

# PLANET STORIES



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# The Death From Orion

By W. J. MATTHEWS

FOR A LONG MINUTE THE BIG man did not speak, rocking gently on his heels, hands clasped behind his broad back. The dim glow of the atomics in the corridor cast shadowy bars of gold and sable across his cold face, picked glints of steel and silver from his heavy gunbelt and saffron uniform. The only sound was the gentle tinkle of leg-irons as the prisoner lounging on the cell-bench idly swung his crossed leg, returning the heavier man's reptilian stare with a detached, infuriating coolness.

It moved him to break his silent regard. The thick voice rasped in the dim-lit cell.

"You know why I am here, Kurland?"

The black-bearded outlaw shrugged, a glitter of white teeth splintering his calm stare.

"Were you other than Gion, Marward

of Jupiter, I should know. As it is, I do not."

Gion's hard lips smiled briefly at the iron compliment.

"I rate you higher than you think, Kurland. I should have come farther still to see you hanged at dawn."

The outlaw shrugged. "I might say the same, had I had your luck."

The big man nodded, his eyes never leaving Kurland. The sharp brows over his enormous eyes lay straight and commanding, and there were lines about his tight mouth Kurland had never seen. Slowly, softly, Gion went on, rocking easily on his booted heels.

"Suppose, came dawn, you did not hang, Kurland?"

The swinging leg halted, the big body tensed in its chains. Then slowly Kur-



*The outlaw stiffened, then his knees buckled.*

**Tiny suns set in rare metals, crystals of fire that mocked Terra's diamonds and pearls as lusterless pebbles and pale glass, the ancient treasure left behind the same time-worn trail of sudden blood and stiffening corpses!**

land eased back against the cold stone wall, a thin, mocking smile playing across his face.

"You should know me better, Gion. I am not for sale, even at such a price. Nor my comrades."

Cold pride flashed in Marward's eyes. "I buy no man's loyalty," he retorted. "Were yours for sale, I should not be here, nor would you. I offer a supposition, nothing more."

Kurland rose, a powerful, black-clad figure imposing even in torn uniform and clinking chains. He stared fiercely at the heavy sub-ruler of the outer Jovian plains, the iron-souled tyrant who had broken and suborned Earthly sway until much of the giant planet lay supine and trembling before him.

"You have not come to taunt me, nor

play with suppositions, Marward. Why not be plain?"

"I shall be plain enough," promised Gion, dropping a hand upon the heavy butt of his silver-mounted glare-pistol. Kurland's teeth flashed in the gloom. There was magic still in his flaming name.

"You know the Jewels of Orion?"

"I have heard of them."

"They have vanished."

The outlaw shrugged, half a laugh breaking through his beard. "My regrets, Marward. I had no hand in it."

Gion bared his teeth wolfishly. "I did." Bland astonishment swept Kurland's face. Then, slowly, a grim smile thrust aside his wonder.

"Forgive my start, Marward. You have stolen so much."

Fiercely Gion brushed aside the cold

insult. He stepped back, his face in shadow. The prison cell was electric with his vibrant hate. "You will have it, will you, Kurland? I came to make an offer."

"Go on," said the outlaw, immobile.

"I am not loved, here on Jupiter," said Gion. "I usurp the authority of greater men. I intrigue, I plot. I conquer and steal, if you will. It requires gold. A fortune." He paused, watching the outlaw. "An agent on Venus flashed me word that the Jewels of Orion, crown jewels of a vanished race on some forgotten planet beyond the stars, were to be shipped once more to Betelgoran. A hundred fortunes, Kurland. I gave orders and he shipped as passenger, with the consigned jewels."

"And then?" Kurland's eyes burned through the gloom.

"The *Plutonian* crashed somewhere ten million miles out in space," said Gion slowly. "My agent. He died with her, and with her people. But he sent the co-ordinates through even as she went down on some uncharted asteroid. I know where the hulk lies piled, an iron coffin for the Orion jewels."

Kurland's glare was deadly. "Make your offer, vulture."

"Go and bring me the jewels."

**K**URLAND flung back his head, a sudden roar of laughter in his muscled throat. The chains clashed on wrist and ankle as he flung derision in the other's paling face.

"You send a wolf on a jackal's errand, Marward! You think I would return, or venture one lean hungry mile on such a rat's voyage to help you on your way, you whom I have fought these many months, you who broke and exiled me, you who made me outlaw and today must hang me for it?" His scorn rasped bitingly in the prison cell, but Gion of Jupiter was not moved by the love or hate of men. He nodded to the tiny barred window.

"Look from the window."

Kurland looked, seeing in the growing pearl of dawn the black and ugly shapes athwart the sky were six gibbets stood ranged along the ramparts of Gion's northern fortress in the Montral foothills.

"You understand," nodded Gion, leaning against the door. "You will return,

and with the jewels, or your five young companions will be swinging there to greet you when my men take you, as they took you once before, Kurland."

The outlaw turned, ice-veined, but Gion did not stir.

"I am a prisoner. Judged and doomed. No ship, no crew."

"Escapes have been arranged before."

Kurland surveyed the big man curiously. "Why not go yourself on this golden errand, Marward?"

Gion shrugged. "Leaving my empire to the wolves? You know I dare not, nor trust a lieutenant in my place. This is not a secret for friends or followers."

"I am no friend of yours. You dare trust me?"

"Outlaw, fugitive, renegade . . . need I fear you, Kurland?" smiled Gion coolly.

"My word against yours."

Kurland nodded slowly. "I see. But should I return with the jewels, what assurance have I that my crew and I do not instantly decorate your gallows yonder?"

