stared at her in the mirror, his mouth tight.

"Aren't I your friend, Nic?" she said, wiggling her toe.

Caine swung the ship. "Let's call it a day."

"Wait a minute!" said the boy. "Wait a minute!" He stumbled past the girl into the empty seat beside Caine. His thin mouth was suddenly hard. "I'm paying quite a little money to see this rotten country and I want to see it."

"We've been up an hour," Caine said.

"All right," the boy said sarcastically.

"We'll stay up six hours then, friend."

Caine felt his hands turn wet in the palms.

"I'm paying for this," the boy went on, his voice taunting, "and you're just the driver. You don't want to forget that. Now if I want to fly over this crap from now until Christmas you're going to do it. Isn't that right, friend?"

Caine's heart was hammering and he knew the anger was showing in his face. Any other time he would have handled this with a crack of his voice, or, if he had to, a crack of his fist. But not today. Today he didn't want any trouble. He wanted nothing to go wrong. All he wanted was to get it over and to get out.

"Did you hear me, friend?" the boy said.

"Yes, I heard you," Caine said.

"All right," said the boy, grinning meanly. "That's fine. We understand each other. Put her down again."

Caine snapped the nose of the ship down and the boy tumbled back into the cabin. "Hey!" he yelled. "Lookee, lookee!"

Caine cut between the tips of the tree-vines. He nearly touched his wheels against a clearing. He climbed. He dropped. He fought the anger.

The boy worked his camera and the girl watched Caine through the mirror. There was a different look in her eyes now, Caine saw. A kind of mocking look that made the anger inside of him swell and beat against his temples.

He knew she was going to start and he asked himself, "Why? Why couldn't they leave him alone just this one day, this one time, so that nothing would go wrong?"

But he knew this had been that kind of a day from the time it started. He knew as surely as he was flying the jetcopter that nothing was going to be right about this day.

She said it: "I think Nic's afraid of Vanny."

He licked his lips and his tongue was dry.

"I mean," she said, "Isn't that queer? A great big strong man like Nic afraid of a little boy like Vanny? Why is that, I wonder?"

Caine took his hands from the controls and rubbed them against his knees. He could feel it breaking apart. He couldn't hang onto it.

Then the boy yelled and scrambled to the opposite side of the cabin. The girl's feet went up and Caine caught the flash of her tan legs. She laughed and shook her hair.

"Looke!" cried the boy. "A purple plateau."

Caine straightened the ship and began moving swiftly away.

"No, no!" screamed the boy. "Put her down there! On the ground!" He waved his hands and pointed at the purple-colored rise of land. "Did you hear me, Driver? Put her down, put her down!"

"This is Venusian land," Caine said grimly, "and I wouldn't put this ship down anyplace but Colony land."

**T**HE boy was behind Caine, his thin fingers digging into Caine's shoulder, "I'll tell you what to do, friend. You just do it."

Caine turned and looked at the boy's white, unhealthy-looking face. The boy's lips curled again.

"If you want to fly," Caine said, "I'll fly you all day. But if you want to land in Venusian territory you get yourself another driver." He accented the word, driver.

The boy clutched at Caine's shoulder and hopped behind his seat. "Put her down on that purple plateau!" the boy yelled. "Damn you, I don't want to listen to your stupid voice! Just put her down, do you hear me, Driver?"

Caine could feel the fingers pinching his shoulder and he could see the white crazy face bobbing beside him. He wanted to lift just one of his hands and slap the screaming boy across the cabin. But if he did there

would be much trouble when they got back.

The girl's father, Caine knew, was the Treasurer of the Colony. This boy was her guest. They could make a lot of trouble for him.

He knew it wouldn't help, but he made one try: "Look," he said, "We've got a written agreement with the Venusians to stay off this part of the land. Don't you understand?"

"Oh, hell!" the boy shouted, "Oh, hell! Damn the Venusians! Put her down there, Driver. Do you hear me?"

Caine swept the ship in a slow circle. He felt the slim foot at his arm again. "Did you hear him, Driver?" asked the girl, her eyes mocking him through the mirror.

Caine dropped the ship.

The boy plunged back through the cabin, chattering, giggling, clicking his camera.

Caine looked at the purple plateau. It was not a plateau, really, it was a rather flat hill in the midst of the thick swampy jungle. Around it he could see the reflection of liquid and then the shimmering slick-looking vine-trees.

The boy's reaction to the fact that this was Venusian territory was what was wrong with this whole planet, Caine thought as he examined the purple hill.

"Damn the Venusians," was the slogan for the Colony. Damn them this way, damn them that way. Write a treaty with them, wink, and forget about it. Get them going and coming and sideways. Because their skin was green and their heads were round and hairless, that meant they were stupid and inhuman and thus to be taken advantage of.

They were not stupid, Caine knew, nor were they inhuman. And how much more advantage could be taken of them, Caine didn't know. There was a point of resistance to everything, even to Venusians. And Caine did not doubt that sooner or later the Colonists would push the Venusians to it. What then, only God knew.

Right now, however, all Caine cared about was getting away from here so he wouldn't have to watch this thing anymore. He was sick of it. Sick to the core. The months and months he'd spent trying to help establish Earth's civilization on this planet appeared now like having driven around in a constant circle, and finally real-

izing that neither he nor anyone else had gone anywhere.

And all because of people like the two behind him.

Caine swore bitterly to himself and circled the purple hill once more.

