

# BLYMUT ELEVEN (green eyes)

BY KURT NEWELL

**T**addeus Jordan was the former ship's agronomist of the Centaur 3, third of four ships to leave Earth for permanent colonization in the far reaches of the Milky Way. He was now the captain, first mate, custodian, mail clerk and cold storage orderly. In fact, he was the only surviving member of the ship's party. If the Nurs managed to kill him, the Centaur 3 would become a forgotten chapter in spacing history. No word would filter back to Earth from Blymut Eleven and no expedition would look for them. He was a link to nothing.

At least, his death would probably be painless, Tad surmised. The Nur used a blaster type weapon whose ray was instantly lethal to the Earthling body type. They seemed to have no interest in taking prisoners. None of the Centaur 3 party was missing, they were all quietly dead, turning to compost in the fecund Blymut Eleven soil.

They'd landed on the eleventh planet of the Blymuth System because they'd had to. A meteor shower had wrecked the communication system and crippled the gyro compass. This was the nearest landfall with a supposedly breathable atmosphere.

The scanty information available had mentioned nothing about Nurs, nor that they lived in ice caves on the planet's extensive polar regions. It had been a month after the colony began clearing the land that a delegation of the white-suited figures first appeared. They were waiting outside the circle of log cabins at dawn one morning. As the mist cleared, they walked into the compound bearing gifts of beaded handiwork and dried fish.

The first meetings with the Nur had been perfectly placid. Kaitlin and Jubba, the ship's linguists, had begun work on a language translator. The work had been difficult. Kaitlin had talked about it during the brief hours she and Tad spent together each night. The Nurian syntax was based on no known form. Still, they were making slight progress. Then without warning the attacks began.

Kaitlin had been his wife for six years. He missed her bitterly when he allowed the feeling to surface. Three nights ago, at the start of the attack, they had released each other from the binding vows. In the event that one survived without the other, he or she could take another mate. Tad survived. He was a free man now. Just what he never wanted to be.

I could stay in the ship for the rest of my life. Batten down the hatches. I doubt if the Nurs could break in. Forty years, maybe fifty. Live on freeze-dried food, even do an extended hydroponic

garden to amuse myself. Keep a journal. Too bad Capt. Mansfield hadn't had the foresight to keep everyone on the ship, instead of being in such a stupid rush to start building the cabins. Also too damned bad I'm not on the ship already, instead of hiding like a rabbit here in the forest. A mosquito buzzed around Tad's ear. He waited until it settled on his neck, then slapped it. Slow mosquito, he thought, looking at the insect's remains on his hands. Very similar to the ordinary Culicidae, but with a longer proboscis.

From the edge of the forest he could see the Centaur 3 gleaming silver in the afternoon sun. Three Nurs stood guard at the open rear gangplank. The other hatches seemed to be closed. The Nur were completely swaddled in the white snow suits they always wore. How they stood the heat wrapped up like that, he didn't know. Even their faces were covered. He'd never seen a Nurian face. None of the party had except Capt. Mansfield, Kaitlin and Jubba when they went to the ice city to parley with the king. Kaitlin had told him they were certainly humanoid, even reasonably good looking by Earth standards, but that their odor was overpowering. It was cold in the ice palace, bathing wouldn't be too comfortable.

The fact that they were humanoid, and their language had no established root, made a good case for human life forms originating from a system other than Sol.

A pang of loss welled powerfully in him, then slowly regressed. He'd had everything he ever wanted, except the son which they had promised to work on as soon as the colony was secure. Now he had nothing at all except his life. How much was his life worth? Could he join Kaitlin in the hereafter if he left immediately? Some people said that was possible. Some said there was no afterlife. Same old argument. Nobody knew the answer. The prime question and only one irrevocable way to find out.

Tad had been a member of the second counter attack that Capt. Mansfield had sent out. They'd driven the Nurs back from the log cabin settlement for a time, but their superior numbers and familiarity with the terrain had prevailed. Tad had fallen back to regroup with the survivors. He'd been looking for them since midnight last night. His last hope had been the ship. If there were people inside, they weren't fighting. He took that to mean that there was no one.

He held the laser rifle which he'd recharged with a new powerpac at the cabin site. He'd also picked up several carbide grenades and a supply of dried rations. The question now was whether

to try and recapture the ship or not. He was too far away to pick off the guards. To get closer meant crawling across the barren crater that had been created when the Centaur 3 landed. That seemed like a reasonably sure way to rejoin Kaitlin, since the Nurs were deadly accurate with their poison guns. Maybe that was a good idea. What did he owe his life, anyway? Was there any possible reason he'd been left alone on this stupid planet? Some little part he had to play in the cosmic scheme? Well, if so, he wouldn't be killed when he tried to retake the space ship.

Under cover of darkness, Tad crept toward the ship. He'd taken an anti-fatigue pill after making his plan. Sleeping was a poor idea in his current situation, he'd decided. He'd eaten another before starting his crawl. Ten years ago, Tad had been part of a research team which discovered the rejuvenating powers of the Venusian pandella plant. He was slightly proud of his part in the project. The pill left no jarring side effects and produced an operational high that was good for eight hours. After about three days, sleep was needed or the body started breaking down. That would be one of his first priorities if he took the ship. A long, healing sleep.

