

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

PLANET stories

Nov.
25¢

THE CONJURER
OF VENUS
by CONAN T. TROY



ENDLESS ROWS OF ALABASTER SHAPES, SITTING ON THEIR CHAIRS OF STONE, LOOKING TOWARD
SHANNACH-THE-LAST A STRANGE-WORLD NOVEL
by LEIGH BRACKETT

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Title: A Planet Named Joe

Author: S. A. Lombino

Release Date: November 27, 2020 [EBook #63890]

Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A PLANET NAMED
JOE ***

Produced by Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan and the Online
Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

A PLANET NAMED JOE

By S. A. LOMBINO

There were more Joes on Venus than you could shake a ray-gun at. Perhaps there was method in Colonel Walsh's madness—murder-madness—when he ordered Major Polk to scan the planet for a guy named Joe.

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from Planet Stories November 1952. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

Colonel Walsh had a great sense of humor. I hated his guts ever since we went through the Academy together, but he had a great sense of humor.

For example, he could have chosen a Second Looie for the job on Venus. He might even have picked a Captain. But he liked me about as much as I liked him, and so he decided the job was just right for a Major. At least, that's what he told me.

I stood at attention before his desk in the Patrol Station. We were somewhere in Area Two on Earth, takeoff point for any operations in Space II. The duty was fine, and I liked it a lot. Come to think of it, the most I ever did was inspect a few defective tubes every now and then. The rest was gravy, and Colonel Walsh wasn't going to let me get by with gravy.

"It will be a simple assignment, Major," he said to me, peering over his fingers. He held them up in front of him like a cathedral.

"Yes, sir," I said.

"It will involve finding one man, a Venusian native."

I wanted to say, "Then why the hell don't you send a green kid on the job? Why me?" Instead, I nodded and watched him playing with his fingers.

"The man is a trader of sorts. Rather intelligent." He paused, then added, "For a native, that is."

I had never liked Walsh's attitude toward natives. I hadn't liked the way he'd treated the natives on Mars ever since he'd taken over there. Which brought to mind an important point.

"I always figured Venus was under the jurisdiction of Space III, sir. I thought our activities were confined to Mars."

He folded his fingers like a deck of cards and dropped them on his desk as if he were waiting for me to cut.

"Mmmm," he said, "yes, that's true. But this is a special job. It so happens this Venusian is the one man who can help us understand just what's happening on Mars."

I tried to picture a Venusian understanding Mars and I didn't get very far.

"He's had many dealings with the natives there," Walsh explained. "If anyone can tell us the reasons for the revolt, he can."

If Walsh really wanted to know the reasons for the revolt, I could give them to him in one word: Walsh. I had to laugh at the way he called it "revolt." It had been going on for six months now and we'd lost at least a thousand men from Space II. Revolt.

"And this man is on Venus now?" I asked for confirmation. I'd never been to Venus, being in Space II ever since I'd left the Moon run. It was just like Walsh to ship me off to a strange place.

"Yes, Major," he said. "This man is on Venus."

At the Academy he had called me Fred. That was before I'd reported him for sleeping on Boiler Watch. He'd goofed off on a pile of uranium that could've, and almost did, blow the barracks sky-high that night. He still thought it was my fault, as if I'd done the wrong thing by reporting him. And now, through the fouled-up machinery that exists in any military organization, he outranked me.

"And the man's name, sir?"

"Joe." A tight smile played on his face.

"Joe what?" I asked

"Just Joe."

"Just Joe?"

"Yes," Walsh said. "A native, you know. They rarely go in for more than first names. But then, it should be simple to find a man with a name like Joe. Among the natives, I mean."

"I don't know, sir."

"A relatively simple assignment," Walsh said.

"Can you tell me anything else about this man? Physical appearance? Personal habits? Anything?"

Walsh seemed to consider this for a moment. "Well, physically he's like any of the other Venusians, so I can't give you much help there. He does have a peculiar habit, though."

