

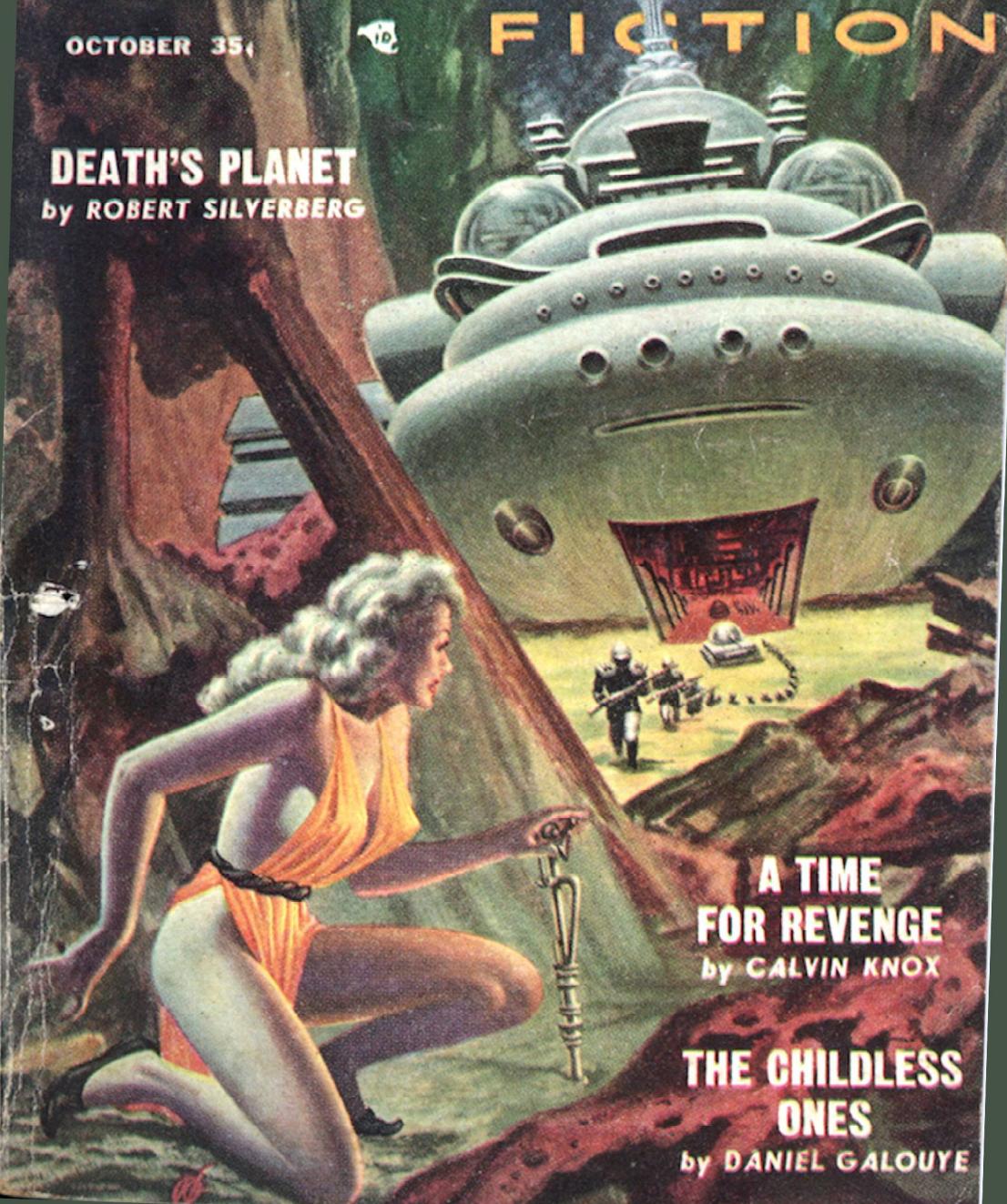
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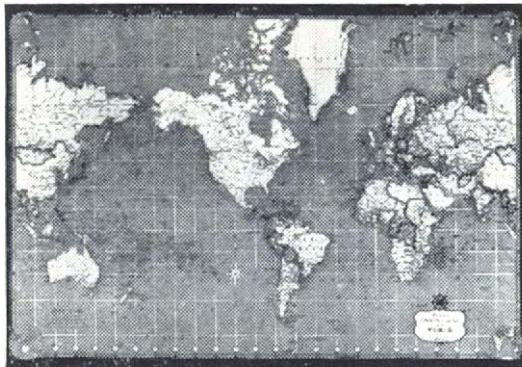


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**THE CHILDLESS
ONES**
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W. W. Scott — Editor

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A TIME FOR REVENGE

by CALVIN M. KNOX

illustrated by EMSH

The Vordillans were alien beings, human but alien. They thought in different categories, and a Terran had to respect this vital difference in their life

FENTON didn't have much to go by when he landed on Vordil IX, but he thought it would be enough to find the alien who had killed his brother. The Vordillans, like any aliens, looked pretty much alike to a Terran—angle-bodied lemon-colored leathery men with dark black fur collars sprouting round their throats—but Fenton had a few stray scraps of description, of differentiation, to cling to.

The Terran liner angled down out of the skies and left Fenton at the spaceport, half a mile out of the main settlement. Immediately three bright-yellow Vordillans came scuttling toward him, and

asked with their clicking accents if they could carry his baggage into town.

Almost automatically he looked them over, looking for the pale grey forehead-stripe and the reddening of the collar that marked the one who had killed Jamie. But these were ordinary Vordillans. He picked the least ugly and handed over his bags; the other two melted into the crowd.

The baggage-boy hailed a two-passenger cab that took them to town. "Staying long?" he asked Fenton.

"As long as I need to." Broodingly, Fenton stared out at the alien scene, at the blue-black carpet of grass and the



needle-thin trees on both sides of the road. "I'm on vacation. Spending a couple of months touring the galaxy."

"You will enjoy Vordil IX, sir."

Jamie took his vacation here, Fenton thought. *And one of these little clowns killed him.*

As they rode into town, Fenton tried to remember the last time he had seen his younger brother. Jamie had been big, topping Fenton's six-two by at least two inches, and there had been something warm and smiling about him that the older brother had never had.

And now Jamie was dead. But a friend of Jamie's had sent word to Fenton, who had been living on Aquillon VII, and Fenton was here to even the score for Jamie.

The cab rumbled into a hot little town of square little buildings strung out in endless rows. "Do you have a hotel reservation, sir?" the baggage-boy asked.

Fenton told him the name of the hotel; the boy repeated it to the driver in Vordillan, clicking it out. The cab veered sharply to the left. They jounced down a rutted road

and stopped before a building somewhat more imposing than the rest. Its gray sides seemed to be made of slabs of mud. Hanging over the entrance was a gaudy sign:

GRAND VORDIL HOTEL

— Terrans Welcomed —

The baggage-boy flipped open the side of the cab—the whole thing lifted away, like the top of a trapdoor spider's home—and dragged Fenton's baggage out into the street. Fenton handed the driver an octagonal Vordillan coin, received three tiny slivers of metal in change, and followed the baggage-boy into the hotel.

A chubby Terran stood just within, wearing seersuckers and sweating heavily. He grinned as Fenton entered.

"You Fenton?"

"That's right. McGill?"

The fat man nodded. "Glad to see you got here. I was wondering whether you'd bother to come."

"He was my brother," Fenton said quietly.

A Vordillan came bustling up to him, jingling keys. "I am the proprietor," he said. "You

are Mr. Fenton? Come—I shall show you your room."

Fenton glanced at McGill. "Why don't you come along with us? I'd like to talk to you."

THE room was small and very square; a filter-stat kept the dusty Vordillan air circulating, but otherwise there was no real air conditioning. *A hell of a planet*, Fenton thought. *A hell of a place for a man to die.*

McGill was sitting on the edge of the bed, sweating. Fenton said, "You were the last to see my brother alive, weren't you?"

"That's so. Jamie stayed at this hotel; we were very friendly." Perspiration oozed down McGill's flabby cheeks. "I saw him just before he was —killed. The alien came and got him in the hotel bar. They left together. Only the alien came back."

"What happened to the body?"

"The aliens buried it in the forest. The Terran Consul made some inquiries and found that out. Got a drink, Fenton? I'm parched."

Fenton buzzed the lobby and had them send up a bowl of Vordillan wine and two glasses. He doled the greasy stuff out to McGill, poured himself a drink, and said, "You're sure about the one who killed Jamie?"

"Positive. Grey stripe across his forehead, and that black ruff of his was on the red side. There's no doubt about it. He admitted it himself."

"What? Isn't there any legal system on this planet?"

"Yes," McGill said smoothly. "Your brother was a victim of it."

Fenton let it sink in. "What the hell does that mean?" he asked the fat man finally.

McGill finished his drink before replying. "Your brother did something that made his life forfeit among the Vordillans. He was...executed. Local law doesn't recognize it as a murder."

"And the life of an Earthman—"

"—is worthless," McGill said. "Don't believe what you read in the travel guides. Your Terran citizenship isn't worth a damn, once you run out of dollars."

"Did Jamie?"

"Jamie was doing a lot of drinking, toward the end." A retrospective smile lit McGill's face. "He was a generous boy, was Jamie. He didn't have much money left."

Suddenly Fenton felt disgusted by McGill's presence; the fat man was interplanetary flotsam, a drifter who had come to the end of his drift here on this hot, dusty little planet, who had seen a good touch in Jamie and so had befriended him. Fenton stood up and said, "I'll have to start unpacking now. Would you excuse me?"

"Of course. I'll be in the bar any time you want me."

Fenton nodded. "All right. And if that alien with the red collar shows up, give me a buzz."

FENTON took a long time unpacking. When he was finished, he drew his needlegun from its holster, broke it open, and inspected the charges. Sixteen of them, and the heat hadn't done them any harm. He reholstered the weapon and went down the three flights of stairs to the hotel lobby.

It wasn't hard to find the bar. The odor of stale liquor floated out from behind the stairs; he followed it. McGill was sitting at the bar, back to the door, head hunched down over a glass. A dark blotch of sweat stained the back of his shirt.

An alien sat at either side of him. Fenton walked noiselessly across the floor and nudged the fat man.

"McGill?"

"Huh—oh, you. Fenton. 'Scuse me." McGill muttered something in the harsh fricatives of the Vordillian tongue and the alien at his left moved over one seat. Fenton slid in next to McGill.

McGill was drinking something red and thick-looking from a pottery dish shaped like a gravyboat. He poured a little into a glass and offered it to Fenton. "Try some. Native drink; pretty damned good. They call it *ghar*."

Fenton sipped it. It was bitter, with a delayed-action kick that really kicked. Fenton imagined this could leave a man mindless in a month, if he drank enough of it.

He said, "You know why I'm here on Vordil?"

"Can't possibly guess," McGill remarked blandly.

"I'm here to avenge my brother," said Fenton. "I want to find the alien who killed him, and kill *him*. Blood-feud. Vendetta."

McGill turned to stare full-face at him. "You better have another drink, Fenton. The heat's getting you. Go on—have another one. It's cheap."

"No," Fenton whispered harshly. "I'm serious. The law on Vordil's going to overlook his murder...but I'm not. I owe Jamie at least that much. If I have to comb this whole planet to do it, I'll find his killer. My own brother, buried somewhere in a forest on a little dustball in the back of a galaxy....dammit, McGill it's no good!"

The fat man shrugged and took another drink. Fenton looked around at the silently smiling Vordillans, the slim almost-humanoids with the sharp angular bones protruding from their bare shoulders and the fur collars sprouting from their throats like expensive wraps. In the half-darkness of the bar,

they all looked alike: grotesque not-men cut from a single mold.

Fenton took ten crisp ten-dollar notes from his wallet and fanned them out before McGill. "You can buy a lot of drinks with these, McGill."

"Yes. Hell of a lot. So?"

Fenton rifled the plastic bills and said, "The hundred is yours if you find Jamie's killer for me. You know this planet; you even know the one I'm looking for. Find him and the cash is yours."

"Pay in advance," McGill grunted. "I'll guarantee delivery."

Fenton hesitated for a moment, then put the bills down next to McGill's drink. With a swift motion of his pudgy hand, McGill scooped them up and pocketed them. "Thanks," he said thickly. "You got yourself a deal."

"I want Jamie's killer," Fenton said. "How long do I have to wait?"

"Not a hell of a long time. He's sitting right over there in the fourth booth back."

THAT stunned Fenton enough to freeze him at the bar for a long moment. H

turned, at last, and counted booths. A single alien sat in the fourth booth, bent over a bowl of liquor. It was hard to see details at this distance and in the dingy light, but it seemed to Fenton that there was indeed a grey discoloration on the alien's forehead, and that the alien's furry ruff had a distinct reddish tinge.

Fenton gripped McGill's fleshy forearm tight. "You aren't playing games with me, McGill? That's the one?"

"His name is Cklezn" McGill said pronouncing the alien name with an ease born of long practice. "He's the one who did Jamie in. I'm not cheating you, Fenton."

"You better not be. I have plenty more bolts in my needle-gun than I'll need for Cklezn."

McGill paled. "I'm an *Earthnan*, Fenton. You wouldn't—"

"Jamie was an Earthman too," Fenton reminded him. "That didn't stop anyone from losing him out." He swung himself lightly out of the seat, picked up his glass, and said, "I'm going over to have a talk with that alien. You stay right here, understand?"

"I got a hundred dollars to drink up. It'll take a while, even for me."

Fenton crossed the bar, stepping around two weavingly drunken Vordillans, and headed for the booth where the single alien sat. Cklezn was peering into his drink, not seeming to care what was going on about him. Fenton was tempted to draw his needlegun and put three or four bolts through the alien's body without bothering to talk to him, but he choked the idea down.

That was the wrong way. Besides, he'd never get away with it in here.

The needlegun was cold against his skin as he bent over the alien's table.

"Is your name Cklezn?" he asked, hoping he had the consonants pronounced right.

The alien peered blankly at him and nodded.

"Mind if I sit down?" Fenton asked.

The alien shrugged. Fenton took a seat in the booth facing him. "My name is Mark Fenton. Maybe you knew my brother. *Jamie* Fenton."

Slowly, the alien's mouth

opened. "Oh. I knew him. Yes."

The bald flat way the alien had of saying it hit Fenton savagely. His eyes narrowed. "You—*knew* him, eh? He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"How did he die?" Fenton asked, weighting each word, making it come out almost as four separate paragraphs. "You know how he died?"

"He was killed," the alien said.

"They tell me he was killed by a Vordillan. Is this so?"

"It is so."

"By *which* Vordillan?" Fenton's fingers trembled.

"I killed him," Cklezn admitted. "You knew this before you sat down next to me. Why do you ask all these questions, Mark Fenton?"

FENTON resisted an impulse to lean across the table and throttle the alien, to grab that reddish fur collar and shake and shake. He said, "He was my brother. Do you know what a brother is?"

"You shared parents, yes? I know."

"There's a loyalty between

brothers. Christ knows I never stuck too close to Jamie, and that's probably why he went drifting around until he landed up on Vordil. But he died here. Why'd you kill him?"

"I had to," Cklezn said simply. "I had no choice."

Fenton remembered what McGill had told him: "*He was . . . executed.*" "Why? What did my brother do to you that made you kill him?"

"Naming it would be as bad as doing it, said the alien. "I cannot tell you."

Casually, Fenton slipped his hand inside his blouse, tugged at the butt of the needlegun, worked it free from the holster. He drew the gun up out of his armpit far enough for the butt to show. The metal had an ugly glint in the dim light of the bar. Cklezn glanced at the deliberately exposed gunbutt, then looked away.

"You know why I'm here on Vordil?" Fenton asked.

"Your brother is dead. You wish to avenge him."

"You're smart, for an alien. You've hit it dead center." Fenton hadn't expected it to be this way; he hadn't expected to be holding a long question.

and-answer session with his brother's killer. The quick shot in a quiet street, the moment of revenge—that was what he had anticipated. Not this.

"I'm going to kill you for killing my brother," he said. "If this place weren't so damned crowded—"

The alien gasped. "No! Not here! It is—impossible—"

Fenton frowned. "I wouldn't do it here." He became suddenly conscious that eyes were on him—*alien* eyes. He looked around. Half a dozen Vordillans were staring at him, regarding him intently, curiously. He knew he could kill Cklezn before anyone moved—but he'd have them all down on him a second later.

The alien lifted his drink-bowl to his face. He had six bony fingers, Fenton noticed, each tipped with a long, tapering green fingernail. The alien drank, set down the bowl, and said, "There is a time for revenge, Mark Fenton. It has not yet come."

He rose smoothly, dropped a coin on the table, and before Fenton could move had vanished suddenly. Fenton sprang to his feet, intending to follow.

Instantly a living wall formed before him: the Vordillans who had been watching him so intently had swiftly glided from their seats and now barred his way. Fenton clenched his fists. The alien was escaping.

A moist, fleshy hand clasped his shoulder from behind. "Don't make a fuss," said a husky voice. McGill's voice. "Don't start trouble in here. It'll be bad for all of us, you know."

Fenton whirled. "He just walked out of here, and they're blocking my way."

"Naturally. They know why you're here. Everybody does. They want you to do the thing properly. They don't want you to shoot him down in a bar, like a pig."

McGill was bobbling unsteadily, but his voice was the voice of a sober man. He seemed to know what he was talking about. His hand tightened on Fenton's shoulder, and he forced him back down into the booth with surprising strength. It was as if beneath the blubber there lay muscles of beryllium steel.

Imperceptibly tension slack-

ened in the bar. The aliens returned to their places. Fenton thought impatiently of the killers escaping outside.

"He won't go far," McGill said, as if reading his mind. "He'll only head out to the forest. You have time to find him whenever you want him. Relax, and have a drink. Let me buy you one. It's your money, anyway."

WITH a few more of the alien drinks in him, Fenton felt relaxed enough to sit still and stare at McGill's puffy face without getting the urge to set off after the escaping alien.

"You've been here a while," Fenton said.

"Six years."

"Okay. Fill me in on a few things. I get the feeling I'm involved in some sort of ritual, and I don't understand the ground rules."

McGill sighed wheezingly. "You've got to understand that these are an alien people, and they don't think the way you do. Maybe there are some surface resemblances, but that's all. Hell, they have two arms

and two legs, so they *almost* look like Terrans. But they aren't. And they almost think the way we do, except they don't really. You follow?"

"I think so. Why did they kill my brother?"

McGill shrugged. "That's part of it. I don't know why they killed him; he was a nice enough kid. Somewhere along the line he did something that they didn't like. Maybe he didn't even know he was doing it. But they picked Cklezn to kill him, and Cklezn took him out to the Death-Grounds in the forest and killed him."

"Didn't he try to fight back?"

McGill looked abashed and apologetic. He said, "Jamie was too drunk to know what they were doing to him."

Fenton's eyes dropped. "I see." After a moment he said, "You couldn't find out what he did?"

"It's taboo to name it. I don't know."

"And what about this Death-Grounds business?"

"It's a place in the forest," McGill said. "When a man has to die violently, he tries to die

there. That's where Cklezn went. If you had killed him in here, he would have lost his soul, or something. He's out there, waiting for you to come kill him. I tell you they're funny people, Fenton. They're alien."

"Let me get this straight," Fenton said, pushing back some hair from his forehead. "Jamie did something wrong. Cklezn killed him. And now Cklezn is out at the Death-Grounds waiting for me?"

"He did something wrong, too," said McGill. "He killed a man. It's a chain that goes on and on, dragging in victim and executioner. I don't know where it ends."

"But that's not right!" Fenton protested. "You can't send a man out as an executioner, and then expect him to die too! Not even aliens—"

"Cklezn killed Jamie while Jamie was drunk. That was the wrong thing for Cklezn to do. So Cklezn's life is forfeit, and if you go out to the Death-Grounds you'll be able to claim it. They're aliens, I tell you. We can't ever really understand them."

Fenton took a long drink. He

licked his lips smackingly, exhaled, stood up. "How do I get to the Death-Grounds?" he asked.

HE left after lunch, when the white dwarf sun was high overhead, blazing furiously. A crowd of interested aliens gathered about the hotel as he left, gun strapped outside his shirt, head shielded by a protective toupee.

McGill walked with him, reeling just a little. Fenton felt completely sober. He didn't bother to look at the curious Vordillans who peered at him; he walked right through them, out into the dusty, sandy road.

"I'll go as far as the entrance to the forest," McGill said. "I'll put you on the road. You can't miss the place if you go straight."

"How will I know when I've reached it?"

"You will. It's a circle about a thousand feet in diameter, smack in the middle of the forest. Not a tree, not a blade of grass—totally bare. Death-Grounds. Cklezn will be there waiting, anyway."

"Armed?"

"No. He expects you to kill him. Make it a clean death, Fenton. Then come back here and pack up your stuff and get off Vordil. Kill him quick and clean and the chain of death is broken."

"You're sure you don't want to come with me?"

"Damned sure," McGill said emphatically. "This is your quarrel, friend. You'll have to settle it alone."

They walked together through the town, down a twisting little rutted road that wound off in a direction leading away from the spaceport. After a while McGill said, "Okay. This is as far as I'm going. You walk straight and you'll get there okay." He pulled out a soiled bandanna and mopped his head. Vordil was the hottest world Fenton had ever seen: hot and dry, but not so that it couldn't make a fat man sweat.

Fenton took five tens from his wallet and waved them in front of McGill's nose. "You come with me and you can have these bills for your very own," he said.

Hesitantly McGill shook his

head. "It's your quarrel," he repeated stolidly. "I got enough drink-money to last me a while. I'm not going any further."

Shrugging, Fenton handed him the bills. "Keep them anyway, then. Thanks for your help. I'll see you tonight, I guess."

"Yeah. See you later," McGill said.

He turned away and waddled back the way he came. Fenton began to walk...on, toward the Death-Grounds.

The alienness of the place was borne in on him as he walked. The afternoon was silent, except for the droning of silvery insects four or five inches long that swooped through the slender trees that rose like needles along the road. The grass sprang up thickly—squarish, shovel-shaped blades, a dull, ugly blue-black in color. In the distance rose a low hill, thick with the spike-like trees.

Life ran fairly close on planets that were fairly similar. The people of Vordil IX were almost human; the trees were almost trees, the grass almost grass. But not quite. There were differences, sometimes

glaring, sometimes subtle. The birds didn't sing, here; they barked. Rabbits bounded out of the thick-packed shrubbery—but they were rabbits with snake-like tails and beady blue eyes and savage teeth.

Fenton wondered how it had been for Jamie to walk this path—whether he had been sober enough to see where he was and how alien the things were, or whether it really mattered to him. He pictured big Jamie being dragged along, half-supported by the wiry little Vordillan who was to be his executioner.

He stared ahead, eyes flicking nervously through the trees. Despite all that McGill had told him, he found it hard to believe that Cklezn would be simply waiting for death, and he expected some sort of ambush. He moved forward warily, now, hand ready to spring to the needlegun in the holster.

But no danger presented itself. The alien calm of the afternoon remained unbroken. The road twisted and turned, winding like an epileptic serpent, and Fenton followed every twist and every turn, never

knowing when death might step out from behind a curve.

And then he turned one final curve and knew he had reached the Death-Grounds.

Whether man-made or natural, there was no way of telling. But the area was absolutely sterile. Not a blade of grass, not a tree-trunk. It was a circle of utterly bare ground, perhaps a thousand feet in diameter, naked, nothing but black earth.

Cklezn stood waiting in the very center of the circle, his thin arms folded in a startlingly human pose.

FENTON drew his gun and advanced into the circle cautiously. The butt of the needler fit nicely into his palm; his anxious finger lay tensely on the firing-stud. Cklezn stared at him interestedly, without moving.

"This is the Death-Grounds, isn't it?" Fenton asked. His voice was strangely dry.

"Yes. I have waited for you, Mark Fenton. This is the place for revenge, and this is the time." He sounded calm, resigned. He didn't seem to carry any weapons.

"The time for revenge," Fenton said, lifting the needle-gun. Somehow it was strangely hollow, gunning down a willing victim this way. It wasn't the sort of death that would wash away the burden of Jamie's murder.

"Why did you kill my brother?" Fenton demanded suddenly. "What did he do?"

"I must not say it," Cklezn muttered. "Especially not here! Not on the holy ground itself!"

Fenton gestured with the gun. "I want to know what my brother did that made it necessary to kill him." He smiled craftily. "You'd better tell me, Cklezn. Or else I'll drag you halfway back to town before I kill you. You wouldn't like that."

The alien sucked in his thin lips in a nervous gesture. "No. I must die here—on this ground."

"Then tell me."