"Down, down!" the boy was screaming, and Caine could hear the girl laughing.

## II

THE nearest Colony post, Caine judged, was thirty miles away. That meant no one would observe his silver ship dropping into the forbidden jungle. But even breaking the treaty would be no worse than inflicting the wrath of a guest of the Treasurer. Or the Treasurer's daughter.

He drifted slowly above the hill. At least, he hoped, there would be no Venusians around this part, although you couldn't tell. If there were, probably they wouldn't do anything, Caine decided, because they did not believe in violence or in physical conflict.

But there was a matter of honor, and Caine for one, especially Caine, did not want to be responsible on this, his last day on the planet, for breaching that honor with these native people.

The perils of the swamp was a thing he saved for final consideration. They would go no further than the boundaries of the small hill. But in reality, Caine hoped that something might be down there, waiting to scare the stupidity out of the loud kid who was forcing him down. Caine didn't know what that might be, because you could never tell what waited for you in the Venusian jungle. It was all strange, unexplored land, and this land, Caine had learned, produced many very weird and awful things.

They would soon find out.

He dropped the ship slowly, aiming for the center of the gradually sloping hill. The boy was like a crazy bird locked in a cage. The girl shook her hair, her teeth shining whitely while she laughed, but Caine could feel her eyes watching him, watching him.

Caine knew then, in that split second before the wheels of the ship touched the purple hill, that it hadn't been the boy's demand that had forced him down, but the girl, watching him through the mirror,

taunting him, daring him, that had made him do this.

He looked up at her and the look she returned made a shiver dance along his spine.

The wheels touched ground.

The boy clawed at the door. "Lookee, lookee, lookee!" he yelled.

Caine's hand snapped out and struck the boy's fingers away from the lock of the door.

"Hey!" said the boy, spinning. "Watch out, Driver. Watch out with that. You don't want to make me mad now, friend. Do you, friend? Do you?"

Caine looked at the narrow glittering eyes of the boy. "No," he said quietly. "I don't want to make you mad."

"That's fine," the boy said, nodding. "That's fine."

The girl reached over and touched the boy. "You tell him, Vanny. You tell him anything you want to. He'll listen and nod and say yes to anything. He's a very sweet fellow, Nic is."

Caine jamped his seat back and stood up. He took out his holstered pistol from the small compartment beneath the instrument panel. He strapped the holster to his waist and turned around.

"I don't want either one of you gong beyond the boundary of this hill. I don't like being down here. I'll tell you that before we get out. And so I don't want any trouble. Get out and look and that's all. In five minutes I'm taking off. If you're not in this ship you can walk back. Do you understand?"

The girl raised her eyebrows and whistled. "Listen to the captain."

The boy yanked at the door. "I don't want to hear your damned speeches, Driver. Open the door that's all, before I get mad."

Caine hit the lock and the boy spilled out to the purple-colored surface.

Caine looked at the girl. She sat there, legs crossed, smiling at him. "I asked you your name. You didn't ask me mine. Don't you want to know, Captain?"

"No," Caine said.

"It's Cice. Isn't that pretty? Cicc? Doesn't it sound nice with Nic?"

"No," said Caine, "it doesn't."

She pursed her lips and stood up suddenly. "All right, Driver. Let's look at the jungle."

Caine climbed out and turned to help the

girl. He held up a hand and caught hold of her fingers. He looked up at her and waited for her to come down into his arms.

She didn't. She threw his hand away and leaped to the ground, a flash of gold and blue. She was like a cat, and there was no loss of dignity or presence when she landed beside Caine. Caine turned away and walked to the tip end of the ship's right wing.

He reached down and felt of the moss-like substance covering the hill. It was like a thick carpet, but spongier, and it was moist. The air was moist, too, and it was in the soft breeze that touched Caine's face and made the slippery leaves around the hill swing and slide together.

The boy was spinning like a gyroscope, snapping pictures this way and that, jerking the finished prints out, looking at them, and throwing them away.

The girl had walked to the front of the ship and stood there, very straight and perfect, letting the wind ripple her blue dress.

Suddenly, the boy swung around and vaulted to the short thin wing of the jet-copter. He crouched there, clicking his camera, while the ship tipped.

Caine yelled, and then as though the center had been split out of the huge moss carpet, it began to slide toward the canal of liquid around the hill. The ship swung partially sideways, while the white-faced boy with the camera pranced on its wing. Caine felt himself moving with the sliding moss and he jumped forward. The girl had fallen to her knees and was reaching for the solid rock-like surface beneath the moss.

**T**HE boy had frozen against the surface of the ship now, and as the tail jets hit the liquid, the silver metal melted and disappeared in the shimmering stuff like soft lead going into fire.

Caine let out a yell and scrambled over the shifting carpet and yanked the girl to the exposed rock. Then he jumped back and grabbed at the hook of the ship's nose, knowing even as he did it that it was a senseless action. The ship kept sliding.

Foot by foot it disintegrated, as though the liquid were an acid. Still the boy hung like a frightened animal to the silver wing. Caine lunged for the boy's hand, but he slipped to his knees and felt himself

sliding toward the liquid.

He reached up to the wing, now sticking in the air like a broken arm. He pulled himself to his feet and it was like standing on shifting grease. He found the boy's arm and yanked hard. The boy came flying off the wing and hit the slipping moss, the camera swinging around his neck, his arms fighting.