"What's that?"

"He has an affinity for Terran cigarettes."

I sighed. "Well, it's not very much to go on."

"You'll find him," Walsh said, grinning. "I'm sure of it."

The trip to Venus came off without a hitch. I did a lot of thinking on that trip. I thought about Mars and the revolt there. And I thought about Colonel Leonard Walsh and how he was supposed to be quelling that revolt. Ever since Walsh had taken command, ever since he'd started pushing the natives around, there'd been trouble. It was almost as if the whole damned planet had blown up in our faces the moment he took over. Swell guy, Walsh.

Venus was hotter than I'd expected it to be. Much too hot for the tunic I was wearing. It smelled, too. A funny smell I couldn't place. Like a mixture of old shoe and after-shave. There were plants everywhere I looked. Big plants and small ones, some blooming with flowers I'd never seen before, and some as bare as cactus.

as cactus.

I recognized a blue figure as one of the natives the pilot had told me about. He was tall, looking almost human except that everything about him was elongated. His features, his muscles, everything seemed to have been stretched like a rubber band. I kept expecting him to pop back to normal. Instead, he flashed a double row of brilliant teeth at me.

I wondered if he spoke English. "Hey, boy," I called.

He ambled over with long-legged strides that closed the distance between us in seconds.

"Call me Joe," he said.

I dropped my bags and stared at him. Maybe this *was* going to be a simple assignment after all. "I sure am glad to see you, Joe," I said.

"Same here, Toots," he answered.

"The guys back in Space II are searching high and low for you," I told him.

"You've got the wrong number," he said, and I was a little surprised at his use of Terran idiom.

"You are Joe, aren't you? Joe the trader?"

"I'm Joe, all right," he said. "Only thing I ever traded, though, was a pocketknife. Got a set of keys for it."

"Oh," I said, my voice conveying my disappointment. I sighed and began wondering just how I should go about contacting the Joe I was looking for. My orders said I was to report to Captain Bransten immediately upon arrival. I figured the hell with Captain Bransten. I outranked him anyway, and there wasn't much he could do if I decided to stop for a drink first.

"Where's the Officer's Club?" I asked the Venusian.

"Are you buying information or are you just curious?"

"Can you take me there?" I asked.

"Sure thing, Toots." He picked up my bags and started walking up a heavily overgrown path. We'd probably walked for about ten minutes when he dropped my bags and said, "There it is."

The Officer's Club was a plasteel hut with window shields that protected it from the heat of the sun. It didn't look too comfortable but I really wanted that drink. I reached into my tunic and slipped the native thirty solars.

He stared at the credits curiously and then shrugged his shoulders. "Oh well, you're new here. We'll let it go."

He took off then, while I stared after him, wondering just what he'd meant. Had I tipped him too little?

I shrugged and looked over at the Officer's Club. From the outside it looked as hot as hell.

On the inside it was about two degrees short of that mark. I began to curse Walsh for taking me away from my nice soft job in Space II.

There wasn't much inside the club. A few tables and chairs, a dart game and a bar. Behind the bar a tall Venusian lounged.

I walked over and asked, "What are you serving, pal?"

"Call me Joe," he answered.

He caught me off balance. "What?"

"Joe," he said again.

A faint glimmer of understanding began to penetrate my thick skull. "You wouldn't happen to be Joe the trader? The guy who knows all about Mars, would you?"

"I never left home," he said simply. "What are you drinking?"

That rat! That dirty, filthy, stinking, unprincipled....

But then, it should be simple to find a man with a name like Joe. Among the

natives, I mean.

Sure. Oh sure. Real simple. Walsh was about the lowest, most contemptible....

"What are you drinking, pal?" the Venusian asked again.

"Skip it," I said. "How do I get to the captain's shack?"

"Follow your nose, pal. Can't miss it."