"Very well," Cklezn said wearily. "It is wrong, and I will be punished for it...but not half so heavily as if I do not die on the Death-Grounds. Come." He started to walk toward the edge of the forest.

"Where are you going?"

"I can't commit a sin while standing on the Death-Grounds itself," Cklezn said.

Fenton followed him across the bare ground to the forest. The border of the Death-Grounds was precise and even, as if it were weeded every day. Probably it was. Cklezn stepped over onto the grass.

He said, "Your brother spat at a priest during a ceremony. This is unforgivable. He was drunk, and knew not what he did—but he had to die for it." The alien shuddered and looked away.

Fenton wondered what taboo made it so revolting for Cklezn to utter Jamie's crime aloud. "For that you killed him?" he asked. "For a drunken act that he never knew he committed...you killed a man?"

Cklezn nodded.

A sudden terrible rage flooded through Fenton. That Jamie should die for such a cheap thing, he led to the fields of slaughter while he was drunk and...

His finger tightened convulsively on the firing stud. He knew how he could exact a fit-

ting revenge, now. He squeezed the stud, once.

A bolt lanced through the fleshy part of the alien's leg. Cklezn gasped and sank to the ground. A needlegun was not a painless weapon.

He stared at his leg, with the tiny hole drilled through flesh and bone and muscle and nerve. "I killed your brother quickly," he said. "Do the same for me."

"Don't worry," Fenton said. "I'm not going to torture you. The next shot is to kill."

Cklezn looked relieved. He began to crawl forward on his hands, over the grass to the nakedness of the Death-Grounds. Fenton grinned.

"Sorry. I don't want you to die there."

"But—"

He seized the stricken-looking alien and dragged him back, tugging him remorselessly over the ground away from the Death-Grounds. Cklezn clung to the grass, dug his hands into the soil, tried to hold back, but Fenton pulled him on.

Finally they were a hundred yards from the Death-Grounds.

Cklezn rose uncertainly and tried to stagger back, exclaiming constantly both in his own language and Fenton's. Taking careful aim, Fenton sent a bolt through his other leg.

The alien toppled, face-forward. Fenton heard him sobbing.

"This is the time for revenge," Fenton said. *"Out here. You'll die the way my brother did...alone, unpriested, in the wrong place. That's the proper revenge."*

Cklezn wailed once. Fenton nudged the firing-stud and the needlegun leaped in his hand. The bolt whizzed through Cklezn's throat. The alien jerked, nearly rolled over, then flattened out.

A time for revenge, Fenton thought.

Then sudden hands appeared to wrench the needlegun from his astonished grasp.

HE whirled and saw four aliens looking at him sadly. One held the needle-gun, pointed directly at him. They had come up so noiselessly he had not suspected it.

Fenton went cold despite the

afternoon heat. "This was between me and him. I killed him. He had it coming to him, didn't he? Give me back my gun!"

The alien with the gun smiled unhappily. "We came to see that it was done right. We had hoped the chain would be ended here. It was not."

"What in blazes do you mean?"

"Your brother...did something. This man punished him for it. The method he used brought punishment upon *his* head, and you were the instrument of that punishment. You, too, failed by wilfully destroying Cklezn's soul." The alien indicated the crumpled body on the grass, and pointed to the Death-Grounds. "He should have died *there*. Your vengeance was too great, Fenton."

"You don't understand. I—"

He broke off and ran forward, hoping to seize the gun. A shaft of pain seared through his thigh. He fell, doubling up, trying to squeeze the bright

agony out of his leg. After a moment he looked up and saw the aliens regarding him patiently, sadly.

Fenton thought of Jamie, drunk, uncomprehending as Cklezn drove home the fatal blow. He thought of Cklezn writhing on the ground a hundred yards from the place where he had come to die. Fenton shivered uncontrollably.

"The chain of death ends with you," the alien said. He nodded to the other three, who lifted the crippled Fenton and bore him forward.

He felt warm soil beneath him—w a r m, b a r e s o i l. Sprawled on the ground, he dug his hands in hard, and waited to die. The aliens had been kind. They had carried him to the Death-Grounds. The one holding the needlegun fired; and Fenton felt absurdly grateful to them as he writhed on the bare ground, waiting for death.

THE END

THE CHILDLESS ONES

by DANIEL F. GALOUYE

NOVELETTE

illustrated by EMSH

It seemed odd. In fact it seemed impossible. But it was true that the natives of the new planet had no interest in sex or reproduction. None, none at all!

CHAPTER I

IT was the native population that was responsible for temporary designation of the planet as Repugnant-I in Survey Headquarters files.

Everything else was charming—pastel skies at sunset, pale green raindrops that fell occasionally against a backdrop of majestic mountains, soft breezes that caressed fields of flowers and surratted through silent forests.

The primitives, though, were a different matter. Their limbs were spindly and knotted and their bodies bulged and sagged and exuded viscous fluids that

eventually dried and caked off like scales.

They were heavy-browed, with small, deep-sunken and dismal eyes. There was a gash for a mouth that exposed craggy, discolored teeth, cheekbones that clung to their faces like tired astrodomes, and an oleaginous mop of hair, dripping reeky slime on neck and shoulders.

No nose. Only two repulsive orifices.

Oh, they were humanoid, all right—if an observer were allowed sufficient latitude in defining the term.

By comparison, Miss Jennifer—all two hundred and ten



pounds of her—sheemed possessed of a certain quiet beauty, despite her myopic vision corrected by thick-lensed glasses, a full crop of freckles and blemishes, flabby and ankleless legs, and an inordinately long and askew nose that punctuated her prognathous face.

Miss Jennifer was Survey Crew Fourteen's microbiologist.

And the comparison between her and the natives was being undertaken reflectively and somewhat tastelessly by Major Volkert, military coordinator for the survey, as he lolled beneath the canopy in front of his tent.

He watched the microbiologist scooping up earth on the other side of the clearing near the primitive huts. Hefting the slotted tray, she started back for the lab tent with her specimens of nitrogen-fixing bacteria.

Volkert laughed silently in self-deprecation and turned away, reminding himself that it wasn't wise to think of Miss Jennifer—not even in terms of relative attractiveness. Unwittingly, she served as a gauge of

space fatigue among the otherwise all-male crew. It was understood that when she "started looking good," it was time to head for home.

THE major prudently waited until Miss Jennifer was settled in her lab before he ventured out into the street. He strode stiffly past the rows of tents.

Shoulders square, hands clasped rigidly behind his back, head high—that was the way to effect an attitude of complete confidence. What if it was a swagger? It was good for the morale of the troops. And it reassured the civilian technicians that the military contingent was equal to any emergency.

He brushed the flap aside and entered Medical.

Dr. Farrell, blunt in stature like the major but lacking the military man's aplomb, stepped back from the surgical table and looked up futilely.

His eyes were apologetic, his shoulders slanted. "It's beyond me, Major. I've approached it from the standpoint of hormonal deficiency, psychology,

biochemistry and diabetics. All without any results."

He shrugged helplessly and stared down at the unconscious native. "Poor devil. No matter which way you add it up, she just doesn't have the merest beginning of a sex urge. They're all that way—the males even worse."

"What about those hormone injections week before last?"

"Utterly negative. And we shot the males so full of androgen and oreton and the females so full of estrone that the stuff was practically coming out of their ears."

Volkert dropped listlessly into a chair, purposely not looking at the repellent native. "We've got to find out what makes them like that, Farrell. From what we've seen so far, this planet is otherwise well suited for colonization."

"Ideally," the other agreed.

"Of course," Volkert went on, "we'll have to get rid of the natives somehow—perhaps enclosed reservations. And enforced extinction should they start reproducing again. But if we don't find out *why* they're not having children, we'll never

know whether human colonists would lose their sex instinct here too."

"I've psyched most of our personnel. We all still check out normally on that score."

"Yes. But for how long?"

Farrell was grimly silent as he slipped off his gloves and smoothed back his graying hair.

"There's something that stinks from here to Antares about this thing," Major Volkert offered misgivingly. "This race has been kicking around for thousand of years. And all of a sudden, just a few years before contact with galactic civilization overtakes them, they quit having children—as though they were precognizant of our coming."

"What else?" the doctor asked gloomily, pointedly not challenging Volkert's postulation.

"They could have hid the children when they saw the contact ship."

"So well that even your spit and polish boys couldn't find them after Survey took over?"

Volkert strained with impatience. "But this is stupid!"

Are you suggesting that *twenty years ago* they actually sensed we were coming and decided to quit reproducing?"

Farrell spread his hands simply. "The absence of libido is there—empirically established."

Volkert laughed. "There's a plausible explanation. For some reason they just haven't had any children lately. For some *elementary* and *biological* reason. You are to find out why—and before the ship returns in sixty day with our replacements."

The woman stirred and sat up. She left the imprint of her back and arms on the surgical table—outlined in slimy exudation and sickly green scales.

The movement had removed part of her body from the cone of odor-killing rays. And now the overpowering stench was like a nauseous, smothering heaviness in the air. It was carrion under a steaming sun, decaying polyps on a hot beach, a slaughterhouse fetid with warm, flowing blood.

"Get her out of here—quick!" Volkert shouted.

Grimacing, Farrell ad-

dressed her in the native tongue. She stared dismally at the major and he retched as he looked briefly into the noseless caricature of a face.

Then she staggered toward the tent flap, faltering as she passed near Volkert. He lunged out of her way. God! That vile, monstrous distortion of the human form had almost touched him!

NIGHTTIME was more merciful. You couldn't see the natives then. They never ventured from their huts after dark—not since Volkert had declared a sunset curfew and had shot down the first three primitives who had violated it.

The major strolled leisurely down the street, enjoying both his security inspection and the breeze that blew in from the bay to the south.

"Howdy, Major."

Volkert looked around abruptly. It was the systemologist, trudging toward the observatory.

"Evening, Wattley," he returned stiffly. "Getting the system all down on paper?"

"Just about." The old man

paused briefly. "I've got all the major planetary motions charted."

"That's fine. And oddities crop up?"

"Not yet—except the absence of inner planets. The closest is over a hundred million miles from the sun. But I think I've got the explanation. You see—"

Voice welled boisterously in the military barracks and Volkert strode swiftly toward the large tent. Nearing it, he could hear several of the men in a heated argument:

"Psychoemissive—that's what I said! Where'd you go to school?"

"He's right, Ralph," someone agreed. "There *are* psychoemissive stars—over fifty of them on record. They give out invisible radiation along the psychofrequency range. Sometimes they resonate with certain thought bands and touch off psychosomatic behavior."

"Rubbish!"

"They can, Ralph," assured a third voice. "Sol is one. It wasn't until they reached the outer planets, almost out of

range of the emissions, that they found out men weren't half as timid and fearful five hundred million miles from Sol as they were on Earth."

Volkert barged into the darkness of the tent and sent his flashlight beam swinging along the rows of cots.

"Knock it off! Or every last one of you will draw a double dose of guard duty!"

The responsive silence was instantaneous.

And the major strode back into the street, savoring the tight-lipped determination that he'd be damned if he wasn't going to have as taut a command here as he'd had on all his previous surveys.

"Oh—Maj-or..."

Volkert winced, wishing there were nearby shadows into which he could melt. But he was directly in the cone of one of the spotlights. "Yes, Miss Jennifer?"

"I do believe there's a short in my light circuit." Her voice strove valiantly to be honey-coated as she stood at the entrance to her tent. "Would you check it for me, please?"

"I'll have Lieutenant Hutchinson come right over."

But he doubted Hutchinson would ever get there. The communications officer, who also doubled as electrician, would dispatch his sergeant, who in turn would send one of the corporals.

CHAPTER II

IT wasn't until several days later, though, that Volkert had the opportunity to talk with the lieutenant about Miss Jennifer's shorted circuit.

"No, Major. I didn't pass the buck," Hutchinson disclosed, not looking up from his work on the transmitter modulator. "I went myself."

Volkert frowned at the lieutenant. He was one of those still-dedicated kids, fresh out of the Academy—clean cut, rather handsome. Until now he had appreciated the subtle jokes about Miss Jennifer, who was ten years his senior, as much as the next man in camp.

"Was there a short?"

"Of course not." Hutchinson placed his soldering iron on the rack and looked up, smiling. "Jenny was just feeling spry again, poor thing. She likes to

be noticed occasionally."

"That two-ton bitch! I'll—"

"She's really not a bad old gal, Major—not when you get to know her."

Volkert drew back disapprobatively, surprised by the other's lack of reserve toward the microbiologist. Maybe he'd better check Hutchinson's record. It might be that the lieutenant had had only a few day's planetary leave between his last assignment and this one.

He turned to leave.

"Major—about this modulator. I haven't been able to do much good with it."

"You mean we're still out of contact with Sector Base?"

Hutchinson nodded. "Our carrier wave's getting through all right. But we can't modulate it with a signal—not until I do a complete job of coil rewinding and circuit balancing."

"How long will it be before we can contact them?"

"Two, three weeks I suppose. It'd be sooner if I had the right equipment and materials."

Volkert scowled. "Damned good thing everything's in hand. I'd hate to have to get a

message through to save our skins."

"I would too, sir."

Outside, the major paused and stared toward the native village. It wasn't difficult to look at them from this distance, since they appeared as only indistinct figures—mere outlines against the background of forest and sky and mountain. Actually, the only thing that reminded him now of their dreadful disfigurements and vile appearance was the slime that covered their bodies and glittered in the sunlight.

The activity he'd first noticed the day before was still in progress. Only, now the natives seemed to be going about their dedicated tasks more fervently, more excitedly. The men were throwing up hastily constructed additions to the shacks. New huts were being built. The women were decking the outer walls and entrances with wreaths and garlands and hanging festoons of blossoms from hovel to hovel.

It was, Volkert imagined, as though the wretched things were revolting against their ugliness and expressing self-re-

sentment by surrounding themselves with all the beauty they could gather from the fields and forest.

But it must all have some sociological significance. He made a mental note to speak with Dr. Steimann about it. The anthropologist would certainly have already noticed the manifestation and started research into it.

LATER that morning Wattley, a sheaf of charts under one arm and a spectroscope under the other, hastened across the field toward the observatory.

It was the first time Volkert had seen the astronomer outside during the day since the survey crew had been landed a month ago to relieve the initial contact gang. Normally, the systemologist worked all night and rarely ventured from his tent between sunrise and sunset.

Dr. Wattley was the oldest person in the survey crew. Reticent and thoroughly absorbed in his duties, he had little time for the nonessential. He was a wisp of a man, with a vestigial

fringe of white hair surrounding an irregular and heavily-veined scalp.

Volkert watched him enter the cupola, then saw the slot slide open and the telescope poke out. The dome pivoted around and the tube swung up, centering on a pale point of light in the southern sky, not very far from the sun.

Curious, the major walked over to the dome and rapped on the door.

"Go away. I'm busy."

Volkert entered and found the astronomer with his face pasted against the telescope's eyepiece. Viewed through the slot, from the darkness of the dome, the point of light seemed to shine even more brightly. The planet, he guessed, was either awfully close or it had a tremendous reflective index to appear so brilliant at this time of day.

"Any danger from that thing?" he asked.

"Uh-uh," Wattley grunted negatively, petulantly.

"Will it come closer?"

"Uh-huh."

"Close enough to upset anything?"

"Uh-uh."

"You sure it won't—"

Wattley swatted the telescope housing and swung around, all five feet, one inch of him bristling. "When I'm working, Major, don't interrupt me. You can examine my records and reports whenever you like. But I won't sacrifice my time in pointless conversation!"

The astronomer returned bluntly to his work.

Irate old goat! Volkert thought as he swung the door open.

"Dullest system I've ever run across," the other grumbled, returning to the eyepiece "And the minute the one interesting feature shows up—"

There was a commotion in front of the enlisted men's barracks—the din of angry voices, the sharp reports of fists on flesh.

Volkert rounded the corner of the tent and went barging into the crowd of off-duty troops, elbowing them aside until he reached the two fighting men. He ducked under a wild blow and grabbed the combatants—both junior corporals of the gunnery detail—by their scruffs.

"Hold it!" he shouted
"You're both under arrest!"

"He started it," charged one of the men, a lean redhead.

"Yeah?" returned the other breathlessly. "Well he didn't have any right telling me to lay off!"

"Lay off what?" the major demanded.

The two men looked disconcertedly down at their hands. Several of the others snickered.

"Lay off what" Volkert repeated.

"Jenny," offered a sergeant, amused.

Volkert started and released the pair.

"Miss Jennifer?" His voice cracked with disbelief.

But it was asinine! He had been on eight assignments with the old bag. She hadn't grown any less pathetically unattractive since the first. And never had anyone been indiscriminate enough to show her the merest amount of attention—not even the elderly civilians.

But now there were two—two young men—who had apparently found something in her desirable enough to fight over!

Across the street, Miss Jennifer's massive bulk blocked the doorway of her tent. Smiling proudly, she winked at the redhead and he grinned back.

"Sergeant," Volkert called out. "See that these two men are taken to the lockup!"

WITHIN two days, though, the pair had been released, assigned extra duty and restricted from further contact with the civilian complement.

Wattley's play-toy speck of light shone brighter in the southern daytime sky. The natives worked more frenziedly at their task of beautifying the village. Lieutenant Hutchinson's transmitter, besides defying all attempts at repair, had developed further trouble, shattering its subethereal crystal. And Volkert was even more fretful over Farrell's inability to learn why the natives were totally disinterested in sex and children.

Tired of waiting for the doctor to report, he went over to Medical and found Farrell taking a blood sample from a native man who had been forcibly escorted there by two gloved and masked orderlies.

The major withdrew from the vicinity of the tent until the primitive was dismissed. Gagging as the creature passed him, he went on in to see the physician.

"Farrell," he asked pensively, propping his booted foot on a chair and draping his forearm over the upraised knee, "anybody ever think of simply asking these natives why they don't have children?"

The other nodded soberly. "They won't talk about things like that. Social taboo." Then he smiled. "However, I think we've made a significant discovery, working with Anthropology."

"What does Steimann know about this business?"

"Nothing. But he's enough enough of a student of races and individuals to have noticed something that escaped the rest of us."

"What?"

"We've observed there are no natives between the zero and twenty-year-old age groups, roughly. Not being familiar with physical features as correlated with age among those creatures, we've assumed

that the population was spread randomly between the twenty-year-olds and the limiting age of eighty or ninety."

"Isn't it?"

"It is *not*, Major." Farrell grinned briefly. "If you look closer you'll see there's one group about twenty years old, another about forty, a third about sixty, and so fourth. But there are *no persons of in-between ages*—none that fail to fit neatly into the twenty-, forty-, sixty- or eighty-year-old groups!"

Volkert scowled heavily. "I don't—"

"It's simple, Major. Twenty years ago wasn't the first time these people quit having children. It seems they quit periodically, laying off for twenty years each time."

Volkert mulled the information. It was interesting enough, but actually it added little materially to the solution.

"But," he reminded discouragingly, "we still don't know what happens during those twenty-year sexless periods—what makes them lose their mating instinct for so long a time."

"No, we don't," Farrell admitted. "But at least we have another clue to work with."

"And we still don't know whether, after a few months here, our colonists would fall into the same pattern. You realize, of course, that if we were restricted to one child every twenty years we'd soon die off for lack of adequate replacements."

"You're right. The Repugnats would too, except that they have five or six kids at a time. Steimann found that out when he counted fraternal noses in some of the huts."

"MAJOR Volkert! Major Volkert!"

Miss Jennifer's voice, strained through the heavy canvas, was imperative.

The major went outside.

"You'll simply have to do something," she insisted. "If it had happened just once, I wouldn't have bothered you. But two nights in a row is too much. And now *this!*"

Leveling a flabby arm, she pointed accusingly down the street.

Wattley, who had evidently

followed her at a distance, drew back indecisively, turned and slunk away.

"You'll just have to speak with him," Miss Jennifer fumed.

"What did he do?" Volkert stared into the strained face, made even more unsightly by a full-blossomed blush which outlined the blemishes more clearly.

"He came sneaking into my tent twice!" Her jaw, trembling with indignation, stuck out to an impossible degree. "And now he's started following me through the street!"

Volkert took a deep breath of incredulity. By stretching his imagination, he might concede that two young bucks could become planet-crazy and lose their sense of pulchritudinous values. But Wattley was an old man who had decades ago reluctantly put aside such things as sex and amatory escapades.

And it couldn't be that Jenny was desperately imagining the sort of intriguing situations that had been denied her all her life. Wattley's guilt was evident in his furtive actions, in his

failure to refute Jenny's shouted accusations.

"All right, Miss Jennifer. I'll see that it doesn't happen again."

Volkert helplessly flapped his hands against his thighs. It just didn't make sense. The natives had become sexual duds. And all along he had feared that whatever made the poor creatures that way would eventually have the same influence on the survey crew and subsequently on the colonists.

But no. Instead the men, even the most erotically unresponsive Dr. Wattley, were apparently becoming oversexed—to a ridiculous degree.

CHAPTER III

VOlkert was up early the next morning—in time to intercept Dr. Steimann as he headed across the field toward the native village.

The major had lain awake half the night doing mental gymnastics with Wattley's incongruous behavior, the recalcitrant subethereal transmitter, the natives' lack of sexual response, and the unguessable

purpose behind the beautification of their village.

It was the last enigma that concerned him most from the standpoint of safety for the survey party. Ritual on a primitive world occasionally meant irrational behavior and augured trouble for strangers.

He overtook the anthropologist halfway across the clearing, just as the latter was adjusting his deodorization mask.

"One moment, Steimann. I thought perhaps you might brief me on what's going on over there—the flowers and construction."

The anthropologist slipped off his mask, exposing a small, hatched face that narrowed down from excessively wide cheekbones to a too-sharp chin, made even more pointed by a meticulously trimmed Van-dyke.

"I thin': I can, Major. I'm putting it down as a religious function. You see, these people are ditheists. They believe in two gods, descendants of a single god-father. They're preparing to celebrate their Festival of the Two Sons."

Volkert stiffened. "They

won't get too fanatic, will they?"

"I think not."

"What's all the construction for?"

"The festival is also the occasion for some sort of sociological upheaval in the village. Until now, a complete family occupied each hut. But the ritual will trigger the disintegration of the basic family unit, with the twenty-year-olds striking out on their own."

The major nodded comprehendingly.

Steimann shrugged. "I'm afraid that's about all I can tell you now. I still have to learn the details of the festival. It has something to do with the reascendancy of one of their gods."

"You'll keep me posted?"

The anthropologist smiled. "Of course I will, Major."

BACK in camp, Volkert made a worried inspection of the establishments and decided there was some sort of indescribable undercurrent to what until now had been a simple, monotonous survey crew routine.

It wasn't anything he could

readily put his finger on. But it was there just the same—lurking in the absorbed-in-nothing stares of the off-duty men who lolled about the recreation area, in the more-than-casual attention the civilian technicians and soldiers were devoting to the pinup portraits on the mess hall bulleting board.

Behind the barracks he found four of the younger artillery-men wistfully scratching lewd drawings in the sand. He routed them with a stern reprimand, but lingered to survey the products of their idle labor.

Despite the fact that the entire personnel was supposed to have been conditioned against entertaining any sex thoughts other than casually, they seemed to be occupied with nothing else. He'd have to take it up with Psychology when he got back to Sector Headquarters.

On the main street, he watched Miss Jennifer stroll leisurely toward Supply. And a score of fancying eyes traced her progress with an interest that was somewhat more than incidental.

In a way, Volkert felt rather

pleased that Jenny seemed to be coming into her own. Actually, she wasn't as much of a decrepit old bag as the men jokingly made her out to be, although her hair was a bit unkempt—the way it straggled over her forehead.

Her jaw did protude a bit, but not enough to warrant the "old battle-axe" moniker the boys had hung on her. Come to think of it, though, he hadn't heard them call her that in the last day or two.

Volkert was still standing in the street as she came out of Supply. Watching her, he decided she must have gone on a diet. At least, she seemed to have lost a good deal of weight. And, quite definitely, her eyes were rather interesting and—

He jolted himself from his errant thoughts with a whispered "damn!" and strode resolutely for his tent.

High in the southern sky, Wattley's shimmering planet came out from behind a cloud. It seemed considerably larger than when the major had first seen it. As a matter of fact, it was more than a *point* of light. He could almost make out the disk.

THE sound of gunfire routed Major Volkert from bed the next morning. He grabbed his revolver and jerked his robe about him, wondering why the artillery hadn't opened up first

Outside, men scurried from the street, diving behind tents or throwing themselves into the ditches. A junior corporal with a Mark IV rifle lay prone under the canopy of the Microbiology lab. He was pouring slugs toward the Dispensary across the street.

