



THE INTRUDERS

BRON FANE

Seven desperate survivors drifting helplessly in a life-capsule, sight an uncharted world. The anti-grav landing shields are only working spasmodically, but the survivors still land safely.

In this strange, alien environment there is room for vivid, dramatic conflict of personalities. The survivors are at a loss to explain the strange conduct of the humanoid ethnic groups which they find on this strange world. Slowly the horrifying truth begins to dawn on the dwindling band from the capsule.

There are other life forms in evidence on the planet, things which were extinct on earth aeons ago. Yet there is a vital, terrifying difference between the giant reptiles of earthly prehistory and the monsters on this alien world.



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Men and monsters co-existed
in a strange alien culture

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Science
Fiction



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Bron Fane

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

SEVEN desperate survivors, drifting helplessly in a life-capsule, sight an uncharted world. The anti-grav landing shields are only working spasmodically, but the survivors still land safely.

In this alien environment there is room for dramatic, vivid conflict of personalities. The survivors are at a loss to understand the strange conduct of the humanoid ethnic groups which they find on this strange world. Slowly the horrifying truth begins to dawn on the dwindling band from the capsule.

There are other life forms in evidence on the planet, things which were extinct on earth aeons ago. Yet there is a vital, terrifying difference between the reptiles of earthly pre-history and the monsters on this alien world.

THE ship made a strange whining sound, reminiscent of an animal in pain. The Captain, galvanised into action, leapt out of his bunk so violently that the grav-simulator was unable to deal with the force of his thrust. He floated towards the control panel in an odd, helpless sort of arc. The navigator reached up a hand and steadied him.

"Thanks." The monosyllable was terse but the navigator knew his skipper well enough not to take exception to the terseness with which the gratitude had been expressed.

The Captain checked the main drive and the subsidiary drives. As his fingers flicked the buttons of the test circuit activators there was a negative response from the warning system. The navigator had joined him at the control panel.

"What do you make of it, Aster?" asked the Captain. The navigator shook his head uncertainly.

"I don't know, Captain Velos."

"You can hear it, can't you?"

"Hear it clearly, sir."

"Would you say it is getting louder?"

"I think perhaps it is."

There was a tense, vibrant silence. Aster and Velos looked at each other and then back at the control panel.

"It is getting louder," affirmed Velos.

Aster put his head on one side and listened like a bird.

"Louder," he repeated, and nodded.

The Captain pressed the General Alarm button. The penetrating tones of the audible signal filled the ship. The three off-duty members of the crew came off their bunks like sleepy caterpillars dropping off cabbage leaves.

There was Plumbus, the ship's biologist, doctor and psychiatrist. He was a big, slow-moving, rather phlegmatic man; he rubbed the sleep from his eyes and came to the centre of the control cabin.

"What's the matter, Velos?"

The Captain put a finger to his ear.

"Listen," he said significantly.

Plumbus began to listen. He did it deliberately and with great precision.

"There's a queer sort of whining noise," he agreed.

"Yes, exactly!" returned the Captain.

He and Aster, the navigator, looked at Plumbus thoughtfully. Schafft, the mechanic, seemed to be also a general, all-round inventor. He was a thin, angular sort of individual. Where Plumbus was slow, almost lethargic, in his movements, Schafft was lightning fast, quixotic, mercurial, in both speech and gesture.

"That's a damn queer noise," he said.

"Well, if you don't know what it is, I'm sure none of the rest of us do!" said Aster.

"What do you think, Schafft?" asked the Captain.

Beneath their heavy lids the eyes of Dr. Plumbus travelled from the control panel to Schafft's face and back again.

Kramer, the geologist, planetographer, photographer and recording expert, was surveying the control panel, as though he would have liked to have hit it with a sampling hammer. Kramer was as hard as the rocks that were his main interest. He had a jaw like granite, eyes like flints, hair like asbestos fibres, and a voice that sounded like water running through subterranean tunnels and passages. Kramer was not a man who spoke much but, as though in a strange compensatory manner, he seemed to listen and think all the more. . . .