I started to pick up my bag as another Venusian entered. He waved at the bartender.

"Hello, Joe," he said. "How's it going?"

"Not so hot, Joe," the bartender replied.

I listened in fascination. Joe, Joe, Joe. So this was Walsh's idea of a great gag. Very funny. Very....

"You Major Polk, sweetheart?" the Venusian who'd just come in asked.

"Yes," I said, still thinking of Colonel Walsh.

"You better get your butt over to the captain's shack," he said. "He's about ready to post you as overdue."

"Sure," I said wearily. "Will you take my bags, please?"

"Roger," he answered. He picked up the bags and nodded at the bar.

"So long, Joe," he said to the bartender.

"See you, Joe," the bartender called back.

Captain Bransten was a mousey, unimpressive sort of man. He was wearing a tropical tunic, but he still resembled a wilted lily more than he did an officer.

"Have a seat, Major," he offered. He reached for a cigarette box on the desk and extended it to me. He coughed in embarrassment when he saw it was empty.

Quickly he crossed the button on his desk and the desk disappeared again. A tall blue

Quickly, he pressed a button on his desk and the door popped open. A tall, blue Venusian stepped lithely into the room.

"Sir?" the Venusian asked.

"We're out of cigarettes, Joe," the Captain said. "Will you get us some, please?"

"Sure thing," the Venusian answered. He smiled broadly and closed the door behind him.

Another Joe, I thought. Another damned Joe.

"They steal them," Captain Bransten said abruptly.

"Steal what?" I asked.

"Cigarettes. I sometimes think the cigarette is one of the few things they like about Terran culture."

So Walsh had taken care of that angle too. *He does have a peculiar habit, though. He has an affinity for Terran cigarettes.* Cigarettes was the tip I should have given; not solars.

"All right," I said, "suppose we start at the beginning."

Captain Bransten opened his eyes wide. "Sir?" he asked.

"What's with all this Joe business? It may be a very original name but I think its popularity here is a little outstanding."

Captain Bransten began to chuckle softly. I personally didn't think it was so funny. I tossed him my withering Superior Officer's gaze and waited for his explanation.

"I hadn't realized this was your first time on Venus," he said.

"Is there a local hero named Joe?" I asked.

"No, no, nothing like that," he assured me. "It's a simple culture, you know. Not nearly as developed as Mars."

"I can see that," I said bitingly.

I can see that," I said bluntly.

"And the natives are only now becoming acquainted with Terran culture. Lots of enlisted men, you know."

I began to get the idea. And I began to appreciate Walsh's doubtful ancestry more keenly.

"It's impossible to tell exactly where it all started, of course," Bransten was saying.

I was beginning to get angry. Very angry. I was thinking of Walsh sitting back in a nice cozy foam chair back on Earth.

"Get to the point, Captain!" I barked.

"Easy, sir," Bransten said, turning pale. I could see that the Captain wasn't used to entertaining Majors. "The enlisted men. You know how they are. They'll ask a native to do something and they'll call him Joe. 'Hey, Joe, give me a hand with this.' Or 'Listen, Joe, how'd you like to earn some cigarettes?' Do you follow?"

"I follow, all right," I said bitterly.

"Well," Bransten went on, "that sort of thing mushrooms. The natives are a simple, almost childish people. It appealed to them—the Joe business, I mean. Now they're all Joe. They like it. That and the cigarettes."

He cleared his throat and looked at me apologetically as if he were personally responsible for Venusian culture. In fact, he looked as if he were responsible for having put Venus in the heavens in the first place.

"Do you understand, Major? Just a case of extended idiom, that's all."

Just a case of extended *idiot*, I thought. An idiot on a wild goose chase a hell of a long way from home.

"I understand perfectly," I snapped. "Where are my quarters?"

Bransten asked a Venusian named Joe to show me my quarters, reminding me that chow was at thirteen hundred. As I was leaving, the first Venusian came back with the cigarettes Bransten had ordered.