"None," admitted Gion. "Reliance upon my word, I imagine, would give you scant comfort, but it is not to my interest to have even the slightest suspicion turned upon me while the jewels are in my possession. Compared to them, you and your arrogant little band are not worth the snapping of a broken twig. Bring me the Orions, Kurland, and your five slip the noose with a day's grace to be beyond my grasp. What more do you require?"

"A ship and my crew to man her," replied Kurland, steadily. "I am your enemy forever, Gion."

Gion smiled, not without malice. "If you will have it so, Kurland. I am a bad enemy."

"You used me once too often, Gion. I was an honest man when first my ships came trading here, too stiff to crawl to your thieving crew, too callow to stomach your vicious thrust to power. Exiled, dishonored, branded, I bear a prouder title than yours, Marward. I am your enemy."

"Serve me, then, and I promise you scant reward," Gion calmly agreed. "Your ship lies in the hangar, beyond the outer towers. Fueled. The chart is marked, your course is set. There are no guards."

Kurland suggestively clanked his chains.

Gion stepped into the corridor, his heavy face set and intent. Drawing his gun, he leveled a short tube with his left hand, focussing it on Kurland's chains through the doorway grill. As the outlaw pulled, links parted like melted cheese in the tinted purple glow.

"There will be reprimands and stern punishments that you were allowed to conceal a dis-tube about your person," explained Gion, holding Kurland motionless with the threat of his leveled gun. "You comprehend. Your companions will be spared, that you be hanged together on your recapture. There will be no questions, no suspicion. On your return, you will place the jewels beneath the seat where you have lain, taking the key you will find there to release your men. Vanish, Kurland. Stay beyond my power. Expect no mercy, for justice shall be no more swift and certain to punish your crimes than I to still your tongue for once and all. You have your warning."

"You make yourself quite plain," agreed the outlaw, hand on hip. "We understand one another, Marward of Jupiter. You shall have your mangy jewels. Nothing else."

Gion laughed contemptuously. "Have you seen them, wolf's-head? What else do I need?"

"Friends, Marward,"

"I have an enemy," Gion mocked, vanishing up the dimlit corridor in a blur of fading saffron. His throaty laugh came thickly back to Kurland as the clicking lock swung the heavy door gently wide.

Kurland was through it instantly, alert for a treacherous blast, darting into the shadows of the poor stone corridor, patched and ragged with broken plaster and creeping moss. Gion had vanished, but he did not dare venture anything in that direction, bearing as he did the lives of all his captive crew. Softly he passed down the empty corridors to the broad upper court overlooking the hillside ramparts.

His broad chest swelled with the fresh breath of freedom, strained though it might be through the rude beams of the new-made gallows he was cheating. The cords along his bearded jaw tightened. His hands found a tiny pill in a slot of his bread belt, pressed it swiftly against

the unguarded wood of the gallows. He melted into the shadows of the stairs as a wave of heat and acrid smoke billowed out, engulfing him and hiding him from view. The startled guards in the towers above saw the tall gibbets wreathed in sudden consuming flame even as they stared.

Rushing to the conflagration, none saw the shadowy figure dart through the postern far below and vanish into the rocks fringing the landing ground at the wall's base. A moment later, the deserted hangars erupted flame and boiling smoke, hurtling into the starry Jovian sky the slim black fighter manned once again by Eldon Kurland, outlaw. Gaping, they watched it vanish among the paling stars of dawn.

## II

HEYWOOD, GION'S JACKAL, moped sullenly about the rocks of the jagged little asteroid, scowling through his vitrine helmet at the tiny figure moving slowly along the crater floor near the distant bones of the wrecked *Plutonian*. The intolerable glare of the naked sun, hidden by the rock's toothed horizon, yet thrust flaming whorls of gold and scarlet above the mountains to hideously outline the ragged ribs of the vessel he had diverted from its course to its death on this uncharted worldlet.

A scowl he kept hidden from his companion darkened his handsome, waxen face, and for the hundredth time he muttered imprecations upon his ill-fortune in the moment of triumph. He had not counted on the girl.

Allen Heywood depended on nothing save himself, for which his master Gion valued him more highly than any other tool and trusted him not at all. Surreptitiously relaying to the Marward the co-ordinates of the space-ship on which he had slipped as passenger, Heywood had coldly blown out the stern-tubes with a delayed-action bomb and sent the big ship crashing into the selected uncharted asteroid, thinking nothing of the fifty lives that flared out in the exploding wreckage. More careful of his own, he had simply stepped out an emergency lock in a space-suit a moment before the ship struck, al-

lowing himself to slowly drift with his own momentum and the asteroid's faint gravitational pull. He had landed a mile from the ship perhaps an hour after it crashed, only to find himself confronted by another suited figure, the woman Francinet.

Shaken by the encounter, he realized she had no suspicion of the part he had played, or that the crash had been less than accidental. She had herself been saved by the merest freak, having been clad in a space-suit for a photograph-minded acquaintance. When the ship split, she had been shot upward through a rent in the hull, drifting slowly down as had he. They were hopelessly marooned.

The ship was ruined, if not completely destroyed. Heywood pushed aside the horrible steel-hard blobs of red which had been human beings with no apparent qualms, nor troubled himself that it had been he who had slain them all as surely as with gun or knife. With the bows crushed shapeless by the headlong smash into the asteroid and the stern blown wide by its own thermoblast bombs, nothing was left them but a length or two of warped and twisted main cabin hardly capable of retaining the Earth atmosphere still flowing through the tiny purifier engines he had seen to preserving. Cleaning out the unrecognizable dead, he rigged up a rough shelter for them. They had occupied it by now for over a week.

He kicked again at a rock, watching it spiral slowly up and over a crevasse in slow-motion. The jewels were still intact, hidden in the ship's safe. He had not risked her discovering him tampering with either, nor the safer course of destroying her as he had her companions. There was no assurance that another ship than Gion's rescuing craft might not discover them first.

