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THE FIGHT WITH THE GORGON

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

illustrated by EMSH

The strange monster had some extraordinary powers. So it had to be fought by extraordinary means, or all of us would be dead men — turned into cold, hard stone!

OUR troubles started the moment the stiffened corpse of Flaherty was found, standing frozen in a field half a kilometer from the ship. Nobody in the crew had cared very much for the big Irishman—but still, finding his body, completely unharmed, stock-still and standing alone, was quite a jolt.

There was no apparent sign of death. In fact, at first we thought he was asleep on his feet. Horses sleep that way. Why not Flaherty?

But he wasn't asleep. He was dead, dead as could be. And

when there are only eight human beings on an unexplored planet, and one of those eight happens to die suddenly of unknown causes, the framework of your existence tends to sag a bit. We were scared.

"We" being the first Earth Exploratory Party, Type A-7, to the planet Bellatrix IV in Orion. Eight men, altogether, charged with the job of bringing back a full report on the whole planet.

Eight, of whom one, ox-like Flaherty, was stiff as a board before us.

Tavy Ramirez, our geologist,



asked, "What did it do to him, Joel?"

"How the blazes do I know?" I snapped. I regretted losing my temper right away. "Sorry, Tavy. But I know as much as you do about the whole thing. Flaherty's dead, and there's something out there that killed him."

"But there's *nothing* out there," protested the biologist, Kal Framer. "For three days we've hunted up and down and haven't found a sign of animal life. Not a sign."

Jonathan Morro, botanist, unwound his six-foot-eight and stretched. "Maybe an intelligent plant did him in, eh, Kaftan?"

I shook my head. "Doubt it, Jon. No sign of violence, no vegetation in the vicinity. We found him standing in the middle of a field, on his two big feet, frozen dead. Doesn't figure."

Over in the corner of the cabin, Steeger—medical officer—was puttering around the corpse. Steeger was an older man than most of us, one who had literally rotted in the service. He had contracted frogpox on Fomalhaut II, and

now he wore two chrome-jacketed titanium legs.

I looked over at him and said, "You have any report to make yet, Doc?"

Steeger turned watery eyes toward me. "There's no sign of any physical harm, Joel. But his muscles are all tensed, as if—as if—well, I can't put it into words. He seems to have been frozen in his tracks by some strange force. I can't explain it."

Phil Janus, our chronicler, looked up from the chess game he'd been playing with pilot Curt Holden and laughed. "Maybe he had an overdose of his own joy-juice and it hardened all his arteries."

That was a reference to the crude still Flaherty had rigged the day we landed on Bellatrix IV. His duties as navigator had kept the big fellow pretty busy all trip, but first day down-planet he had managed to get right at the business of building the still.

He hadn't said a word about it to anyone, but when he showed up at mess that night he was pretty high, and we knew what he'd done. We never found his still, though we

searched all over. The second day Phil Janus had come across a liter flask of whiskey, home-brewed, and his sampling had cost him a black eye when Flaherty caught him.

"Let's be serious a minute," Frammer said. "One of our group is dead, and we don't know what killed him. There's something out there that Flaherty crossed. I move we organize a searching party to find out what."

"Seconded," murmured Morro.

I looked at the corpse for a moment, then at the six men around me. Frammer was my solid man, I knew, the leader of the group. Morro was strong, too, but usually too bored to bother with the welfare of the group. Young Holden, the pilot, was a follower; he didn't have any thoughts of his own, or at least he never expressed any. Tavy Ramirez I knew: quiet, smiling, unassuming—not very strong a person. Doc Steeger was small, frightened, not at all the sort of man you'd expect would go gallivanting around space as part of an exploratory crew. Janus was like Morro in many ways:

he just didn't care. And Flaherty, thank the Lord, was dead. The big ox had threatened nasty incidents many times. He'd been a constant source of dissension on ship.

As for me—Joel Kaftan, Lieut. (Spatial)—I was scared. Visible monsters on a planet are bad enough; invisible ones are hell. I looked out the port and saw the vast, empty, tree-studded plain that was our chunk of Bellatrix IV, and looked back at the men.

"All in favor of a searching party, say aye!"

AYE it was, and we divided up. There were seven of us, now, and that made things awkward. Steeger, as our doctor, was indispensable—and he was no use outdoors anyway. Theoretically Holden was dispensable—in a pinch I could probably have piloted the ship myself—but I would have hated to try, and so I confined him to quarters too. That left just five men for the search.

The logical way to do it would have been to split into two groups, one of three men and one of two. But I suppose I wasn't thinking too clearly

just then. I wanted to cover the maximum possible ground. So I announced that there would be *three* groups. I didn't figure that one poor chap would have to go out alone.

I teamed up with Ramirez, and Frammer with Morro. That left Janus as a searching party of one.

Janus didn't mind. Phil rarely minded anything.