I could tell by the look on his face that he probably had half a carton stuffed into his pockets. I shrugged and went to change into a tropical tunic.

I called Earth right after chow. The Captain assured me that this sort of thing was definitely against regulations, but he submitted when I twinkled my little gold leaf under his nose.

Walsh's face appeared on the screen. He was smiling, looking like a fat pussy cat.

"What is it, Major?" he asked.

"This man Joe," I said. "Can you give me any more on him?"

Walsh's grin grew wider. "Why, Major," he said, "you're not having any difficulties, are you?"

"None at all," I snapped back. "I just thought I'd be able to find him a lot sooner if...."

"Take your time, Major," Walsh beamed. "There's no rush at all."

"I thought...."

"I'm sure you can do the job," Walsh cut in. "I wouldn't have sent you otherwise."

Hell, I was through kidding around. "Look...."

"He's somewhere in the jungle, you know," Walsh said.

I wanted to ram my fist into the screen, right smack up against those big white teeth. Instead, I cut off the transmission and watched the surprised look on his face as his screen went blank millions of miles away.

He blinked at the screen, trying to realize I'd deliberately hung up on him.

"Polk!" he shouted, "can you hear me?"

I smiled, saw the twisted hatred on his features, and then the screen on my end went blank, too.

He's somewhere in the jungle, you know.

I thanked Captain Bransten for his hospitality and went back to my quarters.

As I saw it, there were two courses for me to follow.

One: I could say the hell with Walsh and Venus. That would mean hopping the next ship back to Earth.

It would also mean disobeying the direct order of a superior officer. It might mean demotion, and it might mean getting bounced out of the Service altogether.

Two: I could assume there really was a guy name Joe somewhere in that jungle, a Joe separate and apart from the other Joes on this planet, a trader Joe who knew the Martians well. I could always admit failure, of course, and return empty handed. Mission not accomplished. Or, I might really find a guy who was trader Joe.

I made my decision quickly. I wanted to stay in the Service, and besides Walsh may have been on the level for the first time in his life. Maybe there was a Joe here who could help us on Mars. If there was I'd try to find him. It was still a hell of a trick though.

I cursed Walsh again and pushed the buzzer near my bed.

A tall Venusian stepped into the room.

"Joe?" I asked, just to be sure.

"Who else, boss?" he answered.

"I'm trying to locate someone," I said. "I'll need a guide to take me into the jungle. Can you get me one?"

"It'll cost you, boss," the Venusian said.

"How much?"

"Two cartons of cigarettes at least."

"Who's the guide?" I asked.

"How's the price sound?"

"Fine, fine," I said impatiently. And the Captain had said they were almost a childish people!

"His name is Joe," the Venusian told me. "Best damn guide on the planet. Take you anywhere you want to go, do anything you want to do. Courageous. Doesn't know the meaning of fear. I've known him to...."

"Skip it," I said, cutting the promotion short. "Tell him to show up around fifteen hundred with a complete list of what we'll need."

The Venusian started to leave.

"And Joe," I said, stopping him at the door, "I hope you're not overlooking your commission on the deal."

His face broke into a wide grin. "No danger of that, boss," he said.

When he was gone I began figuring out a plan of action. Obviously, I'd just have to traipse through the jungle looking for a guy named Joe on a planet where everyone was named Joe. Everybody, at least, but the Captain, the small garrison attached to the Station, and me.

I began wondering why Walsh had gone to so much trouble to get rid of me. The job, as I saw it, would take a hell of a long time. It seemed like a silly thing to do, just to get even with a guy for something that had happened years ago. He surely must have realized that I'd be back again, sooner or later. Maybe he had another little junket all set for me.

Or maybe he didn't expect me to come back.