That Gion would send a ship for him he believed with implicit faith, tempered by the knowledge that it would be the loot and not the thief that the powerful Marward coveted. He had no illusions concerning Gion, and so had survived. Thus, as he glanced skyward to see a tiny star moving perceptibly across the blazing night of interspatial glory, Allen Heywood flattened himself behind a huge rock quite as promptly as from the devil himself.

A blaster slid into his hand. The green eyes were intent.

The little ship was coming down.

THE long blue glare paled across the unwinking stars and a red column of fire poured viciously from Kurland's ship, whitening to a rigid arc lancing into the broken rocks below. Eyes intent, the outlaw bent forward over his keys, searching the ragged terrain as he braked his easy dive. Then his firm lips thinned, cruelly hard in the thick beard masking his copper face. The broken ribs of the lost space-ship thrust up against the sun, half-hidden in the shadows of a stoney ledge.

Kurland shut off his drive, thrusting in breakers and snapping down his forward beams. The eight-man ship he had made known and feared through all the distant Jovian system drifted easily through the empty sky, feeling its way on walking tractor beams. The star-shine glinted on the black lines and heavy armament, hesitating to further lighten the dark menace of the craft.

A green beam lanced into a nearby crag, splitting it from top to bottom, and toppling it in soundless ruin across the crater floor. Nothing stirred about the silent wreck.

Lightly the ship touched the crater floor, rocking gently on its beams. A broad figure in black swung down and moved swiftly across the rock toward the broken hulk of the *Plutonian*. Heywood softly drifted into the shadows, floating easily from hollow to hollow, following.

Kurland stood silent, looking up at the gigantic ruin, majestic even in its awful desolation, and the look upon his face was not good to see. There were no deeper hells than those for wreckers, no fate too grim for one who callously snapped the bright, thin thread of life reaching out from Earth to all the Solar planets and their hundred circling satellites. The Marward of Jupiter would buy an empire with this tangled pile of riven steel. He should find the bargain dear.

There was no need to seek airlocks in the *Plutonian's* side. Three were visible, ripped and gaping, and there were a score of torn holes twenty feet and more in width broken through the shell where the vessel had plowed her way into the rocks. Clothes

instruments, furniture, books, and a hundred intimate possessions lay crumpled to view in the gutted cabins or scattered wide across the shining plain. For a moment Kurland looked at a headless doll, then moved forward, his face a deadly mask.

Swiftly he climbed, mounting the broken stone and twisted metal that led him to a greater gash leading into an inner saloon. He forced his way through the debris, then straightened, looking about him curiously.

Furniture and drapes lay crushed, torn, heaped against the broken forward bulkheads, but nowhere could he see the dead who must have died here by the tens and by the score. There was no blood upon the walls, for blood exposed to the instant void of interstellar space crystallized in the very bodies of the injured, but in the debris at the foot of the muralled bulkhead many tiny marbles of dreadful scarlet rolled and tinkled silently as he searched.

He moved forward, passing through the shattered bulkheads where open swinging doors gave acute evidence of the unexpectedness of the catastrophe which had overwhelmed the ship. Ruin and destruction were everywhere, but nowhere a trace of the bodies he knew had exploded into scarlet dust as the biting death of space lanced its deadly vacuum into the rending vessel. There could be only one answer, and it brought his gun into his hand as he moved warily through the corridors.

His search ended in the open, metal-sprayed bowl which had been the forward pilot cabin, for here, piled hideously in red tangles, the rigid blots whose life-blood had rolled beneath his feet in bright pellets as he walked lay sprawled in horrible disfigurement. There were no longer anything at all. Simply *color*, encompassed in torn and broken clothing.

Whiter than the fleshless bone displayed before him, Kurland thrust to the swinging door, welding it shut in one impulsive burst of his blaster. No man should see what lay beyond. Shaking with a terrible anger, Kurland strode furiously back the broken ship, gun in hand, and flung his curses ahead. He opened nothing, but shot doors and panels from their hinges as he advanced, eyes glaring for the faintest sign of movement. Only the man who

had planned and executed this horror could have survived it.

MIDWAY in his stride the outlaw halted, gun lifted. The pilot light over the central chambers glowed softly. There was atmosphere within. Kurland snarled, closed his gloved hand on the twisted lever. He jerked and the battered door swung open, revealing a rough air-lock improvised from the usual intercommunicating chamber. He darted in, snapping the door behind him. Air sighed into the chamber as he drew another rude lever down from the box nailed to the bulkhead.

Removing his vitrine helmet, Kurland holstered his gun and thrust open the inner lock. The air was clean and fresh, Earth-crisp. The room was battered, but not structurally damaged, and the furnishings were neatly in place. There were signs that other chambers had been looted to furnish this one, and Kurland smiled mirthlessly. He silently moved across the thick blue rug.

The room beyond was a sleeping cabin, with male attire in the slotted racks. The stamp of occupancy lay everywhere in the worn, neat articles stamped with a golden H. The other room of the suite had been fitted with heat tubes for warmth and cooking, and were piled high with salvaged foodstuffs.

Continuing, Kurland found a broken passage beyond this kitchen, leading deeper into the shop's waist, but cut off from the first suite by locked doors. The outlaw grinned wickedly and, reversing the charge silently burned the doors from their slides. There was no sound, no vibration as he laid them against the wall. Gion had not hunted him for nothing.

The room beyond was deep in rugs, the panelled walls well-hung with costly paintings. A recorder was singing beyond a brocaded drape, and Kurland could hear footsteps moving lightly across the padded floor. With one swift bound he was across the anteroom, ripping the drapery from its flimsy hangings, and stood upon the threshold of the inner room, a black, terrible figure looming in the warped doorway like the angel of Death. His voice rang softly through the sudden frozen silence as he faced the survivor.

