

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

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THE VENUSIAN

BY IRVING E. COX, JR.

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To survive as a group meant that the Earthmen must adapt; but to survive as a culture—as Earthmen—in the lizzard-civilization of Venus meant that limits must be set upon such adaptation. What limits?

The child saw him as he came out of the Council Building. It ran screaming to its mother.

"Skoon! Skoon!"

The mother carried the child to Curt, holding out her thinly scaled, six-digeted hand in apology.

"Forgive my daughter," she said softly, in the liquid tongue of Venus.

"Of course; I understand," Curt answered in the same tongue

"See Gredda?" the lizzard woman said to her daughter. "This is not a Skoon monster. He is a man, just as we are."

Curt smiled. After seventeen years he was used to it: the horror of the very young children,

who had not seen him before, and the embarrassed apologies of their parents. Even now, when Dale Collins' ultimatum lay on the Council table, the reaction of the Venusians had not changed.

From a purse fastened to his shorts, Curt took a square of compressed Borgan eggs, which stank lusciously of very dead fish. The Venusian child reached eagerly for the confection, her face scales quivering with anticipation.

"As I told you, he is a man. See?" The mother set the child down on the gold-paved street. "You must come and visit our island," she said to Curt. "Bring your family, Friend. When our



children come to know you, they will not be afraid and they will offer you no more of these discourtesies."

Curt thanked her and turned toward his glider, which stood in the parking lagoon behind the Council Building. The boat was a flat of wood, twenty feet long. It was made from a cross-section of an ivy tree, and powered—like all Venusian watercraft—by an enormous, web-footed reptile, the Venusian counterpart of the horse. When the glider had passed beyond the heavy traffic in the city canals, Curt jerked the reins and the chip-like boat skipped across the open water at a speed exceeding eighty miles an hour.

The depression closed upon Curt's mind again. He sprawled flat on the glider, clinging to the safety rope. The mist and warm air beat against his face, but it brought none of the customary feeling of relaxation. After seventeen years, his carefully constructed security was gone—gone because Dale Collins had sent his insolent challenge to the Council.

To himself, Curt admitted that the disaster had been inevitable. It began less than a year after the Earth-expedition had first landed on Venus.

"They're willing to give us an island of our own," Dale Collins

had said to Curt. "We have to take it, Commander Hallen; we'll never escape from Venus."

"We're still exploring, Dale; we've investigated less than half the planet, and even that—"

"I'm satisfied, sir. Gold is the only abundant metal on Venus. Suppose we do eventually find traces of another metal; suppose we are able to make a gold alloy. We're not sure we'll ever develop a metal strong enough to build a shuttle rocket. We're stuck here, sir, until another expedition comes from the Earth."

"Which isn't a remote possibility. As far as they know, Dale, our expedition was lost. You know how Congress kicked at appropriating money for us; they'll never vote funds for a second expedition."

"Not this year or the next, but they'll come some day, sir. The important thing is for us to survive until they find us—or our grandchildren."

"Granted; but we can't survive in isolation!"

"On the contrary, Commander Hallen, we won't survive any other way. If we take your advice and mingle with the Venusians, our children will forget our ways. They'll become Venusians—at least in a cultural sense—in spite of anything we can do to prevent it. They'll lose

identity as human beings, Commander!"

"Survival is adaptation, Dale. Our children have to become Venusians; that's the environment they must live in."

Dale Collins' eyebrows arched as a slow smile spread over his face. "Really, sir? Darwin, I think, had a different explanation."

Friend Ljerdja joined them, putting his clammy, six-fingered hand on Curt's shoulder. Ljerdja was very old, and by virtue of his age honored with the presidency of the Venusian Governing Council.

"You have reached a decision, Friend Hallen?" Ljerdja asked. *Friend* was the only title of address known among the Venusians, and it was used without respect to age or sex.

Curt spoke very slowly in reply. "Friend Ljerdja, we are grateful for your offer, but we prefer—"

"We accept it," Dale Collins put in.

"Friend Collins speaks only for himself."