The ship had nearly melted in the liquid and the right wing, the last of it, crumpled and slid into the shining acid and disappeared.

Caine fought along the edge of the hill, trying to push the boy to the exposed rock that had lain beneath the moss-like surface.

The boy screamed and flailed his arms and legs, and the movement was making them slide toward the waiting liquid. Caine gritted his teeth and leaped ahead, pulling the boy with him. He found solid rock as the final covering of the purple carpet slid into the liquid.

Caine lay on the rock, breathing hard, his hands clutching the boy's jacket.

The boy shook himself loose and he was no longer screaming. "Take your filthy hands off of me," he said to Caine.

Caine's face flushed and his eyes thinned.

The boy stared back at Caine for a long moment, then he stood up and examined his camera.

Caine got to his feet and went up the incline to where the girl waited. "Are you all right?" he asked her.

There was a different look in her eyes. There was no mocking or sarcasm. "Yes," she said, shaking her hair and smiling a little. "I'm all right, Nic."

"Well, that's damned fine," Caine said, a line cutting between his eyebrows. "That's really damned fine because my ship isn't. Have you noticed? Three years of sweat and blood gone down the sewer. Isn't that fine?"

Her smile flickered and she touched his arm. "I'm sorry, Nic. It was our fault—"

He shook himself away from her touch. "Yes, it was your fault and it didn't need to happen, only you and the screaming idiot had to do it. Ships are a dime a dozen to you but not to Nic Caine."

Her smile had vanished and there was a bright glinting light in her eyes. She stood very straight and met Caine's furious stare. "I'll buy you a new one when we get back,



Driver. I don't want to see you cry. Wipe the tears away, honey . . ." she reached to pat his shoulder and he slapped her hand away.

"Keep your hands away from me and don't use that tone of voice when you're talking to me. I'll take that ship from you when we get back. If we do get back. And you can count on that. In the meantime don't push me anymore, or I'll . . ."

"You'll what?" she said, her white smile shining at him. "You'll do what? I'm interested. Say what you're going to do. Or better yet, just do it. I'm ready."

Her smile was a shimmering thing and her eyes danced like bright stars. Caine felt of his strength by clamping his hands into fists.

He hardened his arm muscles and his shoulder muscles, but he knew he didn't have at that moment enough strength to meet her smile and her eyes and her tanned smooth skin. He could strike her half-way across the rock, but she was stronger and he could see in her eyes that she knew it.

But that was her strength right now.

He would test it later and see how it was. And he would test his own, because if they were going to get out of this jungle, they would need all the strength they could find.

Caine whirled. "What do you want?" he asked the boy who had come up behind him.

"I want to know how you're going to get us out of here, Driver." The boy's face still held the same stretched sarcastic look, but his eyes were no longer sharp and insolent. The fright showed easily, and behind the fright, Caine knew there was panic.

"I'm not going to get you out of here," Caine said, his voice suddenly soft. "I'm going to leave you right here to think about your stupidity."

"Listen, listen!" the boy screamed. "You don't talk that way to me, friend. You listen, you don't talk to me that way, do you hear?"

Caine's voice was a quick snapping sound. "Shut up!" He stood there, body tense, his eyes glaring at the frantic youth.

The boy turned and ran a few feet across the hill where he fell down on his knees and crouched, his eyes darting like those of a penned wildcat. He lifted his camera, released the shutter, and yanked out the finished picture to throw it into the waiting liquid.

The picture skipped and then floated.

Caine stared at the floating picture. It lay on the surface for a long minute and then slowly it disappeared.

He turned and looked at the liquid where his ship had disintegrated. Bobbing near the surface was the plastic of the seats. Caine frowned.

The boy was running at him again, arms flailing, and Caine felt the sting of the boy's fists striking him. He pushed the boy back so that he fell sprawled on the rock surface.

"It's all around us!" the boy screamed. "The damned stuff is all around us. You get us out of here, Driver. Do you hear, you get us out of here!"

The girl stood over the wild boy. "You know, Vanny, you're really a jolly fellow."

"You keep your mouth shut!" he yelled at her.

The girl turned away and looked at Caine. "What do we do, just stand here?"

Caine watched the contained look on her face. He knew she was frightened and feeling the panic that was so obvious in the boy. But she stood very straight and her voice was very steady. She would not show her fear.

Caine pointed at the plastic. "The seat covering didn't disintegrate and neither did the picture. Only the metal of the ship."

"So?" she said.

"So maybe we wouldn't disintegrate either."

Caine walked down the hill and crouched at the edge of the liquid. The girl followed and waited a few feet behind him.

The boy still lay sprawled near the top of the hill, his darting eyes watching them.

Caine took a handkerchief from his pocket and dropped it into the liquid. It floated until it was soaked through and then it sank.

"All right," the girl said. "How do we find out what it does to human flesh?"

Caine looked back at the boy.

The boy slammed his palms back against the rock and his body tightened so that the cords of his neck stuck out. His lips trembled.

Caine kept his eyes upon the boy, flexed his fingers, and then drove his hand into the liquid.

The girl screamed and her hand flew against her mouth. The boy lay twitching

against the rock, his eyes upon Caine's submerged arm.

Caine brought his hand out of the liquid.

The metal snap that had fastened his sleeve at the wrist was gone and so was the small gold ring he had worn on his little finger. But there was no trace of effect on his skin.

