

THE WARLORD OF SATURN'S MOONS

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Here I am, a silver-haired maiden lady of thirty-five, a feeder of stray cats, a window-ledge gardener, well on my way to the African violet and antimacassar stage. I can see myself at fifty, fat and a little crazy, making cucumber sandwiches for tea, and I view my future with mixed feelings. Whatever became of my childhood ambitions: joining the space patrol; winning a gold medal at the Olympics; climbing Mount Everest alone in my bathing suit, sustained only by my indomitable will and strange psychic arts learned from Hindu mystics? The saddest words of tongue or pen are something-or-other what might have been, I think. I light up a cigar and settle down to write another chapter of *The Warlord of Saturn's Moons*. A filthy habit you say, though I'm not sure if you're referring to smoking cigars or writing science fiction. True, I reply, but both activities are pleasurable, and we maiden ladies lead lives that are notoriously short on pleasure.

So back I go to the domes of Titan and my redheaded heroine deathraying down the warlord's minions. Ah, the smell of burning flesh, the spectacle of blackened bodies collapsing. Even on paper it gets a lot of hostility out of you, so that your nights aren't troubled by dreams of murder. Terribly unrestful, those midnight slaughters and waking shaking in the darkness, your hands still feeling pressure from grabbing the victim or fighting off the murderer.

Another escape! In a power-sledge, my heroine races across Titan's methane snow, and I go and make myself tea. There's a paper on the kitchen table, waiting to tell me all about yesterday's arsons, rapes and bloody murders. Quickly I stuff it into the garbage pail. Outside, the sky is hazy. Another high-pollution day, I think. I can see incinerator smoke rising from the apartment building across the street, which means there's no air alert yet. Unless, of course, they're breaking the law over there. I fling open a cabinet and survey the array of teas. Earl Grey? I ponder, or Assam? Gunpowder? Jasmine? Gen Mai Cha? Or possibly an herb tea: sassafras, mint, Irish moss or mu. Deciding on Assam, I put water on,

then go back to write an exciting chase through the icy Titanian mountains. A pursuer's sledge goes over a precipice and, as my heroine hears his long shriek on her radio, my tea kettle starts shrieking. I hurry into the kitchen. Now I go through the tea-making ceremony: pouring boiling water into the pot, sloshing the water around and pouring it out, measuring the tea in, pouring more boiling water on top of the tea. All the while my mind is with my heroine, smiling grimly as she pilots the power-sledge between bare cliffs. Above her in the dark sky is the huge crescent of Saturn, a shining white line slashing across it—the famous Rings. While the tea steeps, I wipe off a counter and wash a couple of mugs. I resist a sudden impulse to pull the newspaper out from among the used tea leaves and orange peelings. I already know what's in it. The Detroit murder count will exceed 1,000 again this year; the war in Thailand is going strong; most of Europe is out on strike. I'm far better off on Titan with my heroine, who is better able to deal with her problems than I am to deal with mine. A deadly shot, she has also learned strange psychic arts from Hindu mystics, which give her great strength, endurance, mental alertness and a naturally pleasant body odor. I wipe my hands and look at them, noticing the bitten fingernails, the torn cuticles. My heroine's long, slender, strong hands have two-inch nails filed to a point and covered with a plastic paint that makes them virtually unbreakable. When necessary, she uses them as claws. Her cuticles, of course, are in perfect condition.

I pour myself a cup of tea and return to the story.

Now my heroine is heading for the mountain hideout where her partner waits: a tall, thin, dour fellow with one shining steel prosthetic hand. She doesn't know his name and she suspects he himself may have forgotten it. He insists on being called 409, his number on the prison asteroid from which he has escaped. She drives as quickly as she dares, thinking of his long face, burned almost black by years of strong radiation on Mars and in space, so the white webbing of scars on its right side shows up clearly. His eyes are grey, so pale they seem almost colorless. As I write about 409, I find myself stirred by the same passion that stirs my heroine. I begin to feel uneasy, so I stop and drink some tea. I can see I'm going to have trouble with 409. It's never wise to get too involved with one's characters. Besides, I'm not his type. I imagine the way he'd look at me, indifference evident on his dark, scarred face. I could, of course, kill him off. My heroine would then spend the rest of the story avenging him, though she'd never get to the real murderer—me. But this solution, while popular among writers, is unfair.