Ljerdja's fragile arms fluttered with distress. "We had no intention of provoking a disagreement, Friend Hallen! It seemed to the Council that you Earth-people would be happier if you had a separate island of your own, where none of our

children would intrude with their embarrassing cries of 'Skoon.'"

"We understand their fear; we are not offended," Curt answered. "We prefer to make our homes among your people, Ljerdja, in a normal way—if you'll have us."

"And now, Commander," Collins said, "you're speaking only for yourself."

"We can compromise," Ljerdja proposed. "Those of you, like Friend Collins, who want the isolation of an island, shall have it. We will never come to disturb you or to pry into your lives; the land is yours. As for the rest—we welcome you, Friend Hallen, as a man of Venus."

Dale Collins' acceptance of the island split the survivors of the Earth expedition into two camps. There were only twelve, eight men and four women. Perhaps it was that disproportion in the division of the sexes that made the separation inevitable. Responding to the instinctive drive for biological survival, four men had married the four women. The other four men, including Dale Collins, had retreated to the isolated island. As a logical means of finding mates, their withdrawal made no sense to Curt—not for a long time, and then it was too late for him

to prevent the inevitable tragedy.

Curt saw the familiar hills of his home island through the mist. He pulled on the reins, reducing the speed of his skimming glider. The boat slid smoothly up the gold-walled landing trough. Curt unhitched the reptile and turned it into the pasture lagoon before he sloshed through the shallow water to dry land.

He stood, for a moment, looking up at the walls of his home, sprawling at the crest of a low hill. He was a big, bronzed, black-haired man. Though he was approaching fifty, his body was still hard with the smooth-rippling muscle of youth. A trace of white spread through the thick hair at his temples. Except for the tightly woven shorts he wore, Curt was naked and barefoot.

The shorts were a compromise with Venusian custom. Curt's children went naked, as their Venusian neighbors did. The children would always listen obediently when Curt or Alice tried to explain the Earthly folklore of clothing. But they never understood the explanation; and the purpose of dress entirely escaped them.

Curt's second son, Benny, met him as he approached the house. Benny was fourteen, and not yet

fully grown; but already he was as large as his father, tall and broad-shouldered, with a mane of uncut black hair hanging to his shoulders.

"Salute, Friend Father!" Benny's smile was a splash of gleaming teeth. He spoke in singing Venusian. He knew no other language, although Curt and Alice had periodically tried to teach their children English.

"Where's Alice?" Curt asked.

"Mother's on the terrace." Benny's dark eyes sparkled with excitement. "The Raydens came over for the afternoon; we're all playing in the lagoon."

Curt's heart sank. He wanted to talk to his wife, but he would have to put it off now. Under normal conditions, Curt would not have resented a social call from his Venusian neighbors. It symbolized again the fact that Curt and his family were accepted by the Venusians. A ritual of social recreation was the backbone of their culture; their lives were organized for leisure.

Benny bent over the thick-leaved brush that hid the foundation of the house. He began to whistle shrilly. "I just beat Drago Rayden swimming across the lagoon," he told his father. "The first time, too! But Scizzer ran away in the excitement." Benny whistled again, and a black, hooded snake slithered

timidly out of the brush. The boy held out his arm; the snake twisted up to his shoulder, settling its broad, flat head on his collarbone. Benny scolded, "Good, old Scizzer." It was half in anger, as he caressed the flat head with the point of his chin; Scizzer hissed contentedly.

As always, Curt repressed an involuntary shudder. The pet snakes were a Venusian custom he and Alice could not bring themselves to adopt; but the children had taken to it as other Earth children in another world kept cats and dogs.

Curt and his son walked through the house. From the wide door opening on the terrace, Benny sprang across the stones and knifed into the lagoon, Scizzer clinging tight to his arm. Curt saw Alice lounging beside the dark water, the baby in her lap. The matriarch of the Rayden clan sat beside her, chatting cordially. Curt joined the two women.

"Salute, Friend Hallen!" the Venusian woman said. She was a tall lizard, but, like all Venusians, she had a surprisingly human face. She sat with her short, thick tail dangling in the water, and she swished it back and forth as she talked.