"My apologies. I underestimated Gion."

Irene Francinet, whirling in anger at an intrusion she attributed to the hitherto circumspect Heywood, froze at the sight confronting her, a huge black-bearded stranger with the bronze face of a Japanese devil-mask. The gloved hands were gargoyle claws, hovering over the blasters slung at the intruder's steel-black hips, the blazing eyes lances piercing her to the heart. This was . . . . Death.

She had been preparing for a sun-bath under a lamp built into the wall over the bed. The hand clutching her garments across her breast sank for a moment, evoking a mirthless grin from the giant that froze her already icy blood.

"You needn't trouble," he said, his voice so low she barely heard him. "It won't work."

She drew herself up, dark head high, and tried to still the tremor of her knees. There was good blood in Irene Francinet, and long years of iron discipline.

"You are intruding," she said, and her voice was steadier than she hoped. "Who are you? Where is your ship?"

His courtesy was insulting as he bowed, his eyes never leaving hers. "Your pardon. I am Eldon Kurland, late of North Jupiter. You need no name."

"I am Irene Francinet, Recorder, of Earth." Her voice was angry, uneven. "I do not understand you."

"Let it suffice that I understand you," he replied, his tone acid with ruthless disdain. He moved slowly forward, his eyes chill diamonds under the softly glowing atomics, and slowly she retreated, no longer able to conceal her fear. His hands never left the black handles of his guns.

"I knew the Marward's arm is long," he went on, grimly. "None better than I. I had not thought it long enough to drag the proud name of Recorder in this bloody mud."

She halted, stamping her foot on the rug. "What is this talk? Marward of where? Why do you fling him in my face like . . . like refuse?" Bright color stained her pale cheeks, and he eyed her curiously.

"You do that well enough, Francinet." He surveyed her from head to toe, savoring the midnight hair, the eyes flaming bluey into his, the straight nose and the strong red mouth. "Disclaim Gion of Jupiter if you will. He's no friend of mine.

But save your anger for better men. I've seen your work."

Her face was blank, and he answered her brutally.

"I stand within it. It stinks in the sun. I walked in blood to fling it in your face, you treacherous snake! I'll see the color of Gion's, yes, and yours, before either of you hears the last of this!" he blazed in a sudden whirl of recurring anger. "You'll play at words with me! You know this ship's cargo! You sent Gion her position even as you blew her tubes and sent her crashing here with all her helpless people." He flung a hand back at the door by which he had entered. "Walk out there, Recorder, and feel their blood roll beneath your feet! You who are so free with other's lives to win the treacherous praise Gion lulls you fools asleep with while he robs and slays!"

"What are you saying?" she whispered, lips stiff in her blanched face. "You think I wrecked the *Plutonian*? You think I killed those people?"

"You live," was his brutal rejoinder.

"But why? *Why?*" she wailed, abandoning her firm dignity as he loomed over her, black with anger. "Why should I do so horrible a thing? What reason could I have?"

"My reason," he snarled. "Because you must, as I came here because I must. I to save my comrades from the noose, you for Gion's gold. Well, you've earned it, and triply over, woman. Where are the jewels?"

"I have no jewels," she faltered, her hand indicating her few personal belongings salvaged from the wreckage of her cabin. He brushed them aside, turned a jeering grin on her.

"You haven't opened the safe, then? By Throaze, but Gion knows his tools! Where is it?"

SHE stared at him. "Back there. In the purser's office, I suppose." Her voice was frankly trembling. "I haven't touched it."

"Clever. I might not have been the first." He jerked his head aft. "Ahead of me. March."

"I'm not . . . dressed."

He tossed her a blanket. "Use that. Show me that safe, Recorder." Her proud



title, in his bitter lips, was an epithet, and she bristled. But she obeyed.

She moved into the dimly lit corridor beyond her little suite, feeling her way along the warped and battered passage. They had not attempted to utilize this part of the vessel, although it lay within their atmospheric seals, and she had rough going. Kurland moved close behind her, hand on his gun, but she made no move to oppose him. Her one hope of safety lay in acceding to this madman's demands, trusting to her erstwhile companion, Heywood. He must be somewhere about. And Kurland did not seem to know of his existence.

The office was a broken shambles, records and papers heaped against the forward bulkhead. The massive safes had been torn bodily from the wall and lay upended in the litter. Kurland strode swiftly to the smallest, motioning her to immobility with his gun. Supplied with Gion by the proper combinations, he spun the six dials expertly and the three doors fell open. He took out a small leaden box, then four more.

Prismatic fire blazed roof-high as he flung back the cover of one, jetting iridescently from a tumbled mass of primitive goldwork encrusted with the unbelievable gems of Orion. He lifted a heavy golden torque, studded with blazing goutts of crimson flame and slung on an inch-thick rope of giant Venusian pearls worth each the lives of twenty men. A yellow diamond Chalcidite rolled across the scarred steel of the open door and came to rest, winking like an evil eye in the dim light sifting down the corridor behind Kurland.

His voice was soft, terrible in its hatred as he looked at her, blanket clutched frozen across her bosom. His eyes blazed as balefully as the huge jewel winking before him.

"Will you lie now, Recorder? These are the Jewels of Orion!"

She did not answer, less for the contemptuous accusation in his voice than the more dreadful thought her trained mind thrust at her as insistently. If the *Plutonian* had been sabotaged and wrecked for such world-loot, as his sure knowledge, his very presence indicated, then his first assumption must inevitably be true. The survivor he considered her must indeed be

the hellish wrecker. And she was not the only survivor.