I go into the kitchen, extract a carrot from a bunch in the icebox, clean it and eat it. After that, I write the heroine's reunion with 409. Neither of them is demonstrative. They greet each other with apparent indifference and retire to bed. I skip the next scene. How can I watch that red-headed hussy in bed with the man I'm beginning to love? I continue the story at the moment when their alarm bell rings, and they awake to find the warlord's rocket planes have landed all around their hideout. A desperate situation! 409 suggests that he make a run for it in their rocket plane. While the warlord's minions pursue him, my heroine can sneak away in the power-sledge. The plan has little chance of success, but they can think of none better. They bid farewell to one another, and my heroine goes to wait in the sledge for the signal telling her 409 has taken off. As she waits, smoking a cigar, she thinks of what little she knows about 409. He was a fighter pilot in the war against the Martian colony and was shot down and captured. While in prison something happened to him that he either can't remember or refuses to talk about, and, when the war ended and he was released, he became a criminal. As for herself, she had been an ordinary sharpshooter and student of Hindu mysticism, a follower of Swami Bluestone of the Brooklyn Vedic Temple and Rifle Range. Then she discovered by accident the warlord's plot to overthrow the government of Titan, the only one of Saturn's satellites not under his control. With her information about the plot, the government may still be saved. She has to get to Titan City with the microfilm dot!

The alarm bell rings, and she feels the ground shake as 409's plane takes off. Unfortunately I'm writing the story from my heroine's point of view. I want to describe 409 blasting off, the warlord's rocket planes taking off after him, chasing him as he flies through the narrow, twisting valleys, the planes' rockets flaring red in the valley shadows and missiles exploding into yellow fireballs. All through this, of course, 409's scarred face remains tranquil and his hands move quickly and surely over the plane's controls. His steel prosthetic hand gleams in the dim light from the dials. But I can't put this in the story, since my heroine sees none of it as she slides off in the opposite direction, down a narrow trail hidden by overhanging cliffs.

I am beginning to feel tense, I don't know why. Possibly 409's dilemma is disturbing me. He's certainly in danger. In any case, my tea is cold. I turn on the radio, hoping for some relaxing rock music and go to get more tea. But it's twenty to the hour, time for the news, and I get the weekend body count: two men found dead in suspected westside dope house, naked body of woman dragged out of Detroit River. I hurry back and switch to a country music station. On it, someone's singing about how he intends to

leave the big city and go back down south. As I go back into the kitchen, I think:

Carry me back to Titan.
That's where I want to be.
I want to repose
On the methane snows
At the edge of a frozen sea.

I pour out the old tea and refill the cup with tea that's hot.

The radio begins to make that awful beepity-beep-beepity sound that warns you the news is coming up. I switch back to the rock station, where the news is now over. I'm safe for another fifty-five minutes, unless there's a special news flash to announce a five-car pile-up or an especially ghastly murder.

The plan works! For my heroine, at least. She doesn't know yet if 409 got away. She speeds off un-pursued. The power-sledge's heating system doesn't quite keep her warm, and the landscape around her is forbidding: bare cliffs and narrow valleys full of methane snow, overhead the dark blue sky. Saturn has set, and the tiny sun is rising, though she can't see it yet. On the high mountains the ice fields begin to glitter with its light. On she races, remembering how she met 409 in the slums of The Cup on Ganymede, as she fled the warlord's assassins. She remembers being cornered with no hope of escape. Then behind the two assassins a tall figure appeared and the shining steel hand smashed down on the back of one assassin's head. As the other assassin turned, he got the hand across his face. A moment or two more, and both the assassins were on the ground, unconscious. Then she saw 409's twisted grin for the first time and his colorless eyes appraising her.

There I go, I think, getting all heated up over 409. The radio is beginning to bother me, so I shut it off and re-light my cigar. I find myself wishing that men like 409 really existed. Increasingly in recent years, I've found real men boring. Is it possible, as some scientists argue, that the Y chromosome produces an inferior human being? There certainly seem to be far fewer interesting men than interesting women. But theories arguing that one kind of human being is naturally inferior make me anxious. I feel my throat muscles tightening and the familiar tense, numb feeling spreading across my face and my upper back. Quickly I return to my story.