Caine stood up.

There was only the sound of the whispering leaves and in the sky an infrequent sun appeared and edged toward the tops of the trees, sending its glittering reflection into the depths of the moat-like liquid around them.

Caine pointed to the vine-trees at the other side. "There's the direction of the nearest post. We'd better start."

The boy scrambled to his feet. He stood, feet spread, like a thin scarecrow. "You're not going to get me into that stuff! You can't make me do that. Do you hear me?" His voice was a screeching whine that rose and fell through the peace of the thick jungle.

"I'm not going to make you do anything," Caine said, unbuckling his holster. "You can stay here and starve. It'll be nobody's loss. Stay here. Both of you," he said, looking at the girl.

Her teeth caught her underlip and her eyes glinted. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you very much."

"You're welcome," Caine said, and then he turned and stepped into the liquid.

His nerves jumped inside of him and he wanted to leap out of the stuff and run and lie against the protection of the rock the way the boy had done. But he set his teeth and took one step after another, holding his pistol high above his head.

He felt his jacket open as the metallic snaps disintegrated, and the liquid seeped against his chest. His belt fell loose as the buckle went away, but his trousers, cut in the Venusian Colony style, hugged his hips tightly. The nails in his boots disappeared, and he could feel his soles coming off. The floor of the liquid was like soft clay against his stocking-covered feet.

The liquid crawled up until it was even with his chest and Caine kept moving, one step after another, forcing his muscles to work. The liquid touched his shoulders. If

it crawled any higher it would get in his mouth and melt the fillings out of his teeth. Caine thought about that and he kept going. He reached the center and the liquid rose no higher.

When he reached the opposite bank he looked at his body. His skin was not harmed. He jerked the useless boots off and threw them away. Then he hung his holstered pistol on the branch of one of the vine-trees to wait until his body had dried of the deadly liquid.

He looked back to the hill.

The girl was stepping into the liquid.

### III

THE sun gleamed against her hair, and her eyes were very blue and steady as they watched Caine. She took one step and then another, her eyes never wavering from Caine. The blue dress disappeared into the liquid, inch by inch, and Caine noticed the glitter of the silver buttons that ran down the front of it.

The girl moved slowly, and the liquid reached her shoulders and her chin, and then it was rippling against her lower lip. She was half-way.

She came up carefully. Her eyes were still steadily watching Caine.

It was a moment when the tenseness disappeared out of him, and the time and situation went out of his mind. It was a moment when there was nothing but the girl with the steady eyes and the shining hair, coming slowly out of the liquid, dress open, and golden-tan body rippling with each movement. Time stopped and silence hung in the air, broken only by the sound of her bare legs going through the liquid.

Caine watched, feeling his pulse beating in his temples and the girl stood before him at the edge of the liquid, her tan skin wet and shiny.

She took a quick breath and Caine felt his nails bite his palms.

Then she swept the dress together and held out her hand. "Give me your belt, Driver." Her face was expressionless.

He slipped the clasp-less belt from his trousers and handed it to her. She circled it around her waist and tied the ends together.

They both turned and looked back to the

thin creature crouched on the hill across the acid canal.

Again the still silence of the jungle was heavy and each movement of a leaf or the bend of a vine stalk echoed and magnified its echo through the wild growth. The sun reached the tips of the vine-trees.

"We'll give you three minutes," Caine called to the boy. "If you don't get over by then you can stay there by yourself."

The boy leaped up and ran to the edge of the liquid. His face was a white flashing movement and his hands flew as though the joints in his arms had turned to rubber. His voice screeched. "You won't leave me, damn you. You won't leave me!" He moved along the edge of the liquid as though he were doing a crazy dance.

"One minute," Caine said. "Two to go."

The boy skittered up the side of the hill and held his camera against his eye, pointing it at Caine. He ripped the picture out and ran back to the bottom of the hill, throwing it at Caine. It fluttered short, drifting for a moment on the liquid, and disappeared. The boy fell on his knees and hammered his fists against the rock.

"Two minutes gone," Caine said.

"Oh, you're rotten, curse you!" the boy yelled, and Caine could see tears glistening on the shallow cheeks. The boy crouched then, frozen, his eyes and tears glittering, his hands like claws against the rock.

"Three," said Caine, swinging around.

The boy's cry went into the air, a long, shrill whine. He stood up and through his open mouth came the cry, steady, monotonous. A weird crazy cry that stung Caine's brain and made him want to crash through the liquid all over again, to squeeze the skinny throat until the sound was gone.

The girl clenched her fists and Caine waved his hand at the thick green growth behind them. "Let's go," he said.

All at once the boy was in the liquid, hands clutching his camera in the air, moving, his screaming voice rising, piercing the air until there was nothing else but the hysterical sound. His eyes widened and his mouth was open and he kept screaming. It was a pulsating sound, like a siren, over and over. The liquid splashed and the boy moved, and finally he found the opposite

edge of the liquid and he fell onto the ground and lay there, still screaming.

Caine watched him for a moment while the girl stood, as though frozen out of motion by the terrible sound.

Suddenly Caine stepped forward, jerked the boy up by the collar and slapped his hand back and forth across the wet, insane face.

The screaming stopped, and Caine let the boy drop back to the ground.

"I didn't make you mad, did I?" Caine said, his lips against his teeth.

The boy huddled, his eyes narrow darting slits.