"Salute, Friend Rayden," Curt returned. Reluctantly he added the proscribed invitation,

"You and your family will stay for food?"

"You do us a kindness, Friend Hallen."

"I've already said we'll return their call tomorrow, Curt," Alice told him.

Since it was expected of him, Curt plunged into the water and joined in the game. After an hour he withdrew to the bank and lay on the wet terrace stones, watching the others while Alice and the Rayden matriarch set out a meal inside the house.

Nine of Curt's children—four boys and five girls—continued to play tirelessly with the visiting Venusians. Curt's oldest son and daughter were not there; they had already married and set up homes of their own. Benny would take a wife when he reached fifteen, probably Jorgensen's third daughter.

It was a good life, Curt thought. It had lasted for seventeen years. The tiny Earth colony had thrived. Curt had twelve children; the Jorgensens, ten; the Thayers, eleven; and the Brills, eight. There were already six youngsters in the second generation. Eight of the twelve survivors of the Earth expedition had grown into a colony of fifty-five, scattered among the Venusian suburban

islands which surrounded the planetary capital city.

But now Dale Collins' ultimatum threatened the survival of them all. Curt clenched his fists and ground them against the wet stones.

Three years ago Curt had gone to Collins' island bearing what he thought would be good news. Dale Collins, bearded, naked and hollow-eyed, had been derisively unimpressed.

"So you've found a metal?" he sneered.

"Scattered deposits," Curt admitted. "But we're getting it out slowly; in six or seven years we should have enough to make our alloy of gold."

"So soon as that?" Collins' brows arched mockingly. "My, we are making progress!"

"And Phil Thayer has worked out a fuel formula. The goal's in sight, Dale; we'll be able to go home."

"You will, Hallen. We like it here; we're staying."

"We'll need your help, Collins, and I thought—" Curt's voice trailed off and his eyes strayed to the three men standing behind Collins. The four had met Curt at the landing trough on the beach. Scowling and unfriendly, they had made no effort to ask Curt to their cabin. They stood blank-faced, holding fast to their stone-tipped spears.

Only in their eyes did Curt see any spark of expression—a blazing gleam, intense, fanatical, disturbingly inhuman.

"Our expedition," Collins said flatly, "came to conquer Venus and we—"

"No, Dale; to explore it."

"It's all one and the same in the end. Venus belongs to us. We've learned how to survive, Hallen."

Curt turned back to his glider. He saw it, then—a momentary glitter of eyes, a vague shape hidden in the undergrowth. He grasped Collins' arm.

"Dale! There's someone—a woman—"

"Here, on our bachelor island?" Collins' laughter roared out feverishly. "Where would we find a woman, Hallen? There were only four; they stayed with you and Jorgensen and Thayer and Brill."

Curt's boat had skimmed away from the island while their derisive laughter still sang in the warm air. Curt had accepted Collins' explanation because he could do nothing else. But he knew he had stumbled upon the truth. Biologically, a man could mate with a Skoon. The Skoons bore an exact physical resemblance to men, although they were the most vicious jungle beasts on the planet of Venus. The idea that

Collins would mate with a Skoon churned Curt's soul with revulsion and disgust.

Alice came to the door, calling her family and guests to dinner. Curt pushed himself up from the terrace. Dripping and naked, the others came out of the lagoon and trooped after him into the eating hall. It was a long, low room. The floor, walls and ceiling were plated with gold. Close to the ceiling long, transparent tubes glowed an iridescent green, spreading a soft light over the room. Deprived of all metals except gold, Venusian science had advanced primarily in terms of biology. Plants, marine life and native animals were harnessed to Venusian industry. Web-footed reptiles powered their water-gliders; microscopic ocean flora filled the lighting tubes; the tubes themselves were made from the sap of the ivy tree.

In Curt's eating hall was the typical Venusian banquet board, designed to seat as many as fifty. Venusians had large families—as Curt did himself—and they were constantly entertaining.

Curt's family sat on stools. Their guests used the regular, backless, Venusian benches, which had rear-end cubicles where they could rest their tails. Except for Curt and Alice,

everyone at the table had one or more pet snakes twisted around his arm.

