

PLANET STORIES



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"You asked for it," he gritted and squeezed the release,

QUEST ON PHOEBE

By James R. Adams

Savagely, Ron Farr tore and blasted through the Saturnian moon's jungle, snarling at the timid natives to keep their distance. He sought eternal life—and they might get in his way . . .

OTHERS BEFORE HIM had tried—and failed. Ron Farr meant to succeed. He had come fully prepared to surmount whatever obstacles might lie in his path, to conquer the dread guardian jungle and its unknown terrors and return triumphant to Earth, master of destiny and possessor of undreamed of power.

Farr knew the obstacles would be there, for he sought the secret of eternal life, the fabulous elixir that lay hidden some-

where on Phoebe, enigmatic moon of Saturn, and there was little doubt in his mind that the ancients of the ringed planet had made ample provision for the protection of this, their most cherished treasure. One by one, a dozen eager men had gone in quest of the secret—none had returned. That was enough proof for him.

But, in spite of this grim evidence, Farr was not afraid. He was ready to face death itself, if need be, to gain the goal that would prostrate the world at his feet. He

was ready to face death, but he had taken every precaution against it. For instance, in selecting a likely landing place, he had shunned the area in which the life secret was reputed to be, for his instruments had detected some sort of force-field above the region. Invisible to the eye, the field would have crushed his ship in an instant, had he attempted to enter the area without consulting the instrument panel.

The region was boxed in on three sides by sheer cliffs, leaving but one avenue of approach. That was through the dense and foreboding jungle that stretched for miles across the face of the canyon.

Farr had taken that avenue. Now, as he stepped from his ship and regarded the jungle's fringe with clear, steady eyes, he looked anything but the ruthless brigand he was.

Straight black hair, high forehead, firm, unsmiling lips—all gave the man the appearance of a gentlemanly scholar. But behind those austere features lurked a cunning, treacherous mind. That he should be seeking the secret of eternal life in so surreptitious a manner was proof that the gaining of it would be put to his own advantage, and not to the benefit of mankind.

Now the thin lips parted in a wry smile as his searching gaze focused on a group of watchful creatures gathered silently at the jungle's edge. Sombre eyes stared unblinkingly back at him.

Harmless beings, these, the *Mumums* of Phoebe. They resembled Earthly pygmies in stature, but were wholly alien in anatomy. Hairless and ebon-skinned, they wore only a loincloth as protection against the elements. Depending from this brief garment by means of a length of chain swung a small silvery, tubelike affair. Some sort of tribal fetish, Farr thought, intended to ward off evil spirits. The tubes gave off a musical tinkling whenever the pygmies moved, and he almost had to laugh at their ignorance in believing such nonsense could avert sickness and injury.

They seemed to be attempting to bar his way. He drew his blaster and balanced it in his hand, smiling grimly. If nothing more ferocious than these miserable beings were to test his strength and cunning, securing the life secret was going to be an easy task.

He stepped forward. The *Mumums* did

not move. His steps brought him closer, and still they remained in his way. Farr curled his lips and raised his blaster. If it was necessary to teach them a lesson, he would.

One more stride and he would be touching them. "You asked for it," he gritted and squeezed the release.

There was a hissing crack and a bright stab of flame. The *Mumum* in front of Farr fell stiffly over backwards without a sound, an ugly smoking hole drilled clean through him. The others cringed and drew back as Farr swung the blaster in a threatening arc. "Get the idea?" he grinned.

SWEAT plastered Farr's shirt to his back and streamed copiously down his masklike face. It was only an hour since he had entered the jungle, but already he was beginning to tire. His wiry muscles ached and his breath came wheezily, laboriously. Wearily he sat down on a porous rock and produced a vacuum-carton from his tunic pocket. The mushy food mixture contained in the carton was tasteless, but nourishing, and he ate in contemplative silence, keeping a wary eye on the foliage around him.

Thus far he had successfully avoided contact with malignant life-forms, but he did not allow this fact to lull him into a complacency that might prove his undoing. Even though the jungle denizens had not yet manifested themselves, he knew they were there, waiting for him to grow lax in his vigilance, waiting for his eyes to close in sleep—a sleep from which he would never awaken.

The *Mumums*—the pygmy people—were still with him. They stood a few feet away, soulful eyes watching him devour his meal. Their stares vaguely irritated Farr. What made it the worse, was that they never uttered a sound, but just watched silently, fingering those crazy silver tubes, moving when he moved, freezing into immobility when he called a halt, always keeping between him and the goal toward which he progressed.

