

The Big Show on Titan

by Richard Elam

The space freighter had landed on Titan, the largest moon in all the Solar System. The Shannon twins had been anxious to reach this moon of Saturn because their father had told them that something very exciting might happen here before they left.

There was still another reason why the children had looked forward to the landing. They would meet a boy of their own age who was the son of a worker. He had been living on Titan for the past two years and would be able to show them around.

Steve and Sue came down the outside “gangway” of the cargo ship and stepped onto the frozen ground of the distant world. The twins wore space suits, of course, for the air outside was extremely cold and it was poisonous as well with raw methane and ammonia.

Steve saw beautiful Saturn, with its colored rings, filling much of the blue sky. Titan was a world of close mountains, worn smooth by lots of windy weather. A film of glistening ice covered the peaks like caps of glass.

“Look up there, Sue!” Steve said. “Over our heads! That’s the famous skyport of Titan!”

“I wish we could go up there!” Sue said.

“Maybe we’ll get the chance,” answered Steve.

Ahead of them stood a rounded plastic dome. Men were carrying into it cartons of supplies which the space freighter had brought. The twins’ father, who was an official of the American Space Supply Company, was still aboard to take care of the unloading.

A boy came out of the domed building. “Are you the Shannons?” he asked over his space radio.

“Yes, we are,” Steve replied.

“I’m Bobby King.”

Sue and Steve said they were glad to meet him. He asked if they would like to go up and see the skyport.

Both the young Shannons answered a quick, “Sure!” together.

They followed their new friend into the plastic dome. Bobby King pointed to an overhead cable. Hanging from the heavy cord was a cable car.

“All aboard!” Bobby called, like a train conductor.

Sue and Steve giggled with pleasure as they entered the car, followed by Bobby. Bobby pushed a switch and the cable car began to move.

“We’re going up like a corkscrew,” Bobby said.

Round and round, right out of the top of the building, moved the cable car. Up and up it went. It took about ten minutes to reach the top. As soon as they got out, two men passed them who were talking about a storm that was on the way.

“Boy, if there’s a storm coming, you two are sure in luck!” Bobby told Sue and Steve.

Steve and Sue looked at one another, puzzled. Why should their young friend be pleased over a coming storm?

They saw before them a space that looked as flat as a highway and larger than a football field. There was a row of hangars along the far side.

“Wow, we sure must be high!” Steve burst out. They seemed to be almost on a level with the mountains.

“We’re a whole mile off the ground,” Bobby told him. “The skyport rests on the corners of two mountain ridges.”

They went over to one of the clear plastic walls that edged the skyport.

“Gee, the freighter sure is little down there!” Sue said.

It almost took Steve’s breath away. The big space ship indeed looked no larger than a toy down below.

“Why did they go to such trouble to build this?” Steve asked.

“Because there wasn’t any place flat enough on the ground,” Bobby answered. “My father says they need a main skyport on Titan because there are so many companies here digging for uranium. The colonists fly here to get their supplies and mail.”

“I see some dark clouds over the mountains,” Sue said. “Does that mean a storm is coming?”

Bobby’s helmet nodded. “It sure does! You two are the luckiest ones! You got here right at the start of the storm season.”

Steve and Sue were still puzzled as to why Bobby wanted it to storm.

Bobby showed his guests a faint star burning through the blue atmosphere. “That’s Earth,” he told them, “750 million miles away. My father thinks we can go back for a visit in a few weeks. I’ll be glad.”

“Where do you live here, Bobby?” Sue asked.

“My father and I stay in an apartment a little way from here,” Bobby answered.

“How about school?” Steve wanted to know. “Do they have one on Titan?”

Bobby shook his head. “My father teaches me. He’s out with some prospectors today.”

Bobby showed them Titan’s other nine sister moons, which looked like glowing fireballs. Steve saw that most of the daylight came from Saturn because the sun was so far away. It wasn’t nearly as bright here as it was on Earth.

“I wish we could run over to Saturn for a visit,” Sue said, jokingly.

“You don’t really, Sue,” Bobby told her. “You couldn’t stand up in its heavy gravity. Saturn’s almost as big as Jupiter, you know.”

“What are Saturn’s rings made of?” Steve asked.