Sergeant Yelverton and a private returned the fire with revolvers.

The private went down clutching his shoulder as Volkert dived for cover behind the pickup truck.

Yelverton took careful aim and fired three rapid shots. The junior corporal stiffened, as though an electrical shock had gone through his body, and went limp. Volkert could see the flow of blood from the crisp hole in his forehead.

A stark silence fell over the camp as the major, venturing out from behind the truck, was suddenly aware of the soft sobs

coming from the Microbiology lab.

Miss Jennifer staggered out, hands hiding her face. One sleeve of her dress was torn completely off, exposing a fleshy shoulder, and a shoe was missing. She'd evidently been in a struggle.

Volkert shoved the revolver in his pocket and went over. "What happened?"

Sergeant Yelverton holstered his gun and crossed the street too. "Leave her alone. Can't you see she's had it?"

The man reached a consoling hand out toward Miss Jennifer. But Volkert caught it and swung him around.

"I want an explanation, Sergeant!"

The other soldiers and civilians began filtering back into the street.

"Rogers must have gone berserk," a technician said, nodding at the dead rifleman. "He surprised her in the lab."

"We didn't know it until she started screaming," Yelverton added, grasping Miss Jennifer tenderly around the shoulder. "We didn't know he had a rifle either."

"All right." Volkert gestured toward the wounded private. "Two of you men get Jones into the Dispensary."

He turned to the sergeant. "I'll take care of Miss Jennifer."

"She'll be all right with me," Yelverton assured.

"I said I'll take care of her."

The sergeant backed off grudgingly.

Volkert took Miss Jennifer by the elbow, his other hand enfolding hers, and led her off toward her tent. Poor kid, he sympathized, she must have been scared half to death. Unconsciously, he squeezed her fingers and was surprised when she returned the gesture. When he looked over she was smiling.

But he caught himself. Poor kid? Hell, he realized, she was at least as old as he—chronologically if not on the official record.

At her tent, she asked in words that were spoken softer than he'd ever heard her speak before, "Won't you come in, Major?"

He started to accept, but backed off impulsively. "I'm hardly dressed, Miss Jennifer."

Anyway, I should think you'd be all shaken up after that experience."

She laid her hand on his arm and looked away painfully. "He was so—crude. It wasn't pleasant at all."

The conversation, it seemed, was not without its subtle traps. He turned abruptly and headed for his tent, realizing that the same thing which had driven the junior corporal to such desperate behavior must have been responsible for the astronomer's anomalous actions too.

In other men, such tendencies had been restrained. But in the corporal and Wattley they had predominated. Perhaps if he spoke with the systemologist—

VOLKERT had spoken with the elderly astronomer before—the same day Miss Jennifer had complained. He had relayed her objections and had added his own terse warning, coupled with threats of arrest and summary trial.

But Wattley had only stared off into the distance and snickered. There had been a mis-

chievous twinkle in his eyes and no small amount of reborn pride in his voice as he said, "Very well, Major. I'll watch myself. But it isn't often that quenched fires are rekindled in a man of my age."

And his eyes had narrowed bitterly. "Darn the luck! To be caught in a place like this—practically in total isolation!"

But now, after Volkert had entered the astronomer's observatory without even the courtesy of knocking, Wattley wasn't so sociably inclined.

"Get out," he ordered, looking up from the spectroscope. "I'm busy. I've held myself in check."

"No doubt you have, Doctor. But I'd like your opinion of what made you act up like that the other day."

Wattley waved him silent and adjusted the instrument's collimator.

"In the interest of self-illumination," he said, laughing dryly. "there's nothing I'd rather discuss. But, as you can appreciate, I'm too far behind in my work to spare the time."

The systemologist turned momentarily to the telescope,

centered its sight on the planet that shone like a tiny, silver disk just south of the sun, and engaged the driving mechanism.

Volkert glanced impatiently out the domed slot. Across the field the natives, still preparing for their ritual, had decorated the village to a ridiculously gaudy degree. And they were still hauling in baskets of blossoms from the forest.

"Dr. Wattley—please! This is important!" Damned if he would ever again take out a survey party with a temperamental old buzzard who had to be coddled.

The systemologist paused and glanced up wearily. "Let me show you what I'm up against, Major," he said with patronizing patience as he went to the chart cabinet.

"It's taken a month to completely classify Repugnant." Wattley nodded at the sun, visible in all its greatness and brilliance through the dome's slot. "But that was an easy job, compared with what's ahead."

He found the chart he was searching for and unrolled it on the table. "Here's a schematic

of the system. You'll notice there's none of what we'd normally classify as inner planets, although we have more than our share of outer ones."

Volkert peered over the old man's shoulder to study the outline—the asterisk that represented the solar body, the prominent circle denoting Repugnant-I's orbit, the thirteen additional concentric rings showing the orbits of the other planets.

But he stiffened and gripped the table, his eyes widening in astonishment, his voice faltering. "That—that thing!" He stabbed the chart with a trembling finger. "What is it?"

"That's what I'll have to sweat blood over if I'm going to classify it before it gets out of range."

Volkert only stared incredulously at the astronomer and at the chart. It couldn't be! Yet, that symbol nestled so close to the asterisk was—*had to be*—

He seized Whatley's arm desperately and pointed outside—at the bright disk of light below the sun. "You mean that thing out there *isn't* a planet?"

"You can read astronomical symbols, Major. You see what is on the chart."

"Good God!" Volkert clawed distraughtily at his face as he stared at the symbol. It *couldn't* be. Yet, it *was!* And the most ironic thing about it all was the fact that he *should have known*. Steimann had practically told him—*had* told him. But he'd failed to understand because of a phonetic misapprehension.

He whirled for the door, but paused to face the systemologist. "Get over to my quarters on the double. I'm calling an emergency meeting."

CHAPTER IV

THE response to the call was immediate. All the principals converged on Volkert's tent within five minutes—all except Wattley, who had to be "escorted" by the officer of the day.

Besides the astronomer and the major, there were Steimann, the anthropologist; Farrell, in charge of Medicine; Lieutenant Hutchinson of Communications, and Captain

Raleigh, the OD.

Farrell swabbed his brow with a crumpled handkerchief and stared expectantly at the major. "This about the natives' sexual behavior?"

"That and something more important—quite a bit more important." Volkert leaned tensely over the table. "What do you know about psychoemissive stars, Doctor?"

Farrell shrugged. "Not much more than the average layman. But if you're thinking of using that gimmick to explain the lack of sex urge among the natives, you're on the wrong trajectory."

"How do you figure that?"

"A psychoemissive star—even if there is one that radiates along a sex-stimulating band—couldn't just quit emitting psycho-frequencies at the drop of a hat, as Repugnant would have had to do every twenty years. It couldn't do that any more than a normal sun could just quit giving off light at the snap of a finger. Simply put, there aren't even any variable PE stars."

Volkert straightened and paced around the table. "I

quite agree with you, Doctor. I, too, considered and rejected the PE effect."

"Then—"

The major motioned for attention and turned toward the astronomer, who was still grumbling and staring severely at Captain Raleigh.

"Dr. Wattley, tell them what was on the chart you just showed me."

The systemologist rose protestingly. "I resent—"

"Tell them!"

Wattley bent visibly before the major's shouted order. "A schematic of the Repugnant system."

"And what was the object closest to the sun?"

"A companion sun—a dwarf—the second half of this binary system. It follows an orbit perpendicular to the zodiac. That's what knocked out the inner planets."

Farrell started and stared at the major, then more attentively at Wattley. Steimann and Hutchinson glanced at each other, confused. Raleigh tensed duly.

"The second half of a binary," Volkert repeated. "Why

didn't you tell me about it before?"

"You knew about it. We were briefed on the system, weren't we?"

"I was briefed on the defensive aspect of a projected survey. I was told nothing about Repugnant being a binary."

Wattley squirmed. "They told *me*—at Systemology Headquarters. Guess I forgot to pass it on."

"Thanks," said the major bitterly.

Steimann rose and spread his thin hands. "I don't see what all this—" he began.

Volkert turned upon him. "Of course you don't. But then you wouldn't. You're too damned wrapped up in your specialty—like Wattley. But you knew there were two suns in this system too, didn't you?"

"I suppose I did," the anthropologist said thoughtfully. "Their socio-religious background indicated as much. But you've got no legitimate complaint. I told you as much as I knew."

"Of course you did," Volkert admitted sourly. "Only, when you said 'the Festival of

the Two *Suns*,' I naturally assumed you meant 'Two Sons,' since you'd just said their gods were descendants of a single god-father."

Captain Raleigh shifted in his chair. "I don't get it, Major. What does it all add up to? Are you trying to prove the natives don't have anything to do with sex because of that second sun?"

But Volkert turned back toward Farrell. "How long has it been since that race reproduced?"

"About twenty years."

The major stared at the astronomer. "And what's the period of that binary companion, Dr. Wattley?"

"Why—*twenty years!*"

Volkert spread his hands and dropped into a chair. "And there you have it, gentleman."

FARRELL was first to break the strained silence. "Then it *is* stellar psychoemissions! Those natives reproduce only whenever Repugnant-B swings around Repugnant-A, close to this planet."

Volkert nodded. "It triggers off psychosomatic glandular re-

actions, making the natives sexually potent. Then, during the twenty years this planet is out of range of the emissions, the natives are impotent again."

Hutchinson snapped his fingers. "That's why they're building new huts! It's almost mating time!"

Volkert was staring out the window, across the field at the village. He watched a woman draping a string of flowers over the entrance to a newly-constructed hut.

One of the men brought her another basket of blossoms. But, playfully, she overturned it on his head and lunged into the forest, turning to see whether the man was following. He was—and quite eagerly.

"Not *almost*, Lieutenant," Volkert corrected grimly.

Steimann was shaking his head self-deprecatingly. "I should have recognized the direct connection between sex and sun. There were clues. One of their gods was the God of Light; the other was the God of Fertility."

Volkert rose and began pacing again. "Well, gentlemen.

What are we going to do?"

"Do?" Farrell laughed. "Why, just let them go ahead with their mating, I suppose."

The major faced him with a severe stare. "I don't mean about *them*, Doctor. I mean about *us*. The men. Miss Jenny."

Steimann and Wattley groaned dismally.

"But—but what's going to happen?" Hutchinson asked apprehensively. "To us, I mean."

Volkert hunched his shoulders. "Figure it out yourself. You and I and the other men have a certain normal sex drive to begin with. We don't need a PE sun to trigger us off.

"But the natives have a sex-interest level of zero—until the necessary hormonal changes are stimulated by Repugnant-B's radiation. Those same radiations, however, are going to have a *proportionately greater effect on us!*"

Raleigh sat up rigidly. "If it makes them sexually normal," he whispered soberly, "it's going to make us *hypersexual!*"

Volkert stared ominously at the others. "It wouldn't make

much difference if Miss Jennifer weren't here. But, unalterably, she is. And you've seen what's already started happening among us."

The major turned sharply on Wattley. "When will Repugnant-B get closest?"

"In about five days—that's as near as I can figure."

Steimann fingered his Vandike. "That checks. The native festival is supposed to reach its climax in five days."

"But," Wattley warned, "our trouble won't be over then. The companion still has to recede out of range. That'll take about another ten days."

Volkert faced the lieutenant. "Any hope of fixing that transmitter?"

"Not much, Major," Hutchinson said apologetically. "That wouldn't solve anything anyway. Even if we could contact Sector Headquarters today, it would be two weeks before they could land a party out of hyper."

Major Volkert hitched his belt. "Then we'll have to improvise and ride it out... Farrell, break out all the counter-stimulants you've got and see that

each man gets a double dose daily until we run out."

"Raleigh." He motioned toward the OD. "Collect all sidearms. I'll come over to the arsenal after and we'll run an inventory."

"But suppose something happens?" Wattley protested. "Suppose we need the guns?"

"There won't be much chance of that." Volkert laughed mirthlessly. "The natives are going to be too busy."

"Farrell," he continued with his plan. "Take Miss Jennifer in for a medical checkup. Give her a tranquilizer for the time being. Then we'll lock her up in the guardhouse."

The doctor started out, but a bit too eagerly perhaps to suit Volkert. "Wattley and Hutchinson, you go along with him."

BUT Miss Jennifer was nowhere to be found.

When Farrell came to the arsenal to report her missing, the major looked up anxiously from his sidearms check-off list. "You certain she isn't in her tent or in Microbiology?"

Farrell shook his head.

"She must be in the field gathering specimens then."

"All her equipment's still in the lab, Major."

Captain Raleigh looked around from the racks of weapon. "I thought I saw her walking off into the forest late this morning," the OD offered. "But I couldn't see who was with her."

Volkert felt a sudden flash of envious rage well up in his cheeks. "Muster the troops and civilians, Captain. We'll see who else is missing."

The technicians were lined up abreast on one side of the street and the soldiers on the other. Volkert listened attentively to roll call, but long before it was complete he suspected who was missing. It must be Sergeant Yelverton, who had already fought too viciously and had seemed to enjoy killing the junior corporal in defense of Miss Jennifer's honor.

The major was suddenly aware that his fists were balled into tight, determined knots behind his back.

In the middle of the street Captain Raleigh and one of the

civilians raised their voices to complete the roll call as weird sounds from primitive instruments came booming more loudly across the field.

Volkert glanced disdainfully in the direction of the village. Most of the decorating was apparently complete. And now the Repugnats had entered a more expressive phase of their festival. They sang incessantly. But it was like the sort of dismal moaning that was to be expected from such impossibly repulsive and vile creatures. They danced continually. The movements, however, were a disgusting mockery of grace and rhythm.

Captain Raleigh came over, closing the roster book. "It's Sergeant Yelverton, sir."

Volkert nodded scornfully. So it *was* the gunnery sergeant! He fists contracted into even tighter masses.

The ranks broke up and troops and civilians alike went off mumbling disgruntledly, aware now that both Miss Jennifer and one of the soldiers were missing and fully resentful of the implication.

Two corporals drew up in

front of the major. "We'd like to volunteer our squads, sir," one of them announced, "to form a party and go rescue Miss Jennifer."

Others overheard and rushed up to join the pair, their faces grim with resolution.

"It seems to me," said the major dourly, "that the matter of rescue isn't involved. She went off willingly."

But they pushed on into the forest anyway—scores of them, all bristling with determination.

Volkert let them go off on their quest, then stood pensively in the street watching Repugnant-A, a blazing orange disk, slip toward the mountain range to the west. Its small, silvery companion followed dutifully.

And in the village, the singing rose to a more frenzied pitch as dozens of native women left the assembly and slipped off into the woods with only pretended stealth. A few of the men followed.

JENNY returned the next morning.

She emerged from the forest

just as Major Volkert's patience had come to a desperate end and as he considered mustering an all-complement search party.

She approached the camp humming gaily, her eyes staring abstractedly into the distance, her face transfigured. She wore a garland of flowers around her neck and there was a huge blossom in her hair.

For a moment Volkert, buckling on his holster in front of his tent, realized how ludicrous she appeared. And he was sobered by the contrast of soft, delicate flowers and the ungainly bulk of the woman who wore them.

But his moment of rational perspective was short-lived as he joined the men who rushed solicitously to her side.

Yelverton, Volkert resolved bitterly, would pay for this! But then, the major wondered briefly, how much of his resentment was in the interest of impartial justice and how much represented personal indignation?

He reached Jenny and sympathetically extended a hand. But she turned away indifferently, ignoring him and the

others, and headed for her tent.

She had deliberately spurned him! And he had only wanted to help—to put his arm around her, to reassure and protect her!

There was a rumble of discontent from the men who had gathered in the street and the major turned to see them staring at the edge of the forest—at Yelverton, who stood there indecisive and afraid.

Several of the soldiers broke and lunged for the sergeant. Others, instinctively reaching for their holsters and finding them empty, turned and raced for the arsenal.

Volkert reached the arms tent first and whirled to face the charging men. He fired a shot into the air and they drew up sharply.

"There'll be no issue of side-arms!" he announced decisively.

The men withdrew reluctantly, then rushed off to join the others in vengeful pursuit of Sergeant Yelverton. One paused to snatch up a length of rope that lay in a ditch.

"Farrell!" Volkert spied the doctor and shouted before the

latter could gain the obscurity of the woods.

The other drew up hesitatingly and headed back.

"We're men of control, Doctor," the major appealed. "With a simple determination, we can be above all this. And I need sane help. Go get the pickup truck."

Together, they loaded all the sidearms and other stored weapons on the truck. Then Volkert drove around to the ten gun emplacements, deserted in the frenzy of the moment, and detached all the firing pins, tossing them in with the other weapons.

There would be nothing to fear from the fact that the artillery pieces were now useless. The natives had been given a convincing demonstration of their firepower and were amply impressed. The mere presence of the disarmed guns would suffice for protection.

It wasn't until Volkert had dumped the entire lot off the cliff into the deep waters of the bay that he allowed himself a moment of relaxation. Now if the men were insanely aroused, they had only their fists to use.

When he returned to camp, however, he found a private and a civilian technician advancing stealthily on Miss Jennifer's tent. He shot them both, then, in a moment of restraint, marched Miss Jenny off to the steel-walled guardhouse.

Lusty cries from the forest gave evidence that the sergeant had been flushed from hiding.

Yelverton screamed twice.

Then all was quiet, except for the mournful singing of the natives and the dismal throb and cry of their instruments.

And Repugnant-B was a tiny, glittering jewel beside the relatively soft glow of its giant companion.

CHAPTER V

VOLKERT tossed fitfully in bed that night, as though his intense anxiety could make the days march by more swiftly and return the camp to normal.

But there were other disturbing thoughts that contributed to his restlessness—that Jenny was alone and doubtlessly lonely in her cold steel prison that she must despise him fo-

having locked her up; that, otherwise, the night was serenely beautiful, with the full disk of Repugnant-B's orange moon shimmering as it rose over the range to the east.

Back home, the major realized, savoring the thought, it would be a night for lovers. But here—

He rose and slipped his boots on and snapped his holster about his waist. He paced nervously. And, without conscious direction, his aimless steps took him outside, down the street and around beyond the assembly tent to the lock-up.

A brilliant but fitful light flared spasmodically against the olive drab canvas of the tent next to the guardhouse.

Already the gray tinge of dawn was pushing the darkness of night away from the horizon. He crept silently around the tent and stepped into the full glow of the flickering light.

Dr. Steimann was directing the flame of an oxyacetylene cutting torch against the cell's padlock. Miss Jennifer, her face leering expectantly in the glow of the sputtering jet, was visible through the bars.

His thin features etched with eagerness, Dr. Wattley trundled another cylinder of compressed gas from the supply tent, then bent over the anthropologist's shoulder to see how much progress he was making.

Swearing soundlessly, Volkert circled wide and came up from behind the two men. He swung the butt of the revolver and Steimann collapsed with a grunt.

Wattley turned and sped away. Until he had rounded the corner of the next tent, Volkert kept the revolver aimed at his back, eager to fire but reluctant to do so until he could be sure whether his motive was one of justified expediency or envious wrath.

"I was praying you'd come in time, Major," Miss Jennifer lied cooingly. "I wanted to scream. But I was afraid. I didn't know what they'd do."

He only stared uncertainly. Her face was visible now in the pale light of dawn—slender, delicate, fascinating.

"You did come for me, didn't you, Charles?"

He closed his eyes and shook his head, trying to restore a semblance of rationality that

would be independent of the glandular changes stimulated by Repugnant-B.

But an impartial appraisal of Jenny was impossible now. All that mattered was that she was there, beckoning coyly, irresistibly.

She rattled the door of the guardhouse and her intense supplication was implicit in the harsh sound.

But, God! He couldn't!

Nevertheless he reached into his pocket and got the key.

"That's it, Charles!" she encouraged avidly. "Let me out and we'll go away—*together*. Just you and me!"

He opened the door and she stepped out, staring almost reverentially into his perspiration-filmed face.

It was a timeless moment in which the door of eternity stood ajar. In the native village across the field, even the interminable ritual music paused and a portentous silence lay thick over the countryside.

Jenny extended her arms and came forward eagerly.

Volkert raised his revolver and emptied the chamber into her chest.

FOR an eternity he stood there—motionless, staring at her lifeless form.

A pale orange sun came up and cast an unworldly glow over the scene.

Civilian technicians and soldiers filtered from the tents and the forest and stood gaping, some of them eventually smiling in relief.

Volkert's hand finally relaxed and the gun fell to the ground.

It had been *that* simple, he told himself. And he remembered that once his uncle, a rancher on one of the out-worlds, had had a female *uratra* that seemed eternally to be in heat. And there were always scores of male *uratras* yowling and barking and tearing up the orchards in their mating tournaments, even though the bitch was penned up. Peace returned only after he had killed the captive animal.

Volkert allowed himself a brief smile of amusement. He was probably the only man in galactic history who'd have a medal pinned on him for being farsighted enough to murder

defenseless woman.

But there was a rustling in the forest all around him and the major looked up apprehensively.

Several of the men, facing the woods, were backing away. Two of them whirled around and only object fear was written on their faces.

Then the natives emerged from the shadows—advancing furtively, eagerly. Their bodies, covered with the sickly green mucous, glistened in the early morning sunlight. Their doleful eyes, peering avidly now out of the grotesque masks that were their faces, darted from soldier to civilian and back to soldier.

One of them started a low, suggestive chant and the others took it up as the survey crew members backed horrified toward the center of the camp.

Then Volkert gagged on his

breath as he saw that all the hundreds of primitives surrounding them were women!

Now he remembered, rather nauseously, that the women of the village outnumbered the men almost two to one.

And there were still two days to go before Repugnant-B even reached conjunction!

He screamed hoarsely.

But his cry was drowned out by the frenzied shouts of one of the soldiers who had fallen before the irresistible advance of the natives. Two of the women overtook the private and pulled him toward the forest. He screamed once more before he retched and fainted.

And the women came on like a stampeding herd.

Later, a stillness fell over the deserted camp and the forest breezes blew warm and soft all that day.

THE END

SCIENCE SHORTS

by EDGAR P. STRAUS

With DDT losing its effectiveness as an insecticide as the new six-legged generations develop a natural immunity, scientists are looking for new methods of insect control. One of the most interesting approaches is the attempt of some entomologists to trap insects by appealing scents.

It is known that male insects are attracted to females of their species by characteristic scents. If, scientists reason, these scents could be identified and synthesized, they could be used to lure the males to death-traps. This system has one built-in advantage over DDT: the insects could never evolve a resistance to it, because those which did would also evolve a resistance to females—and thus would not pass their trait on.

Already German Nobel Prize winner Adolf Butenandt has

prepared a seductive extract from female moths, and an Army quartermaster has extracted a substance which sends male cockroaches into a frenzy of sexual excitement. Dirty fighting, perhaps, but no holds are barred in man's struggle against the insect world.

Copper is poisonous to most forms of life, but a little-known type of moss actually thrives on copper. These mosses—the “copper mosses”—use sulfur from copper sulfides for the process of photosynthesis.

This form of photosynthesis is rare, known previously only in some green and purple bacteria. But it was believed to have been common in the distant past before the earth's atmosphere acquired oxygen, and botanists suspect that the copper mosses are survivors from that era.

SONG OF THE AXE

by DON BERRY

NOVELETTE

illustrated by ORBAN

There was a hidden mystery on Procyon IV. It could be vital to the whole Federation. Mason Kimberly thought the dancing girl might be a key that would unlock it

THE dingy bar on Procyon IV offered only two things. Liquor and a dancer. The liquor was rotgut, but the dancer was good.

Kimberly sat at the bar, nursing a drink, his lean, square face impassive. Through narrowed eyes he watched the dancer whirl and spin beneath the blue light. She's good, he thought, too damned good for a rat's nest like this.

He reflected bitterly that he had once watched the premier dancers of the Galactic Ballet, back on Terra, in the huge Interworld Auditorium. They had danced for *him* then, for Mason Kimberly, Hero. Now he sat in rundown tavern on Procy-

Four, trying to make a drink last so he wouldn't have to spend his few remaining credits for another. It made you wonder.

The dancer finished with a pirouette that stripped the last filmy cloth away from her slim body. She stood there under the spotlight for a moment nude, her ripe flesh glistening under the lights. Then it was black, and when the light came back on, she was gone.

Kimberly signalled the bartender. The burly Procy moved up the bar, taking his own time.

"Who's your dancer?" Kimberly asked.

"You want another drink?"

"I asked you who's your



dancer," Kimberly repeated.

"Name's Neela," said the bartender, unruffled. "Don't make trouble, Kimberly. You're in no position to make trouble." He made a small gesture with one pudgy hand.