Now out on the snowy plain, my heroine can see the transparent domes of Titan City ahead of her, shining in the pale sunlight. Inside the domes the famous pastel towers rise, their windows reflecting the sun. Her power-sledge speeds down the road, through the drifts that half cover it. Snow sprays up on either side of the sledge, so my heroine has trouble seeing to the left and right. As a result, it's some time before she sees the power-sledges coming up behind her on the right. At the same moment that she looks over and sees them, their sleek silver bodies shining in the sunlight and snow-sprays shooting up around them, her radio begins to go beep-beep-beep. She flicks it on. The voice of Janos Black, the warlord's chief agent on Titan, harsh and slurred by a thick Martian accent, tells her the bad news: 409's plane has been shot down. He ejected before it crashed. Even now the warlord's men are going after the ejection capsule, which is high on a cliff, wedged between a rock spire and the cliff wall. Janos offers her a trade: 409 for the microdot. But Janos may well be lying; 409 may have gotten away or else been blown up: She feels a sudden constriction of her throat at the thought of 409 dead. She flicks off the radio and pushes the power-sledge up to top speed. She realizes as she does so that 409 is unlikely to fare well if Janos gets ahold of him. Janos' wife and children died of thirst after the great Martian network of pipelines was blown apart by Earther bombs, and Janos knows that 409 was a pilot in the Earther expeditionary force.

I write another exciting chase, this one across the snowy plain toward the pink, green, blue and yellow towers of Titan City. The warlord's power-sledges are gaining. Their rockets hit all around my heroine's sledge, and fire and black smoke erupt out of the snow. Swearing in a low monotone, she swings the sledge back and forth in a zig-zag evasive pattern.

I stop to puff on my cigar and discover it's gone out again. My tea is cold. But the story's beginning at last to interest me. I keep on writing.

As my heroine approaches the entrance to Titan City, she's still a short distance ahead of her pursuers. Her radio beeps. It's Janos Black again. He tells her his men have gotten to the ejection capsule and are lowering it down the cliff. Any minute now, they'll have it down where they can open it and get 409 out.

Ignoring Janos, she concentrates on slowing her sledge and bringing it through the city's outer gate into the airlock. A moment or two later, she's safe. But what about 409?

Frankly, I don't know. I stand and stretch, decide to take a bath, and go to turn the water on. The air pollution must be worse than I originally

thought. I have the dopey feeling I get on the days when the pollution is really bad. I look out the window. Dark grey smoke is still coming out of the chimneys across the street. Maybe I should call the Air Control number (dial AIR-CARE) and complain. But it takes a peculiar kind of person to keep on being public-spirited after it becomes obvious it's futile. I decide to put off calling Air Control and water my plants instead. Every bit of oxygen helps, I think. I check the bathtub—it's not yet half-full—and go back to writing. After a couple of transitional paragraphs, my heroine finds herself in the antechamber to the Titan Council's meeting room. There is a man there, standing with his back to her. He's tall and slender, and his long hair is a shade between blond and grey. He turns and she recognizes the pale, delicate-looking face. This is Michael Stelladoro, the warlord of Saturn's moons. His eyes, she notices, are as blue as cornflowers and he has a delightful smile. He congratulates her on escaping his power-sledges, then tells her that his men have gotten 409 out of the ejection capsule. He is still alive and as far as they can determine uninjured. They have given 409 a shot of Sophamine. At this my heroine gasps with horror. Sophamine, she knows, is an extremely powerful tranquilizer used to control schizophrenia. One dose is enough to make most people dependent on it, and withdrawal takes the form of a nightmarish psychotic fugue. The warlord smiles his delightful smile and turns on the radio he has clipped to his belt. A moment later my heroine hears 409's voice telling her that he has in fact been captured. He sounds calm and completely uninterested in his situation. That, she knows, is the Sophamine. It hasn't affected his perception of reality. He knows where he is and what is likely to happen to him, but he simply doesn't care. When the Sophamine wears off, all the suppressed emotions will well up, so intense that the only way he'll be able to deal with them will be to go insane, temporarily at least.

The warlord tells her he regrets having to use the Sophamine, but he was certain that 409 would refuse to talk unless he was either drugged or tortured, and there simply wasn't enough time to torture him.

"You fiend!" my heroine cries.

The warlord smiles again, as delightfully as before, and says if she gives the microdot to the Titan Council, he will turn 409 over to Janos Black, who will attempt to avenge on him all the atrocities committed by the Earthers on Mars.

What can she do? As she wonders, the door to the meeting room opens, and she is asked to come in. For a moment, she thinks of asking the Titanians to arrest the warlord. Almost as if he's read her mind, he tells

her there's no point in asking the Titanians to arrest him. He has diplomatic immunity and a warfleet waiting for him to return.

She turns to go into the meeting room. "I'll tell Janos the good news," the warlord says softly and turns his radio on.

She hesitates, then thinks, a man this evil must be stopped, no matter what the cost. She goes into the meeting room.