Farr uttered a sneering laugh. They couldn't stop him! Let them stare. Let their saucer eyes reproach him. He would go on and emerge from the jungle with the secret that would place the fate of the world in his hands.

He laughed again and wiped the last

particles of the meal from his lips. The food was making him sleepy. Gratefully he allowed leaden lids to close over sun-dazzled eyes. A keen sense of danger prodded his drowsy mind, telling him to awake, to throw off the torpor before the perils of the jungle closed in on him.

By will-power alone, Farr forced his eyes open and strove desperately to rise. He seemed to be rooted to the rock, and the insidious lump of matter was sucking out his life-force, draining him of vitality. Where he had been prepared to face fang and claw, this inanimate foe had caught him completely off-guard and was swiftly fulfilling the purpose for which it had been placed here—the destruction of interlopers who sought the secret of immortality by way of the jungle.

A less determined man than Farr would have succumbed to that compelling force, would have fallen back on the stone and let the life flow from his exhausted body. But Farr was made of stern stuff, and as long as there was life in him, there was fight.

Sweat stood out in glistening beads on his forehead and his lips compressed in a bloodless slit as he marshaled his powers of concentration. Slowly his hand moved to his side, clutching at the blaster that hung there. Minutes passed as his fingers closed around the butt of the gun and inched it from the holster.

His thumb adjusted the weapon to a tight beam, then he was aiming it steadily at the rock. A thin finger of flame lanced out and drilled into the porous stone, devouring it hungrily. A moment later he leaped free as the chunk of mineral cracked under the heat and suddenly collapsed in a pile of jumbled fragments.

FARR was too shaken for a moment to do anything but stare in horror at the cooling pieces of the devil stone. Then, reaction over, he became his calculating, impassive self again. Reflection on the fate he had narrowly averted was not for him; he must push on. But he did marvel at the cleverness of the ancients of Saturn in placing the stone here. It had come close to getting him—too close, for he felt strangely lethargic and weak.

Groping in a pocket he brought forth a vitamin capsule and popped it in his mouth.

The potent stuff went to work immediately and shortly Farr could feel his energy returning, slowly at first, then faster as the capsule's contents worked through his bloodstream.

Feeling better, he tested his legs, then moved forward once more, resuming his interrupted progress through the brooding jungle. Before him the ever-present *Mumums* retreated slowly, backing away through the underbrush, always with their sad eyes fixed unwaveringly on the intruder.

Farr had come to hate those eyes, in the short space of time he had known the creatures. Though he realized now that neither they nor their owners could do him harm, still he was somehow disturbed by the intent and mournful gaze.

Shrugging off the feeling, he plodded on, moving ever toward the distant goal in utter defiance of the terrors lurking around him. Farr would not be denied his triumph and, now that he knew what to look for, he kept a wary eye out for other such diabolical traps as the devil stone.

But, in spite of his caution, he had not the least suspicion of the next snare that lay in his path, and he was hopelessly enmeshed in it before his confused mind could understand what was happening.

He had been advancing on a small grassy clearing, and as he reached its edge he stopped to regard it dubiously. The wood-free tract seemed innocent enough, and its flat expanse offered no concealment for contrivances intended to dispose of meddlers. Satisfied that it was safe, he set foot on the clearing and moved quickly across it.

Halfway across, Farr felt the ground shake under him and a low muffled droning began somewhere far below. He knew then that it was a trap, and with the celerity of one pursued by a fiend, lengthened his stride into a desperate run. But it was too late.

Things suddenly went black, and with the abrupt darkness that fell over his eyes, Farr stumbled and fell face forward in the grass. Panic-stricken, he clambered to his feet and passed a hand across his face. He saw only blackness.

"My Lord!" he cried in horror. "I'm blind!"

Farr could feel his lips moving, knew that his frantic brain had commanded the

vocal organs to speak the words—but he could not hear them. He was deaf, too. Blind and deaf! Walking through the glade, his footsteps had set in action machinery buried deep in the earth, machinery that emitted a penetrating ray, blanking out the senses of sight and hearing. Now, surely, his quest would end in blind groping through the forest, till some ravenous denizen would put a stop to his misery.

FLINGING his head back, Farr laughed shrilly, madly. Facing the guns of the planetary police, he had never known the feel of fear, but he knew it now; fear of the darkness, fear of the silence that pressed in on him. He cried out again, but not the least sound pierced the stillness in his brain.