Kimberly looked around him. Conversation had stopped in the bar. All heads were turned toward the two men, watching quietly. The space-linted faces wore expressions of contempt and hostility. There was little question whose side the men would take if it came to a fight. Some of them seemed to be relishing the prospect.

Kimberly said an ugly word, very quietly. The Procyon bartender's face twisted, but he made no move.

Kimberly swung away from the bar and headed toward the door. As he reached it, he heard the conversation resume.

He stepped out into the cold Procyon night. There were no lights, not in what they called the Pariah Quarter, but Kimberly had no trouble seeing. The sky shed its own light, the massed accumulation of billions of stars. They lay like a great luminous blanket over the planet, heaped and massed

in a profusion unknown on Terra. The night sky on Procyon was like a gigantic jeweler's velvet, gleaming with the brilliance of ten thousand diadems, a million queen's tiaras, ten million flashing jewels scattered at random across the sky.

HE stood there with his head thrown back, letting the liquid bright sky soak into his eyes, and thinking about space. Thinking of standing on the shining bridge of an EcoSurv ship. Thinking of the controls moving under his hands like a woman, thinking of the fierce joy of fighting landings on—

As though moved by some inner sense, Kimberly suddenly dropped to his knees. Something whined over his head and hit the wall behind him with a crash.

He whirled, still in a crouching position, and dimly saw a shadowy figure turn and begin to run down the narrow alleyway. A quick glance told him the figure had too much start to be caught. Once around the corner, he could lose himself easily in the endless series of alleys and cutbacks of the Pa-

riah Quarter. Even those who had lived there most of their lives didn't know them all, and Kimberly was relatively new.

He stood, and walked over to the wall. Deeply embedded in it was a Procy Fire-axe. It was a ceremonial weapon used in the Procy Fire Ritual, a huge, double-bitted axe with a heavily embellished blade. Except that on this one, both edges were honed to a razor keenness. If it had ever been used in the Fire Ceremony, that was its purpose no longer. It was meant to kill.

Kimberly's eye roved over the polished bit with the skill of an artist. A part of his mind he had not used in many months told him the Axe was a particularly good specimen. Narleen Dynasty, probably, exquisitely worked. The intertwining engraved designs were done with precision and sensitivity, the work of a master craftsman. Kimberly knew that Narleen Dynasty Axes were not easy to come by, particularly not a Singing Axe, which this one apparently was, from the fluted groovings on the bit. It didn't make any sense that someone would use a work of

ancient art for murder.

On the other hand, it didn't make any sense that anyone would try to murder him, really. Except possibly a relative of one of the Canopus VI colonists, and he thought he had checked their whereabouts carefully enough.

After the Canopus VI incident, he was not a popular man, certainly. But would anyone hate him enough to kill him? It didn't seem reasonable. The Solar Federation laws were not particularly lenient with murderers, and even on Procyon IV the law enforcement agencies were efficient when they had to be.

He shrugged and hefted the Fire-axe. So. He would add it to his collection of Procy art, when and if he ever saw Terra again.

As he started again down the alleyway, three men turned in at the other end, walking rapidly, close together. Kimberly stopped, shifted his grip on the Fire-axe.

The men came closer. Kimberly spun the Axe in his hand, making the finely worked blade scatter reflections of light from the starry sky. The three men

stopped, and one stepped forward.

"Kimberly?" he asked dubiously.

"Yeah."

"Come with us."

"What am I under arrest for?"

"Nothing, yet. Somebody wants to talk to you."

"Who?"

"Jacob Spack," said the Guard officer. "Where'd you get the axe?"

"It was a present," said Kimberly. "Sort of a going away present, you might call it."

"Where you going?"

"No place. But the people who—gave it to me didn't know that. What does Spack want with me?"

"How should we know?" said one of the other men irritably. "He said to pick you up, that's all. Why don't you put that Fire-axe down?"

"All right," Kimberly said. "You three walk along in front of me, then." Grumbling, the Guardsmen turned and walked toward the end of the alley, with Kimberly following several steps behind. Just around the corner a Guard cruiser was parked and the leader of the

three motioned for Kimberly to get in.

THE cruiser swung smoothly into the street. Soon they had left the Pariah Quarter and were moving along the brightly lit concourses of the City proper. They seemed to be heading on a direct route to the huge spire that marked the Ecological Survey Building, and Kimberly began to relax.

It began to look as though the Guardsmen were actually taking him to see Spack, Director of Ecological Surveys. Kimberly wondered bitterly what Spack could possibly have to say to him.

He didn't blame the Old Man for what he had done, he'd had no choice. Popular opinion would have forced him to get rid of Kimberly, if nothing else. When two hundred colonists die, people are going to look for a scapegoat, and Kimberly was it.

As Captain of an EcoSurvey ship, it was Kimberly's job to examine the ecology of a colonizable planet. It had to be determined that the natural balance of a planet wouldn't be upset by the intrusion of human-

ity. If the arrival of colonists threw the planet's ecology off kilter, there was no telling what might happen. Nature has strange ways of maintaining her own balance, cruel and implacable ways. Usually they involved the removal of the disturbing element, in this case human colonists.

If a Captain's judgement was off, it could cost the lives of all the colonists, so EcoCaptains were not permitted to make mistakes.

Kimberly had.

It made no difference that the vicious *z'art* insects were in their larval stage when he had made his examination. By the time the colonists arrived on Canepus VI, they were hatched and looking for a place to lay their eggs. On the third day after planetsfall a cloud of the *z'art* had spun over the horizon, so many as to blot out the sun. Like a monstrous scythe they swept through the colonists camp, cutting down everything before them. They moved like tiny flying needles, piercing everything in their flight path, injecting their paralytic poisons into anything warm, then depositing their eggs. The

living bodies of the human colonists had become incubators for the *z'art*. And since the *z'art* paralytic affected the muscle center but not the nerves, they had been conscious. Conscious and capable of feeling pain as the eggs grew in pulpy swarms beneath their flesh.

And Kimberly had become the most hated man in the Federation.

"We're here," the driver said shortly.

They got out of the Guard cruiser, walked through the lobby and entered the elevator. Kimberly noticed with wry amusement that his entrance caused a certain amount of consternation among the staff, but he said nothing.

The Old Man was seated at his huge desk, in the exact center of the room. He was idly shuffling papers, pretending to examine them, but Kimberly knew he was aware of his presence.

SPACK was a small man, but incredibly dynamic. Only a man with the energies of a giant could have held his job. His physical appearance was deceptive, small, balding, an almost

kindly face with bright blue eyes, but Kimberly knew how ruthless the man could be. He had seen it too often.

Spack looked up, regarding Kimberly without expression. His bright blue eyes flicked quickly down to Kimberly's hands, still holding the Procy Fire-axe.

"Where'd you get that?" Spack asked.

"It was thrown at me tonight."

"By whom?"

Kimberly shrugged. "I wish I knew. Thanks to you, lots of people like me."

Spack frowned. "Not enough to kill you," he said.

"I didn't think so either," Kimberly said. "But here's the Axe."

"That's bad," said Spack. "I hope it doesn't mean what I think it means." He reached forward on his desk, depressed a switch. "Find out who owns Procy Fire-axes, registered and un-registered, and where they are now."

"This shouldn't be hard to trace," Kimberly said. "It's Narleen Dynasty. There aren't many around."

Spack repeated the informa-

tion into the desk top, and turned back to face Kimberly.

"We'll see if we can trace it. Sit down."

Kimberly waited patiently while Spack shuffled the papers several more times. Abruptly, the small man said, "Kimberly, you want a job?"

"With EcoSurv? Hah! After the discharge you gave me I can't get a job sweeping streets in the Pariah Quarter."

"This is a big machine, Kimberly. People get caught in the gears occasionally. I thought you knew that."

"Nothing personal intended? Sure, I know that. It doesn't make it a hell of a lot easier to take."

"All right," said Spack. "I apologize. Do you think I enjoyed sacking the best man I had. I didn't have any choice, Kimberly. Keeping you would have destroyed people's faith in EcoSurv's infallibility. And," he added bitterly, "we've got to be infallible for them."

"Get to the point," said Kimberly. "What's the job?"

"I'll have to explain some things to you, first. What I'm going to tell you is known by only a handful of men. If you

don't want the job, you'll have to be hypnowashed. Still want to hear it?"

Kimberly nodded.

"All right," said Spack. "The brutal fact is that EcoSurv is going under. At the present rate of decline, it'll be dead in fifty years. When that happens, humanity stays on the planets it has. No more colonization, no more expansion."

"So?"

"Kimberly, I don't know what you've heard in the way of rumors, but this is *fact*. We are not alone, in the galaxy or any other. The Solar Federation is not the only Empire in the stars."

"I'd heard rumors," Kimberly admitted. "Wrote them off, mostly."

"They can't be written off any more. There is another Empire, and it is going to clash with the Solar Federation. Maybe not for two or three hundred years, but eventually it's inevitable. We know more about them than we think they know about us, though we may be mistaken. They are on a technological level comparable to ours, and, of course, they're humanoid."

"How do you know this much?"

"We captured one of their ships."

"Where?"

"Here. *In the Procyon system.*"

KIMBERLY was momentarily stunned. *The Outsiders were in the Procyon system!* What had been the vaguest of unsubstantiated rumors had suddenly become harsh fact. He was trying to sort out the implication of this unexpected data, when Spack's voice broke in again.

"The ironic fact," he said wryly, "is that the ship we took was Their equivalent of an Eco-Surv Team. They were checking out the Procy system against some old records of theirs."

"And they're humanoid."

"That's right. They can live on any planet we can. What this means, Kimberly is this: When the time of eventual contact comes, the two cultures will be in direct competition. The Solar Federation will have to be the stronger of the two, or it will be wiped out. In order to make it stronger, we

must expand. In order to expand, EcoSurv must continue, and even increase its effectiveness."

"And what's threatening EcoSurv?"

"Money," said Spack. "Simply money. Do you know how much it costs to send out a single Team? Yes, I suppose you do, you did it long enough. The simple fact is that the economy of the Federation will not even support exploration on the scale we need, much less colonization."

"Where do I come in? You asking for a donation?"

"Don't be funny, Kimberly. We have one chance, and only one. We can't compete on the basis we have. We've got to have a shortcut. We think we've found one, but we can't even be sure of that."

"What is it?"

"Naturally, the Outsider ship we captured carried a library. Part of it was stuff quietly picked up here, when they found the system was inhabited. Their LangComps were in the processs of translating it into their own language, so we have several books in both languages. With this as

a basis, we've translated the rest of their library and found out some things about the Procyon system we didn't even know.

"According to one of their histories, Procyon was once the center of an interstellar empire of its own. The original Procy race had colonized a volume of space that makes the Solar Federation look like a child's balloon. Then they disappeared. The Outsider history didn't say how, apparently the records had been lost. It was a long time ago, perhaps better than a million years. At any rate, it explains the advanced artifacts some of the EcoCaptains found on Survey runs.

"The point of this being that the Procy race had something comparable to EcoSurv. It's a necessary pattern. Before a planet can be colonized, *somebody* has to go in and check it out."

"All right," said Kimberly. "Admitted. So? I don't see how ancient history has any bearing on this situation."

"Just this," said Spack. "We have reason to believe that the original records of the Procy Team are still in existence."

Two thousand years, thought Kimberly, five thousand years of EcoSurv work, already done for them. Perhaps enough to make the difference between victory and defeat in the eventual clash between Empires. If they could find the records.

"Wouldn't they be obsolete?" he asked.

"Some of them," Spack admitted. "Even those that were obsolete would be useful. If we could date them, the computers could predict the eventual development of any given planet, and make a pretty good estimate of what it would be like now. And just knowing where to *look* for an oxygen planet would save us billions of credits and hundreds of years."

"Where do you think the records are?" Kimberly asked.

"Right here. On Procyon Four."

"Why?"

"One of the jobs of the Outsider Team was to search for them here."

A buzzer on Spack's desk hummed angrily, and the small man cut in the wall speaker.

"Yes?"

"Here's the data on the ceremonial Fire-axes, sir."

"All right, I'm recording."

"There are sixteen Narleen Dynasty Axes in existence that we know of. Fifteen are in private collections and museums. Do you want the list?"

"No," said Spack. "What about the other one?"

"It was registered to the Thalan temple of the Fire Ceremony, about fifty years ago."

"Where's that?" interrupted Spack.

"Here on Four," said the voice. "In the Kandor Mountains. But it isn't there now, the Axe I mean. There was some kind of religious defection, one of the priests deserted the temple and took the Fire-axe with him. That was about twenty years ago and there's no record of it since. They never found the priest."

"All right," said Spack, and cut off the speaker. "Dead end," he said to Kimberly.

"Looks like I get a Fire-axe of my very own," Kimberly said.

"Do you want the job?" asked Spack abruptly.

"You want me to find the Procy records," said Kimberly.

"Yes. Frankly, the only reason I can think that anyone would try to kill you is that they heard you were coming here. That means there's a leak somewhere in my own organization. It may mean that the Outsiders even have an espionage system on Four, I don't know. The only thing I can say for certain is that it'll be dangerous, and you won't be able to depend on EcoSurv for help if you get into a tight spot. I understand the Procy are pretty touchy about people digging around in their past."

"Darned if I do and damned if I don't," mused Kimberly. "Thanks to you I can't get a job anywhere else. I don't suppose I have any choice. You've got me over a barrel."

"That's the way I see it," said Spack.

"All right, you're on. What about pay?"

"Living expenses, unlimited expenses you run into on the job, and reinstatement of your old commission if you succeed."

"If I don't?"

"Tough," said Spack.

Kimberly laughed glumly. "You really stack the deck, don't you? All right, where do I start?"

"With the Outsider library," Spack said. "Oh, I suppose I should tell you one other thing, Kimberly."

"What?"

"We're missing a ship, too."

THE library was not particularly enlightening. The Outsider histories were apparently pieced together from the fragmentary records that survived some great cataclysm of their own. As such, their information was spotty; very detailed examinations of some things, vague guesses about others.

The records of the Procyon survey teams were somewhere on the fourth planet. Procyon IV had been the base of operations for the original Procy race, just as it was for the Terran crews. Which was natural enough; the present-day Procys, direct descendants of the previous culture, were completely humanoid.

Beyond the planet, the Outsiders apparently knew nothing of the record's location.

The one part Kimberly

found most interesting, if not helpful, was the lengthy description of the Procyon religious ceremonies.

Their religion had apparently been irrevocably connected with conquest, and symbolized the spreading of the Procy race through space. It was their divine destiny to conquer, and all the resources of the planet and its peoples had been directed to that sole end.

Kimberly found the descriptions of the ritual dances vaguely disturbing, but could not say why. Like all races bent on conquest, their existence depended on racial fertility, and there was a good proportion of their ritual that was frankly sexual in intent and meaning. Many of their dances were the direct enactments of their desire for, and realization of, fertility for the race.

It was a fairly common pattern, but Kimberly felt the tugging sense of familiarity more strongly than mere anthropological knowledge could explain.

HE left the EcoSurv Building, turning over in his mind the limited data the Out-

sider library had provided him with. There was not much to go on. Well, let that settle for a while; first things first.

That night he discovered the source of the ringing sense of familiarity the descriptions of the Procyon religious rites had caused.

It was the dancer he had watched in the bar, the night before. Tonight, sitting this time at a private table, Kimberly watched her with new knowledge adding meaning to her movements. He realized she was dancing a somewhat pale version of the Procy fertility rites, and caught himself wishing she were doing the whole thing. As it was, the excitement of her dance caught at his imagination, and apparently the imaginations of all the men in the bar, for the end of the number was signalled by tremendous applause and shouting. Operating on a hunch, Kimberly quickly scribbled a note. He signalled the bartender, who reluctantly came to the table.

"What did you say that girl's name was?"

"Neela," said the bartender.

"Take her this," Kimberly.

said, handing him the note.

"Neela don't talk to the customers," said the heavy man, making no move to take the folded paper.

Kimberly dug into his pocket, added a five credit note to the paper. The bartender reached for it.

"Later," said Kimberly. "When I'm sure she has the note."

Grumbling, the bartender moved off into the dark recesses to the rear of the bar. In a few moments he reappeared. Beside him was the slight form of the girl, wrapped in a long enveloping cloak that made her look like a child in her mother's clothing.

Silently, Kimberly handed the bartender the five-credit note, and motioned for the girl to sit opposite him. She did, keeping her darkly luminous eyes directly on Kimberly.

"You dance well," he said.

"I know." Her voice was as gentle and liquid as her dance had been, with the same, sure confidence.

"Not particularly modest, are you?" Kimberly laughed.

"Why should I be?" the girl asked. "My dancing is a fact,

why should I pretend it is not?"

"No reason, I guess," Kimberly admitted.

"Your note said you were familiar with the dance. I don't see how that is possible. It is my own."

"Where did you learn it?" asked Kimberly.

"Much of it I made myself. Some is from—a dance of my people."

"A very old dance of your people."

"Yes."

"A religious dance."

"Perhaps we understand different things by religion," said the girl warily.

"A ritual dance," Kimberly insisted. "A dance performed only in the temples during ceremonies."

"You are obviously mistaken," the girl said with amusement. "Did I not just dance it—here?" Her graceful gesture expressed her contempt for the surroundings, and for Kimberly.

"Why do you dance here, anyway?" Kimberly asked, ignoring her comment. "With your body, and your talent, you could be dancing on Terra in

the Interworld Auditorium. I've seen worse, there."

"One must live," she shrugged.

"Not like this."

"Perhaps not. Recognition of ability does not always come swiftly. I'm sorry," she added, glancing at Kimberly's watch. "I must go now.

"Where?"

"Home. I am finished for the evening."

"Let me take you."

"No," she said. "I'm sorry, it isn't permitted."

"Not permitted by whom?" asked Kimberly. "Him?" He gestured to the pudgy bartender, who stood behind the bar, glaring.

"No," she said. "By me." She stood quickly and moved gracefully across the room, entering the door from which she'd come, apparently back stage.

KIMBERLY counted slowly to fifty, then yawned ostentatiously and stood up. Crossing to the bar he wore a rueful expression of good-natured defeat. He handed the bartender another five-credit note and said, "She doesn't go

for the idea. Thanks anyway. She looks like a good one."

The bartender didn't smile as he took the extended money. "Better try someplace else. Neela's too high class to go to bed with the likes of you, Kimberly."

Suppressing an impulse to put his fist in the pudgy face, Kimberly left. He turned the corner and doubled back behind the building, where he waited in the dark until he saw the girl's slim figure move out of the back door. She stood quietly for a moment, apparently looking around her, but Kimberly was well hidden.

The shadow form moved away from the wall and down the alleyway. Behind her, Kimberly followed quietly, keeping to the shadows. The girl passed two streets, then turned into a doorway that was almost invisible in the darkness.

Kimberly speeded up and turned into the doorway. There was a sudden metallic pressure in his belly, and he looked down to see the starlight reflected from the muzzle of the weapon in the girl's hand.

"Oh," said Neela. "It's just you." Kimberly didn't know

whether he was being complimented or insulted.

"Who did you expect?" he asked lightly. "Just wanted to make sure you got home all right."

"Thank you very much," said Neela sarcastically. "I appreciate your concern."

"Aren't you going to invite your protector in for a nightcap?"

Ignoring that, the girl said, "Where did you get the idea that my dance was like a religious ceremony?"

"Trade you that information for a nightcap," Kimberly said.

The girl considered this for a moment, then put the gun back into her coat pocket. "Oh, all right," she said. "I suppose you aren't very dangerous."

"I don't know as I like being considered not dangerous," said Kimberly as they climbed the darkened stairs.

"You're not," the girl told him flatly.

There was not a single Terran object in the girl's room. Kimberly noted this especially, for most of the Procyon population had fully adopted Terran ways. Since it was furnished in Procyon style, there were no

chairs in the room. Against the walls were large mats, which doubled as sleeping pads. Now they were covered with the daytime covers of bright saffron.

Kimberly kneeled on one of the mats and bent his head to touch his knees. As he straightened, he noticed the girl's surprise that he knew the formal Procy gesture of respect for one's host. However, she did not comment on it, but went into the little serving alcove and got a bottle full of a murky red fluid.

When she returned, Kimberly was standing in front of a painting, his back to her. The painting was a landscape, depicting rugged mountain country with a Fire-temple set inconspicuously into one of the cliffs. It was beautifully executed, in the style of one of the greatest of Procyon artists. Kimberly mentioned it.

"You seem very familiar with our art and customs," said Neela. Kimberly heard the clink of the *mazh* bottle against the cups.

"I have a certain amount of my own," said Kimberly. "On Terra."

"You neither look nor act like a collector," the girl said.
"At least not a collector of art."

She had removed her cloak in the serving room, and was now dressed in a style Kimberly had seen only in paintings. Her breasts were bare, and she wore a skirt-like garment which began at her hips. It was held almost waist high on her right hip, and cascaded gently across the soft contours of her belly to a much lower point on her left hip. The left side was slit from floor to top and joined with a golden pin.

"Does my dress bother you?" she asked naively. "I thought anyone so familiar with our customs would not be shocked.

"It bothers me, but in a pleasant way," Kimberly said.

Putting his cup down, he took her slim white shoulder in one hand. The girl leaned forward slightly, lips parting. Kneeling, the slit of her dress exposed the full length of her thigh, and Kimberly gently moved his hand along the smooth flesh, until he reached the golden pin which clasped the top together. Her full, firm breasts moved toward him,

swaying slightly from the rhythm of her breathing.

Their lips met, and clung, and Kimberly felt the warmth of her mouth on his, moving softly. She leaned back, pulling him with her to the mat. Kimberly felt the golden pin loosen beneath his fingers, and then there was only soft flesh beneath his hand.

When they finally sank into sleep, his body was pervaded with a warm fullness, and the touch of her body against his was electric.

WHEN he awoke, she was gone from his side, and he could hear low voices in the adjoining room. As he started to sit up, he discovered his hands were manacled together, as were his feet. Heavy links of chain clanked together as he moved, attracting the attention of the people in the other room.

There were three of them. Necla, her face cold and impassive, led the way. Behind her came a small man, white-haired, old, dressed in the traditional Procyon robe of respect. Last was a man as large as Kimberly himself, deeply tanned and muscular. His skull

was shaven and tanned an even brown from long exposure.

"Well, well," the old man said. "I see your—guest has awakened. "Did you sleep well?"

"Who are you? What's the idea?"

"Allow me to introduce ourselves," said the old man. "Neela, unfortunately, you already know. I am Dar Manson, the young man is my son Kai Manson."

"Why the manacles?" asked Kimberly.

"Why, obviously to prevent your going anywhere," said Dar Manson in a tone of surprise.

"Obviously," agreed Kimberly wryly. "Beyond that?"

"We have some plans of our own, Mr. Kimberly. Unfortunately you have become involved in them, and we must have you with us, whether you prefer it that way or not. We are going to take a trip up into the mountains. If you will come gently, we will take the manacles off. Otherwise, they stay on."

"Don't be a fool, father," said Neela. "You couldn't trust him anyway. The manacles stay on."

"I'm sorry," said Dar Manson. "I forget. One cannot trust the Terrans. I am not used to dealing with them." He turned again to Kimberly.

"As I said, we are going to the mountains, Mr. Kimberly. There, in fact." He pointed to the painting Kimberly had examined that evening, showing the Fire-temple in the rocks.

"Would those be the Kandor Mountains?" Kimberly asked.

"Very perceptive," nodded the old man. "These people are not so stupid, Neela. You've misrepresented them to me."

"And," Kimberly continued, "if those are the Kandor Mountains, that would be the Thalan Fire-temple."

"Yes."

"From which a Narleen Dynasty Fire-axe is missing."

"Yes. We are going to return it. That is one of the reasons for our trip."

"What makes you think I'll give it to you?" asked Kimberly.

"We've already seen to that," Dar Manson said. "Kai visited your flat earlier. We have the Axe here."

"You work efficiently."

"We must. We are few."

There is little allowance for error."

Looking again at Neela, Kimberly said, "You don't care much what weapons you use, either." He was grimly satisfied to see the rising blush cover the girl's features.

SUDDENLY a huge fist exploded in his face, throwing his head back to the floor. Kai Manson stood over him, apparently ready to throw his hammer-like fist again.

"Kai!" the old man shouted. "Enough!" The young man stepped back, and Dar spoke to Kimberly.

"You touched a rather sensitive point with Kai. You should be more careful."

"I think I will in the future," Kimberly said ruefully, tasting the salt blood that ran from his nose.

"Very wise," nodded the old man. "Kai, pick him up." The young giant moved behind Kimberly, easily lifted him to his feet.

"Does it talk?" asked Kimberly, tilting his head at Kai.