Caine turned to the girl. "Do you want to go with me, or do you want to stay here with your jibbering friend?"

The girl met his stare. "You're really tough, aren't you, Driver?"

"Like steel," Caine said, and he jerked his holster from the branch and snapped it around his waist. The sun was making long quivering shadows over the hill and the liquid and there was a cooling of the air. Caine strode into the tangled growth and began moving through the jungle.

"Nic . . ." He heard the sound behind him, a quick, involuntary word that she tried to stop by shutting her teeth together.

A little weakness, he thought, somewhere in the midst of the strength. He let his teeth show, without really smiling. "Are you coming?"

She came after him.

They moved together through the darkening entanglement of leaves and vines. Behind them now, they could hear the cashing, erratic sound of the boy, following them.

The light was dim as they penetrated the thick growth. There was a sweet moist smell to the air, and around them the yellow and green and purple leaves showed their colors vaguely in the Venus twilight.

Here and there sharp-edged plants with thick round bases and knife-like leaves quivered in the breeze like waiting swords.

ONCE Caine tripped and as he caught himself, his hand whipped against one of the plants, and he found his palm slit thinly. He wiped the blood against his jacket and touched the razor-sharp plant care-

fully. It was like a slim piece of honed steel.

Light disappeared, and Caine led the way through the maze of foliage. Slippery tongues of green softness, swirled around his ankles and slowed each step. Following direction was difficult, and the razor leaves kept nipping at him. A chill went into the air and a thick blanket of moisture fell around them.

Caine stopped. The girl waited behind him and Caine could hear the movement of the boy nearing him.

The girl was a misty outline in Caine's vision, but he could see the white of her eyes and when she breathed, he could see the fine line of whiteness that was her teeth. Her dress was a blue veil and the tan skin of her body blended into the darkness and the mist and the solid growth of the jungle.

The bobbing form of the boy appeared, finally, and he crouched a few feet away.

"We'll stay here," Caine said.

He could hear the click of the boy's teeth going together. The white gaunt face wavered and Caine could hear the swinging motions of the boy's arms. "You stay here," the boy yelled. "I'm not going to lie in this muck and dung! I'm not—"

"Don't then," Caine said softly. "Go on alone."

The boy was suddenly silent, and Caine watched his shape through the darkness. There was no more sound from him, and Caine knelt to the thick floor of greenness. He explored the soft growth with his fingers, and finally he stretched out, relaxing each muscle to fight the chilling penetration of the cooling night.

The girl lay down beside him. Caine could see her, the outline of her body, her eyes that watched him. He felt the touch of her fingers against his bare chest. "Nic . . ." she said.

Caine turned over and faced the other direction.

Sleep came swiftly. His mind dimmed and his body went limp and there was only blackness.

The cold light of dawn was in his eyes and he woke up swearing. His right hand swung out and caught air. He jumped up and leaped forward, but his hands caught nothing. The boy was away from him, twisting backwards into the undergrowth. Caine

knelt, still cursing, one hand on his empty holster. He could see the glint of the pistol in the boy's hand.

"What are you going to do with it," he asked the boy, "now that you've got it?"

"Kill you, Driver."

"Sure," Caine said. "And then who leads you back to your crib?"

The boy's lips worked back and forth over his teeth. He shook the gun in his hand. "I didn't say when I'd do it, Driver. You just stand up and start moving. I'll let you know when. Do you hear me?" The boy's voice rose to a sudden scream. The pistol swept through the air and smashed a vine to pulpy shreds. Then it was pointing again at Caine's stomach. "Move!" the boy yelled.

Caine straightened and began to move through the foliage. The girl started to follow.

"No!" the boy screamed. He jumped to the girl's side and grabbed her arm. He motioned the gun again in the crazy leaping way he did everything.

Caine started through the jungle.

He could feel the pistol pointing at his back and he could feel the stare of the boy's bright darting eyes. The boy was shrewd, Caine thought, like a crazed animal. Fear had warped the already wayward brain, and to try to charge him or bully him or anything else would be like striking matches in a room full of explosives. He would have to wait, Caine decided, until he found a chance to trick the lightning-like senses of the boy.

Somehow, he would have to find a way to sweep the pistol out of the boy's nervous fingers. And Caine was thinking of this, working it back and forth in his brain, when they reached another circular clearing.

Yellow and green grass lay glistening in the morning dampness. Purple and red flowers dotted the thick carpet. A wall of vines and thick leaves bounded the clearing and the thin razor leaves extended here and there from the thick wall like polished rapiers.

Caine walked nearly to the center of the circle and then stopped suddenly.

He could see them, just behind the first thickness of foliage. The pale green skin and the globular heads and the large round eyes, lidless and soft-looking.

He turned back to the girl and the boy. The boy waved the pistol. "Go on, damn you. Go on!"

Caine glanced back at the green-skinned creatures who waited in the green growth.

"I told you," the boy screamed, "you go on! Do you hear me?"

**C**AINE held his hands at his sides, feeling his nerves tremble inside of him. It wasn't fear of the Venusians that made him tense. It was the boy with the pistol and the girl and the total of things.

They were in forbidden territory, trespassing on ground called sacred to the native people of this planet. Caine, who had worked so hard to help preserve the sanctity of these people's rights, had become now like the rest of the Colonists he had hated so much. He had brought the evil into the center of the Venusians' own private domain, and he was responsible.

"Did you hear me?" the boy screamed.