“Oodles and oodles of rocks,” Bobby replied. “They are traveling so fast that they make the rings look like one solid piece.”

Wind was beginning to howl around them and this seemed to make Bobby very excited.

The coming storm must be something special, Steve thought. His curiosity had been aroused strongly.

The clouds gathered darker and more thickly behind the mountains. The wind was driving harder.

“Hadn’t we better go inside?” Sue asked, worriedly.

“Shucks, no!” Bobby said. “It won’t be any fun unless we’re right out in it! There won’t be any rain. It’s too cold on Titan for rain.”

Suddenly the three heard a loud siren wail.

“That means a jet plane is coming in,” Bobby said. “All planes have to land when word of a storm gets around.”

The plane’s wheels touched down and the ship rolled along until a hook on it caught a line that stretched across the runway. The line brought the plane to a sharp halt.

The jet’s wings were folded down and the ship was pushed off to a hangar. Two more ships landed afterward. Then a blinding flash lighted up the sky. It made Steve and Sue blink and jump in fright.

“Look!” Bobby exclaimed. “The storm has begun!”

Other men had come out to see what was going to happen and they lined up along the edges of the skyport with the children.

Bobby pointed to a sparkling balloon of light that burst into a blossom of sparks over the

mountains. A moment later a red dagger flash skipped across the peaks. During all this there were loud crashes and rumblings. Steve was scared and thrilled at the same time.

“It’s just like fireworks!” Sue called out.

Now Steve could understand why Bobby had looked forward to the storm. He guessed, too, that this was the exciting surprise their father had said might happen while they were here.

An orange pinwheel, like a Fourth of July sparkler, rose from a mountain top and looped upward. It grew bigger and bigger and fainter and fainter at the same time. It was really a beauty.

“What causes the fireworks?” Steve asked above the noise.

“Partly strong wind,” Bobby said loudly, “and partly Titan’s gases exploding against the mountain tops!”

They watched spellbound for fifteen minutes, then a half hour. The Shannons were sure they had never seen anything quite so breathtaking as this.

At one time a row of peaks seemed to glow with a sheet of red flame. The flame danced and flickered like a forest fire for a long time before it faded out.

The children had been enjoying themselves so thoroughly that they knew nothing of the peril that was heading their way.

The first warning came when one of the skyport men standing nearby shouted over his space suit radio. Steve whirled in alarm. His heart seemed to stop beating completely for a terrible moment.

A tardy plane had come in for a landing on the sky platform. But the howling wind had kept everyone from hearing the warning siren.

Because of the fierce blowing, the plane had not hooked firmly to the braking line. It scooted off to the side and was heading for the very spot where Bobby, Steve and Sue stood.

“Bobby!” Steve cried. “Get out of the way!” As Bobby ducked for safety, Steve also moved quickly. Sue screamed as Bobby grabbed her hastily by her space glove. He had to jerk her sharply in order to get her out of the path of the runaway plane.

The plane crashed into the plastic wall of the skyport, tearing out a section of wall as though it were thin cardboard. The ship was left dangling on the very edge as if ready to fall a mile to the ground.

“The poor pilot!” Sue cried. “Oh, I can’t look!”

But the skyport men had come running quickly over and together they pulled the jet plane back to safety. They helped the scared pilot out. He walked shakily off into one of the hangars.

“Whew! That was close!” Steve breathed. “For him and us, too!”

“My heart is still thumping like a drum!” Bobby said.

As for Sue, she was too upset to say anything at all.

They turned to look at the fireworks to take their minds off the accident. The wonderful ending of the show almost made them forget it completely.

They saw a dazzling white light burst like an empty volcano. The banner of fire rose as high into the sky as huge Saturn. Then it spilled over like a great fountain. It changed into purple, then blue, green and red.

Before dying out, it gave the big planet a lovely ruddy glow, showing up its rings like a gleaming necklace of rubies. That was the end of Nature’s grand performance.

“Wow, wasn’t that terrific?” Steve asked. “A show like that in a grandstand on Earth would cost you three-and-a-half.”

“Maybe four!” Sue chimed in.

“You can’t see this show anywhere on Earth, Steve,” Bobby said. “Titan is the only place. And the good thing about it is that it’s all for free!”

Source:

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