"Only when 'it' has something to say," the old man said

with amusement. "A policy we might all be well advised to follow. Especially yourself, if I may say so."

Kai went to the room from which the three had come, returned with the ritual Fire-axe in his hands, holding it with the ease of long familiarity. Seeing Kimberly staring at him, the huge man grinned. Kimberly was surprised to see that the grin was not a malicious one, rather it seemed an expression of genuine amusement. He almost caught himself grinning back.

They left the flat, Kimberly walking noisily and awkwardly because of the chains binding his ankles. Instead of going down the stairs he had come up that evening, they moved to the back of the building. What looked like a boarded-up door opened at Dar Manson's touch, revealing a sleek, modern elevator. It dropped smoothly, far past the street floor and stopped with a hushing susurration. When the door opened it revealed a tunnel-car, like those Kimberly had found on Nighthawk III. Only this one,

instead of being rusted through long disuse, was gleaming and polished.

"Get in," said Dar Manson.

The tunnel-car started rapidly, pushing Kimberly back in the seat with the force of acceleration.

"So these were native to Procyon," he said.

"Yes," said Dar Manson. "There are a few still in use."

"Why doesn't the Solar Federation know about them?"

Dar Manson laughed. "You Terrans believe what you are told," he said ambiguously. "When your curiosity is satisfied with likely stories, you never pry any further."

"Why are you taking the Fire-axe back to the temple?" Kimberly asked.

"It is needed," the old man said.

"Father," said Neela. "You are talking too much. He doesn't have to know anything."

"Perhaps not," said the old man. "On the other hand—Kimberly, how much do you know about our religion?"

"Not a great deal," said Kimberly cautiously.

"Just what you read in the Outsider's library, eh?" Dar Manson looked at him with amusement. "Yes, we know all about that. It's one of the reasons you're here." Neela started to interrupt, but the old man silenced her with a gesture. "Neela, please let me handle this."

"You know about the Outsider ship, then," said Kimberly.

"Oh yes," said Dar. "We've known about the Outsider for a good while now. We—had a brush with him a long time ago."

"You're speaking in riddles," said Kimberly.

"No mind. We're here now. You'll see soon enough."

"Father," Neela gasped. "You're not going to let him—"

"Yes, Neela, I'm afraid I am. It has occurred to me in the past that I may have been taking the wrong approach to this problem in ignoring the Terrans. I'm beginning to be convinced of it."

"Let me what?" asked Kimberly.

"Watch the Fire-Ritual," said Dar Manson.

THE Thalan Fire-temple was set into a cliff of the Kandor range. The straight purple cliff soared above it for a thousand vertical feet. Below, the ground tapered into a series of gently rolling hills, which ended on a plain nearly fifteen miles away. From its vantage point, the Thalan temple commanded a view of all the surrounding countryside. At its back was the impregnable bulk of the Kandor range.

Kimberly caught a brief glimpse of this as they left the tunnel car and crossed the narrow courtyard-pavilion in front of the temple. A low wall separated the pavilion from the beginning of the foothills. He was taken through a narrow tunnel to the central chamber, hewn from the living rock. The central chamber was circular, perhaps a hundred feet across. All around the perimeter the wall was pierced with tunnels similar to the one Kimberly had come through. They were apparently the only entrances, as though the chamber were the hub of a wheel and the tunnels, spokes.

Neela and Kai left them

then, and Dar Manson led Kimberly up to an overhanging shelf like a balcony above the central amphitheatre.

In the center of the amphitheatre was a slightly raised circular disc, perhaps six inches higher than the surrounding floor and five feet in diameter.

"I was once the priest of this temple," Dar Manson informed him. "Unfortunately, there was a difference of opinion between myself and the other Initiates. I left."

"Taking the Fire-axe."

"Taking the Fire-axe," agreed the old man. "I hated to do it, but it was the only way I could back up my feelings on the matter."

The amphitheatre began to darken. Coming from the tunnels, dark figures began to gather. They formed a ring about the outside edge of the chamber. Kimberly started to ask what the disagreement was that caused Dar Manson to leave, but the ex-priest hushed him.

"Watch," he said. From somewhere a drum began to throb, and was joined by the muted wailing of strings. The circular group below them be-

gan to sway gently in time with the slow rhythm set by the drum.

Dar Manson was now whispering low into Kimberly's ear, "We had an Empire once, from Procyon our race scattered to the stars. We ruled for ten thousand years, unchallenged. Then—we met the race you call the Outsider. They were young, vigorous, growing. Our Empire, though larger, was old. We had lost the vitality of youth, we had settled into more peaceful ways."

Below, the throbbing of the drums grew faster and louder, as counterpoint to the ex-priest's words.

"When the two cultures met, there was war, as there must always be. Our weapons were stronger, but we had forgotten how to wage a war on an interstellar scale. Their drive was greater. They wanted conquest with the hunger of a man for a woman, while Procyon wanted only to maintain what we had.

"The two advantages cancelled each other out. The combat left a thousand planets barren, deserted, lifeless. In the last stages, the Weapon was discovered, which can make a

sun go nova within seconds. That has been lost, and for that we can thank whatever gods there may be. But the war had destroyed both cultures, both were crippled beyond help. Both withdrew to their home systems, all dreams of Empire crushed.

"The Outsider forgot, we know that. Procyon almost forgot, except for a few men who determined that the lesson should not be wasted."

THE lights in the amphitheatre were still low. The swaying circle was barely visible. Suddenly, a brilliant shaft of light darted from the ceiling, falling on the central disc. From the darkness a swift shape came, and Kimberly saw that it was Neela. She swept once around the central disc, just outside the ring of light, and then leaped full into the brilliant shaft. She stood rigid, her arms outstretched above her, her head thrown back. In one hand she carried a wand with what looked to Kimberly like a crystal tip. Neela thrust the wand up into the shaft of light, as if trying to reach its source. Gradually, the crystal

tip began to sparkle and gleam with a light of its own.

Soon it was brighter than the light which kindled it. The strings had stopped their wailing, and there was only the rapid beat of the drum in the amphitheatre.

The circle began to shift.

It split into segments, then into small groups, then into individual dancers. As they passed near the shaft of light, Kimberly saw that each dancer carried a wand of similar construction, though dark. They began to weave a complex pattern about the central disc, where Neela still stood rigid. Kimberly heard Dar Manson's voice again in his ear.

"These men embodied the facts of our history into ritual, to be passed on from generation to generation. A few Initiates of each generation, the high priests, were to know the symbolism, for they were to have access to the records. It is not difficult to understand, when you know what to look for: Neela represents Procyon in the dance. Watch."

Neela began to sway beneath the shaft of light. Gradually the swaying became more pro-

nounced, and soon she was making a slow circle, the glowing tip of the wand reacing almost the limit of the cylinder of light in which she stood.

Then she left the disc and darted between the other dancers, who continued to move around the disc in a pattern too complex for Kimberly to make out. Occasionally as she moved, Neela would touch one of the dark wands with her own, and it would spring into light. Soon the floor of the amphitheater was full of the bright sparks, and the central shaft of light was diminished and faded, leaving the chamber lit by the shining wands of the dancers.

Suddenly a new drum came into play, deep and heavy. It beat slowly, implacably, and a new figure came onto the floor. It was Kai Manson, his brown body gleaming with oil, the Fire-axe cradled in his arms.

"The Outsider," the old man said.

Behind the young giant came a horde of hooded figures, dark shadows against the light shed by the wands of Neela's dancers. They too carried wands, these glowing with a smoky red light. They began to weave in

and out of the complex pattern of white. When one would touch a white wand with his own red one, the white and red would both be extinguished, and both dancers would sink to the floor.

Neela was back on the central disc, and Kai Manson mounted it with her. They began a slow, circling dance about each other, Kai twisting the Fire-axe and sending splintered shards of reflected light into the shadows, Neela moving straight and graceful.

As more and more of the wand-lights were extinguished by contact with each other, the central shaft of light began to glow again, glinting down on the oiled bodies of the man and woman.

"Our people came back to Procyon IV," the old man was whispering. "The Fire-temples were set up, to be the heritage of Procyon in a better time. The records we could salvage were sealed in vaults in each temple. One key was made for each vault, and put into the hands of the priest of that temple. If they were threatened, they were to be destroyed."

Kai was now swinging the

Fire-axe in a great circle around his head.

"Listen!" said the old man.
"The Axe sings!"

KIMBERLY listened. The keen blade moaned and whistled as it swung. The flute decorations caught the air and whined. Kai began to whirl the great blade faster, and the song grew higher. Several times he slashed in a great diagonal at Neela, without breaking the rhythm of his swing. Each time she stepped smoothly out of the way and the shining bit missed her slim body by inches.

"The Fire-axes are the keys to the vaults," said Dar, "and that is why I took this one with me. Now we have returned it."

With a shriek of victory that resounded through the chamber and echoed back from its walls, Kai swung the Axe into the center of the raised disc. He and Neela stepped swiftly into the shadows.

With a whining of tortured metal, the disc raised, a tubular column rising from the floor. The dancer had gone, and there was no one left in the amphitheater.

theatre except the two men on the balcony.

"The vault," said Dar Manson.

"Why are you showing this to me?" Kimberly said.

"Because the Outsider is back in our system," the ex-priest told him. "You have captured one ship, a small one, but there will be others, and very soon."

"What records are in the Thalan vault?"

"The ones you were sent to find," said the old man. "The ecological data on all the planets of the Procyon Empire. For twenty years I have held the key to the vault, for it was twenty years ago that the first Outsider made contact with this system again. The other Initiates wanted to destroy the records, but I was convinced the contact was accidental, that they were not bent on conquest again. Now they have come again."

"You were involved because you were close on the trail and you had the Fire-axe which Neela unfortunately—gave you."

"Why?"

"Neela has never been in this

temple, though Kai grew up here. She was born after I left, and took a wife. She was trained in the ritual, but not its meaning. When she was instructed to assassinate you, she picked the first weapon at hand, without realizing its importance."

Suddenly there was a thunderous roar, shaking the balcony on which Kimberly and the old man sat. A thin streamer of dust floated down from the ceiling.

"What was that?"

"I don't know," said Dar Manson. "Surely they couldn't—"

The lean, muscular figure of Kai Manson darted across the amphitheatre floor. He stopped below the balcony and cupped his hands to his mouth. His voice was drowned by another clap of thunder and the balcony shook again.

"Dar!" shouted the young man, "they're here! The Outsider is attacking!"

"Take these things off my wrists," Kimberly snapped.

Dazedly, Dar Manson complied. "I don't know what—"

"Come on! Let's get out of here!" More dust began to

trickle from the ceiling as the Outsider's blasting began to take effect. Kimberly grabbed the old man's arm and pulled him off the balcony.

"How do you lower the vault?" he shouted.

"From the main floor."

"Let's get down there!"

They stumbled through the increasing dust, finally finding the stairs which led to the main floor. In the main chamber they met Kai, who turned them around.

"It's no use," he said. "The vault won't go back down. The blasting has jammed it halfway!"

"Then destroy it!" said Dar.

"No!" Kimberly said. "We'll defend it!" To Kai he said, "Have you any hand weapons?"

"Some," said the young man. "Back in the living quarters."

"Get them out. Get as many men as you can who know how to use them."

KAI ran off into one of the tunnels to collect what weapons the temple could offer. Kimberly grasped the shoulder of another young man from the crowd that was begin-

ning to gather in the central chamber.

"Where's the Outsider?" he demanded.

"They landed in the foothills. They're blasting from their ship and sending troops out on foot."

"How'd they get a ship past the Federation?"

"It's a Federation ship. I don't know where it came from."

Kai Manson returned, laden with weapons, and began passing them out to the men in the chamber. Another blast shook the temple, and plumes of dust descended toward the floor.

"They'll have the range in seconds," Kimberly shouted.

"No," said Kai. "They won't destroy the temp'e, they want the records!"

"What's happenin' then?"

"They're firing at the cliff above," said Kai. "dropping stones on the roof."

"That means they'll probably try to take it with ground troops. They can't outnumber us too badly, with one ship. How many men do you have?"

"Only about twenty with weapons," Kai answered.

"Another fifty with knives."

"Knives aren't much good at this distance," Kimberly said. "All right, put your men with weapons out on the pavilion. Get everybody else in here!"

Kai charged toward the door, his armed men following him. Kimberly turned to the old priest.

"Is there a safe place for the women?"

"Yes," said Dar. "The living quarters are set back into the mountainside."

"All right, get them together and send them all back in. Then build a fire someplace. Set the building on fire."

"Set it on fire!"

"Or build a fire outside, I don't care. Anything to get some smoke going so it looks as if the temple were burning."

"I don't—"

"If the Outsiders see smoke, they may think they've hit the temple after all. If they want those records, they'll have to come after them before they're burned. Understand?"

"All right." The old man scurried off through the chamber, calling for the women to gather in the living quarters. As

Kimberly started for the tunnel leading to the pavilion, a little figure darted across the floor to him.

"Neela!" he said. "Get back in the living quarters!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Try to get 'em where the knives will do some good," he said. "Otherwise we're through. Now get back there!"

"Wait," she said, still holding his arm. "I want you to know—last night wasn't all—"

"Get the hell out of here!" Kimberly shouted. "I don't want that pretty body all scratched up!" He lifted her chin and kissed her harshly.

AT the front of the temple, Kai had placed his men with weapons in an even line behind the low wall that marked the edge of the pavilion. The Outsider foot troops were advancing slowly up the foothills, frequently dropping while the big batteries on the ship pounded the cliff. Rock was now falling in a steady stream from the cliff, bouncing off the temple roof and rolling down the hill.

Kimberly found Kai in the center of the line.

"Is there any chance that cliff will give way?"

"I don't know," said Kai. "It might. They're giving it an awful beating." He glanced fearfully up at the purple precipice, now occluded with clouds of dust scattered from the explosions that periodically racked it.

"Pull these men back into the temple gradually," Kimberly ordered. "Have them gather in the passage ways. Take them out of the line slowly enough that the Outsider will think they're being picked off by rock.

Kai was still watching the cliff, but now his eyes were following a streamer of black smoke that began to rise from the temple roof and flow up the side of the cliff.

"The temple's burning!" he shouted. The men lying on the line all turned their eyes back at the smoke.

"No," said Kimberly grimly. "That's the bait. Now we'll see if the fish bite."

Shortly the blasting from the Outsider-manned ship stopped. There was a momentary pause, a complete silence that roared

in their ears after the constant din.

"They've seen it," Kimberly said. "Now—"

They waited.

There was a sudden concerted movement all along the foothills, and the Outsider troops began their charge. The blasting from the ship's batteries did not resume, but the fire from handweapons increased as the ground troops covered their own approach.

"Pick off as many as you can without risking your own men," Kimberly directed. "When they get to that first rise, pull all your men inside."

Kai nodded his assent and began to bellycrawl along the line, passing the orders.

Kimberly raced back into the temple and made a quick survey of the physical set up. Each of the radial tunnels was perhaps wide enough for three men abreast, but only if they crowded. The Outsider would probably come through two at a time. From the looks of the line of troops spread out along the foothills, there were at least two hundred of them, perhaps more. The tunnels would give him an advantage of position

but whether enough to offset the numerical superiority of the Outsider, he didn't know.

Kai was back at the entrance, shouting. "They're over the first rise! Couple minutes at most!"

"All right! Get your men back in."

When they had all assembled in the central chamber, Kimberly saw with shock there had been more casualties than he had figured on. Apparently the enemy ground fire had taken its toll along with the falling rock. There were roughly forty men left capable of holding weapons.

Quickly he outlined his plan, and the Procys took their places at the entrances of the tunnels.

Soon the first of the Outsider troops were heard in the tunnels that led outside. The leaders tried to approach the chamber cautiously but were being forced forward by the pressure of their comrades behind. As the first appeared in the entrance, they were quickly met with knives. But within a few scant minutes, the sheer numerical weight of the Outsider troops had pushed the Procyon

defenders back away from the entrances, and more poured in.

THE amphitheatre was soon filled with struggling clots of men, and full of the low sound of wounded and dying. Those still on their feet grunted and panted, but there was no other sound. The floor became slippery with the blood of Procy and Outsider alike.

Kimberly's foot slipped in a pool of blood and he fell heavily.

Looking up he saw the butt of a blaster plunging at his head. He rolled, kicking out with his feet, and felt them connect with the legs of the Outsider soldier as the blaster smashed into the floor where his head had been. He scrambled to his feet and kicked the Outsider in the face. He fell back, under the feet of the other combatants. Kimberly saw a hand appear as if by magic from the knot of men and deftly slide a dagger into the Outsider's throat, then disappearing back into the melee of arms and legs.

He was knocked off balance by another plunging body, and

thrown into the wall of the still upraised vault. It had gone nearly half way down before the mechanism jammed, and the circular disk was only about four feet off the floor. In the center the Fire-axe still hung, the key in the lock. Kimberly clambered to the top of the cylinder and wrenched loose the Axe.

An Outsider charged toward the vault, and Kimberly leaped from the top, whirling the Fire-axe. He caught the onrushing Outsider at the joint between neck and shoulder and split him cleanly, the head dropping away at a strange angle as bright blood spurted from the gash.

Kimberly swung the Axe above his head and started it whirling. It began to keen and wail as the blade flashed around and around, the tiny grooves of the decorations catching the air and turning it into a banshee's scream.

Kai shrieked from somewhere in the battle, the same high paean of victory that had chilled Kimberly's blood at the end of the Fire-Ritual. Kai's shaven brown head, now spattered with blood, appeared. His

head was thrown back and the shrill, piercing scream came from his throat in a rhythmic ululation.

Where the chamber had before held only the sound of struggling men, there were now the two eerie wails of the Fire-axe and Kai Manson. Some of the fighting men started, almost physically jolted by the sound.

With the terrifying war cry still issuing from his throat, Kai picked an Outsider up and threw him into the shining circle of death around Kimberly.

The Fire-axe neatly clipped off the man's head, and its wail was clotted with the gurgling of blood. A Procy knife man shoved another of the enemy soldiers backwards, and the Axe bit deeply. After each victim, Kimberly started the Axe whirling again, and soon the floor on the perimeter of the glittering circle it made was littered with the dead and dismembered bodies of the enemy.

Those left suddenly made a dash for the exit tunnels. Fear mirrored on their faces. They were met by the remnants of

Kai's men, and none left the central chamber.

Gathering the remaining Procys around him, Kai dashed to Kimberly. Together they made for the temple front and the pavilion. They reached open air just in time to see the Outsider ship lift.

It climbed vertically, under full acceleration until it was lost from their sight.

"I hope that's the last we see of them," Kai said.

"I doubt it," said Kimberly. "They'll be back."

THEY turned to re-enter the temple, and were stopped by a shout from one of the Procy kniiemen.

"Look! Look up there!" Their eyes followed his pointing finger. Far above, in the direction taken by the escaping Outsider ship, there was a new sun in the sky, its glare rivaling for a brief second that of Procyon itself.

"Nuclear blast," Kimberly said. "The Federation must have caught on to them."

Some minutes later the huge bulk of a Federation battle-cruiser appeared in the sky. It settled to earth gently, three

miles down the hill from the temple. A scout copter detached itself from the parent ship and sped quickly toward the temple cliff.

When it reached the courtyard, the entire remaining body of the Procy defenders had gathered on the pavilion, the women coming from the living quarters where they had spent the battle.

Neela came up beside Kimberly without a word, and linked her arm in his. He bent his head and looked into her luminous dark eyes.

"Well, we made it," he said.

He turned his eyes to the men climbing out of the Federation copter. One of them was Jacop Spack. His bright blue eyes widened as he saw Kimberly standing at the temple entrance with Kai at one side and Neela at the other.

"I suppose I might have known it," Spack said. "Kimberly, do you have to get mixed up with everything unsavory that goes on in this galaxy?"

"Just doing my job," Kimberly said. "Boss."

"What was that ship doing attacking this temple?" Spack asked. "We had it reported as

missing, then it turns up bombing a Fire-temple. When we challenged them, they fired on us. So—" Spack shrugged, and inclined his head toward that patch of sky where the Outsider ship had glowed so brightly.

"That was an Outsider you just vaporized," said Kimberly.

"Well, we figured something of the sort, but how—"

"I'll explain it all to you later," Kimberly said. "Oh, by the way," he added casually. "Your ecological records are in the temple there. Thought you might want to know."

Spack's iron control broke, and he stared open-mouthed at Kimberly, who ignored him.

"Tell you what," said Kim-

berly to Neela. "Suppose we go talk over things of mutual interest and let our friend here catch bugs in his mouth."

"Now listen, Kimberly—" Spack began.

"*Captain* Kimberly, please. Remember? Neela, do you think you could ever love a man who had to work for a man like that?"

"I think I might manage it," said Neela solemnly. "It would depend a lot on the man."

"You know," said Kimberly, "I think you're going to make a pretty good wife for an EcoSurv Captain. A pretty good wife indeed. There's nothing like having a dancing girl around the house."

THE END

LOOK TO THE STARS

by SCOTT NEVETS

A debate of long standing concerning the behavior of time in the theory of relativity seems to have been settled. The problem is: Would space travelers moving at speeds close to that of light (186,200 miles per second) age more slowly than people on the earth? Frank S. Crawford, Jr., of the University of California, has concluded that the answer is a definite "yes"—at least, that is, if the travelers are the subatomic particles known as mu mesons.

A number of physicists had suggested that the question might be answered by measuring the half-lives of fast-moving radioactive particles. If they decayed more slowly while in fast motion than while standing still, this would be proof that matter ages less rapidly in high-speed motion.

Crawford reported in a letter to a scientific magazine that the experiment has been performed

by cosmic-ray physicists in studies of mu mesons. These particles are formed in the upper atmosphere and travel at high speed toward the earth. Unstable, they decay readily into electrons. By comparing the intensity of mu meson occurrence at sea level and on mountaintops, it was shown that their half-life in flight is about 30 millionths of a second, as against only two millionths of a second at rest. The conclusion seems to argue that matter ages more slowly in rapid motion.

Temperatures twice the heat of the sun have been created by the University of Chicago in a former trolley-car power station. A water-stabilized electric arc has produced heat reaching 25,660 degrees Fahrenheit. The sun's surface heat is less than half that—11,250 degrees.

THE FEAR TRAP

by RICHARD R. SMITH

illustrated by ORBAN

How can fear be driven from the mind? When it came to a showdown and we had to be completely fearless or die, I suddenly got a simple idea about it—and it worked!

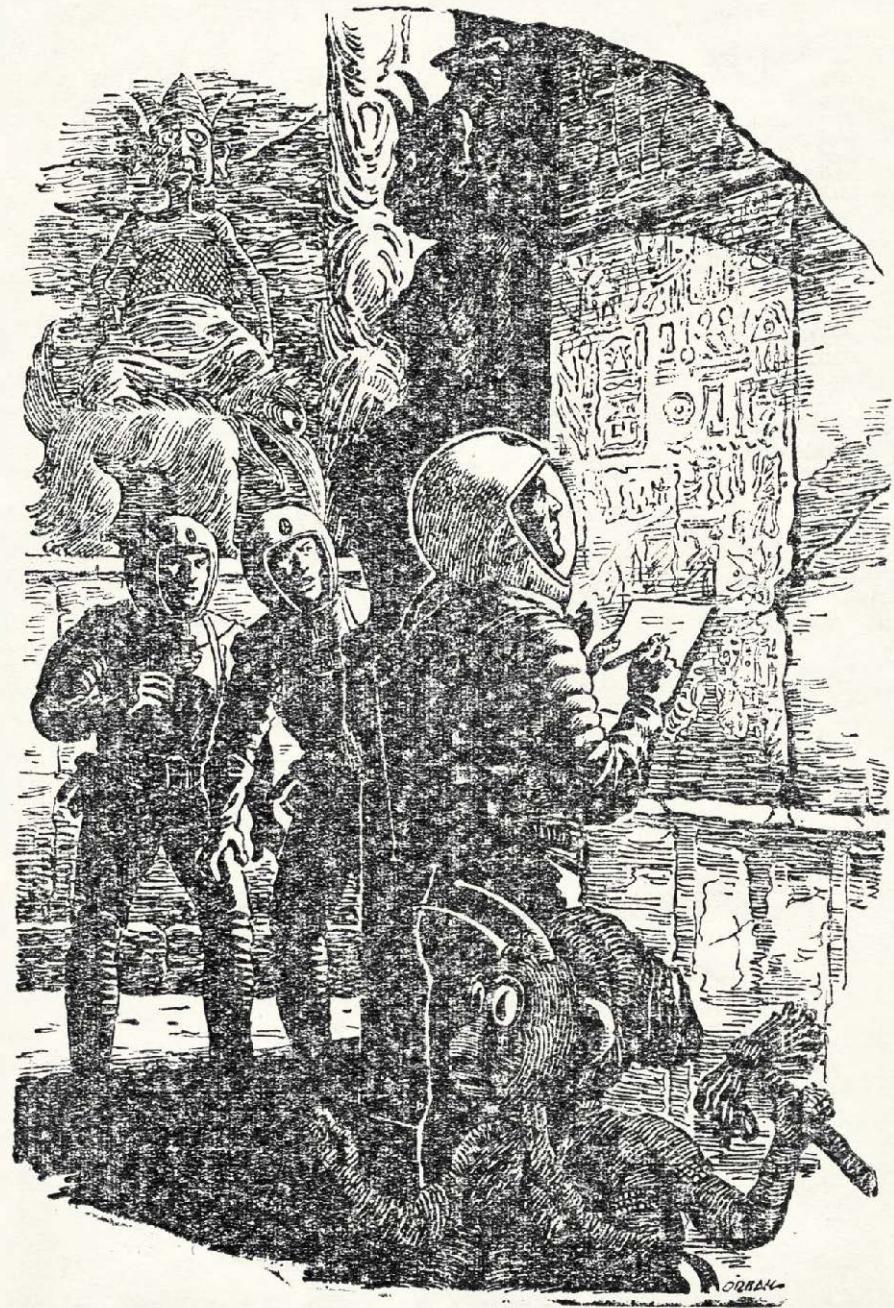
WEEKS stepped down from the truck and tried to shake the red sand out of his clothes. "Phew. That was quite a trip. We must be two hundred miles from Marsport."