The thought hadn't occurred to me before this, and I began to consider it seriously. Walsh was no good, rotten clear through. He was failing at the job of keeping Mars in hand, and he probably realized that a few more mistakes on his part would mean the end of his career with Space II. I chuckled as I thought of him isolated in some God-forsaken place like Space V or Space VII. This probably bothered him a lot, too. But what probably bothered him more was the fact that I was next in command. If he were transferred, I'd be in charge of Space II, and I could understand how much that would appeal to Walsh.

it, and I could understand how much that would appeal to Walsh.

I tried to figure the thing out sensibly, tried to weigh his good points against his bad. But it all came back to the same thing. A guy who would deliberately go to sleep on Boiler Watch with a ton of uranium ready to blast a barracks to smithereens if it wasn't watched, would deliberately do just about anything.

Sending me off on a wild goose chase after a character named Joe may have been a gag. But it may have been something a little grimmer than a gag, and I made up my mind to be extremely careful from here on in.

The guide arrived at fifteen hundred on the dot. He was tall, elongated, looked almost like all the other Venusians I'd seen so far.

"I understand you need a Grade A guide, sir," he said.

"Are you familiar with the jungle?" I asked him.

"Born and raised there, sir. Know it like the back of my hand."

"Has Joe told you what the payment will be?"

"Yes, sir. A carton and a half of cigarettes."

I thought about Joe deducting his commission and smiled.

"When can we leave?"

"Right away, sir. We won't need much really. I've made a list of supplies and I can get them in less than an hour. I suggest you wear light clothing, boots, and a hat."

"Will I need a weapon?"

He looked at me, his eyes faintly amused. "Why, what for, sir?"

"Never mind," I said. "What's your name, by the way?"

He lifted his eyebrows, and his eyes widened in his narrow face. He was definitely surprised.

"Joe " he said "Didn't you know?"

Joe, he said. Didn't you know.

When we'd been out for a while I discovered why Joe had suggested the boots and the hat. The undergrowth was often sharp and jagged and it would have sliced my legs to ribbons were they not protected by the high boots. The hat kept the strong sun off my head.

Joe was an excellent guide and a pleasant companion. He seemed to be enjoying a great romp, seemed to love the jungle and take a secret pleasure in the work he was doing. There were times when I couldn't see three feet ahead of me. He'd stand stock still for a few minutes, his head barely moving, his eyes darting from one plant to another. Then he'd say, "This way," and take off into what looked like more impenetrable jungle invariably to find a little path leading directly to another village.

Each village was the same. The natives would come running out of their huts, tall and blue, shouting, "Cigarettes, Joe? Cigarettes?" It took me a while to realize they were addressing me and not my guide.

Everybody was Joe. It was one beautiful, happy, joyous round of stinking, hot jungle. And I wasn't getting any nearer my man. Nor had I any idea how I was supposed to find him. I began to feel pretty low about the whole affair.

Joe, on the other hand, enjoyed every moment of the trip. In each village he greeted the natives cheerfully, told them stories, swapped gossip and jokes. And when it was time to leave, he would say goodbye to all his friends and we would plunge into the twisted foliage again.

His spirits were always high and he never failed to say the right thing that would give a momentary lift to my own depressed state of mind. He would talk for hours on end as we hacked our way through the jungle.

"I like Venus," he said once. "I would never leave it."

"Have you ever been to Earth?" I asked.

"No," Joe replied. "I like Terrans too, you understand. They are good for Venus. And they are fun."

"Fun?" I asked, thinking of a particular species of Terran: species Leonard

Walsh.

"Yes, yes," he said wholeheartedly. "They joke and they laugh and ... well, you know."

"I suppose so," I admitted.

Joe smiled secretly, and we pushed on. I began to find, more and more, that I had started to talk freely to Joe. In the beginning he had been just my guide. There had been the strained relationship of employer and employee. But as the days lengthened into weeks, the formal atmosphere began to crumble. I found myself telling him all about Earth, about the people there, about my decision to attend the Academy, the rigid tests, the grind, even the Moon run. Joe was a good listener, nodding sympathetically, finding experiences in his own life to parallel my own.