The food was typically Venusian—a number of salad-like dishes, several steaming platters of boiled fish, and the irresistible—if odorous—cakes of compressed Borgan eggs.

Before the meal was over Curt heard a glider screech into the island landing trough. He went to the door as Friend Mannak hurried across the black ground toward the house. Mannak was the Einstein of Venusian science, director of the Experimental Institute, Chief Consultant for the Council, and by all odds the most respected Venusian on the planet.

Although Curt earned his living as an Institute lecturer—as did Jorgensen, Thayer and Brill—Curt had not directly contacted Mannak since the early days, when the survivors of the Earth expedition had lived in the Institute. The scientist drew Curt aside into the tiny reading room.

"Salute, Friend Hallen!" Mannak grasped Curt's hand in his six, clammy fingers.

"Salute, Friend Mannak; I am deeply honored—"

"I've neglected your people disgracefully in the past few years." Mannak's aging face scales quivered with apology. "Sometimes I feel that we've

drained you of information, and given nothing in return."

"You've made a home for us, Friend."

"Yes, you're Venusians. Just so." The scientist snorted with a surge of emotion and grasped Curt's hand again. "But someday, of course, you will leave us; unless—unless your alloy of gold—"

"We're mining all the alloy metal we can find, but we still require at least another half-ton."

"May I have a sample of the metal, Friend Hallen? I want to take it back to the Institute. Perhaps some of my researchers might develop a substitute."

"Don't tell me you made a trip out here just for that! I could have brought it to you at any time."

The scientist's hand closed on Curt's arm, and his voice sank to a rasping whisper. "I want you to finish your escape rocket quickly, Friend. It may be necessary for your people to—to get away from Venus."

"I'll show you what we have. The storage shed is outside. We'll need Benny's help."

Curt summoned his son from the eating hall. Benny and the scientist exchanged the prescribed greetings and the three crossed the terrace to the square, gold-walled building

which stood on a wooden scaffolding beside the lagoon. A warm rain was falling. The metal walls were as slick as a glider landing trough. Slowly, with straining shoulder muscles, Benny and Curt boosted the scientist through the round opening in the bottom of the building. Then they pulled themselves in after him.

A bank of lighting tubes kept the room dry and warm. On the floor chunks of a silvery metal glistened beneath a thick, transparent coating. Curt selected a small piece and, with a sharp-pointed stone, he began to chip away the protective covering. With the courteous manners of a Venusian child, Benny kept quietly in the background while his elders talked.

"After we refine the ore," Curt explained, "we store it here. Our chief difficulty is preventing oxidation until we're ready to use it. You remember how rapidly our expedition rocket rusted because of the high oxygen content of the Venusian air. But I think we've worked out an effective system of protection. The room keeps out most of the moisture, and we seal the individual pieces of the metal with a coating of ivy sap."

"You've assembled so little, Friend Hallen!" Mannak ex-

claimed. "And you've worked at it so long!"

"The ore deposits are scattered, and they're deep in the ground. It'll be at least two more years before—"

"You can't wait that long! This morning, Friend Hallen, the Governing Council asked your opinion about the action we should take against Dale Collins and your fellow Earth-men. You said we must destroy them. Why?"

Curt answered woodenly, tonelessly, "Three days ago, Dale Collins invaded the island next to his. His men murdered every Venusian they could lay their hands on. A survivor tells us the island was attacked by fifty men—not four."

"But we know that can't be true; there are only four of them."

"Do we?" Curt laughed bitterly. "You have seen Collins' ultimatum. He says he'll make a treaty with us, if we'll evacuate and surrender twenty of the southern islands to him. Four Earth-men have no use for so much land." Curt drew a deep breath. "The truth, Friend Mannak, is obvious, I think: Collins and his men have mated with the Skoons."

Benny gasped and forgot his manners. "No, father! You must be wrong! A man would

not mate with beasts!"

Curt put his arm around his son's naked shoulder. "Sorry, Benny; no other explanation will hold water."

"But—Skoons!" Benny's body trembled with shock.