"Looks like I'm lone wolf," he said. "Okay, gentlemen. If you hear a loud silence from my neck of the woods, run like hell."

We opened the airlock—not really necessary, since Bellatrix IV conveniently had an Earthtype atmosphere—and we left.

Tavi and I struck out for the site of Flaherty's finish. We didn't say much. We were both kind of numb. When your lifespan is 150 years or so, and you've got more than a hundred of them left, you're not too anxious to die young, even as a hero on an alien planet.

Framer and Morro wandered up toward the big ridge behind the spaceship. Janus headed for the clump of twist-

ed red-leaved trees about two hundred meters away.

Tavi and I moved slowly, looking around in every direction. As usual, there was no sign of any animal life. Bellatrix IV had an abundance of plants, not chlorophyll-based but with some sort of iron-compound base, a temperate climate, and flowing streams of real H₂O water. But no visible animals. Of course, we hadn't covered very much territory yet, no more than two or three square kilometers.

No one dared to make a sound. Then suddenly, in about two seconds flat, we had our first encounter with Bellatrixian life.

We saw poor Janus come racing out of the woods—and lumbering behind him out of nowhere came a bizarre thing about ten feet high, with little flapping non-functional wings, gleaming golden scales, and a headful of writhing, pencil-like tentacles.

We stood transfixed for a moment. I snapped out of my shock, drew my rifle, and put a shot into the scales, without causing any apparent disturbance to the beast. And then

Janus turned and stared right up at the beast for a fraction of a second as he ran.

It was a mistake.

The beast stared back at him, and the frantic pursuit came to an end. They glared at each other for just a moment. Then the monster seemed to lose interest in the chase. It wheeled and ran off in the opposite direction. Within moments it had disappeared over the hill.

But Janus remained where he was, frozen dead.

WE planted our second corpse and gathered morosely in the cabin of our ship, a scared and dismal bunch. We missed Flaherty, just a bit, but not very much. Janus, though, genial, clever, enormously capable—it was hard to believe he was dead, killed by a gorgon.

Gorgon it was. There was no doubt that the beast of the forest was a gorgon, straight out of the old mythology. Doc Steeger had given us the first inkling when he pointed out that the deaths of both Flaherty and Janus had been caused by a sudden neural blast.

Framer looked up. "But we

didn't see any physical contact between Phil and the monster."

"No," Ramirez added. "Janus just looked at the thing, and then he froze stiff—"

The explanation must have hit Morro and myself at just about the same instant.

"Gorgon," I said.

"Gorgon," he echoed, a split-second later. He stood up and peered out at the wide plain with its deadly clump of trees off to the side. "A gorgon."

There was a moment of silence. Then Holden said, "If you'll pardon me, sir—just exactly what *is* a gorgon? I don't remember hearing about them at the Academy."

Framer muttered something under his breath. I knew he had a vivid scorn for modern methods of specialized education. It was Morro who spoke.

"A gorgon, Curt, is a mythological beast. It killed by a glance; if you looked at its eyes, you were turned to stone. And the thing outside is almost a living version of a gorgon, complete to the tentacles on its head. The original gorgon was supposed to have living snakes instead of hair."

Holden said nothing, but his eyes widened.

Ramirez scratched his neck uneasily. "Gorgon, is it? Joel, how do we deal with *that*?"

"The same way Perseus did," I said.

And so Operation Medusa got under way. It needed some preliminary discussion. For one thing, Holden, who as our most experienced technician was vital to the plan, had not the slightest knowledge of the Perseus myth, and so we had to fill him in on it.

Morro patiently did most of the explaining.

"A Greek hero named Perseus boasted he could kill Medusa, the gorgon," Morro said, smothering a yawn. "With the help of the gods he got a pair of magic sandals which enabled him to fly, and a cap of invisibility. Then he polished his shield to mirror brightness and swooped down on the gorgon, watching her in his mirror-shield. And without ever looking her in the face he cut off her head."

"I see," Holden said. "We have to hunt down this gorgon too, and we can't look at it either, or—" He nodded mean-

ingly at the two brown mounds of earth outside the ship.

"Right," Framer said. "But we don't have a mirror. And we can't build one. What now?"

We racked our brains. Morro wondered if we could somehow polish the ship to the proper brightness, but the scheme was impractical.

"Try radar," Ramirez offered finally.

"That's it!" I whooped "Hunt down the gorgon with radar and blast it without ever looking at the damned thing!"

That was our plan. Medusa's number was up. But I suspected she wouldn't go down without a fight.

HOLDEN had the radar screen dismantled and set up for gorgon-hunting in no time at all. The boy's horizons were limited, maybe, but in the fields for which he had been educated he was tops.

We set out on our gorgon-hunt. It was a warm, summery day.

Wherever we looked, redness greeted our eyes. The trees had red leaves and the grass was

a carpet of red. Bellatrix IV was one huge plain, it seemed, covered with a bloody carpet.