And as our relationship progressed from a casual one to a definitely friendly one, Joe seemed more enthusiastic than ever to keep up our grinding pace to find what we were looking for.

Once we stopped in a clearing to rest. Joe lounged on the matted greenery, his long body stretched out in front of him, the knife gleaming in his belt. I'd seen him slash his way through thick, tangled vines with that knife, his long, muscular arms powerfully slicing through them like strips of silk.

"How far are we from the Station?" I asked.

"Three or four Earth weeks," he replied.

I sighed wearily. "Where do we go from here?"

"There are more villages," he said.

"We'll never find him."

"Possibly," Joe mused, the smile creeping over his face again.

"A wild goose chase. A fool's errand."

"We'd better get started," Joe said simply.

I got to my feet and we started the march again. Joe was still fresh, a brilliant contrast to me, weary and dejected. Somehow, I had the same feeling I'd had a long time ago on my sixteenth birthday. One of my friends had taken me all over the city, finally dropping me off at my own house where the whole gang was gathered for a surprise party. Joe reminded me of that friend.

"There's a village ahead," he said, and the grin on his face was large now, his eyes shining.

Something was missing here. Natives. There were no natives rushing out to greet us. No cries of "Cigarettes? Cigarettes?" I caught up with Joe.

"What's the story?" I whispered.

He shrugged knowingly and continued walking.

And then I saw the ship, nose pointing into space, catching the rays of the sun like a great silver bullet.

"What...?" I started.

"It's all right," Joe said, smiling.

The ship looked vaguely familiar. I noticed the crest of Space II near the nose, and a lot of things became clear then. I also saw Walsh standing near one of the huts, a stun gun in his hand.

"Hello, Major," he called, almost cheerfully. The gun didn't look cheerful, though. It was pointed at my head.

"Fancy meeting you here, Colonel," I said, trying to match his joviality. Somehow it didn't quite come off.

Joe was walking beside me, waving at the colonel, beaming all over with happiness.

"I see you found your man," Walsh said.

I turned rapidly. Joe nodded and kept grinning, a grin that told me he was getting a big kick out of all this. Like a kid playing a game.

I faced Walsh again. "Okay, what's it all about, pal?"

"Colonel," Walsh corrected me. "You mustn't forget to say Colonel, *Major*." He emphasized my rank, and he said it with a sort of ruthless finality.

I waited. I could see he was just busting to tell me how clever he'd been. Besides, there wasn't much I could do but wait. Not with Walsh pointing the stun gun at my middle.

"We've come a long way since the Academy, haven't we, Major?"

"If you mean in miles," I said, looking around at the plants, "we sure have."

Walsh grinned a little. "Always the wit," he said drily. And then the smile faded from his lips and his eyes took on a hard lustre. "I'm going to kill you, you know." He said it as if he were saying, "I think it'll rain tomorrow."

Joe almost clapped his hands together with glee. He was really enjoying this. Another of those funny Terran games.

"You gave me a powerful handicap to overcome," Walsh said. "I suppose I should thank you, really."

"You're welcome," I said.

"It wasn't easy living down the disgrace you caused me."

"It was your own damn fault," I said. "You knew what you were doing when you decided to cork off."

Beside me, Joe chuckled a little, enjoying the game immensely.

"You didn't have to report me," Walsh said.

"No? Maybe I should have forgotten all about it? Maybe I should have nudged you and served you orange juice? So you could do it again sometime and maybe blow up the whole damn Academy!"

Walsh was silent for a long time. When he spoke his voice was barely audible. The heat was oppressive, as if it were concentrated on this little spot in the

jungle, focusing all its penetration on a small, unimportant drama.

I could hear Joe breathing beside me.

"I'm on my way out," Walsh rasped. "Finished, do you understand?"