He suddenly lunged forward and ran screaming through the glade. He did not stop until he felt the undergrowth of the jungle whipping about his legs, then he sank to the ground in a cringing heap, sobbing out his despair and beating his fists against his temples.

For an hour he sat there, staring sightlessly into space. Frenzy gave way to apathy, and he no longer strove to fight off the implacable blackness and quiet that filled his world. Death would come soon, creeping and crawling through the brush, and he could do nothing but sit and wait for it, without hope of defending himself.

Despite his despair, Farr was not the least bit penitent. He had played the game and lost, and now he was ready to pay the price of failure. His only regret was that he had fallen short of his goal, had been cheated of it by the infernal ray device, one of the many traps that had been placed throughout the jungle by the now long-dead ancients of Saturn.

His features hardened as he thought again of the secret those pitfalls guarded—the secret of immortality. If only he could yet reach it! Fumble his way through the jungle somehow and take the treasure from its cursed temple. He could still be master of the world, if he could accomplish that, master of all worlds, in fact, for who would not prostrate himself for the chance of possessing eternal life?

But it was hopeless, Farr knew. He could wander around in here until he dropped, and still be no nearer his destina-

tion than when he started. Nor could he find his way back to the ship, navigate the distance to Earth and have his eyes and ears operated on by some unprincipled, yet skillful surgeon. No, he would never have another chance at the life secret, never return to civilization with the power that he—

What was that? Was it a glimmer of light in the darkness?

Farr's heart leaped with sudden hope. Was his mind playing him tricks, or was his sight returning? He climbed to his feet, straining his eyes at the pinpoint of light. No, it wasn't his imagination; his vision was definitely coming back! As he watched, the small patch of brightness grew slowly, expanding, pushing back the fearsome darkness.

"I—I can see again," he whispered, voice shaking with emotion. Then, flaming with new-born spirit, he repeated in a shout, "I can see again!"

His joy knew no bounds as he witnessed the unfolding of this miracle. In short minutes his eyesight had completely returned to normal and his hearing, too, was rapidly improving. He began talking to himself, savoring the sound of each word as it impinged on his eardrums. He caught sight of the *Mumums*, standing at a distance, mute and motionless as ever, and he yelled to them, "Hi, you ugly things! Am I glad to see you!"

Indeed, Farr was glad to see anything again, after that awful blackness that had blotted out his most precious sense. The ray had been intended to destroy his hearing and sight, but he had escaped its field in time to avoid permanent injury. Had it not been for the unreasoning fear that overwhelmed him, he would have remained there in the glade, to flounder about helplessly and eventually succumb to thirst and hunger.

Now, he was again in full possession of his faculties, and just as determined as ever to continue on to his destination. Twice he had fallen prey to the ingenious devices of the Ancients, and both times emerged unscathed. He was now convinced that the jungle could produce no obstacle that his cunning could not overcome.

Thus decided, Farr took his bearings. Finding that his flight had brought him to that side of the glade nearest his goal,

he had nothing to do but resume his march through the lush Phoebe plant-life.

On two occasions during the next few hours he came across grim discoveries, discoveries that made him shudder in spite of his callousness—sun-bleached, grinning skeletons. He found the first one draped over a devil stone, picked free of carrion, mute testimony of the insidious rock's power.

The other lay not far away in a clump of bushes. As Farr approached, the willowy branches of the shrubs whipped into sudden action, flicking gobs of black, gooey matter directly at the surprised spaceman. He dodged aside with a cry of dismay, barely averting contact with the stuff. Several of the viscid wads plopped against the bole of a tree and began eating furiously into the bark.

Eyes bulging, Farr turned and fled, putting distance between himself and the deadly bushes. No wonder there hadn't been much left of that second heap of bones! The shrubs were living acid manufacturing, remaining dormant until the approach of a victim, then to spring into life and bombard the prey with gobs of the fatal stuff.

And those blanched remains back there—they had once been living men, like himself, in search of the legendary life secret. But unlike him, they had not been clever enough to elude the pitfalls of the jungle, and had died agonizing deaths, miles short of the goal. Farr was glad it was so, else the secret would not now be there for him to pluck from its pedestal and mold to his own use.

MANY HOURS LATER, Farr emerged from the jungle to stand at last at the entrance to a desolate canyon. Aching in every muscle, battered, bruised and hardly able to stay on his feet, he felt a surge of new energy as he spied his objective, near the center of the valley.