Her eyes were enormous. A mound of living fire grew upon the dusty steel as he piled up the blazing rings and brooches of the long-dead Orion kings. He tossed down a circlet of hammered gold, wreathed for the brows of some ancient queen, and the thirty pendant gems tinkled musically in the silence. Each could have brought the souls of an army, round, glinting stars of purest emerald green deep-sunk with tiny suns of icy diamond lustre. Kurland paused in his magical task, looking across at her.

"Are they worth the blood we walked upon to reach them, Recorder?" he asked, quietly.

"I . . . I didn't know," she faltered, meeting his gaze with growing firmness.

"Men have died before over these bright toys," he shrugged, opening another box and pouring it in a blazing cascade over the first heap of white fire. "Men will die again. And among them, Gion."

"The Marward of Jupiter?" she whispered. "He knows? He sent you here, knowing this?"

"Your message reached him. The Marward is swift to serve his servants. Particularly those . . . bearing gifts."

"You betray yourself," she flashed, pointing at the gems. "Gion is evil, but would he trust any messenger with those?"

Kurland looked quietly at her. "The Marward holds me in tighter bonds than you think, Recorder. If I fail him, five of my friends hang. Skyhigh."

She looked searchingly at him. "Who are you? You rate your friends very high, Black-beard."

**K**URLAND smiled, a hard grin with no mirth in it. "I am Eldon Kurland, as I told you. Outlaw. Gion made. Were you a true Recorder, you should know of me, and know I hold my men dearer than this trumpety glass from beyond the Milky Way." His gloved hand struck the gems contemptuously, tossing jewels to right and left upon the papered flooring. She followed their meteoric flight, then glanced up in astonishment as Kurland swayed, knees buckling, and sank with a clash of heavy armor to sprawl across the fortune he had struck aside. Behind him a bright, feral

countenance smiled wolfishly and the slight figure which had slipped silently into the room from the passage straightened up triumphantly, gun in hand. Allen Heywood smiled upon her benignly.

### III

**KURLAND OPENED HIS EYES** dizzily, then shut them again. The thick voice of Gion purred through the spinning darkness.

"You might as well, Kurland. It's real."

He opened them again, fixing his unsteady regard upon the heavy, impassive countenance of the Jovian Marward. Gion sat across the table, his hands folded upon the polished surface. The leaden boxes were stacked neatly beside his arm. A thinly wavering smile touched Kurland's lips as he glanced back at Gion.

"Your arm is longer than I thought, Gion."

"You had your warning," shrugged the Marward.

"How did she do it?"

Gion smiled, a gross caricature of mirth. "It would be amusing to let you go in that misapprehension, I suppose. Perhaps profitable. But you've earned the right to know. The girl wasn't my agent. So much the worse for her. While you were reviling her, the man who wrecked the *Plutonian* walked up behind you. Heywood isn't one to take chances, as your head probably indicates."

"Heywood?"

Gion waved a casual hand at a slight, elegant figure seated at his right, and the evil little jackal permitted himself a tight-lipped grin at Kurland, the chained lion. The outlaw studied him without affection.

"And what do you have on him?"

"Nothing in particular," shrugged Gion. "Heywood is devoted to my interests, seeing they're his own. I have no more loyal follower, no better friend."

Allen Heywood fidgeted under the unusual expansiveness of his patron, allowing a tinge of color to stain his cold pallor. The look he gave the Marward was an amazing blend of adulation and open suspicion, and Kurland smiled thinly. He did not anticipate leaving this little rocky underground room alive, and had no objection to sowing dissension as a parting leg-

acy. His dark eyes sought the Marward's.

"Our gentlemen's agreement, I take it, is off?"

Gion nodded indifferently. "But naturally. It was not you who fetched me the Orion jewels, Kurland. Your intentions may have been honorable, and in all honesty I admit so much, but it was Allen Heywood who brought me the stones. The reward I meant for you shall be his."

Kurland glanced at Heywood with some pleasure. The little man might not care for that.

The burly Marward rose, pulling his gun. The outlaw noted that the alert Heywood was on his feet as promptly, his own gun opening in his hand. But Gion meditated nothing at the moment, apparently, save ridding himself of evidence even one of his eminence could not brook revealing. He motioned Kurland to rise.

The outlaw got up, noting his feet were hobbled by a short rope. His wrists were lashed behind his back, his holster empty. From the aching dizziness in his limbs and head he realized that Heywood must have drugged him after striking him down back upon the asteroid where the *Plutonian* had crashed, taking no chances whatsoever on the long voyage back to Jupiter in Kurland's ship, bearing captive and loot. The feral little man slipped behind him, prodding him with his blaster.

"Move, wolf's-head." He shuffled silently after Gion, moving ahead down rocky, dim-lit corridors. There was no sound but the rasp of their boots and the growing rumble of underground water not far ahead.

**THE** massive stronghold of Montalven where Gion squatted, playing at power behind the scenes, was far more fortress than palace, relic of an earlier day when Earthmen maintained their sway by the strength of their ships and spreading armies rather than by the gentler rule of law. The taste of power was sweeter in the Marward's mouth than the empty display indulged in by the appointed viceroys whose strength he had sapped by gold and treachery, rudely expanding beyond the borders of the northern province legitimately his own until all the Earth colonies and many of the native kingdoms trembled at his slightest word. Kurland

was being afforded a further glimpse of the reason. He had been outlawed and hunted across Jupiter for his defiance of that lawless sway. He was to die for it now.

They came out upon a rough stone platform where a swift underground river glanced roughly by in rude channels, spitting foam and spray as it dashed against the stone. A flimsily built raft made from an old door and several planks tied together with rope was moored at the quay's edge, a foot or so below the floor level, and lying bound upon it, gagged, lay the girl Kurland had found in the wreckage of the *Plutonian*, Irene Francinet. Her white dress was already soaked as the wretched craft bobbed and swayed in the swift current.

Kurland halted, swung angrily on Gion. "What is this, Marward? You disclaimed the woman."