"No other explanation," the Venusian scientist agreed dully. "And you gave the logical answer, Friend Hallen; we must destroy them all. You're right, but I've persuaded the Council to veto your proposal."

"Why, in the name of the Great Mist?" Curt demanded. "You can't compromise with—"

"We can gain time. Time for you, Friend Hallen. Eventually we shall have to wipe them out. But you know the great weakness of our people." The Venusian held up his arms. "We have no strength in our arms to hurl weapons against them; and we have no weapon except our snakes. Yes, we can stamp out Dale Collins and his breeder Skoons, but there will be hundreds of casualties. The terrible Skoon-fear will rise high in our minds again. All our accumulation of knowledge and civilization will not counteract it. Our mourning will always remind us that you Earth-men can mate with Skoons. Eventually, for our own safety, we will convince ourselves that we must destroy you, too. It would be foolishness,

of course; but the fear would warp our rational thinking. Before that time comes, Friend Hallen, you must build your rocket and take your people away from Venus."

He fell quiet. There was a long, brittle silence, broken when Benny whispered,

"Skoons! Men have mated with Skoons!"

"Tomorrow," Mannak said heavily, "I will lead a delegation to Dale Collins and propose a treaty."

"May I go?"

"Thank you, Friend. We will need your help, I think. The official Council glider will leave the capital early tomorrow afternoon."

The following day, as Curt left the house, Benny slipped out and joined him. "My older brother is married," Benny said. "I am the first son, now, father. In time of danger, I am expected to be at your side."

Spoken like a true Venusian! Curt's heart swelled with pride in his son.

They went to the capital on the glider. Curt sprawled flat on the deck, clinging to the safety rope; Benny stood, Venusian fashion, in the bow, riding the skimming boat like an aquaplane—tall, proudly naked, his black hair dancing in the wind. When Curt slowed the craft to

negotiate the heavy traffic in the city canals, Benny dropped on the deck beside his father.

"Father," he said thoughtfully, "some day we must fight the Skoons and slay them."

"The Venusians will, Benny."

"That's what I said—we'll have to fight them. Father, wouldn't the metal we're mining make a weapon? Suppose we shaped it into long, flat strips, with sharpened edges and—"

"On the Earth, Benny, we'd call that a sword."

"Sword." Benny played with the unfamiliar word for a moment. "Sword. It would be stronger than the spears of the Skoons."

"But useless, Benny. The Venusians haven't the strength in their arms to use such a weapon."

Benny flexed his muscles. "Are the Skoons stronger than we are, father?"

"Now get that idea out of your head, Benny—and get it out fast. There won't be any fighting. If we use our metal to make swords, it'll rust. We would never be able to build our rocket, then. And right now that comes first. Friend Mannak's right. We can't destroy Dale Collins' Skoon colony without hundreds of Venusian casualties; and, if that happens, we destroy ourselves, too."

"Yes, father."

The official Council glider was waiting in the lagoon behind the Council Building. Friend Mannak and two other Venusians went with Curt and his son on the treaty mission. The long boat, powered by a brace of web-footed reptiles, slid into the landing trough on Collins' island late in the afternoon. Collins met them on the beach and silently conducted them up a steep path to a cliff-top clearing overlooking the sea. A fire blazed up against the darkening clouds.

Collins, apparently, had given up all pretense at secrecy; as they waited, a band of Skoons came stealthily out of the woods and surrounded them. A wave of nausea ate at Curt's viscera; for the mob was talking—and their words were English. They were dressed in crudely made slacks and blouses; woven sandals were on their feet. Their yellow hair was cut and combed. They fairly gleamed with the superficial gloss of humanity.

Benny shrank, trembling, against his father. "Skoons!" he whispered. "And they're wearing body coverings, the way you and mother do. Why, father? Why? Do they think we're Skoons, too?"

Dale Collins listened impatiently to the Venusian delegates as they outlined their treaty.

Suddenly he cut them short and turned to Curt.

"I'm glad you brought me Mannak," he said, speaking in Venusian to make certain that the delegates understood his insolence. "We'll dispose of him, and the rest will—"

"They have the immunity of a diplomatic mission, Collins."