Schafft unscrewed a couple of bulkhead panels and began examining, examining the circuits underneath.

"Press the test circuit buttons again," he asked.

The captain pressed them, the test lights showed negative response.

"The circuits appear to be O.K. but, of course, they may have shorted out somewhere around the fault," said Schafft.

"Is that very likely?" asked Aster.

"Damned unlikely!" agreed Schafft. "Normal procedure is for a short to throw in the central alarm system. Mind you, freak shorts do sometimes occur, but only once in a hundred thousand times. They are put in the textbooks as an example of what *can* happen to the uninitiated. There was the case of the Lepros IV which was lost with all hands in deep space, finally turned out, when salvage crews picked her up years later, with the skeletons still aboard, that was what had happened."

There was silence for a few minutes. Silence, that is, except for the whining noise, which continued to grow.

"Whatever it is," announced Schafft, rather enigmatically, "it's getting worse. . . ."

"You've got no idea at all?" asked the Captain.

"I've got plenty of ideas," returned Schafft, "the thing is, how many of them are right? And how much time have we got in which to test them out? It could, I suppose, be one of the sigmel bearings on the main riffel drive. It could be one of the golandian bars come adrift near the akon chamber. . . . It might be the magnetrox in the helion compartment."

"You don't really think that any of those possibilities are likely, do you?" asked the Captain.

This crew had sailed together on many occasions before. They knew each other well. Velos knew his men perhaps better than any of them knew him, for Velos was something of a mystery man. He had the mystique of the captain.

The whining grew worse. The ship began to shudder. Emergency lights began flashing on.

"Skin seems to be coming adrift," said the navigator, pointing to the emergency light in the third panel. Tension switches were thrown. The emergency light flicked off for a second. The whining grew louder. The ship's vibrations grew worse. The emergency lights flashed on again.

"What else can we do?" asked the Captain. "The tension switches have all been thrown."

"Retract the forcefield," suggested the engineer. He was shouting to make himself heard above the whine.

The Captain nodded to show that he had heard. He threw over the lever which would bring back the forcefield until, instead of acting as a buffer, for any stray meteoric particles, it was absorbed into the hull itself. To retract

a forcefield was the Grade A emergency. The whining grew louder.

The engineer suddenly snapped his fingers.

"I've got it!" he roared.

"Do you mean you can stop it?"

Schafft shook his head.

"Life capsule," he shouted. "Life capsule as fast as you can make it!"

They scrambled into the ship's life capsule, but a swift glance at the panels made the navigator scream a warning.

"It can't be done!" he shouted. "It can't be done!"

The four space men looked at Aster questioningly. The whining was so loud that it was painful. The altitude gauge was down to practically zero.

"We should never launch in time," yelled the navigator.

"We shall have to attempt a landing!" Somehow, the Captain fought his way back to the control panel, contrived to close his mind to the brain-destroying whine. The gauges, the levers, the wheels, the dials and the switches seemed to dance in front of his face. Nothing seemed to really make any sense. He forced himself to go on concentrating. Lives depended on his ability to concentrate. He must not let them down. It wasn't just his own life depending upon him. It would have been easier to give in, then. It was the other lives that mattered.

Velos kept on wrestling with the controls. Finally he got the shattered, disintegrating ship absolutely athwart her auto-landing beam. He threw the switches to automatic grounding position, and collapsed, clapping his hands to his ears.

Aster was already down; Plumbus and Schafft were

buckling at the knees, only Kramer stood erect, fighting the noise. Kramer, the rock man, thought the Captain.

Then the intensity of the sound made him black out. His last conscious thought was a prayer that the auto-lander would get them down on this planetary surface, wherever they were.

CHAPTER II

"IF I didn't know better," said Val Stearmann, pointing towards a skimming disc of light, "I would be inclined to say that that was a flying saucer."

The Cleopatrine beauty beside him fixed her exquisite eyes on the descending disc ship.

"It is a saucer," she said quietly.

Val looked at her.

"You're joking!" But her voice had not been bubbling with humour when she had spoken. Deep down within his secret heart of hearts, at the lowest level of his existence, Stearmann knew that she was not joking.