"So I did," placidly agreed Gion. "I told you Allen was thorough. He brought back *everything*."

"And . . . we know too much?"

"Too much to hang," replied Gion, frankly. "Not with your friends. You're going down the river. It doesn't come out."

"She's a woman, Gion. What's her word against yours?"

"She's a Recorder, a trained Government official of the highest rank. Their word against kings and princes, my friend. I don't take chances, my friend. Step down. Allen, see that he does."

Under the sudden pressure of Heywood's weapon, there was nothing for Kurland to do but obey. He stepped down upon the raft, tipping it dangerously and soaking the Francinet woman to the hips. He squatted down, obediently.

Gion nodded. "Tie him to those hinges, Allen. They'll drift for miles before the roof slopes down and sinks the raft." There was a sudden gleam in his bulging eyes as the lighter man swung down upon the raft, but Kurland said nothing. He owed the wrecker-vulture nothing.

Roped to the worn hinges, he sat quietly watching the bulky Jovian ruler and his dapper lackey. Gion smiled.

"Tight enough, Allen. Get back and cast them off." And he gave Heywood his hand to assist him. Dazzled by the

condescension of his noble confederate, Heywood failed to notice that it was the left hand of the Marward he grasped. The powerful muscles contracted to leave him to safety on the rough-hewn quay, and, as he came, the right arm of the Marward swung abruptly to drive a heavy dagger to the hilt in the startled little fiend's unprotected throat. Allen Heywood had for once neglected his caution.

Contemptuously, Gion released the suddenly slack fingers of his devoted henchman, the dying man falling heavily back upon the raft, choking in his bubbling blood. He rolled to one side, staining Irene's white dress a horrid crimson as he clutched her body, his eyes a glaring horror as he stared at the faintly smiling Marward watching him, then fell back limply. His head dropped, his clawed hands relaxed, and he sagged into the water. A booted leg, caught between two broken planks, held him precariously, half-submerged. The green waters rushing past darkened thinly as he fled along the death-trail upon which he had been so cheerfully embarking Kurland and the hapless Irene Francinet.

Kurland looked up stonily at the Marward.

"It doesn't pay to work for you, does it, Gion?" he asked, quietly.

"I promised him your reward," Gion smiled, bending to cut the rope holding the raft. "You may share it with him. Bon voyage, my friends."

The rope parted, the flimsy contraption darting away into the current. Their last view of the Marward was of a jocular farewell waved after them as they dashed wildly into the round tunnel below the cavern where the landing crouched. Shadows engulfed them as the raft swayed drunkenly through the sibilant darkness.

#### IV

**EVEN** as Gion vanished, Kurland exploded into action. His shoulders knotted and he exerted every available ounce of strength in a ferocious test of his wrist lashings. But their dead passenger had been an expert. They held fast. Writhing over on his side, he doubled himself and his body tensed, steel-hard

muscle and powerful bones and sinew against the Marward's treacherous bonds. For long moments, as they whirled and swayed deeper into the darkening tunnel beneath the rocky hills of Jupiter, he pulled and strained evenly at his leg ropes.

HERE, too, Heywood had done with professional skill his bravo's work, but he had lavished no such care on the makeshift raft designed for the last journey he had not thought to take himself. The rough board holding Kurland's boots bent upward, cracked, bent double, and split lengthwise. He jerked his legs free.

Hooking his boots under a second plank, he slid his bare feet from the sleek black leather. Twisting about, he clamped a body-scissors on the gasping Irene Francinet. His powerful back muscles doubled, coiled upon themselves, lifting her inert figure from the dark water running over the partially submerged planks where she lay bound. They creaked, straining, as he exerted a pitiless pressure on her bowed ribs and chest. The steady leverage of her body slowly twisted loose the outer planks of the raft, and split two of them cleanly from the rough framework.

Gasping, he let her fall, then swung her again in her loosening bonds, letting her drop down against his own chest.

"Quickly," he snapped. "Your hands to my wrists! Before the ropes swell."

She pressed herself against him, wet and cold in the gathering darkness, fumbling with the ropes still holding him fast which had given him the tremendous leverage to break her own bonds. It was a struggle between her slim fingers and the expanding Jovian fibers of the cords, but he had been in time. She undid the knots and a moment later he had torn his hands free and sat up. With one swift move he slipped her gag off and ripped at her remaining bonds. Board after board tore free and shot off into the darkness, and when he had unfastened the last of the thin ropes holding her, stuffing them under his gun belt, there was little of the raft Heywood had thrown together but the big door they crouched on and a tangle of crazily-angled planks a stern where the dead jackal's booted leg still thrust up stiffly from the swirling waters.

"Here!" Kurland bit at her, thrusting

a broken shaft of wood into her chilled, numb fingers. "Paddle, girl, if you want to see the Sun again!" And he dug in on his side with another fragment of the plank he had broken.

Irene bowed, exerting what strength her long, drug-induced sleep from the planetoid and consequent imprisonment had left, trying her best to keep up with Kurland's long, plunging strokes. The raft's wild career into the depths of the Montral mountains was checked, then halted. They watched the distant circle of light marking the tunnel entrance, hoping against hope that its faint glimmer of phosphorescent light might not fade and dwindle once more. For a moment the raft held, then slowly inched backward against the current, lurching perilously through the dashing tunnels of the underground river.

Kurland glanced swiftly about. An element of his success both as peaceful racketeer and hunted outlaw had been his ability to subordinate his naturally sanguine temperament to the circumstances of the moment. He realized the awkward craft must collapse long before it was forced upstream to the quay from whence it had been launched. And should it hold, it was only too evident the paddlers could not. He tossed aside his board and stood up, drawing her up beside him.