Collins roared with laughter. "A diplomatic mission from— from lizards? Curt, we're men. We don't make treaties with animals."

"Don't lose your head, Collins."

"And you came yourself, Curt; that showed exceptionally good sense. It's nice to be on the winning side, isn't it?" The syrup oozed out of his voice and he barked a command at his men. The Skoons threw ropes around the Venusians, dragging them back against tree trunks at the edge of the clearing. Curt moved to help them, and found himself hemmed in by a ring of spears, the sharp, stone points biting into his chest.

"The lizards we killed on the island made good eating, Curt," Collins said languidly. "The best steaks I've had since I left Chicago. Try it, sometime. This fish diet on Venus gets mighty monotonous after seventeen years."

"You—you ate them!" Benny whispered. He stared in horror

at Collins. After a moment, he doubled over, retching violently. Collins jerked the boy erect. Benny staggered back toward the edge of the cliff. Collins snatched his arm and twisted his face toward the firelight.

"Your son, Curt?"

"Yes."

"New blood; glad you thought of it. I have just the mates for him."

"Skoons?" Benny asked in terror.

"My own daughters. Yes, boy, a whole tribe to choose from."

Benny stared for a moment into Collins' blazing eyes. Then, suddenly, he jerked his arm free and sprang over the cliff into the Venusian sea.

"After him!" Collins cried.

A score of his people scurried down the steep path to the beach. For more than an hour Curt waited, under heavy guard, in the clearing. On the beach below he heard the noise of feet in the brush, the splash of flat-boats in the water, periodic outbursts of profanity. Occasionally well-dressed, slick-haired Skoons stole into the clearing and looked at the captive Venusians. They prodded them with pointed sticks and laughed among themselves.

Eventually Dale Collins returned, wet and sweating.

"For what it's worth, Curt, your kid got away. But it's thirteen miles to the nearest inhabited island. I don't think even a trained swimmer could make it at night. A pity, too. Your son would have made a fine breeder."

Perhaps a man could not have made the swim, Curt thought; but Benny was a Venusian. He was thoroughly at home in the water. Curt was sorry Benny had run away, but the cowardice seemed excusable. Benny had been born on Venus. He had grown up in the Venusian culture; he had absorbed the social heritage of Venusian lore. Benny shared with the Venusians the shattering Skoon-fear.

Curt hoped Benny would tell Jorgensen and Thayer and Brill what had happened. Perhaps, by some miracle, these three men could finish the alloy of gold and get the escape rocket in the air.

Dale Collins ordered the fire built up again as more and more of his men crowded into the clearing. They were all clothed and combed, all chatting pleasantly in English. Curt counted almost a hundred of them; others lurked deep in the forest shadows. They drove thick, wooden stakes into the ground close to the fire. Collins came and stood beside Curt, smiling out upon the activity.

"The work of trying to bring

back your son made my people hungry, Curt."

"Collins, you're a fool! Do you realize that Mannak is the most important scientist—"

"A lizard genius? That's the kind of curiosity a zoo would pay good money to get."

"A zoo? These are men, Collins!"

"Once, Curt, you and I disagreed over the matter of survival. Remember? You were all for this namby-pamby business of adjusting to the environment. I'm a man, not a lizard. I'll make my world over to suit my ways—not myself to conform to it. I've done exactly that, Curt!" His voice rose to a fever scream and he thrust his contorted face close to Curt's. "Only the strong survive. Look at them, Curt. They're our children. Four of us have put man on Venus. Only four of us, and we'll conquer the planet!"

The last of the wooden stakes was secure in the ground. The Skoons untied the Venusians and bound them to the stakes. Curt fought to reach them, but strong arms held him back.

"Do you know how we did it, Curt?"

"Stop it, Collins! Stop it!"

"We stole Skoon women, Curt—two or three at a time, until we had a pack of fifty. They were good breeder stock. And

the children, Curt! They can be educated! They talk English, Curt; they've learned to dress as we do; they think as we do. They've learned our ways. They are men, Curt, and they will rule Venus."