"It was worth it," Kane replied as he studied the low stone structure before us. "I'll bet nobody else has been here."

Grave robbing had become a popular hobby among the colonists. The Martians religiously avoided their ancestral graves, but their big mistake was that they didn't guard them. Earthmen didn't give a damn about the alien religion... especially when the tombs frequently contained valuables.

As we walked the rest of the way, I saw that the roof was covered with sand dunes. From the air it would be invisible in the red desert, which meant Kane was right; we were probably the first.

As I had expected, when we entered we found a ramp leading downward. Martian tombs were never constructed with doors but had steep ramps that led down from the forever open entrances. The sand blown through an entrance by the infrequent winds slid down a steep ramp and into huge caverns dug for the purpose of collecting sand. The system wasn't as absurd as it sounded:



a stone door would be impossibly heavy to move. Other materials such as wood would rot in years and the Martians had built their tombs to last eons.

As we followed the ramp, we passed several of the huge sand-collector pits until eventually there was no more sand beneath our boots. At the end of the ramp, we entered a level corridor and our footsteps rang hollowly on blocks of polished marble.

"Look."

Cut into a yard thick plastic wall before us was a triangular opening. It was a definite indication that the building was ancient since the Martians had discarded the style centuries ago.

Passing through the doorway, we immediately heard a sound of tinkling bells. Visibly frightened.

"What's that?" Weeks was

The small room seemed empty, but we looked above us and saw that thousands of brightly colored strings covered with bells hung from the high ceiling.

Weeks sighed with relief. "A good indication of Martian intelligence," he complimented

the aliens. "They designed the tomb so air currents created by anyone moving through it strikes the bells. I wonder how long they've been up there?"

As I listened more closely, it sounded as if the tiny bells were ringing in a definite rhythm. But, I knew that was fantastic. It would mean that the air currents were directed at individual strings in a pattern. I doubted if even an engineering genius could create such a system.

PASSING through another doorway, we entered a huge room that looked like something from a technicolor movie. The walls were a kaleidoscopic maze and the floor was a brilliant blue and grey. In the middle of everything was an incongruous, colorless marble bench.

Another collection of bells hung from the ceiling and sounded twice as loud as the ones in the previous room. Whereas I had imagined the other bells playing a gay tune, this group sounded weird, ominous.

"Funny looking dump," I commented.

When we reached the bench we saw that there was in inscribed plaque set into the marble.

Weeks was a linguist so I asked him, "What's it say?"

He removed his rimless glasses from a pocket, quickly cleaned them and examined the inscriptions. "It's ancient Martian. It would take hours to decipher."

Fisher, a businessman who liked more action than suited his ulcers said, "We haven't got hours to sit around reading Martian fairy tales. Let's move on and see if we can find some diamonds."

He went a few yards and then paused to look up at the ceiling.

His forehead wrinkled and I knew from his expression that the dismal tune of the bells bothered him. I understood how he felt...the weird music gave me the creeps.

He raised a foot to take another step, but a beam of light shot from the ceiling and bathed his body in its brilliant glow.

He crumbled into a pile of ashes.

Kane was paralyzed with awe but I happened to glance at Weeks and saw that he was far from motionless. His thin frame was trembling from head to toe.

"It's a trap! Those damned Martians set a trap for us!"

"Could it be some kind of accident?" I suggested.

Kane laughed without humor. "What kind of accident could cause a thing like *that*?"

Weeks groaned.

"What do you think, Weeks?"

"I-I-I" He cleared his throat and began again, "I-I don't think anything!"

"Why isn't somebody moving?" I asked. It had occurred to me that neither of us had moved for five minutes.

"I'm afraid to move," Weeks admitted.

"Why don't you move, Kane?"

He shrugged his husky shoulders. "Why don't you?"

Realizing that I couldn't just stand there the rest of my life, I gathered my courage and walked a short distance. When they saw that I didn't become a pile of ashes, they moved also.

"What do we do now?" Kane asked.

WE all looked at the expanse of blue floor that stretched between us and the doorway that led from the room. The blue circle completely surrounded the grey circle upon which we stood. Fisher had walked across the blue area and had died...

"Any volunteers?" I queried. There were no volunteers. Each of us was afraid to follow in Fisher's footsteps.

"The inscriptions on the plaque might tell us something," Weeks suggested. "I'll try to decipher it." Taking a large note pad from a pocket, he sat down on the bench, leaned over the metal plate and began the task.

I expected it to be a ten minute job, but he worked for three hours while Kane and I smoked one cigarette after another and tried to act casual.

Weeks finally put the pad back in his pocket and stared at the grey floor beneath his feet as if it was quicksand. "I deciphered it."

"What's the matter?"

"When we stepped on this

grey circle, we activated a trap." He rose and pointed at the blue floor with a limp hand. "Centuries ago this place was a Martian...*proving ground* you might say. They used it to select their leaders and warriors; to weed out the weak from the strong."

He closed his eyes and I suspected it was to hold back tears: he had about as much nerve as a fly. "There's some kind of atomic disintegrator in the ceiling...and a machine sensitive to brain waves that activates it."

"Brain waves?"

"If a person in this circle walks across the blue area with any fear in his mind, the machine recognizes the neural pattern, triggers the disintegrator and the person is—"

"Blown to ashes like Fisher was," Kane supplied.

"Right."

"You tell me," I said, "how to get out of here. I got a date with a cute blonde tonight and I'd hate to miss it."

Weeks shrugged his bony shoulders. "I don't know. The trouble is that our minds are similar to Martians' and the

machines react to our thoughts!"

"We can't just sit here," Kane said. "We've got to try something."

After a half hour examination, we found there was no way to take the floor, bench or plaque apart. There was also no way to reach the ninety-foot ceiling and in short, there was no way we could do anything.

We sat down on the bench and tried to think.

AFTER several minutes of confused concentration, I said, "It doesn't seem possible that a machine could survive over a period of centuries."

"I translated a word as *machine*," Weeks informed me. "It might mean something else. And actually, the things in the ceiling might not be machines in a normal sense. For instance, the disintegrator might be a highly radioactive mass in a lead container. If it is, it wouldn't have any moving parts and could last until—"

"And how does the machine that's sensitive to brain-waves work?" I interrupted. "Don't tell me a machine like that

wouldn't have moving parts that could rust or fall apart?"

Weeks frowned with concentration and then snapped his fingers...or tried to at any rate. It seemed like he could never perform any physical act decently. "It wouldn't have to be a machine. Have you seen how a thermostat works? It has a piece of material inside that expands when heated. The Martians might have an alloy that reacts to electrical emanations from a brain. Thoughts travel instantaneously. When thoughts of a fear pattern reach this material, it might expand and upset a system of balances that holds a shield over the radioactive mass. The exposed mass might then—"

"Whoa," I said. "You lost me back at the last bend."

"Who cares how the Martians did it?" Kane said angrily as he rose to his feet. "They *did it* so who cares *how*? We're wasting time. Weeks, didn't you say the plaque states if a person isn't afraid when he walks out, he'll be safe?"

Weeks nodded affirmatively.

"So, if we exercise self-control when we walk across that

floor, we *won't* be afraid. I'm willing to try it first."

WE both looked at Kane's muscular face and cold grey eyes. He had been one of the first to take ships between Earth and the Moon and one of the first to travel to Mars. I knew his nerves were made of steel. If they weren't, he couldn't have gotten a job as a space pilot. And if anyone could walk across that floor without being afraid, he could.

He hesitated a moment to gather his courage, then began walking.

After going several yards, he laughed. "This is silly. There's nothing to be afraid of!"

Nothing except fear of fear itself, I thought.

The Martian bells tinkled softly as they played their ominous tune.

Kane continued walking...
...and almost imperceptibly quickened his stride.

I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, Kane was gone.

Where he had been, a pile of ashes drifted lazily across the floor. The space pilot with nerves of steel hadn't been an

outright coward but there must have been *some* fear in his mind...enough to set off the Martian trap.

Weeks was whimpering like a puppy in a snow storm and I fought an impulse to knock his face in. It was too early to give up; too early to cry about dying!

The two of us sat down and tried to think.

I tried to concentrate on the problem of escaping but my mind had slipped in a groove and couldn't get out: Weeks' wife. She was a gorgeous blonde with light blue eyes that made you breathe faster whenever she looked at you. She had been a secretary, but was cute enough to have been a model or movie star. How, I asked myself, did Weeks latch onto her? He was such a pale little guy, the combination seemed ridiculous.

"Maybe we'll be lucky," Weeks interrupted my chain of thought. "Maybe a Martian will come and tell us how to get out."

"Don't be stupid. Why would a Martian come to a joint like this in the middle of a desert when after he got here he

might get fried alive if he was afraid!"

After my reply he was quiet for half an hour until he looked up at the strings of bells high above us and said, "In ancient times on Earth, a knight proved their bravery by fighting with a lance and mace. Here Martians proved their bravery by fighting with their minds."

After that deep but useless thought, he was silent for another half hour.

MY stomach began to grumble because it wasn't being treated properly and I realized there was only one thing for me to do.

Clearing my throat, I began, "Weeks, you've probably heard of men like us sitting around waiting to die and making all sorts of confessions?"

He grunted his reply, and I kept my eyes focused on the floor, unable to look at him.

"Well, I used to think it was damned silly." I paused. "But now, I can see why guys do it and I have something to tell you. I'm not doing it because I'm a religious man—I haven't been to church since I was a

kid. But, I think I'll feel better when I get it off my chest."

I had gotten through to him and he was watching me now, interested. "Your wife and I. I suppose everyone in Marsport knows it except you. That's the way it always is...no one has the nerve to tell the husband."

"What?" He thought he misunderstood.

"Your wife and I," I said angrily. "We've been seeing each other for months. It's your own damned fault in a way. You shouldn't have married such a good-looking woman."

He shook his head from side to side. "I don't believe you."

I laughed. "Ain't that something? I tell you so I can get it off my chest before I die and you don't believe me!" I shouted at him, "*Want to hear the details? Want to hear what happened last night while you were uptown?*" I continued with lurid details that made my face redden.

"*You dirty—*"

I never saw anyone so mad before in all my life. So help me, the little jerk grabbed his knife and tried to stab me!

He was a push-over even when he was mad. I could have taken the knife away from him but I would have probably broken his arm in the process.

I ran.

Waving the knife and screaming like a maniac all the while, he ran after me.

He finally caught up with me, but he was so exhausted it was easy to knock the knife from his hand. I had to yell to be heard above his screaming, "*Whoa, boy. Look!*"

He stared at the familiar corridor and his jaw sagged. "We got out! How'd we do it?"

I tapped my chest. "Me, buddy. I did it. I realized there was only *one* way to get out."

"How...?"

"Simple. If you fill your

mind with something else, it crowds out the fear." I patted him on the back. "All that stuff about your wife wasn't true. I made it up so you'd hate me so much you wouldn't be afraid of anything...and it worked."

"It worked!" he exclaimed. "I wasn't afraid!"

He laughed...laughed until tears rolled down his cheeks...laughed so hard he had to sit down.

"You sonofagun." He took a handkerchief from a pocket and wiped the tears from his face. "And what were you thinking about?"

It was my turn to laugh. "I hope you don't mind. I was thinking about your wife."

THE END

SOUND AT SEA

by J. FOSTER BLAKE

A novel method of signalling over extremely long distances at sea has been developed by the Navy and named, appropriately enough, "SOFAR." The system makes use of a wartime discovery about the travel of sound under water.

Sound moves through water at different speeds, varying with the depth. It moves most slowly at a depth of 4000 feet; above this level the higher temperatures and below it the higher pressures cause it to travel more quickly. Therefore, since sound waves moving into areas of higher velocity are refracted toward the region where they travel most slowly, the 4000-foot level is a natural sound channel which can be used virtually as a speaking tube.

A group of Columbia University oceanographers then dis-

covered that the noise from the explosion of a four-pound charge of TNT in this natural "speaking tube" could be picked up and identified by sound receivers at astonishing distances—up to 10,000 miles. The signal's arrival time can be read with an accuracy better than one twentieth of a second, and if the signal is picked up by three stations the point of origin can be located trigonometrically within one mile.

This has an immediate practical application: castaways at sea can signal for help even without radio equipment. The Navy now is equipping life-boats and rafts with supplies of explosives, and is setting up a monitor system at various points in the Pacific to keep their ears on the "speaking tube" in the sea.

DEATH'S PLANET

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

NOVELETTE

illustrated by BOWMAN

Planet Seven on Star System A was a hideous place, a world where sudden, violent death was the rule not an exception. Nature was harsh, ruthless and cruel here

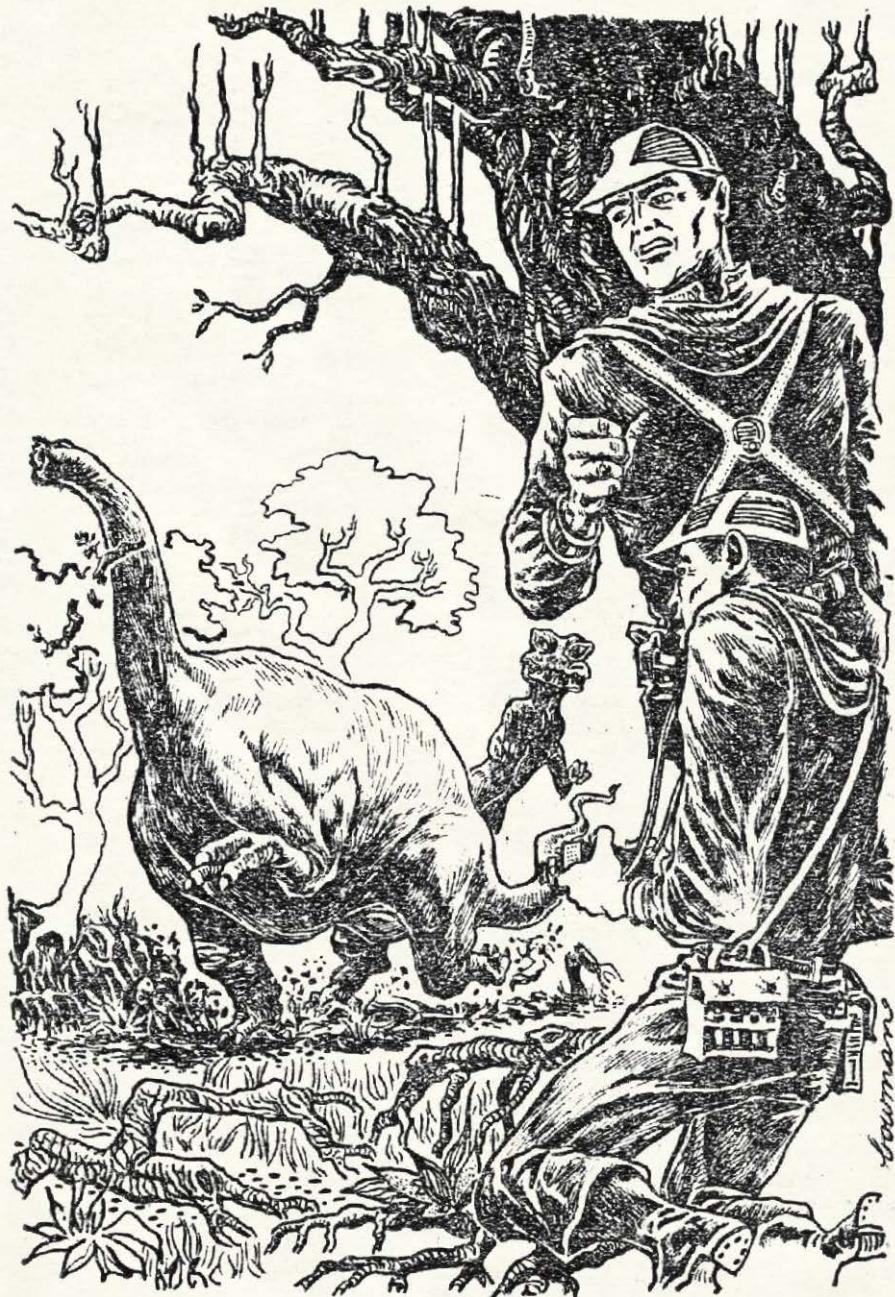
I found out about World Seven of Star System A quick, and the hard way. I pulled short straw and came down out of the Exploration Team's ship first. There was just about time for me to take three or four hesitant steps on the purplish grass when something came bounding out of the thick jungle and knocked me end over nose.

I got to my feet dizzy and started to grope for my blaster. This time I got a good view of the whatever-it-was. It was the size of a man, roughly, except that about a third of it was head, one-sixth stomach, and half a pair of huge coiled kang-

aroo-like legs. I caught the flash of white teeth the length of my fingers, of staring red eyes and scaly yellow skin. Then the kangaroo legs tensed, released, and the thing bashed into my chest and knocked me sprawling a second time.

I didn't have a suit on, so I couldn't radio for help. They were probably watching me, up in the ship, waiting for a clear chance to fire. I found myself facing a headful of spike-like teeth. Some getaway, I thought. Escape from a murder rap on Velliran only to be gobbledd up alive in this unexplored system.

But just as those teeth



seemed ready to bury themselves in my neck, the weight began to list. Some other friendly beast had come forth from the jungle. I was being granted a reprieve.

This new one was a lulu. It was tall and thin, maybe fifteen feet high and a foot wide. It looked like a walking telescope, green all over, with two tremendously long dangling arms, a pair of tiny legs tucked away underneath it, and a petal-like arrangement at the very top. One of the dangling arms had grabbed the thing that was sitting on me, and was now hoisting it in the air.

I got to my feet again and stepped back into the shadow of the ship, and watched. The beast with the teeth was kicking and squirming, but the telescope thing had a good grip on it and wasn't letting go. I saw the animal rise higher and higher, until the spindly arm held it over the petal arrangement on top. Then the arm let go.

The petals spread wide to receive the animal.

There was a lump, live and kicking, in the telescope thing's throat. Then, slowly, horribly,

that lump started to sink stomachward. I shuddered.

The telescope creature folded its long arms around its middle, hugged itself in a little dance of contentment and joy, and waddled back into the jungle. A second later, I was surrounded by my shipmates.

"We've been welcomed," I said.

DEATH came quick and fast and ugly on World Seven of Star System A. But it came just as fast on the allegedly civilized world of Velliran, and when it came you had to look out or it would sweep you in along with the intended victim.

That's what happened to me. I'm from Earth, originally; I wasn't born on any of the outworlds, but right on Homeworld herself. Not that that meant anything. With umpteen-billion people scrabbling for a living on Earth, I made like everybody else and took off for the outworlds, where, I thought, I could live comfortably and well and breathe fresh air.

I went to Velliran. Velliran's a world in the Pollux system; it's big but not too dense, and

so the all-important grav ratio is 1:1 with Earth. I settled on Velliran and I lived there eight years, and I probably would still be there except for the events that led me to World Seven of Star System A.

Velliran is populated chiefly by native life—small, finely-formed blue-skinned humanoids whose ancestry goes back into the dim years of the universe. They speak softly to each other in a strange, liquid language, and they keep pretty much to themselves, not mingling with the Earthmen who have built cities on their world. They have a keen sense of the ethical, and I'm told their religion is one of the galaxy's noblest. I don't know. I never had much to do with them.

I was operating a yangskin syndicate on Velliran, and bringing in a tidy profit. I employed six Terran hunters who ventured into the interior to hunt the strange eight-legged yangs, and I employed three skinners and four curers and two packers. At its best it was a medium-big syndicate, and I was bringing in some 20,000 credits a year profit, with more

orders tumbling in day by day as the women of Earth found it more and more fashionable to deck their shoulders with the soft, clinging black-and-white skins.

I was on the way to the bank one morning with the week's loot in my pocket. It was a bright, clear morning, the sky having the fantastic transparent look that makes Velliran so lovely. I remember thinking about how glad I was just to be here. The streets weren't crowded; couple of slim, soft-eyed little natives were walking up ahead, and a few Terrans.

Exactly what came next I wasn't sure. It felt like I'd been clubbed over the head and struck with lightning simultaneously, except that when it was all over I was still standing right where I was, and the street was just as quiet.

Only now I was holding a jewelled knife tight in my right hand. It was dripping bright red. *Blood* red—but not Earthman red. Oh, no. The only people who had blood as flamed-red as that were the native Vellirani.

There was one of them at

my feet, looking peaceful even in death. But he hadn't died peacefully at all. His blue body had been ripped open with a knife. With the knife I now was staring stupidly at.

THEY reeled me into court a little while later—naturally, a Corpsman came strolling along while I gaped at the murder-weapon I held—and the trial took about six minutes. The judge was a stranger to me, which was too bad.

He squinted down from the bench and said, "Defendant Crawford, you have slain a Vellirani in broad daylight. Do you have any explanation for this crime?"

I blinked. "None."

What else could I say? I couldn't argue with the bloody knife in my hand.

The judge said, "The crime lies outside the jurisdiction of Terran court on Velliran. But, of course, this does not mean you will go unpunished."

I stared at him. "I didn't do it. It couldn't have been me!"

"The Vellirani have ways of justice of their own. To them do we commend you."

And they turned me loose. I stood outside the courtroom a few minutes, looking up at the transparent sky and wondering how it was that your life could crumble to hell inside half an hour. The deposit was still in my pocket. Two thousand credits, backed by pretty Terran platinum. They weren't going to get to the bank, now. I was going to need them. And there wasn't much time.

Someone had put the frame to me, but there was no point trying to convince anyone of my innocence. The Vellirani would never understand the concept of falsely blaming another for a crime he hadn't committed. To them, I had killed their countryman, and I had to die. That was the way Vellirani justice worked. And, I knew, their methods of execution were unpleasant.

There was a man I could see, though. His name was Geofirey Hallan, and he was an Expediter. He made things easy for people.

He was a small, squint-eyed man with a sharp nose and a pale face. He said, "You really didn't kill the alien?"

"Honest. Unless I had a sudden kill-fit and now I can't remember it."

He shrugged. "Well, it doesn't matter whether you killed him or not, does it? As far as the Vellirani are concerned, *someone* has to die for the crime, and it might as well be you as anyone else."

"Exactly." I took out my bank deposit, flicked the bills with my fingers, and slapped them down on my desk. "Here's two thousand, Hallan. Can you get me off Velliran by nightfall?"

HE took the bills, rifled through them speculatively, studied the serial numbers, rubbed his thumbs over the portrait in the middle. At length he said, "Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"There's an Exploratory Corps ship in town, due to leave tonight. Their ecologist died in space, and they asked me to find them a new one. I contacted the Corps headquarters and had them ship a replacement out here. His name is Paul Markham, and he's here in the city."

"So?"

"Suppose," he said, "I got *you* aboard that ship instead of Markham."

"Me? I'm no ecologist! I don't know anything about—"

Hallan smiled bleakly. "You don't have to. All you need to do is get aboard that ship. They're bound for unexplored territory in the Andromeda region, and if you can bluff your way until you're in hyperspace, *you've* got it made. They won't turn back on your account. If there's any trouble, I'll make up some story or other. When they return, you go to some other planet and change your name. The galaxy's big; the Vellirani won't bother *you*."