"You can swim?" he asked. It was more a statement than a question, for the proud corps of Recorders were the pick of the Solar System's trained agents.

"Yes," she replied. "Can we make it?"

He tossed her the end of the thin rope he pulled from beneath his belt. "Knot that on your wrist, Recorder. We've travelled so many miles together, I'd not be parted on this last one."

She bowknotted the line, then poised, shivering and soaked, drenched with the brackish river water, stained with Heywood's blood. He looked at her, seeing in the dusk the slim, beautiful lines of her body under the torn white robe. She flung him a glance, impatient, tense.

"Ready, Kurland. We're drifting."

"Ride the eddies," he warned, his arm tightening for an instant about her half-bare shoulders. "We'll hug the wall." He bent for a moment, seizing the dead man's boot and plunging his arm beneath the surface. In his hand when he arose was

the jackal's blue-black glare-pistol. Holstering it, he pressed her hand, swung forward, and launched himself flatly into the stream, her white body streaking at his side. They emerged near the rocky wall where the swirling rifles were white in the shadowy dusk and the ragged teeth of the overhead rocks bit wickedly down at them as they swam. The raft turned about two or three times, then sped silently downstream into the bowels of the planet, bearing the dead Heywood to the unknown tomb he had meant for them.

THEREAFTER, it became a nightmare neither could ever quite remember nor forget. Rocks battered them. Shallow water, giving a moment's respite from effort, made the struggle upstream seem the harder. Foam and spray blinded them. Eddies spun them crazily in the dark. Narrow sluices tore at them forcing them relentlessly back into the depths. Only the rope connecting their arms saved both on more than one occasion, and within yards of the entrance it parted. Kurland's powerful arm closed about Irene, the renewed light from the nearing tunnel-mouth bright on her upturned face. He grinned down at her from the tangled black hair framing his shadowed face.

"Stick it, Recorder," he whispered, and felt her go limp in his arm. The title was no longer a biting imprecation. She took a breath, flung back her own tangled curls, and leaned forward into the current once more. He could not see her face. Heads down, they bent stiff arms, threshed leaden thighs, and fought again the grim river boiling into the tunnel. The open cave was full in view.

Less than an hour after they had been flung to death from its worn stones, they lay gasping on the rude quay, their hands dug into the rocky surface as though to anchor themselves forever to the solidity it represented. There were no signs of Gion or any of his men.

Kurland stirred, sat up. Irene just looked at him, not troubling to lift her head from the quay. He pulled off his torn jacket, his massive chest and powerful arms strangely white in the brilliant atomic overhead. The tangled black beard dripped upon the floor, the faint drops loud in the silence. He shook himself,

getting to his feet, a wild, ragged, outlandish figure. The heavy gun swinging low on his hip gleamed blackly.

She sat up, the water running from the rags of her once-dainty gown. She ran her hands through her black hair, watching him. His face was flinty, shadowed in the brilliance.

"What now, Kurland?"

His hand stroked the gleaming butt of his gun. He looked at her, unseeing.

"Gion."

"No." Her voice was oddly flat, accented.

"We made a good bargain, Gion and I," he replied, his eyes accepting her. "The jewels for my men's lives. Now, I collect."

She came to her feet, lithe and graceful even in her ragged tatters. "Not with guns, Kurland! I can free your men. I can ruin Gion, smash his rotten empire. I'm a Recorder. My word could break him in any court from here to Pluto. The law can handle him."

"Our law is here," replied Kurland, gravely. His hand patted the black leather holster sheathing Heywood's gun.

"Outlaw guns!" she flared. "Is that your justice, here on Jupiter?"

"You have tasted Gion's!" he grimly reminded her. "Courts! Laws! And who will serve the Marward with the warrant, girl? He feeds a thousand men within this single fortress city. He rules the rest through fear."

She looked up the passage where the Marward had vanished and there was a strange and haunting look upon her lovely face.

"It will not hold them now," she said, her voice unsteady. "Gion is dead."

His face blanked. She nodded.

"Your reason?" His eyes bored into hers. Only the sibilant gurgle of the river glancing past disturbed the quiet of the ancient dungeon.

"Why did Gion send across the System to wreck the *Plutonian*?" she replied. "Perhaps to avert suspicion, yes. But I can tell you why. He had to, because the *Plutonian* would never come to Jupiter. Because the Jewels of Orion were slipping beyond his grasp forever."

"You mean . . . ." Kurland began, slowly.

"They did not dare. They were exhibited on all the inner worlds, but not on Saturn, nor on Jupiter. They're unstable, crystallized gas from a galaxy a million miles beyond the belt of Orion.

"We handled them," he urged.

"In Terran atmosphere, yes. The Council dare not risk them free in anything less. Let the Cranford elements touch those jewels . . . ." Her shrug was expressive.

"The jewel boxes were upon his desk when I awoke," he rejoined, tugging thoughtfully at his beard.

"He had not opened them," she replied, positively. "They were his bait, to dull his jackal Heywood's wits, to speed him into carelessness. You saw his impatience to be done, to divide the spoil. He was in haste for his reward."

"Gion did not keep him waiting," replied Kurland, a grim laugh in the words. "I did not know of this."

"It is known to few, Recorders among them. I tell you that you may leave the Marward to his fate.

**K**JURLAND shook his head. "But not my men. His remain, and mine are outlaws by his decree. I cannot abandon them."

"I revoke your outlawry, and your men's." Her mien was imperious, and he did not demur.

"You have the power?" he asked, quietly.

"He had no authority to sentence. Authority or none, my word outweighs his, my will his law." She watched him steadily, and he smiled back, a glow about his heart at the fine, proud spirit of this woman fighting hard against his rocky will.

He took her arm. "You have a theory. Let us test it, on Gion." They moved softly into the rough-cut corridor. The lights were very old and dim with ancient grime, but the way was plain enough. Kurland grinned at her. "They did not plan on our returning."