The temple was old, very old. Its walls were drab gray, as if with the grayness of age, and a great silence hung over it, unbroken by even the strident sounds of insect life. But in spite of its gloomy, tomb-like appearance, there was an air of magnificence about the temple, a faint aura of greatness once known, but long since gone. It was at once beautiful and forebod-

ing, guardian of the heritage left by the Ancients to those with courage and intelligence enough to win it.

Farr was not impressed. Beauty meant nothing to him, save the beauty of power. But he noted the *Mumums*, still with him, were stirred by the scene. Throughout the trek through the jungle, they had shown no signs of emotion, but now they were milling about restlessly, staring at the temple and chattering excitedly among themselves.

Drawing a deep breath, he moved cautiously into the canyon, blaster ready at his side. There was no telling what hellish devices he had yet to face, and he did not intend to be robbed of the life secret now, having come this far along the road.

Sheer cliffs soared high above on three sides of him, and one look told him that no one could scale those dizzy heights. The *Mumums*, scampering ahead of him, silver tubes tinkling melodiously, reached the edifice's yawning portal and stood staring apprehensively into the impenetrable darkness. He followed quickly, eager to secure the elixir and leave this dismal canyon far behind.

Twenty feet from the looming entrance, something rattled loosely under his step and he bent to examine the object. A skull. His eyes traveled across the ground and spied the body of the skeleton lying between two boulders. He stepped over to the grisly relic and knelt beside it, regarding it thoughtfully.

Clutched in the bony fingers was a corroded blaster, and through the tatters of the dead man's rotted tunic protruded charred stumps of ribs, grim indication of the last use to which the gun had been put. Suicide! But why? Had the man been enmeshed in some trap from which there was no escape? No; if that were the case Farr himself would now be caught in its toils. At this realization he jumped back with a start, cursing his thoughtlessness in approaching the spot without first examining the surroundings.

But nothing happened and, thus reassured, he moved close again, puzzling over the inexplicable mystery confronting him. To all appearances the man had been free to leave the valley whenever he so willed. Yet he had snuffed out his own life—that last desperate measure one takes when

he is faced by some barrier above which his resources cannot lift him.

Tiring of the problem, Farr gave the remains one last scornful look and moved away. He had no sympathy for one who comes out second best in a contest of cunning. But as he walked on to the temple and passed into its shadows he felt a dark premonition of danger edging into his mind.

He paused inside the structure's entrance and switched on a torch, sweeping its beam about the chamber in which he stood. The room was cubical, small, dank and musty with age. Blank walls stared back at him mockingly, and for the briefest instant he again experienced a feeling of impending doom, then it faded as before.

Before moving on into the temple proper, he looked over his shoulder to see if the *Mumums* had followed. They hadn't. They crowded around the portal, jabbering shrilly and jostling one another in their eagerness to get a better view, but carefully refrained from entering.

Shrugging, he turned away. He had no time to wonder at the stupidity of the *Mumums*; there were more important matters to look after. Directing the ray of the torch before him he located an inner door and moved through it, heart leaping in sudden excitement at the sight.

There, resting in solitary splendor atop a marble pillar in the center of a vast hall, was the object which he had braved every conceivable type of horror to obtain. Awed in spite of himself, he walked slowly forward, eyes riveted in fascination on the gleaming prize.

Then the spell was gone and he broke into a run, a shout of exultation on his lips. He caught up the object from its pedestal and waved it wildly overhead, brain enfevered by the triumph of the moment. He brought the gleaming metal cylinder in front of his eyes and gazed at it in rapture. Power. This represented more power than any man had known, and plans for its use were already spinning in his brain.

Something rustled dryly in the vacuum container. Powder; it was a powder, rather than a liquid. The legend had erred on that point, but the discrepancy was inconsequential. He peered eagerly at the container, expecting to see the formula of the powder

inscribed thereon. There was none, but it did not disturb him. Chemists could analyze the stuff and manufacture it.

Flashing his light once more over the great hall to make certain he had missed nothing, he strode buoyantly to the entrance and passed into the small outer chamber, thrusting the container of powder in his tunic pocket as he went.

IMMEDIATELY a dazzling brilliance lit up the room. Varicolored lights played about his head, blazed radiantly in his brain and etched every cell in bold relief. Farr fell to his knees, throwing his arms over his eyes in a vain effort to shut out the light. The torment in his mind was unbearable, agonizing.

The door! He had to make it to the door! Stumbling to his feet, he propelled himself on unsteady legs to the entrance, hurtled through it and down the temple steps, where he collapsed in a quivering, gasping heap on the rocky valley floor.