I remember the bath water, leap up and run into the bathroom. The tub is brim-full and about to overflow. I turn off the tap, let out some of the water, and start to undress. After I climb into the tub, I wonder how I'm going to get 409 out of the mess he's in. Something will occur to me. I grab the bar of soap floating past my right knee.

After bathing, I put on a pink and silver muumuu and make a fresh pot of tea. Cleanliness is next to godliness, I think as I sit down to write.

My heroine tells her story to the Titan Council and produces the microdot. On it is the warlord's plan for taking over the government of Titan and a list of all the Titanian officials he has subverted. The president of the council thanks her kindly and tells her that they already have a copy of the microdot, obtained for them by an agent of theirs who has infiltrated the warlord's organization. "Oh no! Oh no!" my heroine cries. Startled, the president asks her what's wrong. She explains that she has sacrificed her partner, her love to bring them the information they already had. "Rest easy," the president says. "Our agent is none other than Janos Black. He won't harm 409."

Thinking of Janos' family dying of thirst in an isolated settlement, my heroine feels none too sure of this. But there's nothing left for her to do except hope.

After that, I describe her waiting in Titan City for news of 409, wandering restlessly through the famous gardens, barely noticing the beds of Martian sandflowers, the blossoming magnolia trees, the pools of enormous silver carp. Since the warlord now knows that the Titan Council knows about his schemes, the council moves quickly to arrest the officials he's subverted. The newscasts are full of scandalous revelations, and the warlord leaves Titan for his home base on Tethys, another one of Saturn's moons. My heroine pays no attention to the newscasts or to the excited conversations going on all around her. She thinks of the trip she and 409 made from Ganymede to Titan in a stolen moon-hopper, remembering 409's hands on the ship's controls, the way he moved in zero-G, his colorless eyes and his infrequent, twisted smile. Cornball, I think, but leave the passage in. I enjoy thinking about 409 as much as my heroine does.

After two days, Janos Black arrives in a police plane. 409 is with him. Janos comes to see my heroine to bring her the news of their arrival. He's a tall man with a broad chest and spindly arms and legs. His face is ruddy and Slavic, and his hair is prematurely white. He tells her that he kept 409 prisoner in the warlord's secret headquarters in the Titanian mountains till the Titanian police moved in and arrested everybody.

"Then he's all right," she cries joyfully.

Janos shakes his head.

"Why not?"

"The Sophamine," Janos explains. "When it wore off, he got hit with the full force of all his repressed feelings, especially, I think, the feelings he had about the war on Mars. Think of all that anger and terror and horror and guilt flooding into his conscious mind. He tried to kill himself. We stopped him, and he almost killed a couple of us in the process. By we I mean myself and the warlord's men; this happened before the police moved in. We had to give him another shot of Sophamine. He's still full of the stuff. From what I've heard, the doctors want to keep giving it to him. They think the first shot of Sophamine he got destroyed his old system of dealing with his more dangerous emotions, which are now overwhelming him. The doctors say on Sophamine he can function more or less normally. Off it, they think he'll be permanently insane."

"You planned this!" she cries.

Janos shakes his head. "The warlord gave the order, miss. I only obeyed it. But I didn't mind this time. I didn't mind."

I stop to drink some tea. Then I write the final scene in the chapter: my heroine's meeting with 409. He's waiting for her in a room at the Titan City Hospital. The room is dark. He sits by the window looking out at the tall towers blazing with light and at the dome above them, which reflects the towers' light so it's impossible to look through it at the sky. She can see his dark shape and the red tip of the cigar he smokes.

"Do you mind if I turn on the lights?" she asks.

"No."

She finds the button and presses it. The ceiling begins to glow. She looks at 409. He lounges in his chair, his feet up on a table. She realizes it's the first time she's seen him look really relaxed. Before this, he's always seemed tense, even when asleep.

"How are you?" she asks.

“Fine.” His voice sounds tranquil and indifferent.

She can't think of anything to say. He looks at her, his dark, scarred face expressionless. Finally he says, “Don't let it bother you. I feel fine.” He pauses. She still can't think of anything to say. He continues. “The pigs don't want me for anything here on Titan. I think I'll be able to stay.”

“What're you going to do here?”

“Work, I guess. The doctors say I can hold down a job if I keep taking Sophamine.” He draws on the cigar, so the tip glows red, then blows out the smoke. He's looking away from her at the towers outside the window. She begins weeping. He looks back at her. “I'm all right. Believe me, I feel fine.”

But she can't stop weeping.

Enough for today, I think and put down my pencil. Tomorrow, I'll figure out a way to get 409 off Sophamine. Where there's life there's hope and so forth, I tell myself.

The End