"They did not plan on many things," she whispered, her voice suddenly venomous. "I remember nothing after Heywood stunned you, there in the *Plutonian*, until he tied me to the raft just before you came. He was kind enough to inform me that I was on Jupiter, under Gion's

fortress, and could expect to die there. When he spoke of the reward he had earned by his treachery, I realized what Gion had become and how justly he might be punished."

While she whispered, they had swiftly stolen along the stone tunnels cut long ago by the Jovians for the first wild troops of Earth. Kurland unerringly led the way, following the dusty trail of footsteps he himself had earlier trodden under the guns of the *Marward* and his agent. Suddenly he paused, feeling a rough projection under his palm still warm. He pushed, and a clumsy panel gave, swinging in to reveal a deep, shadowy pit sinking far down into the depths of the rocks, extending upward until it was lost in the darkness. He thrust in his head. Above him the twinkling stars glimmered down through the opening of the rough volcanic blow-hold, or vent. Directly opposite the panel, a plank leading to its open port, his own black fighter sat poised nose-up, and locked in shining modern cradles below were three lesser craft, dark and wearing no colors.

"Heywood came last, drifting in on gravity beams," he whispered, moving aside that she might see. "No one saw him arrive . . . nor his cargo."

"What ships are those?" she asked, peering down.

"Gion's. Escape craft. The regular cradles on the open field could go, but he keeps ships here in this forgotten blow-hold, unmarked and unknown. Insurance. Trust a rat to have a way to leave the sinking ship. We'll remember them." He closed the door gently.

They slipped on. Above them the distant sounds of fortress life drifted through the deserted corridors, but in these depths they met no living thing. His hand checked her, hard on her soft arm.

"Beyond that. The room where Gion sat, watching me." His gun was out, the powerful slides poised and ready in his hand. "Wait here."

"I needn't," she replied, quietly. "You will not find him, Kurland."

He rounded the corner, paused. The rough wooden door of the room stood half ajar. A dim light burned above it, casting dark and mocking shadows across the worn grey stone. Somewhere a man

whistled merrily, faded away into the distance.

They moved forward, silent, barefoot on the stone. He sighted on the door's edge, stepped forward abruptly. She saw him freeze, the gun lifting, then sway back, his body slowly relaxing. The blaster was hip-high, level, ruthless as the steel within his greying eyes. The door swung silently open at his touch.

Gion sat beyond the table, the leaden boxes piled beside him. One lay open, tilted carelessly upon its side, and across the gleaming surface of the table lay a tumbled heap of ruddy golden chains and bangles and massive, chiseled collars. Bright glints of white and blue and green sparkled cleanly through the twisted coils of hammered gold, but the white-hot glare the outlaw knew no longer blazed within the priceless settings.

The Jewels of Orion were . . . gone.

**KURLAND** and the girl moved forward, their eyes on Gion, sitting in silence, his hands buried wrist-deep within the tumbled fortune spilling from the leaden box. He made no move, nor spoke.

They paused, standing by the table's edge, a golden heap of ancient rings winking clean white sparks through their coils. A look of infinite wonder darkened Kurland's face as he studied Gion's.

"He has escaped us," the outlaw said. "And so easily. He never knew."

The woman nodded. "They said of him, like Midas, that he had the golden touch, that everything on which he laid his hand was his. He made it so, and came to this. A fatal gift, Kurland."

The Marward's garments stirred to a vagrant draft, shifting in a silver ripple across his massive chest. But a chest of human flesh no longer. The Orion jewels had gone, dissolved into air like dreams, and before the silent Marward lay the empty settings, flaunting their remaining simpler jewels in barren poverty, but the loss no longer troubled Gion. Beneath his simple robe his flesh shone with a thousand lustrous lights, his muscles ridged with Phidian carving in purest emerald green. His deep-sunk eyes were topaz gold, shot through with jetting bits of white, and his startled lips were purple

as fire-shot jade. His massive head was translucent through and through, a vein-sprayed sculpture in Venetian glass where truant silver bubbles froze in silent thunder as they burst. His hands were coral white, the bones within curling to and fro like vagrant bits of scarlet ruby, all caught and held forever in one eternal crash of living color. The Jewels of Orion had but changed their form, burst from the ancient golden settings to plunge and explode and freeze anew in living human flesh.

Gion, Marward of Jupiter, had become himself a jewel.

Slowly Kurland sheathed his blaster.

"Our work is done, Irene. And by the Marward himself."

She looked up at him, pale-faced, dark-eyed, watchful. "I could have told him as much." Her eyes fell to the table, to the four boxes remaining unopened, then rose to his. "Must I tell you?"

He slowly picked up the boxes, weighing their priceless, deadly contents.

"My crew is caged back there in those side corridors, near those ships. We'll take them and go. There's nothing to hold us . . . now." His hand touched her shoulder. "You will come with us?"

She smiled, and gestured toward the boxes that held the Jewels of Orion.

There was a pause, and his face slowly paled. But his eyes never left her. He nodded slowly, then extended the boxes to her. "A Marward couldn't hold them, and I've been an outlaw too long."

But her hands gently repulsed his offer. There was color again in her damp cheeks, a rushing glowing tide of color that warmed her cold body like wine.

"We'll deliver them to the authorities. But, until then—hold them for me, Kurland."

His eyes glittered as he laid the leaden boxes suddenly on the table and his hands were rough upon her shoulders.

"So you make an honest pirate out of me, Irene? You give me name and ship again, you trust me as you would trust any decent sailorman? Then take the consequences!" And his lips were hard and fierce on hers, his arms crushed tight about her ragged body. She stiffened, then slowly relaxed, her eyes laughing into his.

"Did I pardon you for less?"