Another narrow escape! He could not guess the nature or effect of the lights, but undoubtedly they had been meant to dispose of him in some hellish fashion. Apparently he had sustained no injury, though his head did feel peculiarly light.

Shaking his head dizzily, Farr arose and felt in his pocket. The cylindrical container was still there, and he breathed a rasping sigh of relief. All that remained now was to return to his ship and rocket Earthward, where his plans for the life secret would immediately be put into effect.

The *Mumums* brought up the rear now, apparently resigned to the fact that their puny efforts to prevent the theft of the secret had failed. Knowing that he would no longer be confronted by their unwinking gaze was a comfort to Farr, and he moved quickly across the sweltering valley.

Moving rapidly as he was, he had no time to avoid crashing into the towering wall of rock that loomed suddenly in his path. Strangely he felt no pain as he clambered erect, but the very unexpectedness of the collision stunned him, confusing his befuddled mind even more.

There should be no wall here, yet here it was. Farr could not deny that, though he could have sworn it had not been here when he entered the canyon. There was nothing to do but walk around it.

The cliff stretched a hundred yards to either side of him. He began moving along it, a fierce anxiety to escape this infernal place beating in his brain. The inscrutable *Mumums* followed, pattering along on bare feet.

He had covered what seemed like forty yards, when he stopped and stared in puzzlement at the craggy precipice. He looked back along the wall, then ahead, peered up at its dizzy heights, then down at its smooth base. Color drained from his face and his shoulders slumped in defeat.

He was beaten. Farr knew it. Knew too why that other adventurer had never left the valley, why his brain was spinning and whirling like a mad dervish. The ray in the temple—he could easily guess now what it had done to him. For stone does not move of its own power, and the cliff *had* moved. Its terminations still reared a hundred yards in either direction from him!

It was an illusion, that wall, an illusion conjured by his own ray-impregnated mind. But for him it was real. He could spend eternity walking along its face, yet never would he reach the end of the barrier.

He watched dully as a *Mumum* scampered past and melted into the cliff. Mad-denying to know that the wall existed only in his own mind. He tried to concentrate, tried to nullify the terrible force that had invaded his brain. If he could do that, the cliff-illusion would vanish.

Veins stood out on his forehead with the effort; but the wall remained, seemingly solid as ever to his touch. The ray-force was too powerful.

Farr wanted to scream, wanted to hurl himself at the barrier and pound and tear at it with all the wild energy of a trapped animal. But he couldn't. His emotions were played out. He could only stand like a burnt-out robot, his apathetic eyes following the antics of the *Mumums* as they popped in and out of the wall-illusion, taunting him, trying to drive him mad with the realization that only he could not pass through it to freedom.

The Ancients had triumphed. The life secret would remain in this valley, eternally guarded by the ingenious ray that warped men's minds and made them see illusions that to them were insuperable actualities. Not until a Master Intellect claimed the

heritage for the human race, would it ever leave here

Farr was not that Master Intellect, and he knew what he must do now. His blaster came slowly from its holster. He brought the gun to his temple.

His finger tightened on the trigger. White fire exploded in his brain, cooking the cells, melting them. A last scream of defiance ripped from Farr's lips, then his form went suddenly limp and crumpled to the ground, to lay silent . . .

IT WAS Londar's time to return the cylinder to the temple. Its contents were worthless, he knew, but it was the Ancients' command that the ritual be observed, so the pygmy-creature dutifully bent and retrieved the gleaming container and walked slowly with it toward the brooding edifice.

To carry out his mission, Londar would be forced to pass through the Great Lights, and Londar was afraid of the lights, much in the same way savages of Earth fear the magic of witch doctors. But the intelligence of the *Mumums* was slightly above that of savages, and Londar realized in a vague way that the lights could not harm him, could not do the things to him they had done to the black-haired man from the sky.

For, long ago, he had swallowed several of the mysterious crystals contained in the small silver tube swinging at his waist. The Ancients had commanded him to do that and Londar had complied, as had all his race, out of their great respect and love for the wise ones. The Ancients were gone now, had vanished into the sky many seasons since. But Londar and his people had lived on, ageless, undying, tirelessly performing the strange duties assigned them by the masters.

Some day, another great race would come, and Londar's people would then surrender the silver tubes. The black-haired man might have been the representative of such a race, but he had shown contempt for the *Mumums* and had slain Kyrrad. That would not be the way of a true people of supreme intellect.

Londar walked on, the silvery tube fastened at his waist tinkling musically in rhythm to his stride.