"Yes," Caine said, closing his fingers against his palms. "I heard you." He watched the muzzle of the gun. If the boy's eyes found the Venusians, he would pump the gun wildly at them and there would be death, and the impact of it could unbalance the whole structure of the relationship that already was leaning precariously.

"Well, then, you do what I tell you."

Caine's eyes narrowed.

"Nic," the girl said. "Do what he says. He's crazy, he—"

The boy's left hand lashed out and struck the girl. She stumbled to the ground.

"You shouldn't have done that," Caine said, stepping forward.

The boy crouched, holding the gun with both hands. "You don't move any further. Do you hear? You don't move any further!"

Caine took another step and then he heard the movement of the Venusians behind him. He saw the boy's eyes widen, and out of the corners of his own eyes Caine could see the green skin of the approaching natives.

The boy cocked his head, his eyes shifting rapidly. His mouth was a grotesque leer. He yelled, "Oh, no, you filthy . . ." and then the sound of his voice was lost in the explosion of the gun.

As though he were dreaming, Caine saw the jerking of the pistol in the boy's hand.

He heard the peculiar screams around him as the bullets sprayed the clearing. He felt his shoulder burn as a wild slug cut his skin. Then he was diving forward.

The boy leaped sideways out of Caine's reach, falling and climbing up again, still firing the pistol. He yelled crazily, spinning and firing, and all of a sudden there was an end to the sound and the movement.

The boy was facing the clearing from the edge of the enclosing growth. His face was a surprised, contorted thing, and the pistol dropped out of his hand. He coughed once, and looked down at the red end of the razor leaf that had gone through his back and now showed its gleaming point through the center of his chest.

The boy crumpled and hung on the plant like a punctured rag doll. His head lolled at a twisted angle and his open eyes stared unseeing at the clearing.

Caine was on his knees, his hand against the wounded shoulder. The girl still lay on the soft grass, unhurt, but her face was pale beneath the golden tan.

Two Venusians lay sprawled across the clearing, their large lidless eyes staring at the sky. There was no sign of the others, and the jungle was silent.

Caine crawled to his feet. The wound of his shoulder was slight and already the flow of blood had diminished, but his skin felt as though it had been razed by fire.

The girl stood up slowly and looked at him, her eyes showing that fear had finally gotten inside of her.

Caine's eyes were hard as he stared back at her, and the hate and indignation for what had just happened made his stomach tighten and his hands tremble. In that instant, he detested the sight of the girl because she was a part of the group that had bred the crazed specie that hung now on the tip of a razor plant.

He wanted to hurt her, to make her suffer for the two green-skinned beings that lay dead; two more victims of a sweeping cruel invasion that cared nothing for the inherent rights of a native race; victims because they had been naive and trusting and basically honest.

So because he wanted to hurt her, he walked quietly across the clearing, lifted the limp body of the boy, and struck his hand

across the dead face.

Her cry was a short, shocked sound.

He snapped the body up again and drew his hand back.

"Don't!" she screamed. "Don't do that again!"

He saw the tears shining on her cheeks. Her lips were trembling and her hands were white tight fists.

He let the body fall against the impalement of the plant. He noticed then that the camera was still looped around the boy's neck. He held the camera in his hand, and then he snapped the strap over the boy's head and put it around his own neck.

"You louse," she said, her voice hissing through the small white teeth. "Why don't you take his money, too?"

He looked at her, his eyes steady and cold. Then he dug a hand into the pocket of the boy's jacket and drew out a wallet. He extracted a thick packet of Colony currency, put it in his own pocket and threw the wallet into the brush. His eyes were icy and full of hate when he looked at her. "He forgot to pay me for this trip."

She cursed him.

Caine walked quickly across the clearing and examined the two Venusians. Then he turned back to the girl.

"This is one they won't let go by. I'll guarantee that. Do you want to wait for them with your friend?" Caine said, motioning toward the boy. "Or do you want to face it with me?"

"I'll make you pay for hitting him," the girl said, controlling her voice.

"Sure," Caine said, his smile a humorless curl of the mouth. He crossed the clearing, picked up his gun and reentered the brush. He could hear her following.

He hurried. The remainder of the group he had seen in the clearing would be taking care of the two bodies now, and probably, the body of the boy. There would be no violence or physical harm, but these people were capable of strange things, and Caine felt himself searching the brush around him tensely.

The girl followed him stubbornly. And Caine lengthened his strides, smashing through the thick growth, dodging the razor leaves, skirting the muck-like pools that appeared here and there.

#### IV

THE air was getting hot and sticky, and there was the ripe sweet smell that made him sick. At that moment, Caine realized that he hadn't eaten since this trip began and his stomach was like a hard knot.

Ahead was a small dark opening. Caine could see there a large scattering of the purple wild grapes out of which the common settlers had made so much wine. He pushed into the clearing and grabbed a handful of the rich-colored fruit.

He kept his back to the girl who had entered the clearing behind him. He sorted out one of the ripest of the grapes and lifted it to his mouth.

He felt his hand being caught.

The girl was beside him and her tan fingers were around his wrist.

He turned and faced her.

With her other hand, she took the grape from his fingers and held it up to his mouth. Her eyes were deep blue sparkling lights that shone even in the dimly filtered light. Her skin was golden and shiny, and Caine could see the long bare V that ran from her throat to the belted waist. The blue dress was filled with a jutting mound on either side of the V.