"What about this Markham?"

"Him? He'll just miss the boat, that's all. There are plenty of ways of delaying a man past blastoff time."

THE three moons of Velliran were high overhead, casting their orange light, when I arrived at the spaceport. I had spent the day at Hallan's, arranging things. He would hold all my property and my bank account for me, and when I re-

turned from my exploratory jaunt he would forward them to me on my new world. I didn't trust him too much, but under the circumstances I was happy to get away from Velliran alive, let alone with any property.

He drove me down to the spaceport at 1945, and the ship was there—tall, slim, glittering faintly in the moonlight. He escorted me to the ship's elevator.

"Okay. You should make it clear from here, Crawford—ah, *Markham*. Take it smooth, and I'll watch for the word from you."

"Thanks, Hallan. Thanks."

I stepped into the elevator and rode up into the ship. Eight or nine men were waiting for me.

"I'm *Markham*," I said. "The new ecologist."

A tall man in blue-and-gold uniform said, "Welcome aboard. I'm Captain Hendrin. These are the men you'll work with."

He introduced me rapidly around: there was a biologist, a medic, an anthropologist, a botanist, a chemist, and so on—all the usual manpower of an exploratory mission. Cap-

tain Hendrin said, "We're bound for the Andromeda system, as you may have heard. It's going to be the standard six-month jaunt. We're beginning in Star System A, and the orders are to name and survey as many worlds as we can within our time period."

I grinned, trying to make it look scientific. "Glad to be aboard, Captain."

Gradually I settled into shipboard routine, bluffing mightily as I went. Actually, it wasn't too hard. The Exploratory Corps has been dealt with pretty frequently in adventure fiction, and from the novels I'd read I had a fair knowledge of shipboard routine and the like. Of course, I didn't know a thing about ecology, but from my readings in the ship's tape-library I slowly acquired a working knowledge of my subject.

All that mattered was that I had gotten off Velliran alive. I didn't know who had framed me or why, nor did I think at the time that I'd ever find out, but all that was behind me. I had been put in a situation where it was get offworld or else, and no time to argue about

the rights and wrongs and moral undertones of the thing.

It was a three-week journey —the first two days in standard ion drive, then, when we were clear of the Pollux system, the conversion and wrenching screech into hyperdrive. Three weeks in the nothingness of warp, as the ship gulped up space.

Then we were out of our galaxy altogether, and into the Andromeda cluster. It hung all around, bright strange starry dots against the black field of space. In the first few minutes after we emerged from warp, I peered out the viewplate, looking at the immensity of stars.

I was thinking that the universe was appallingly big. Here we were, exploring a galaxy the size of our own—and, on and on through the endless night, there lay galaxy after galaxy, millions of them, each with its thousand billion stars or so. Man could send out Exploratory Teams from here to the end of time and probably not have a chance to touch down on each world of space as much as once.

The autopilot homed in on

the arbitrarily-named System A, a group of eleven worlds revolving around a bright young yellow main sequence sun. We'd spend our next six months in System A, and probably not even do that job thoroughly. Near-infinite worlds, near-infinite life-forms—

I realized I had been developing a pretty provincial attitude, in my previous life as a prosperous yangskin-exporter on Velliran. The universe was a big place. I was only now getting to appreciate that.

The eleven worlds of Star System A hung outside our viewplate like spinning bright-colored globes. Two of the planets were ringed; one spun so close to the sun that it could not possibly have any form of life; two more, double worlds, revolved about each other in a strange orbit that would require detailed investigation.

But Captain Hendrin selected World Seven of Star System A as our first port of call. We swung into a landing orbit, and as the ship spiralled down the chemical team studied the atmosphere and reported that it would be breathable.

We landed. The tests were

checked and double-checked. It was clear that we could go out without spacesuits. Custom now dictated a lottery; we drew, and I got the short straw.

Captain Hendrin chuckled. "I suppose it's fitting that our ecologist should be the first one out on World Seven. You'll be the first to see the fauna."

I stepped through the lock and out. I was the first to see the fauna, all right. But the fauna saw me, too—and they moved faster than I did.

MY nine shipmates were standing around me, looking worried.

"You all right?" Hendrin asked.

"Pretty good. That beast with the teeth took me by surprise. I guess I'd have been down the old alimentary canal by now if the other one hadn't come along."

I flicked some sweat from my forehead and stared at the dark forest. The air was thick, hot, hard to breathe; a sort of sweltering moistness about it made it unpleasant. Far within the thicket of sharp green leaves I heard a cry: a harsh, croaking, desperate cry.

A death-cry.

"This is a rough, primitive world," said Lazenby. He was the biologist. "It's a young world. Life is cheap here."

Hendrin nodded. "We'd better operate in teams on any explorations," the Captain said. "And go about heavily armed. Wide-beam blasters for everyone. There's no telling what strange beasts are lurking in there."

I was still shaking a little. That sudden encounter with the toothed creature hadn't done my nervous system any good. I said, "Maybe we'd better leave this world, Captain. It's too dangerous for us. We ought to go on to some of the other planets in this system."

Hendrin wheeled around to face me, and I saw all the Joviality drain from his face. The *real* Hendrin poked forth for the first time since I had come aboard. His face was the face of an ascetic; of a man dedicated to his job, ready to perform it no matter what the cost. I felt chilled.

"Markham," he said, "You haven't been with us long, so I can forgive you for that re-

mark. But coming from a member of the Exploratory Corps, and from an ecologist as well, your words shock me. Once an Exploratory Corps ship lands on a planet, it stays there until its job is done. I've operated that way for thirteen years, and I'll keep on operating that way." His voice crackled like a whip. He turned to the other men of the team. "Is there anyone else who feels like leaving now?"

No one spoke.

I nibbled my lip unhappily. Part of me wanted to tell Hendrin that I was no ecologist, no Exploratory Corps man at all, just a fugitive yangskin-exporter who was fleeing a phony murder rap and had used his ship as a handy way out. But I saw that would never do at all. Hendrin was too dedicated to his lofty principles to let me stay at large if he knew the truth. From the expression on his face, I knew he was the sort who would bring me for the duration of the voyage and return me to Velliran when it was all over.

Geoffrey Hallan probably had known that. Well, Hallan was just out for a buck, like

the rest of us. I was going to have to keep up the pretense of being an ecologist until Hendrin decided he'd explored World Seven of System A fully enough. It wasn't going to be easy.

Another death-cry sounded in the forest.

"I'm sorry, Captain," I said, making my voice appear humble. "The experience of being suddenly attacked—my nerves—"

"Okay, Markham," he said. His voice was gruff but sympathetic. "I understand. But no more talking of leaving here until our job is done!"

I forced a grin. "Right, Captain!"

But as I heard the sounds of rending and killing coming from that wild, steaming jungle all around us, I wondered whether I would have been safer back on Velliran.

WE began formal full-scale exploration of World Seven an hour later, after a quick briefing aboard ship.

By this time I had soaked up enough of standard exploration procedure to be fairly

confident of passing as a genuine Corps man, provided no one studied me too closely. I knew the general routine.

The purpose of the Exploratory Corps was to size up each of the worlds of the universe, of which there were billions, and to file a full report with Central Control back on Earth. Central Control, the vast computer that made existence in a galaxy of a hundred billion people possible, would digest and tape the reports.

We were supposed to bring back, primarily, a yes-no statement on the world's value as a potential Terran colony; a comprehensive report on the planet's natural wealth, its minerals and soil fertility and livestock; a comment on the presence of intelligent life on the world. All this data went into the great hopper of Central Control, and the Exploratory Corps moved ever onward into unexplored regions of space.

My job as ecologist was to study the relationships between animals and their environment on World Seven, and prepare a report indicating how these relationships could be put

to use in the event of Earth colonization of the planet; which animals controlled the breeding of which other animals, how the extermination of certain forms of plant life would effect the distribution of life, etc. In a way, it was an easy job; in another way, it was an overpoweringly hard one—because it required me to get out there and explore that jungle.

Which was one thing I had little desire to do. Murray, the cartographer, had it easy: he spent his hours aloft, in the tiny copier the ship carried, mapping out the world. Unless there were monsters of the air, he'd be in no danger.

But me? I was going to have to get a first-hand look at life on World Seven.

I was teamed with Lazenby, the biologist. He was a slim, stoop-shouldered man in his middle forties, mild-mannered, quiet. Just the sort who would spend his life roving from world to world, collecting algae and protozoa. I had been hoping to be matched with Bartlett, the anthropologist—a big, square-built, blocky man who would be of some value in case of

trouble. But Bartlett was paired with Dorvin, the chemist, and I drew little Lazenby.

We rode down the ship's elevator together, out of the ship and to the ground. This time, before venturing into the little clearing that surrounded the ship, I looked around in all directions. I wasn't taking chances.

The coast was clear, though. "Come on," I said to Lazenby. "No trouble in sight."

We were armed with stubby blasters, but we were weighted down with note-taking apparatus too, and Lazenby carried a couple dozen collecting bottles slung in a harness around his waist.

The jungle was heavy with moisture: not rain but dew, precipitated straight from the air and beading out on anything and everything, leaves, stones, ground, us. I glanced at my watch. We had arranged to cover as much ground as we could in an hour's time, and then return to the ship.

I kept my ears tuned. I knew this forest was full of strange and probably dangerous creatures, and I wanted to be ready for them.

It didn't take long.

We had been walking for perhaps five minutes when I heard rustling up ahead. I glanced at Lazenby. He was kneeling over a tiny pond, scooping up samples of its water for later bacterial analysis. I said, "Better look sharp. Something's coming."

"Where? I don't hear anything."

"Listen up ahead."

The sound of thrashing vines and splintering saplings came to us—and then, thundering toward us like a runaway express, came an animal. I caught Lazenby's arm and dragged him into the shade of a thick, gnarled tree.

THE creature was perhaps twenty feet long, glossy brown in color. It had four legs that terminated in splaying toes, a long, thin neck, an equally long tail at the other end. It weighed perhaps ten tons, and it was moving fast.

It had no head.

At the end of that neck was a jagged slash, and then nothing but welling gouts of blood that pulsed forth with each con-

vulsion of the animal's heart, and squirted out over the trees. The beast was dead, but it was so slow-witted it hadn't realized it.

"We ought to follow it," Lazenby said. "It's bound to drop soon. I'd like to examine it close-up."

I shook my head. "Uh-uh. That boy may be dead, but I'll bet the thing that did it to him will be along any minute now. Let's wait."

I was right.

The animal that appeared moved with almost sickening grace: it slid through the forest as if it were on wheels, gliding along effortlessly. It was ten feet high, standing upright on two tapering legs with two more up beneath its throat. A mouth full of razors yawned at us, and dripped blood. It sped past us and pounced on the headless beast we had seen first, which had stumbled and fallen in the underbrush ahead.

I watched, chilled, as the killer dug its two tiny fore-paws deep into the still-quivering flesh of the other, and brought its teeth down for the first bite. I couldn't stand the sight. Before I knew what I

was doing I had the firing stud of my blaster yanked back, and gave the killer full beam.

He sizzled and fried for a second or two before he knew what hit him. Then he reared up from the dead or dying body, came at me, and actually travelled three or four feet before he fell. I finished ashing him and lowered my blaster. I realized I had been shouting incoherently all through it.

Within moments half a thousand tiny creatures had come from nowhere—out of the trees, out from under rocks, up from the pond. They began to feed on the two hulking corpses. The smell of death pervaded the place.

I turned and saw Lazenby staring at me in utter horror. For the first time in minutes I regained self-control.

"I've never seen anything like that," he said, in a hushed voice.

"The killer? Vicious bastard, wasn't he?"

"No," Lazenby said. He looked pale and uneasy. "I mean you. The sadistic joy with which you killed the animal! The cries of hate! Markham, it was horrible!"

"Look here, Lazenby—that animal was a killer. I had to blast him."

"Why?"

That stopped me. I didn't have any answer.

He said, "It had already killed its prey. It hadn't attacked you at all. Your job was to record the feeding process, not to interfere with that damned blaster of yours. But you did."

"I lost my head. Something just broke open inside me and I had to fire. Silly of me," I said.

"Silly? It was downright criminal! For an ecologist to destroy life wantonly when he could have been observing the process of—"

That was when the tree wrapped its arms around Lazenby and lifted him off the ground.

"*Lazenby!*"

He was pinioned by a thick green tendril that had wrapped itself three or four times around his waist. His face was gray ashen; he was ten feet off the ground, and rising. I saw the treetop writhing in anticipation; there was something un-

comfortably like a mouth up there.

Carnivorous trees?

"For the love of God, get me out of here!" Lazenby was pleading. I drew my blaster and tried to aim it, but he was kicking and squirming wildly, trying to fight the inexorable lift of that tendril.

"Hold still," I shouted. "I don't want to hit you."

I fired above his head, at the tendril, and missed. I caught a limb of the tree instead. The tree shook convulsively. I fired again, and this time I nailed the tendril squarely.

The tree screamed.

It was a bellowed howl of pain and rage that wrung itself up out of the thick trunk and sounded all over the forest. Lazenby came tumbling down, bouncing from branch to branch. I caught him and broke his fall. The seared-off tendril still clung to his middle, and his face was pale green.

I unwrapped the tendril and flung it to one side. He got up, shakily.

"Thanks," he said hoarsely.

I looked up at the tree, which had resumed its station-

ery position now. It looked totally innocent. Scowling, I looked at the ground at my feet, as if I expected it to open a fanged mouth and swallow me.

"Let's go back to the ship," I said. "We can explore some other time."

BACK in the safety of the ship, I was able to let my tight-strung nerves slacken a little.

Hendrin had been aboard ship, dictating log notes, and he came forward to demand why we had returned so soon. I told him.

"Carnivorous trees?" he repeated. "We'll have to send Grover out for a look at those." Grover was the botanist of the group. "Did you get films of the attack, Markham?"

"I was too busy getting Lazenby out of that tree," I said. "I couldn't think about films."

Hendrin frowned. "Saving Lazenby was important, of course. But you should have taken films. And I hope you don't expect to take the rest of the day off, do you?"

"We're a little shaken up, sir," Lazenby began diffident-

ly. "Some time to rest before we go back out—"

"All right," Hendrin said. "Take half an hour. But don't waste any more time than that. I don't want the schedule chopped up."

We left the Captain, heading for the ship's lounge to have a drink or two before returning to the job outside. "He really means business, doesn't he?" I said.

Lazenby grunted. "It's the right way to run an Exploratory Team. You get the job done, that way."

We had a couple of drinks each, and I saw the color come back into Lazenby's face. He wasn't as ruffled by his narrow escape as I might have expected him to be; he took it more in the line of an occupational hazard, which it was—something that might happen in the course of everyday work.

He turned to me and said, "There was something I was meaning to ask you before that tree got me."

"Shoot."

He paused for a second, then said, squinting up his eyes, "Who are you, Markham? Really, I mean."



I put my drink down.
"Huh?"

"Don't play innocent." There was a sudden strength behind the watery eyes. "I know damned well you're not Paul Markham of the Exploration Corps. Suppose you tell me just who you *are*."

"Lazenby, has that tree-thing driven you nuts? Of course I'm Markham!"

I'm afraid I wasn't a very good liar. The little biologist smiled wryly. "You're no more of a trained ecologist than I am a circus strongman, *Markham*. You might as well admit it. The real Markham had been in the Corps five years. I don't know him, but I know damned well you aren't any ecologist with five years' field training. The way you blasted down that killer animal before—"

I looked at him coldly. He had me nicely pinpointed. "Suppose I'm not Markham. What of it?"

"Nothing. You saved my life, whoever you are, and I don't intend to turn you in. But it's unusual, to say the least, to have an impostor in an Exploration Team. For my

own curiosity, I'd like to know why."

I took a deep breath. "My name is Ree Carpenter. I'm a native of Earth, and I lived on Velliran for eight years. Somebody framed me while your ship was down to pick up the real Markham, and I had to get off planet in a hurry. This was the quickest way."

"And what happened to Markham? The *real* one?"

I shrugged. "A friend of mine was supposed to arrange that he show up late at the spaceport. I don't think they did anything to him."

Lazenby smiled and said, "How much of this am I supposed to believe?"

"As much or as little as you want," I said. "It all happens to be true. I was framed for murder—they accused me of having killed a Vellirani native. It wasn't so. But the evidence made it look that way, and on Velliran that's enough. So I'm here, on this hellworld."

He was looking at me strangely. "You were accused of killing a Vellirani native?"

"Damned right! I don't know how it was done, but I found myself holding a bloody

blade, with a dead Vellirani lying in the street at my toes. I didn't kill him."

Lazenby smiled. "I'm sure you didn't. That reminds me of a very funny story. Remind me to tell it to you some time."

HE wouldn't elaborate on that, though I tried to pry it out of him. After a while we decided we had rested enough, and went back outside for another survey of the forest.

Lazenby was very helpful. As we advanced warily, inch by inch, through the sweating jungle, he made occasional comments that were designed to help me in compiling my report, pointed out things that I, as a presumably skilled ecologist, should have noticed, and was generally of assistance. We didn't encounter any other carnivorous trees, or anything else that was really dangerous. But every minute I spent in the jungle of World Seven, I liked the planet less.

There was something sick about it—something broodingly rotten. Every manifestation of life shared that characteristic.

"Look here," Lazenby said.

He pointed down, at a pool of water perhaps three feet across. There were tiny creatures swimming in it.

"So? A puddle with tadpoles in it."

"Take a look at the tadpoles," he said.

I knelt while he stood guard, and peered into that puddle. The "tadpoles" were small dark things about an inch long—with bright little teeth, jagged and sharp. They moved fast, those "tadpoles." And they were busy.

A snakelike creature about twenty inches long lay beneath the muddy water, wriggling slowly—while the tadpoles energetically picked away pieces of its flesh. The snake evidently had taken a shortcut through the puddle, or perhaps he had wanted a bath. But the tadpoles had been lying in wait,

"It's the same everywhere on this planet," I said. "The animals are killers. The plants are killers."

Lazenby nodded. "Life is short and tough, here. You have to be fast to survive, and you need a good pair of teeth."

"It's a vicious world," I said.

"No. Nature isn't vicious, or ugly, or any of the other moralistic tags you're probably getting ready to toss up. That's just life, you see down there. And on World Seven life is a tough proposition."

"It's a tough proposition anywhere," I said. "But here it's more obvious."

"Exactly."

I looked down at the hungry little beasts in the puddle and shuddered, "I'm a lousy excuse for a scientist," I said. "I can't be cool and detached in a place like this. Not where even the trees try to eat you. I'd like to get the hell off this planet. There's something filthy about it."

He only smiled. "You don't have the true scientific mind. You aren't detached."

"I won't have to bluff being a scientist for long," I said. "Just till Hendrin decides he's ready to return to civilization. If I'm still alive by then," I said, looking at the quivering fronds of a huge fern nearby. "If this planet doesn't get us all first."

As it happened, not every member of the team

seemed to share Lazenby's calm, precise, scientific attitude. That became clear that evening, when we were gathered back aboard the ship to compare notes on the day's work.

Murray, the cartographer, said, "This is the nastiest world I've ever seen."

I snickered. "You see it from a thousand feet up. Go take a walk through the jungle if you want to find out how nasty it can be."

"I did," he said. "I brought the copter down to let Chung, here study some geological formation. We weren't on the ground ten minutes when a brawl started. Some big blue and red beast the size of a hill came toward us looking mean. But before he got anywhere, three jag-toothed flying creatures came swooping down like dive-bombers on him. Sliced his neck open and had themselves a feast."

"I didn't get to see the formation I was interested in, either," Chung, the geologist who had flown with Murray, said. "We decided not to wait."

"It's the same everywhere," said Grover, the botanist. "I

went out to examine that devilish carnivorous tree that nearly swallowed Lazenby."

"Did it perform for you?" Lazenby asked.

"Damned right it did! I had no sooner got there than it lashed out with a tendril and swooped up a hulking deer-like creature. I filmed the whole thing. It wasn't pretty."

Fernandez, the medic, a swarthy heavyset giant, looked up from his brooding silence in the corner and said, "This is no world for a ten-man team. We ought to go on to the next place, and let Earth send a fully-armed expedition out here if they're interested. We're risking our lives every time we step outside the ship."

"Yeah," said Bartlett, the brawny anthropologist. "We already know this planet isn't suitable for colonization—at least not for another hundred million years or so. Why are we sticking around?"

"Why don't you ask Captain Hendrin that?" Lazenby suggested quietly. He was loyal to Hendren, I knew. "He seems very interested in giving this world detailed study. And I

am too; it's quite a remarkable primitive tropical planet."

Bartlett's eyes blazed. "Remarkable! Remarkable, when every beast in that jungle's waiting to feed on you? I'd like to get moving—to a safe planet."

"What's that, Bartlett?" said a cold voice at the door.

We all turned. It was Captain Hendrin, standing at the entrance, one hand clamping the edge of the bulkhead. "Would you care to repeat that in my presence, Bartlett?"

The husky anthropologist was pale, but he looked squarely at Hendrin and said, "I was expressing the opinion, sir, that possibly we had achieved all we could achieve on this planet and should move on, since it's obviously an unsafe world."

"Oh, I see," Hendrin said in a dead, flat voice. "You didn't hear the little speech I made to Markham when he advanced the same idea, earlier?"

"I heard it. I think it's suicide to stay here, Captain."

"Who else feels this way?" Hendrin demanded. He glared around the cabin. "Chung? Grover? Lazenby?"

"I'm not so happy here," Fernandez admitted quietly. But none of the rest of us spoke up. At length Hendrin said, "You seem to be in the minority, Bartlett. We'll stay here and do it the way the Corps always does it. This planet will need at least a month's intensive work."

Bartlett smothered down his anger. It required a visible effort.

"Let's have no more talk of leaving," Hendrin said. "Is that understood?"

IT was. But it wasn't understood or accepted gracefully, I could see. After Hendrin left, Bartlett and Fernandez had a conversation of low whispers in one corner of the room, and after a while they called Grover over. I didn't know what was going on, but I could guess they were planning some way of getting Hendrin to change his mind.

In a way I was a little disillusioned. Only Hendrin and Lazenby, of all these men, was a Corpsman in the sense I was accustomed to from reading the adventure stories. The rest of

were ordinary people like

me—scientifically trained, but not particularly anxious to martyr themselves in the name of scientific investigation. This was a bitch of a world: they recognized the fact, and they wanted out, just the same as I did.

That night, the forest howled and hooted at us from sundown to sunup. I spent a good chunk of the night staring out the viewplate at the waiting jungle outside. World Seven had two moons, but they weren't attractive golden spheres like the three of Velliran; they were jagged little rocks that cast a pale white light, old and baleful. In their glimmer I saw strange wolf-like animals range themselves around the ship and bay their anger, and slinking cat-beasts that slipped among them and fought in the World Seven; the others didn't last long at all.

The next two days saw the pattern spread out and intensify. I learned more about World Seven, and the more I learned the more anxious I was to get offworld fast—and most of my shipmates seemed to feel the same way.

Lazenby and I turned up

sights on our rambles through the forest that sickened me—and once even bent the slim biologist's scientific poise. That was the little incident where we came upon a bloated black-and-gray striped mammal lying on its side in a swamp—*her* side, I should say, because the creature was plainly a female.

She looked something like a wart-hog, something like a Minervan *brolly*, and something indescribable. She was perhaps eight feet long, and had recently given birth. A little cluster of offspring, small enough to be cute if they weren't so hideous, jostled and pushed at each other in order to suckle.

Seven of the little ones managed to get in on the food supply. Two more were left out in the cold—and, when the seven had fed, mama calmly lifted her massive head and snapped up the two weaklings in a mouthful apiece.

I looked at Lazenby. He hadn't enjoyed that.

"Survival of the fittest," I said acidly. "Mother Nature in action."

He glanced at me for a second, then back at the chop-

licking beast in the swamp. "I've never seen a world like this," he said curtly, and began to scribble notes.

That was what World Seven was like. We slogged through the mud and slime and heat, and the more I saw of it the less happy I was about the eventual report I'd be expected to file. The planet was an ecologist's nightmare, an interlocking series of biological dependencies that seemed to have no end. Even with Lazenby's help, I'd never be able to bluff my way through and fool Hendrin.

Somehow we avoided the carnivorous trees and the various toothy killers long enough to make a fairly complete survey of our sector. Work was proceeding on other fronts, too. Murray was preparing his aerial maps, and Chung, flying with him, had given the geology of the planet a thoroughgoing job. Since there was no intelligent life here, anthropologist Bartlett could not function in his speciality, so he teamed with Dorwin the chemist and served as lab assistant. The report was shaping up.