The flames lapped high around the stakes. The Venusians beat futilely at their flaring scales. They screamed in pain.

Curt lashed his fist into Collins' jaw, throwing him back against the ring of spears. Curt sprang through the opening. He bent at a stake, trying to break the ropes that bound Friend Mannak. The Skoons swarmed upon him. A spearhead slashed the skin of his arm. He pulled the weapon from his opponent and used it against the others. Another spear leaped from the darkness. The head buried itself in Curt's leg, just above the kneecap, and the spear shaft broke. Curt staggered and fell. And dragged himself to his feet again. For another minute he held them off before the mob overwhelmed him.

They bound him and rolled him to the side of the clearing, where he lay in the black mud while grime and filth slowly clotted around the spearhead imbedded in his leg. His body throbbed with pain, and his mind with a terrible anguish as he watched the Skoons feast.

upon the Venusians. Four hours it lasted—the eating, the savage dancing, and the orgy that followed.

At last the pain and the loss of blood closed a merciful unconsciousness over Curt's mind. He recovered hours later. The gray clouds glowed with the light of day, and Curt still lay neglected and ignored at the side of the clearing. Above him three charred stakes made a gaunt silhouette against the dull sky.

Curt was immensely thirsty; his body pulsed with fever. The flesh around his wounded knee was swollen and black. He lapsed into unconsciousness again.

Still later he was jerked back to awareness by the shrill screaming of terrified voices. A mob of Skoons fled across the clearing. They ran back again, huddling together at the place where the blackened stakes still stood.

Through the trees Curt saw broad, naked shoulders and arms which wielded crudely contrived swords. He recognized Benny and his other sons; Jorgensen, Trayer and Brill, with their sons at their sides. Behind them, sheltered by the sword-bearers, came the Venusians. They closed the ring upon the Skoons. The slaughter was quick and thorough. Dale Collins' wheedling

plea for mercy was cut short in his throat as he died.

Through the distorting fog of delirium, Curt vaguely recalled the glider trip back to the capital. The Venusians applied an emergency poultice to his wounded leg, but when doctors in the Experimental Institute examined it, their face scales quivered with sorrow. Curt's wound had gone untended too long. They could save him only by amputation.

Days later Curt lay convalescing on the terrace of his home. A mutter of sing-song voices in the entry-way interrupted his placid dozing. Curt was sitting back against the cushions when Alice led out a delegation from the Governing Council. They made a formal speech of presentation, with typical flourishes of Venusian courtesy, before they gave him the plaque.

He read the rolling script, "The First Citizen of Venus Award."

"A symbol of affection from the people of Venus, Friend Hallen," one of the delegates explained. "From your people. We would be honored, Friend, if you would run as candidate to the Council from your island at the next planetary election. Venus needs the vision and

guidance of such citizens as yourself."

For a long time after they had gone, Curt and Alice sat side by side looking at the plaque. The Venusians were really honoring Benny; Curt knew that. It was custom to make the presentation to the parents. Nonetheless, Curt felt a warm infusion of deep pride.

"From your people, Curt," Alice repeated softly. "That's what they said."

"They've accepted us, Alice—all of us."

"I should hope so! Didn't you fight to save them—"

"The battle with the Skoons had nothing to do with it, my dear. We killed Collins and his mob to save ourselves." Curt glanced at the plaque and smiled. "The survival of the strongest. Only the Venusians—"

"We Venusians, Curt," Alice

said gently. "And why not? Venus is our home. It belongs to us. Collins and the Earth-people were trying to take it from us."

Curt lifted himself awkwardly from the lounge, leaning heavily on her shoulder. "Help me down to the lagoon, Alice. I want to see if I can still enjoy a swim."

"A Venusian always will, Curt."

Curt was very weak. After a few minutes, he pulled himself up on the bank where Benny sat playing with his snake. Curt reached out impulsively and stroked Scizzer's head. The snake coiled under Benny's chin, hissing with pleasure.

"You know, Benny," Curt mused. "I've been thinking I ought to get a pet of my own one of these days."

Curt's last ghost of revulsion was gone.