She took a breath and the dress drew taut.

Caine slapped the grape from her hand.

She shook her head, her hair soft and rustling. She lifted another grape and held it to his lips. "You can't refuse it," she said.

"The hell I can't," he said, and his hand was an arcing motion that sent the grape whirling across the clearing.

"You can't," she repeated, and she touched her fingers against his chest.

He watched her steadily, seeing the blue eyes narrow to thin sparkling slits, the whiteness of the small teeth as her lips parted.

"I'm paying you back, Driver."

"You're cheap. For all your money and your breeding, you're no better than the ones who walk the streets."

"You're right, Driver," she said, and her voice was soft and husky. "And you want to be so strong and self-contained. You want to rule everything you touch or look at. You worship your own shrine, Driver, only

you're not strong enough to refuse this. You can slap dead kids, only you're too damned weak to walk away from me. You hate me for that, Driver, and you hate yourself. But you can't do anything about it because I'm stronger than you are, and you're weak, you're really weak, Driver."

He watched her, and her face was a golden oval that waited for him. He swept her hands from his chest.

She stood there, hands at her sides, and still she waited. He wanted to lash out at her face with his fist but he couldn't. All he could do was stand there, as though he were frozen, locked by her eyes and the white shine of her teeth and the golden smoothness of her skin.

Then he felt his hands and arms moving and he couldn't stop them. His fingers were jerking blue cloth and touching cool skin, and her face was in front of his, the blue eyes glittering, the white teeth shining. He tried to fight it and when she whispered, "You weak miserable coward," he wanted to crack her body in two.

But he didn't and all he could do was know the golden face was coming up to his, her eyes nearly closed, her lips apart—and then all at once he swore and sent her spinning away from him.

He stepped back feeling his heart jumping inside of him. Sweat prickled out on his forehead.

On the ground in front of him were five girls with the tan skin and shimmering brown hair. He heard "Nic . . ." and it was a multi-voiced echo. Five faces paled and ten eyes stared in panic. Fifty fingers clutched at five throats. It was a quintuple exposure of the girl he had just held in his arms, and it made his blood thin and chill in his veins.

"For heaven's sake, Nic . . ." and the echo of five voices wavered through the jungle.

Caine stood motionless, staring.

Five hands reached out for help. Ten eyes pleaded.

His nerves were like flying charges of electricity along his spine.

Then there was a sudden swift movement and the five figures before him meshed into one jumbled mass and began moving away from him, through the green growth.

He watched, feeling the sweat on his

forehead turn cold. This would be the way the Venusians would do it. Not force or violence, but this. A quiet, smooth absorption of the girl through illusion, the deadliest power of the Venusian. A hypnotic lock of his brain and hers so that instead of seeing four green-skinned Venusians and one girl, he saw five girls.

And there was, he knew, no way to break through the spell. The illusion would remain true to smell and touch as well as sight and hearing.

He heard five voices ring out together through the jungle. "Nic, please!"

HE STARTED forward. As he moved, he examined himself for one brief moment, asking himself why he was going after a girl he told himself he hated. And there was no answer, except the same pulling force that had made him want her with every fiber of his body only a few seconds ago.

He knew, reasonably, that a loss of a girl who was a daughter of a Colony official would have the same effect as a fired fuse in the relations between the natives and the Colonizers. But even this was, at the moment, unimportant, and it was only an emotion that drove him forward, an emotion that got into his blood and brain. And he hated it and he tried to free himself of it, but it drove him on, and all he could think of was tearing the girl free from the grasp of the creatures.

But how?

He didn't know, and he kept following the jumbled movement of tan skin and blue cloth ahead of him. He couldn't use the gun at his side, because he couldn't tell reality from illusion. He wouldn't know whether he would find his bullet in a green globular head or in the finely shaped head with the shimmering brown hair. He could only follow and think, think of an answer.

The jungle rippled with the movement of the five forms ahead of him, and Caine went on, swinging at the growth, swearing, sweating, driving his brain to find the solution.

The figures stopped, finally, in a short vine-enclosed square. He walked to the fringe of the opening and watched the five faces, pale and frightened, staring back at him. Five hands went up to five mouths and

trembled against red lips. "Nic, please do something!" The five voices rang against his ears.

"I'm here, Nic. Here!" The five faces pleaded with him.

He closed his hands, his eyes shifting from one face to another. He couldn't tell. It was like trying to capture an image in a room full of mirrors.

"Oh, God," the voices moaned, and together the figures slumped to the ground.

They were considerate and polite even now, Caine thought. They were letting her rest. They wouldn't hurt her physically, only move her steadily away to the oblivion of illusion. Cultured, quiet, but because of what had been done in a clearing miles back, deadly.

And he would have to fight it the same way. Against everything he had tried to do here, he was finally ending it up, forced to fight the people he had tried to protect and defend. He hated the memory of the boy and he hated the girl, but he was drawn into it as though he were being swept into a sucking, swirling whirlpool.

Caine kneeled down, his eyes watching the trembling figures in front of him, each of the forms precise images of the girl. He was tired, and even in the tenseness of the moment he could feel his hunger. But there was no time now, except to try to break through this armour of hypnotism.

"Cice," he said, listening to his voice saying her name for the first time. "When I say move, put your right hand out in front of you."

Five faces watched him.

"Move," he said.

Five hands extended into the air.