Then Evans, who doubled as radioman and assistant chem-

ist, came back from his hike carrying what was left of botanist Grover.

I didn't get a good look at Grover. I only got half a look, and that was enough. Fernandez, who's a medic and who doesn't get bothered by such sights easily, grabbed up a plastic tarpaulin and wrapped it around the body in a double hurry.

Captain Hendrin appeared, looking grimmer than usual, and glanced around.

"What happened to Grover?"

"He—fell, Captain," Evans said. The radioman licked his lips nervously. "He saw a plant he wanted to examine, and took a couple of steps off the beaten road. Then he yelled and slipped out of sight. It was some sort of trap—it looked like solid ground, but it wasn't. It—I don't know what it was. Whether it was a plant or an animal or what. He screamed a couple of times. I saw something yellow frothing around, and thin little tentacles waving."

He held out his hands. They were red, raw, blistered. "I reached in and yanked him out.

Some of the stuff spilled on my hands. It was like acid, sir. Like acid."

Hendrin was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Bartlett, Murray—get a grave dug outside the ship. And make it deep. This planet may have a few ghouls along with its other forms of life."

They shambled off to do the job. We were all pretty stunned at Grover's death—not so much the fact that a man had died, as the way he had died. He'd been eaten alive by—what? A pool of protozoa? Who knew?

He was the first human victim of World Seven. The planet's deadly spell was extending to us, now.

Grover's death cast a shadow over the rest of that day. No one went out of the ship after sundown; the moons had risen, and their cold light glittered on the crude grave outside. We spent our time filing reports, transcribing notes, doing anything at all to keep our minds busy.

LATER that night, Fernandez came over to where I sat in the ship's study, and

tapped me gently on the shoulder. I looked up, startled.

"Markham?"

"What is it?"

"Can you come to my cabin for a minute? I want to talk to you."

I didn't object. I followed the hulking medic up the narrow companionway to his private cabin and we went inside. He clicked the lock closed.

"What's this all about, Fernandez?"

He held up one beefy hand. "Patience, friend. All in good time." Going to his closet, he drew forth a drinkflask containing an unmistakably sparkling liquid, and handed it to me, grinning. "Have a drink first."

The stuff was Vellirani whiskey, one of the finest beverages known to the universe. I had missed it. "Where'd you get this?" I asked, as I punctured the drinkflask seal and took a sip. "Is it allowed on board?"

"Medicinal purposes," Fernandez said blandly. "A little privilege of my position. Have another drink."

I had another, and two or three more. Then I said, "You

didn't invite me here to drink your liquor. What's on your mind, Doc?"

"Hendrin."

"Eh?"

"Grover's death this afternoon could have been avoided—if we'd left this planet yesterday. I don't know how you feel about this, Markham. You're new to the crew. The rest of us have been together a long time, and Grover's death hurt. Hurt hard. You want me to stop talking, or should we go on?"

"Go on," I said.

"Okay. You may or may not know the clause in the Corps charter that refers to replacement of superior officer when he no longer is capable of commanding ship."

"I'm familiar with it. I saw now what Fernandez was driving at. "I'm with you so far," I said. "Keep talking."

"Some of us—Bartlett, Murray, myself, mainly—have come to the conclusion that remaining here is not in the best interest of the group's common safety. We're not equipped for a world like this, and it's suicide to keep wandering around

on foot in that jungle. This ought to be a three-ship team, with land-crawlers and heavy artillery. You were the first one of us to be attacked by native wildlife. You know what it's like.

"In my position as medic, I can issue an opinion that Hendrin is temporarily insane. It'll stand up anywhere in the galaxy. We'll remove him from command, put him down below where he can't interfere, and get off World Seven. But I won't issue the opinion unless I have a majority behind me. That's why I have to know where you stand, Markham."

I frowned. "You're proposing mutiny, in other words?"

"No. Legal removal of a temporarily insane commander is not mutiny. And it'll mean the deaths of all of us if we stay here the full period. Well, Markham? Are you with us?"

Grinning, I said, "What do you think? I like to stay alive just as much as the next man."

I had a few more drinks and left Fernandez' cabin, and so far as I knew the mutiny remained in abeyance for the

next day or two. Perhaps Fernandez was waiting until he had a unanimous backing behind him; I didn't know. So far as I knew four of the eight crewmen were in favor of deposing Hendrin—Fernandez, Murray, Bartlett, and myself. Only one—Lazenby—seemed to prefer remaining on World Seven to complete the observations. The other three, Chung, Evans, and Dorwin, had made no definite statement, at least not to me, but I was fairly certain where their sympathies lay. None of them was the deep-down dedicated type that would vote to remain on a suicide world like this one.

But nothing happened, during the next day. I saw little of Captain Hendrin, and what little I did see I didn't like: he was dour, grim, and stern, as if he expected what was brewing and was determined to squash it the moment it started.

For some reason, the field pairings were switched around the next day. It seemed that Chung wanted to investigate the geology of our region more closely, and had requested that he be teamed with someone

who had been working in the area. I was paired with him; Lazenby was shifted over to work with Bartlett, and Murray did his stint in the copter with Dorwin. With the death of Grover the balance of the teams was disrupted; we had always had four-two-man teams out and two men guarding the ship, but now the breakdown was three two-man outfits and three men back at ship.

Chung and I set out on a parallel track to finecomb the area, and Lazenby and Bartlett roamed out somewhere near us. The forest was so thick there was no way of seeing anyone nearby.

Chung devoted most of his time to rocks and ridges, while I, feeling a little lost without Lazenby, bluffed my way through an ecology tour. Luckily, Chung didn't say much, and I wasn't forced to reveal just how ignorant of my speciality I really was.

We were gone about half an hour when I heard a very human yell echo from the left.

Chung was bent over, studying a quartz outcropping. I said, "You hear that?"

"Sorry, no. Some animal?"

"Animal hell! That sounded like Lazenby, and I'll bet he's in trouble!"

As if to punctuate my mark with an exclamation point, another yell came from the adjoining glade.

"Come on," I said. "Let's see what's going on."

WE cut our way blindly through the infuriatingly thick overhang of vines, slashing madly in the direction of the noise. I yelled, "Lazenby! Bartlett! Is there any trouble?"

After a moment Bartlett's voice, quite close, said, "No, no trouble at all."

I hesitated—but then I saw Bartlett dimly veiled by close-packed fern fronds, and decided to see what was up anyway. I stepped through the ferns, followed by Chung.

Bartlett stood there, looking down at the ground. At Lazenby.

The little biologist was lying sprawled grotesquely on his stomach, rigid, corpselike. I felt chilled. That Lazenby, who of all of us had the most vivid interest in searching the forest

for its secrets, should meet death this way—

"What happened?" I asked.

Bartlett was very pale. The anthropologist said, "I didn't know. Something sprang at him from the tree up there, and he fell over. I couldn't see what it was."

There was a moment of silence. Then I went white as the "corpse" wriggled, painfully flopped over, and stared at us. I could see the knifewound in his chest.

"That's a lie," Lazenby said in a half-whisper. "It wasn't any animal. Bartlett knifed me . . . the way he did the Vellirani native . . . because I was going to tell you . . ."

He slumped, caught at his middle, tensed. His face was a mask of agony. I looked up from him to Bartlett, and now I saw the bloody knife clutched in the anthropologist's powerful hand.

"You had to be nearby?" Bartlett asked bitterly. "You had to get here before he died? You had to hear everything?"

I saw Chung backing away, frightened. "What is this, Bartlett?" I asked in a voice I didn't recognize.

"I killed him. Sure, I killed him. Like I killed a blueskin on Velliran."

"Why?"

"I didn't mean to. Never meant to. The native wouldn't answer questions; threatened to report me for unethical practices. Lazenby . . . gave me a drug. I used it on you. It stopped your time-perception; I killed the native, put the knife in your hand, left you standing there."

My mouth sagged open. I heard the chittering of the million insects on the forest floor. "You—"

"Me. It didn't have to be you. It could have been anyone; it just happened to be you that came along. And then I saw you join the crew as Markham. Why did it have to be *you*?"

So Bartlett had killed the Vellirani, and planted the weapon on a total stranger—me. Only I had followed him to World Seven. That was the "funny story" Lazenby had enigmatically promised to tell me, someday . . . and now, never would.

I stared at Bartlett across

Lazenby's stiffening body. And then Bartlett leaped.

The knife went high, but my hands were quick. I slapped his wrist, deflecting the aim outward, and clamped my other hand down before he could compensate. I twisted; the knife fell.

"Get help, Chung! He's out of his mind!" I managed to yell. Bartlett, weaponless, pummelled me back against a tree. I caught a freezing glimpse of some forest creature crawling out to feed on Lazenby's body. I blocked Bartlett's fists as well as I could, landed a cross to the chin, followed up my advantage with a heavy smash to his stomach.

He reeled back, stunned. I hit him again. I wanted to knock him out, to bring him back to the ship and eventually back to Velliran to clear my name. But it wasn't going to be that way.

He staggered, off balance. I landed another blow and he took three awkward wide falling steps backward—

And the ground gave way.

He sank down with a little terrified gasp, and I saw something yellow and slimy in the

ground, and fifty shiny transparent tentacles twine up and wrap around him. Within seconds he was below the surface, and out of sight. The yellow liquid swirled satedly, and then the trap began to close over again.

I stood staring at it, feeling sick. The trap was simple: the fluid at the surface congealed, forming a sticky, fragile surface to which leaves would adhere, creating a seemingly-innocent patch of ground that gave way when a foot touched it. And then...it fed.

I shuddered and turned away. Chasing a small striped feeder from Lazenby's body, I shouldered the corpse and sadly made my way back to the ship to announce that World Seven had claimed two more human victims.

AS I drew near the ship, I heard a strange sound: the high sucking whine of a blaster being fired. I moved faster, despite the burden on my back.

Then I stepped into the clearing, and saw the ship. Chung lay dead some twenty yards from the ship's elevator, a blaster-hole where his chest

should be. A little closer to the ship was Dorwin, his face a crust of ash. The sound of shouting, struggles came from the ship.

Somehow my mind found time to tally the score as I ran toward the ship. Five members of the team were dead; I, the sixth, was out here. That left Hendrin, inside, holding off Fernandez, Evans, and Murray. *Damn this world anyway*, I thought.

I looked up. The hatch opened, and someone tumbled down. Murray. A second later Fernandez' head poked out. "Markham! Where's Bartlett?"

"Dead. What's going on?"

"We sprang the mutiny on Hendrin, but he's holed up in the front now with a blaster. Just Evans and me left inside. You have a gun?"

"Yes," I said.

"Come on up here. But be careful."

I heard a blaster-shot, and Evans came staggering out to fall almost at my feet. That made seven corpses for World Seven, I thought. Nice and neat.

I edged my way toward the fore cabin. The sound of struggle reached me: a fist-fight, it seemed like. But I wasn't going to risk anything foolishly. I clung to the cold metal skin of the wall, and went forward step by step.

Then I saw them in the cabin—Hendrin and Fernandez, looking like two wildmen, slugging it out with bare fists. Hendrin's blaster lay discarded, on the floor; out of charge most likely. Fernandez turned his head a second and yelled, "Markham! He's unarmed! Help me!"

Hendrin's captain's uniform hung in tatters. I crept around behind him, snaked an arm around his throat, and yanked back. I holstered my blaster and pinioned him with my other arm.

"Hold still, Captain," I said warningly. "I've got a blaster here."

Hendrin held still. But suddenly, before I knew what was happening, Fernandez grabbed the blaster from my hip and felled Hendrin with a single shot. I let the Captain's body drop, jumped forward, and

clamped Fernandez' wrist.

But I didn't need to. The gun dropped of its own accord, and Fernandez stood there, a giant of a man, brooding foolishly like a small boy over Hendrin's body.

I picked up the gun. "Why'd you kill him? He was under control. Why'd you kill him, Fernandez?"

He looked into my face, and I saw sheer horror in his eyes. "I don't know," he said quietly. "I...was out of my head. It's all over now." He was shaking convulsively. He found a seat and took it, head in his hands.

"They're all dead," I said. "Every last one but you and me. Some expedition."

Fernandez was sobbing. It hurts to see a man his size sob. He said, "I'm supposed to be a healer, a curer...and I killed him I didn't need to. I just killed him."

"You couldn't help it. There was killing in the air. This world could drive anybody

crazy."

We worked for four hours straight, and when we got through seven more graves were ranged alongside Grover's. The jungle trumpeted defiant noises at us as we worked.

When it was done, Fernandez looked up at me, an ironic smile on his heavy face. "Well, it's done with now. We know all we need to know about World Seven of Star System A. We can go bac'k. now. I'll pilot the ship. But—"

"But what?"

"We're forgetting one thing. According to regulations, the last thing an Exploration Team's supposed to do before it winds up a tour is to name the planet. We haven't done that."

I looked at the jungle—the pestilent steaming hothouse of a jungle—and down at the eight graves. "That's easy," I said. "We'll call it *Death's Planet*."

THE END

THE BETTER LIFE

by CHARLES V. DeVET

Everything in the universe is subject to the force we call the will. McMahon found the secret of using will power, and it made a great, great change in his life

A blast of wind jerked at the window as Roy McMahon opened it. He slipped—and he was dead.

He still breathed; the blood of life still flowed through his veins; he still reasoned. But no power on this Earth, or out of it, could stop his hurtling fall to the sidewalk fourteen stories below.

Or at least that was McMahon's first thought. After the initial shock of dismay—the realization that he was falling to his death—a strange something happened to his mind. It acquired a lucidity and swiftness of function that amazed him. It was as though the reality within which he moved had paused and lengthened. He had often heard that a

man's life passed before him at the instant before death, and now he knew that it was true.

He thought with regret of the many things that would be left undone; he knew a swiftly passing sorrow for his many mistakes. All these he weighed and measured, and dismissed; All his past thoughts, emotions, likes and dislikes, passions and hates arrayed themselves before him—and assumed their true perspective. All had been picayune, childish. He exulted in his new wisdom. And for the first time knew true peace.

He was surprised to find that he no longer feared his approaching death. After a moment he understood why.

Nothing can frighten a man who has already given his life as lost.

He turned his attention to the phenomenon at hand. He saw then that all this introspection had taken place while his slipping fingers still grasped futilely at the window ledge. If so much inner contemplation could be achieved in so brief a span of time, he reasoned, the amount he could do before he reached the ground should be stupendous.

With renewed interest he regarded his present predicament. For a man possessed of the wisdom he had acquired, even saving his life should not be impossible. He sought for the means. The answer was waiting for him, like a friend in a warm room.

Will power!

Some philosopher—probably Schopenhauer—had said that everything is subject to the force which we call will. That too had been correct. To save his life would take great concentration—that was the secret of will power—but he knew he was capable of it.

He closed his eyes to better

orient the subtle flow of force which he felt generating within his brain. He pictured himself slowing in mid-air, bringing his body around into an upright position, and coming softly to rest on the sidewalk.

A moment passed. He felt the hard cement surface press gently against his shoe soles, and his descent stopped. He had succeeded!

McMahon's effort of concentration had been so great that when he first opened his eyes his right seemed blurred in a great gray blanket of fog, but gradually the sidewalk and the buildings beside it took shape, and finally pedestrians appeared on the walk, and automobiles in the street. None of the passers-by seemed to have noticed his fall and passed him with the usual I'm interested-in-me-only expressions.

McMahon's own emotions were a bit difficult to define. He felt as though he had wakened from a dream; glimpses of what he had experienced in his fall came and went. The celerity and cold logic of mind were gone, but he still felt,

deep within, the strength of will which he had discovered. He returned to his office and did not mention his accident to anyone. They would not have believed him, and he would have appeared ridiculous trying to convince them.

When he returned home he kept his secret to himself, for the same reason. But all through the night the new thing within seemed to throb, with a subdued purr of potential power.

THE next day McMahon returned to his job at the garment factory. He held a very minor executive position there; assistant to the assistant personnel director.

Sometime during the early part of the afternoon McMahon glanced up and saw old Vic Peterson, the plant production manager, passing by the glass door of his office. It would be nice to have his job, McMahon thought idly, as he had done often in the past.

Peterson paused in his absent-minded strolling. He seemed to look about him in puzzlement. Then his face

cleared and he turned and entered McMahon's office. He smiled. "Afternoon, Mac," he said. His tone was more cordial and friendly than McMahon remembered ever hearing it.

Peterson came over and sat on the edge of McMahon's desk. "You know, Mac," he said, "I've just this minute decided to take my retirement. I've been thinking about it for several years, and now I have a chance to buy a lake place at quite a reasonable price. I'm going to do it!"

McMahon felt his eyebrows rise. He sought for words to agree that Peterson was doing the right thing, but not to appear too eager to see him go. This had taken him completely by surprise. Not so much that Peterson was retiring, but that he should be the first to hear about it. Peterson had never been particularly friendly toward him. He was quite certain that Peterson had always regarded him as merely another minor cog in the organization.

"I've always regarded you as one of our better young men," Peterson further surprised him

by continuing. "I'm going to put in a good word for you to Baudette when I tell him I'm leaving."

Peterson held up his hand to halt the sputtering thanks McMahon tried to get out. "Oh, it won't be as easy as all that," Peterson warned. "You'll have to sell yourself. Baudette is a sharp one. My advice is to think up a good sales talk. And make it really good." He clapped a friendly hand on McMahon's shoulder and left.

McMahon took Peterson's advice and concentrated on what he would say, if and when his interview with the executive vice president came up.

BAUDETTE called him in three days later. By that time the news of Peterson's imminent retirement had become general knowledge. The office grape vine also had it that Baudette had already interviewed several other potential production managers from among his executive force. All of them held more responsible positions than McMahon.

"I'll be frank," Baudette said between puffs, as he lit his pipe, "I wouldn't have con-

sidered you for the position if Vic hadn't been so insistent on it. I didn't know he was such a good friend of yours." He held his voice up in a half question.

"We aren't exactly friends," McMahon said. "I was surprised as you must have been when he said he was recommending me."

"Well, no matter," Baudette figuratively brushed the topic aside, "but one thing, Peterson is no fool. If he says you have the stuff there must be something more than ordinary there."

"I hope he was right." McMahon was careful not to say too much."

"Do you have any ideas?" Baudette asked suddenly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"If I made you production manager, how would you go about bettering the business?"

"This would have to have your approval, of course, and probably that of the board," McMahon began, striving for just the correct manner of confidence plus deference, "but an idea occurred to me a few days ago that might do

a great deal to promote the company's business."

Baudette nodded encouragingly. "Go on."

"The idea's quite simple. Perhaps for that reason it could be very good. We already make 'stretch' stockings that fit any foot. Why don't we make 'stretch' underwear—shirts and shorts?" As Baudette's eyes widened with some emotion he could not quite define, McMahon went on. "Using the 'stretch' material would eliminate considerable overhead. It would save much sizing and pattern work, enable us to carry a smaller inventory, and cut losses on obsolete styles. On the sales end, the retailer also could get by with a smaller inventory. And finally, we would be first on the market with the new articles—the novelty value would be great, you know."

Baudette's pipe had gone out. For a moment he stared straight ahead. "Why didn't I think of that?" he murmured. "Why didn't anybody think of it?"

THE following week McMahon was made production manager. However, by that time he was not as thrilled as he might have been earlier with the promotion. He had learned more about the power within him—and it was so great that it staggered his imagination.

He was on his way home one evening, hurrying to catch his train, with a crowd of other commuters blocking the platform ahead of him. "I wish they'd get out of my way," McMahon thought.

A path opened through the crowd and with startled disbelief McMahon walked through. Abruptly the pattern clicked into place in his mind. He could control the actions of those about him! He recalled then how Peterson had so unexpectedly decided to retire—and recommended him for the position. That had not been a coincidence.

On the way home McMahon mentally fondled the new gift he had found like a man savoring wine on his tongue before swallowing. But there was still more to come.

His wife, Elena, met him at the door. "How's your sinus?" McMahon asked, kissing her. She had been troubled with it for the last several years. It had been getting progressively worse.

"Still as bad as it was this morning," Elena answered. "This headache is killing me."

A new thought occurred to McMahon: Would it be possible, he wondered, to cure her headache? He concentrated.

"I'm glad you're home," Elena said after a minute. "I'm beginning to feel better already. I believe my headache's going away too."

"That's good," McMahon answered, keeping his exultation hidden behind his calm words. He looked at her fondly. He hadn't paid too much attention lately, but she had changed considerably since they'd been married twelve years ago. She had put on more weight than was either comfortable or attractive, and sinus drainage had formed permanent pouches under her eyes. She had lost much of her early zest for life, and while she was not unhappy, there

was little that thrilled her these days.

McMahon wondered just how great his new power was. Could his influence make her more like the happy, exciting girl he had married? He decided to try. But he would have to be subtle. No sudden, unnatural change; it would have to be done gradually, carefully.

SIX months later McMahon's wife was more beautiful than she had ever been—and more contented and happy. In addition, his company had prospered greatly under his direction. He was a successful man.

The day he took a mental inventory of himself, and his new power, he received a letter from General Motors. He knew what would be inside the envelope.

A few days before he had heard that they were looking for a new general manager; he had asked for and received an interview.

He had recommended that they make their motors in sealed units, such as was used

in refrigerators. When any automobile developed trouble the motor could be replaced—with the use of a simple crane—in ten minutes' time. The defective unit would be sent to the factory and repaired on an assembly line. Thus, for a few dollars more a manufacturer could guarantee his automobile for life. The idea would revolutionalize the industry.

McMahon was certain that the envelope contained the offer of the job. Life had became a beautiful thing, he reflected. There was no limit to what

he could achieve, to the goals he could attain; no limit to the help he could give other men and women with his great power. He was just beginning to realize the scope of what he could, and would, do.

McMahon knew from then on life would be adventurous, blissful; that there was little that would prove impossible for him. He knew all this—but there was one thing he did not know.

He did not know that he was dead.

THE END

OBEY THAT IMPULSE

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NUCLEAR NEWS

by STEVEN RORY

With the recent development of Element 101, named Mendelevium in honor of the great 19th-century Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleev, chemist of the periodic table, scientists have brought to ten the number of artificial elements that have been synthesized in the atomic era.

These artificial man-made elements are known as the "transuranic" elements, because they lie after Uranium, the heaviest natural element, on the periodic table. They have been created chiefly by bombarding radioactive elements with alpha particles in the University of California's 60-inch cyclotron.

The first of the transuranic elements to be created in the laboratory was Element 93, given the name Neptunium because it is beyond Uranium just

as the planet Neptune is beyond Uranus. Neptunium was first produced by bombarding Uranium-238 with neutrons in 1940. It was followed by Element 94, Plutonium, in 1941. This element was later manufactured in quantity when it was discovered that it shared with U-235 the ability to reach critical mass and detonate.

Elements 95 and 96 were added in 1944, being developed by the bombarding of plutonium. 95 was named Americium; 96, Curium, after the famed French pioneers in radioactive work.

1950 saw element 97 created by the irradiation of Americium with alpha-particles in the California cyclotron, and its creators chose to call the new element Berkelium, after the location of the cyclotron.

Element 98 was synthesized from element 96 later in 1950, also with the Berkeley cyclotron. Only 5,000 atoms of this element were created—a fantastically sub-microscopic quantity—and they had a radioactive half-life of just 45 minutes. But the element was detectable, and it was named Californium, for obvious reasons.

Elements 99 and 100 were actually discovered by accident. Traces of them were discovered in the debris left after the thermonuclear test explosion in the Pacific in November 1952. Since then, the Berkeley laboratory has been able to produce them without the assistance of an H-bomb explosion. The difference is that it took them three years of constant bombardment of plutonium to create 99 and 100, while in the fusion-fission explosion they were created

from uranium in microseconds.

Element 99 was named Einsteinium; element 100, Fermium, in honor of the father of the atomic age, the late Enrico Fermi.

Element 101, Mendelevium, is the newest of the manmade elements, created out of a microscopic amount of Einsteinium. It is, like most of the other transuranic elements, extremely short-lived.

Work is proceeding on extension of the table of elements. The California experimenters believe that they will probably be able to extend the list to about Element 108, though from here on their task will be complicated by the fact that the elements will become progressively more unstable, decaying almost instantly into a lighter element, and thus will exist barely long enough to enable chemical identification to be made.

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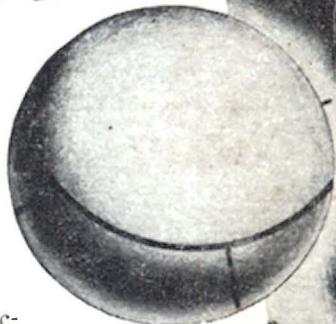
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