"Good," I said. And I meant it.

"This Mars thing. A terrible fix. Terrible."

Beside me, a slight frown crossed Joe's face. Apparently he couldn't understand the seriousness of our voices. What had happened to the game, the fun?

"You brought the Mars business on yourself," I told Walsh. "There was never any trouble before you took command."

"The natives," he practically shouted. "They ... they...."

Joe caught his breath sharply, and I wondered what Walsh was going to say about the natives. Apparently he'd realized that Joe was a native. Or maybe Joe's knife had something to do with it.

"What about the natives?" I asked.

"Nothing," Walsh said. "Nothing." He was silent for a while.

"A man of my calibre," he said then, his face grim. "Dealing with savages." He caught himself again and threw a hasty glance at Joe. The perplexed frown had grown heavier on Joe's face. He looked at the colonel in puzzlement.

Walsh turned from Joe and raised the stun gun. I wondered if he had yet realized that Joe was one of a million Joes scattered all over this planet, that Joe was all the natives on Venus. That Joe was all the natives everywhere throughout the galaxy. I looked at Walsh's eyes. He was a sick man, alone with his thoughts in the middle of a stinking jungle.

"I'm on my way out, Major," he said, "but you won't get a chance to succeed where I've failed. No. Oh no. I'll see to that."

"And you had to come all the way to Venus to do it?"

"Don't joke," Walsh snapped. "Don't joke, Major. It's not funny. It's not funny at all."

"It's pretty sad, I'd say."

"You can't afford to say anything," Walsh remarked drily. "You're going to be dead in a very few minutes."

Joe's eyes widened, and I saw indecision cross his features as he tried to understand what had happened to the game.

"What'll they say back on Earth when they hear about this?" I asked.

"When will they hear about it? Four, five months from now? By then, my little trip will have been forgotten. Besides, I'm here on a routine check. Everyone knows that."

"A routine check on Venus? Mars is your territory."

"One of my men is up here," Walsh said. "That gives me temporary jurisdiction. At least enough to visit the planet and see how conditions are. Anyway, I'll be home long before Joe here carries your body in."

Joe shook his head imperceptibly but Walsh didn't catch it.

"A casualty in the jungle," Walsh continued. "The native will return to the Station and explain the accident. I'll be back on Earth long before he reaches there."

"Sure," I said, "nice and simple. You kill me and Joe delivers the news and takes the rap. Good old sucker Joe."

"That's about enough out of you," Walsh said.

"Go ahead, Colonel," I shouted. "Pull the trigger. Then run off and leave Joe to...."

"I said that's enough out of you!" Walsh shouted.

I turned to face Joe. His mouth was drawn across his face in a tight emotionless line. He stepped in front of me and stared at Walsh.

"Get out of the way," Walsh commanded.

Joe shook his head slowly. "This is not what you told me. A friend, you said. A surprise. You said you wanted to...."

"Get out of the way, you damned sav...."

With one swift movement Joe leaped forward. The knife gleamed in his hand and there was momentary panic on Walsh's face.

The stun gun snapped up. It crackled once in the Venusian jungle, its blast blinding me for a moment. It shuddered through Joe's left arm and paralyzed it momentarily.

But the hand with the knife was hacking away at Walsh's throat, the blood dripping down over the silver planet on the collar of his tunic.



I made my report to Bransten.

I told him the body of Colonel Leonard Walsh had been discovered in the jungle. He was barely alive when he'd been found. I'd administered aid but his knife wounds had proved to be fatal. He died shortly after I found him.

"Awful," the captain said, "awful."

I nodded sympathetically.

"Did he say anything? Did he give you any idea? I mean, did he say who did it?"

"Yes," I said. "He told me who murdered him."

We were standing near the platform of my ship, waiting for them to prepare for blastoff.

"Well who, Major?" he asked. "Who did he say did it?"

"Joe," I explained. "A native named Joe."

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