"But——" he began, and then stopped in mid-sentence. The thing was moving fast, and there was no doubt at all that it was coming towards them.

The fields on either side of the narrow road along which Val was driving his powerful sports saloon were white with snow. The lingering February frosts of the frozen beginning to 1963 still had large areas of the East Anglian countryside in their savagely icy grip.

Val and La Noire stopped the car and sat watching for a few microseconds which seemed to last hours.

"Do you think we're in danger of being hit?" she asked suddenly. "Let's get out."

"Out?" protested Stearman. "Darling, it's cold! There's about fifteen degrees of frost."

"Let's get out!" she repeated.

Val stopped arguing. He knew La Noire well enough to know that her mysterious, Cleopatrine beauty was not her only attribute. She possessed a keen and hyper-sensitive brain. If she sensed danger, then a hundred to one that danger was very real and very close. He waited for her to get clear and then opened the door and scrambled out himself.

The spinning circle of light in the sky ahead of them was very much closer now. Val looked at it with considerable interest. There was practically no cover, but on the other side of a gateway on the other side of the road was a firmly frozen ditch. Its icy surface was two or three feet below the level of the field which it drained.

La Noire climbed gracefully over the gate and Val vaulted it with ease and athletic precision. The disc of light was now quite unmistakably some kind of artifact, and if it wasn't a space ship of some kind, Val Stearman would have been prepared to eat the old check cap which he habitually wore when he was driving.

Putting his arm protectively across La Noire's shoulder, Val pinned her to the icy surface of the ditch. His body half covered hers. A few feet above their heads, cutting into the frozen surface of the field, throwing soil and small stones into the air, the fuselage of the strange disc made contact with earth.

Clods of frozen soil and showers of earth and little stones spattered all around them. Val and La Noire crouched in the protective miniature valley of the ditch.

"Thank heaven it's frozen," said Val.

As he spoke there was an ominous cracking sound. There was a grinding roar from behind them, which drowned the cracking sound that the ice was making in protest at the combined weight of Val and La Noire Stearman.

"Whatever it is, it's landed!" said La Noire.

Val straddled the ditch and lifted her lightly and easily into the field, then with a quick thrust of his massive legs he sprang from his rather awkward position and stood in the field beside her, surveying the circle of light thirty yards beyond them.

Stearman was a man whom life had not treated gently. He had no complaints or regrets about that; in fact, he would rather a thousand times over have died of violence than of boredom. One legacy which the adventures of life had bestowed upon him was the habit of going nowhere without a Browning automatic.

Stearman enjoyed the rather unusual position of Psychic Investigator and Reporter on the Unusual, on the redoubtable *Daily Globe*. He had been to the furthest corners of the earth in the course of searching for news of his own particular kind for the gratification of the *Daily Globe's* readers, and the mollification of the one and only "Mac," the irascible old Scots editor. It was in the course of one of those adventures, long ago, that Val had first met the bewitching La Noire. In those days she had herself been involved with a rather unwholesome organization who, after Stearman's intervention, had pursued Val and La Noire relentlessly. One by one the hunted had dealt with the hunters. But that was history. . . .

A legacy of the history was the gun. . . . Now, as Val and La Noire moved cautiously, but purposefully, towards the ship the gun slid out of Stearman's pocket and nestled in the broad palm of his right hand. It had a nice feel to it, that gun; a comforting and reassuring feel.

Stearman was also the kind of man upon whom Nature had bestowed some of her choicest gifts. He had a keen brain; clear, bright, penetrating dark eyes, a crop of curly, iron-grey hair, and a face that was powerful and rugged; it was handsome in a strong, masculine way; in the same way that the Vilder Kaiser mountains in Austria are ruggedly handsome.

A gun was almost a superfluity for a man with Stearman's physique. Despite the two-score-and-a-bit years, during which he had lived and moved and had his being, he was as fit, as strong, as virile, and as enthusiastic for life as he had ever been. It might have been written of him, as it was written of that mighty prophet of old, "His eye was not dim, and his powers were not abated."