Steeger remained behind on ship, peering intently into the radar screen. The other five of us fanned out slowly. We were well armed. That didn't keep us from feeling terrified. I had visions of myself being borne back to the ship, frozen, to share that impromptu graveyard with Janus and Flaherty.

Steeger had more to worry about than any of us. Hunched over the radar scope, his job was to relay instructions to us. We knew the gorgon was somewhere in the copse, because Framer had seen the great beast go thundering into the clump of trees the day before, and no one had seen it come out. But only a fool would go in there after a creature that could kill with a glance.

Slowly, painfully, the five of us formed a wide circle around the copse, standing no closer than a hundred meters from the edge. Not one of us dared to look up, of course. Our eyes were fixed on the blood-red grass and Steeger directed us to our positions, step by painful step. It took half an hour

to form the circle, as Doc would tell first one, then another of us, to move a couple of steps to right or left.

Finally the circle was complete. Five Perseuses, frightened green.

Then came the toughest part, as we waited for the attack. When the call came over the phones from Steeger, I was going to hurl a Johnson flare into the copse, and, if all went right, the gorgon would come lumbering out. Without looking, we would fire.

It was a pretty harebrained scheme. So many things could have gone wrong that it's a wonder we ever went ahead with it.

Doc gave the signal, and I drew back my arm and flung the flare, automatically looking up as I did. For one horror-stricken second I feared the gorgon might approach just as I looked up. It didn't.

Then all hell broke loose in the copse.

A Johnson flare goes off like a lithium bomb—at least, it's pretty damned bright. That copse lit up bright yellow, and I caught the odd contrast between the red of the leaves and

the yellow of the light. And I saw something huge thrashing around in the heart of the copse before I jerked my head down. I forced myself to stare at the ground.

An awful ten seconds passed, seeming like days. I grew progressively more numb with fear, until I passed the point of fright and became almost fatalistically calm. Nothing happened, though the flare continued to kick up a powerful light. I heard rustling noises in the copse.

And then all at once I heard Steeger's tinny yell in my phones:

"Joel!"

In the same instant I drew with my right hand and flung my left hand behind my neck, forcing my head down. I aimed the blaster up at a 45-degree angle and began sizzling away for all I was worth. I could hear Morro doing the same over to my left.

There was the sound of thunder, as of a great beast pounding the ground near me. I could hear Steeger screaming something in my phones, but I was unable to stop yelling myself. And I didn't dare look up.

For all I knew the gorgon was standing right over me and bending to bite me in two. But I had passed the point of any coherent reasoning. I was still screaming and squeezing the trigger of the burned-out blaster five minutes later, when Morro and Framer came over to me and led me back to the ship.

WE had killed it, then. And I was Perseus.

"We thought we'd never get you up," Morro said.

Steeger said, "I saw that gorgon come out, and I yelled to you. You started waving the blaster around, and Morro came over too. But by the time he reached you, you had blasted Medusa in the neck and pretty near cut that head right off.

Ramirez took up the story. "You were still blasting away without looking, even though the gorgon had fallen on its face. Holden came up and cut its head off, but it's still thrashing its wings out there."

I looked up. The accumulated tension had built up to such a pitch while I was waiting for the thing to come out of its lair

that I felt I had been through a wringer and squeezed flat. I looked around at the men ranging the couch on which I lay.

I saw Morro standing at my feet, and old Steeger looking even older after his remote-control chess-game with the gorgon. And there was Holden, and Ramirez. Four. And I made five. Two dead made seven. It took me another second to realize we were not all together.

"Where's Framer?"

"Out there," Ramirez said. "He's examining the gorgon."

"But you said the wings were still thrashing," I yelled, leaping up. "That means—"

They realized what it meant, too, and we raced through the airlock door together.

We were too late, of course.

We found the biologist bent over the decapitated gorgon, examining the head with interest. He was frozen stiff.

Averting our eyes, we carried Kal back to the ship and buried him next to Flaherty and Janus. More than any of us, Kal had been a scientist, and he hadn't been able to re-

sist trying to solve the puzzle of the gorgon. Whether he had or not we would never know. The gorgon's neural network had been of a low order, low enough to remain functioning for a while after the organism's death.

There had been enough of a charge left in those deadly eyes to give Framer a freezing blast.

I directed operations from the door of the ship. Ramirez and Morro crept up blindfolded and slipped the gorgon's head into a thick plastic canvas bag, and zipped up the top. We sealed it and stuck a "*danger—do not open*" sign on it.

Medusa had cost us three men, but we had beaten her. We loaded her headless corpse into the deep freeze for Earth's scientists to puzzle over. We were glad to see it out of sight. No more monsters, we thought; the expedition would be a breeze from here on out.

Until the next day, when Ramirez found that Sphinx crouching near the ship—

THE END