"What's my name, Cice?"

Five voices said, "Nic."

He worked his fingers. It was his own brain creating a mirage, and it was Cice's, too. The Venusians were sitting there, digging into each of their brains, creating this terrible block that couldn't be penetrated.

She was crying now, and the sound of it, magnified five times, ground against Caine's nerves. "Please, Nic," said the voices. "Please do something!"

He struck his fist against his knee, and the movement juggled the camera that was still around his neck. He grabbed it angrily

and began to throw the loop off. Suddenly he paused.

He remembered the frantic boy, ripping picture after picture out of the compact black mechanism. He dropped to his haunches, keeping his eyes upon the five images of the girl. They could make illusions of themselves to Caine's brain, but could they trick a camera?

His right hand slowly unloosened his pistol in its holster. Then he began talking to Cice, saying anything, to keep the sound of his voice over the click of the camera's shutter. He drew the camera up against one knee, as though he were making an unconscious nervous gesture, so that the lens pointed at the five figures.

He released the shutter, and it seemed as though the sound of it were magnified ten times.

He lifted the edge of the picture that appeared from a slot in the upper part of the camera, and finally he dropped his glance. He saw in the shiny photograph Cice and four green-skinned Venusians. Cice was the second figure from the left.

His pistol was out of its holster and in his hand, and the jungle screamed with the sound of the explosions and the cries and the ricocheting bullets.

When it was over, four Venusians lay sprawling, visible now to Caine's eyes, their hypnotic spell broken and their brains dead.

The girl, her hands against the sides of her face, was still on the ground, but her body had stiffened with fright and she was trembling all over.

"Oh, Nic," she said, over and over.

Caine stood up and looked at the bodies of the creatures he had just killed. The sweat that had formed while he had carefully trapped the Venusians turned cold on his skin. He unlooped the camera from his neck and dropped it on the ground. Then he stood there, staring at the dead green bodies, his face tight and mask-like.

The girl stood up unsteadily. She walked slowly to his side and touched his arm. He jumped away, as though he had been struck by a needle. A shudder went through the muscles where she had touched him.

"Nic, you . . ."

"Don't talk to me," he said, trying to



keep his voice even and not trembling, "and don't touch me. I don't want to hear you or feel you again. I'll lead you back to the post, but don't come near me or I'll kill you like I killed those poor creatures."

"You can't blame me for this, Nic," she said and there were thin lines of tears on her cheeks. "I wouldn't have asked for this."

"Oh, yes, you would. You did. That's why it happened. You asked for it when you needed me into coming down here. You asked for it when you couldn't remember that an agreement with these people was something valid and honest. You and your sweet dead friend, you're what's the matter with this planet! You can't understand what decency and respect are, so you step on anything that gets in your way, and if that won't work you kick it or shoot it. But you destroy it and you don't really give one simple damn, just so you enjoy yourself and get a laugh out of it. And for me, I'm sick of it, and I'm going to get on the first rocket I can find, so I can breathe again and feel clean and not get sick to my stomach every time I look around."

He hoped she could not keep up with him.

But she did, and he could hear her behind him, gasping now and then, crying once. But she followed him and when the jungle had turned dark and he finally saw the yellow lights of the outpost, she was still behind him, calling him.

He stopped and turned.

She leaned against a thick vine and Caine could see in the yellow light from the windows of the houses, that her hair had been ruffled and matted and that her dress was torn in a dozen places. A thin trickle of blood was coming from a cut above her left eye. She was barefoot, Caine noticed for the first time, and he knew what her feet must be like. But the beauty was still there and the bearing, and although lines of fatigue had been etched into her face, there was still the life and the fire.

"What do you want?" he said flatly.

She clutched at the vine and Caine could see her biting the inside of her lip. "I wanted to tell you, Nic, that I was wrong about you."

He waited motionless, keeping his eyes thin and hard.

"I thought you were strong, Nic. I thought you were the strongest man I'd ever seen. You were a challenge and I wanted to see that strength break. That's why I did what I did in that clearing back there. Only just before the Venusians came I knew you were going to love me, hating me at the same time. I didn't want you that way.

"It wasn't just a challenge then," she said, her white teeth gritting. "It was *you*, because I suddenly thought you were noble and honest and because I thought the strength was real. But I was wrong, Nic."

Caine wiped his palms slowly back and forth against his jacket.

She shook her head. "You haven't got any real strength. And you just carry your nobility and your honesty around like a sign. They're not inside of you. You scream for the rights of Venusians, you swear at injustice. You damn the people who've colonized this planet, and you hold yourself up like you thought you were a god. Only you're not. You're not anything. You're just another cheap screamer with wide shoulders and no guts. And instead of trying to do something about what you're screaming against, you climb into the first ship going out because you can't stand the sight of blood. You're not strong, you're weak. I thought I loved you, only I can't love a weak man, and you're weak." Her hand slipped from the vine and she crumpled to the ground.

Caine stood watching her for a long moment, then he walked slowly back and picked her up. He held her in his arms. With his left hand, he lifted her head so that he could see her face, and he saw the fatigue there that had finally made her collapse and he saw the blood that was still trickling along her cheek.

He bent down and kissed her lips, gently, and then he began to walk toward the yellow light and the warmth and the rest. She was light and soft in his arms, and he liked the feeling of her there. And so he took his time, step by step, because he knew he wasn't going anywhere, not for a long time.