Stearman motioned to La Noire to drop just a little behind him, and the almost feline beauty of her shadow moved softly and mysteriously in his wake. Stearman reached the outline of the ship. He moved his hand forward. The ship was hot, very hot. He withdrew his hand. It seemed reasonable. It had been coming down pretty fast. There was some slight damage, not much, as far as he could judge from his circumnavigation of the hull.

La Noire peeped over his shoulder by standing on tip-toe; a sound of movement could be heard within the ship. Stearman slipped the safety catch off the gun and, holding La Noire behind him, backed off a few paces. A panel opened in the side of the ship. . . .

CHAPTER III

VELOS, Captain of the disc ship, poked his head through the observation panel. The air samplers had already shown that the atmosphere was safe, and the grav-tester on the auto-landing device indicated that it was practically normal. Velos felt almost relieved that the whining had stopped.

Schafft followed the Captain to the hatch.

"Any idea where we are?" he asked.

The Captain nodded.

"Unexplored, but it's been observed," he replied.

"What do the observers have to say about it?" asked Schafft.

"Mixed," said the Captain cryptically. "Very mixed. Humanoid culture, stage four development. . . ."

"Stage four?" said Plumbus, peering behind the Captain in the hatchway.

"Stage four," affirmed Velos.

Plumbus nodded his ponderous chin. "Hmm," said Plumbus; it was a very thoughtful monosyllable. "Hmm," he said again, as though thoroughly satisfied with the noise that he had made on the first occasion.

Velos and Schafft looked at him.

"Are we going to explore?" asked Schafft.

"I don't see why not," answered the Captain. "I want to make a quick external examination before I——"

Schafft broke off in mid-sentence; he tapped the Captain on the shoulder and pointed silently to where Stearman and La Noire stood looking at the space men. "Let's hope they're friendly," said Schafft, recovering some of his composure.

"I endorse your sentiments there," replied Plumbus.

"There are only two of them, and one's a woman," said Velos.

"The man looks pretty big," said Plumbus.

"Yes. I should think he's as heavy as you and he's not fat," returned Schafft, weighing up Val Stearman, and casting a swift glance at Plumbus.

"I'll go and speak to them," said Velos.

"Do you know the language?" asked Aster, who stood Behind them in the lock.

"I took an intensive when I was on observation duty here, years ago, before I teamed up with you characters," said the Captain. "There's probably an educo-reel in the store with some of this planet's languages on."

"What's the place called, anyway?" asked Aster.

"Earth!" answered the Captain. There was silence.

"I'll see if I can find that educo-reel," put in Aster, and disappeared back inside the ship.

Val and La Noire stood watching silently. The Captain came forward.

Vale broke the silence; he whispered to La Noire swiftly and urgently out of the corner of his mouth.

"What sort of impression do you get of this character, friendly or otherwise?"

"Friendly, I think," returned La Noire. "There is no sense of evil with him, anyway. He seems"—she hesitated—"he seems very like us," she finished.

"Well, that doesn't make him a saint incarnate, does it?" said Val with a wry grin, but he lowered the barrel of the gun.

Velos screwed up his face into a frown of concentration. It was a long time since he had done that intensive. He bit his lip for a second, then his eyes brightened and some of the ferocity of the scowl disappeared.

"My name is Velos," he said. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes!" cried Val. "How on earth do you come to speak English?"

"I have been instructed in your language," replied Velos. He was still speaking very slowly and uncertainly. "When I was younger I came to this planet to observe. I listened to many of your television and radio transmissions." Every word was coming out as though it was something of an effort.

"Your people have been observing us for a long time?" asked Val.

"We are inquisitive," smiled Velos. "We have observed many planets." He pointed to the crumpled edges of the disc ship. His face became rueful. "This was one of our explorator craft," he said slowly.

Val nodded.

"Will it be possible for you to repair it?"

"Perhaps." Velos didn't sound particularly optimistic.

"If you can't repair it, what will you do?"

"We will throw ourselves upon the mercy of your government," said Velos slowly.