He inched his way to the lip of the crater. The guards had made a smoky fire of green wood and sat huddled around it. Three of them. How many were inside? Surely at least three more. They didn't seem worried about being attacked. Their weapons lay beside them on the ground and they were silhouetted perfectly by the firelight.

"I'll get these three and then time will tell, he thought. The ground was melted smooth by the retro rockets. His knees and elbows hurt like fire after he'd crawled fifty yards, but he kept on, creeping like a land crab. Crawling is grueling work, he decided, feeling the sweat running into his eyes. Life and death situations make it a little more possible. He grinned at the absurdity of his observation. The scientific mind wouldn't stop compiling data even at the brink of death.

He wormed up behind a jumbled pile of sandbags, one of Capt. Mansfield's defensive emplacements. The bodies of two Centauri soldiers sprawled stiffly beside a D-type flame gun. Another weapon at his disposal, but not a very practical one. As an agronomist he had never taken large weapon training. He could picture himself burning the ship down with this thing, but it was nice to know it was here if he needed it. Sometime in the future he could familiarize himself with all these toys.

He discarded the idea of lobbing a grenade at the fireside group. The noise would alert any Nurs inside.

Quietly, he eased his laser rifle over the sandbag bunker. Sighting on the farthest Nurian, he wondered if the man had a family, then squeezed the trigger. The white form crumpled. He shot the second man in the chest and zeroed in on the third, who was scrambling for his weapon. Tad's first blast hit the guard's arm, spinning him toward the fire. The second caught him below the left shoulder blade and pitched him face-first into the embers. There had been no outcry that Tad had heard. Not very effective guards to let themselves be taken by a farmer.

Tad approached the ship cautiously. The rear portal was open and unguarded. He slipped inside. The generator was still humming, the corridor lights were on full power. Either the Nur didn't know how to turn it off or they wanted it on. Either way was fine. Tad pushed a button and the space-tight door slid into place. The flick of another button locked it. No further disturbance from outside. He would go through the ship, keeping this door as a safe point at his back. If he was overwhelmed, he would die, otherwise he would clear the ship.

He still felt no real fatigue. His left knee hurt a little, probably bruised it on a pebble. What he needed was to get to the main scanner. That would open the ship to him. The bottom level was mostly storage and a few sleeping compartments for soldiers and maintenance people. He checked each room as he came to it. All empty. Some signs of minor looting, but no Nur.

At the far end of the corridor was the main food storage warehouse. Sprawled in the doorway were two uniformed soldiers and a technician named Miles Farrentino, a micro biologist. Very dead. Inside the warehouse was a scanner terminal. He flipped the switch beside the screen. The ship's operation room came into sharp focus. Two snow-suited Nurs were fooling with the console board on the left wall. If there were two, there had to be more, but this scanner only connected with the main unit.

Taddeus Jordan stepped back into the corridor. He had never enjoyed hunting, never even the concept of it. He liked to grow things. Growing wasn't killing. Life had played a trick on him. He decided against taking the elevator up because of the noise. The ship's ladder also had its danger since he could hardly fire the rifle and climb at the same time, but he had to reach the upper level.

Rounding a corner, he surprised a Nurian coming from a sleeping compartment. Tad threw the laser rifle to his shoulder and fired point blank. The Nurian doubled up, his rifle clattered to

the floor. A babble of excited voices came from the room. So much for secrecy. Tad jerked the pin on a carbide grenade. A plume of white smoke followed the grenade's arc into the room. Nurian screams mingled with the explosion, then silence. Fire licked into the hallway. No good burning the old crate down. Self-defeating. The fire died out, but the unwelcome stench of burned flesh permeated the corridor.

He ran back to the food warehouse and activated the scanner. No one was in the operations room. Great. They were up there, he was down here. He could wait them out. They'd have to come down sometime. What if he captured one?

Of course. He'd capture a Nur. He'd try to take one alive. Dead they were no good to him. But alive it would be like Robinson Crusoe and Friday. Eventually he could learn the language, maybe even make a friend. The Nurs he'd seen upstairs were probably non-combatant anyway. Scientists looking the ship over. The Nur had sophisticated weapons, so naturally they had scientists of some sort. Maybe there were no more soldiers on board. With luck and enough time maybe he could find a way to fit into their culture. Maybe that was his mission.

They wouldn't be graceful about being taken prisoner. That was too much to expect. He pushed the elevator button. When the door opened, he flipped the lock switch. Now they would have to come down the ladder.

There was a spot of trouble, however. They could stay upstairs for days, and he would have to sleep sometime soon. He could feel the telltale signs of bone weariness coming over him. They wouldn't want to come down the ladder after the explosion anymore than he wanted to go up it. He'd have to force their hand. Futility passed over him in a tidal wave. Disregard it, he thought. It's the pill wearing off. A plan formed itself. A silly one, but maybe worth a try.

Tad propped his fallen comrades into semi life-like sitting postures behind him and switched the scanner back on, making sure the speaker channel was open. He knew his image was on one of the large screens at the communication console. I suppose I look ferocious with this beard stubble, but they already think we're dangerous enough to wipe out.

"Give up," he said into the microphone. "Calling all Nurs. Throw down your weapons. We do not want to kill you." What a joke, he laughed to himself. They can't understand me, but maybe they'll respond to the screen.

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