"I think you will be treated all right. You would probably be top priority and top security," said Val. "I can just imagine what they'd do to you now. Interrogating you about your space technology, all that sort of thing. Yes, you'd be big business in the war sphere. You'd put us ahead of the Yanks and the Russians!"

"My people are troubled by the political difficulties of your people. It is not good that a culture which has reached Stage Four in technology should still be at Stage Three in its ethical development."

"I don't quite understand you," replied Val.

"Your people can make space ships, and flying bombs. You have the beginnings of atomic and space technologies," said Velos, "but you are still in the political stage at which nation states exist."

"Do nation states no longer exist on your own world?"

"Nation states have not existed on my world for thousands of years," answered Velos. "In fact, among our people planets themselves are units in larger organizations."

"Sounds pretty comprehensive," said Val.

"Com-pre-hen-sive?" said Velos. "Oh yes. Now I remember. The word comes back to me."

There was a pause and a silence.

Schafft, Plumbus, Kramer and Aster had now come forward. Val shook hands with Velos first, and then with the others as the Captain introduced them.

Aster the navigator said something swiftly to Velos in a language which Stearmann and La Noire did not understand. Velos nodded and smiled.

"Aster, my navigator, has found an educo-reel in our

ship's library. It is the basic rudiments of your language. It will not take more than a few moments for each of my men to play the reel through his educo-unit while he sleeps. This will mean that we shall all be able to converse together."

"You will find it a great advantage to know our language, if you find that your stay on earth is a protracted one," said Val.

"Protracted?" asked Velos. Then, before Val could offer an explanation, the alien's eyes flashed intelligently.

"Oh yes, protracted—of long duration, drawn out. The word comes back. I think I must also avail myself of the educo-reel! It will not harm me to have a refresher!"

Again there was a silence. The spacemen disappeared with the English language educo-reel. They were soon back.

The capsule started buzzing. Val and La Noire looked questioningly at Velos.

"Something is wrong, please wait."

Val nodded. Velos and the other alien humanoids made their way rapidly back into their ship. He stood looking at the capsule. It was Plumbus who decoded the warning buzzer, then, gritting his teeth together, the corpulent doctor smacked one pudgy fist into the palm of the other hand.

"What is wrong?" demanded Velos.

"Plenty!" answered Plumbus. "A helluva lot, in fact!"

Aster, Schafft, and Kramer—the silent Kramer—looked inquiringly at Plumbus.

CHAPTER IV

PLUMBUS reset the alarm buzzer, and pointed to the decoding spot on the alarm's signal chart.

"Well, that's your department," said Velos. "It means comparatively little to me."

"I'm afraid it will mean a great deal to you," said Plumbus, "to all of us, in fact, Captain."

"Come on, out with it," demanded Aster. "What's the matter?"

"The crash!" said Plumbus.

"Well, so what?"

"Apparently some of my department got stirred up when we landed."

"You mean your bacterial cultures?" asked the Captain. Plumbus nodded.

"It wouldn't have mattered on most planets," he said, "the little devils would either have been frozen or fried. But this planet is almost too conducive to life."

"What's got out?" asked the Captain.

"Unfortunately, the only thing that shattered—and that's what registered on the alarm filters, was the 'Y' culture."

"The 'Y' culture!" Velos looked grim.

"It could be worse," said Plumbus.

"How could it be worse?" said Velos. "It's fatal and they probably haven't encountered it. They're only a Stage

Four technology. You can't expect them to have the kind of medical science which would knock out the 'Y' culture. What the devil were you playing about with 'Y' culture for, anyway?"

"I have to keep some living 'Y' culture in case I need some vaccine quickly for the benefit of any of you mugs who might go down with it," said Plumbus. He sounded unusually angry.

"I'm sorry, doctor," said the Captain. "I didn't mean to question what you were doing. You've always run your side of the ship extremely well."

"All right," said Plumbus, "we're both of us feeling the strain a bit. Sorry I shouted."

Velos grinned. "It's all right," he said.

"What's this all add up to?" asked Kramer suddenly.

Plumbus looked at him rather darkly.

"Not good," he said. "Not good at all. This 'Y' culture dies quite rapidly without a host, but there's no doubt that some of us at least went out loaded with the stuff, and stood round talking to those two earth people, which means that they must also be loaded with it."

"So?" asked Velos.

"So we shall have to get them on board. If they once start carrying it, it could spread anywhere. I couldn't possibly manufacture enough vaccine to inoculate a whole planet. The place is pretty populous. They just haven't got the technology yet to manufacture 'Y' culture for themselves," said Plumbus.

"Let's hope nobody else is about, and let's get those two inside quick," said Velos. He went out again and beckoned.

Val and La Noire came towards the hatch.

"Did you hear that alarm bell ringing?" asked Velos.

"Heard something," said Stearman.

"I have very bad news for you," responded Velos.

"Bad news for us?" asked Stearman.

"In the crash, some bacteria which we call 'Y' culture . . . it—it escaped."

"You mean that we might be infected?" said Val.

"You are almost certain to be infected."

"Is it dangerous?"

"It is fatal!" answered Velos simply.

Val felt that his stomach had suddenly turned to ice. Not by so much as a flicker of an eyelid did his face betray his emotion.

"What happens now?" he asked.

"Fortunately, we have serum which will protect you against it," said the Captain.

The ice began to thaw in Stearman's stomach. He drew a deep breath.

"Unfortunately, a problem has now presented itself," said the Captain. "The 'Y' bacteria is transmitted from one living host to another. It won't travel far without direct personal contact. Loose on your planet, it would wipe out 99 per cent of your people!"

"Can't you give us this serum?" asked Val.

"We have a limited supply and we can manufacture some more limited supplies. That, in fact, was why the 'Y' culture was on board at all."

"That makes sense," responded Stearman.

"It's the truth," said Velos.

There was silence again.

The spaceman looked at Val and La Noire. They looked back at him searchingly.

"I'm afraid I must ask you to come aboard for the sake of your own people,"

Stearman looked at La Noire. She looked very hard indeed at Velos.

"I trust you," she said.

"All right," put in Val, "we'll come aboard."

They climbed through the lock into the strange alien space craft.

The complexity of the mechanisms defeated even Val Stearman's keen mind, and La Noire's high intellect and hyper-sensitivity were no more able to grasp the full import of the complex banks of machinery than Val could.

"I see that our technology baffles you?" said Velos, with just a trace of justifiable pride.

"That's putting it mildly!" replied Stearman.

There was a deeply upholstered, double anti-grav bunk in the compartment in which they now sat.

"Sit down, please," said Velos.

Plumbus appeared with a hypodermic syringe. . . .

"Old fashioned, but very swift and effective," he said.

He gave Val and La Noire a small injection each.

"You should feel no ill effects at all," he said, "but if you do let me know immediately. I'll give you another dose."

"Thanks," said Val.

"I'm afraid we don't deserve your gratitude. It was our fault this blasted 'Y' culture got loose on your planet at all."

"It hasn't got loose now, has it?" said Val, interrogatively.

"No, thank God," said Plumbus. "You didn't speak to anybody other than us, did you?"

"No. There was no one about," answered Val.

"Right! Then everything's O.K."

"Sooner or later," said Velos, "somebody is going to come up to this ship and demand admission. Or else they'll ring it and send a policeman, or something."

"You know quite a bit of our customs," replied Val. "Your observations must have been thorough!"

"But very little," said Velos.

Again there was silence for a few moments.

"The only safe place for quarantine would be in orbit," said Aster, tentatively.

"And how do you propose to get this thing into orbit?" demanded Schafft.

"Well, the ship is pretty well finished, but the capsule would work."

"You can't get that capsule up with seven of us in it."

"We could at a push," answered Schafft.

"We can't just sit up there in orbit in the capsule! We'd better try to get the ship going again."

Schafft looked glum.

"I think I've found the source of that whining noise," he said. "It's in the main drive."

"The thing is, can we take off?" asked Velos.

The Captain had scarcely finished speaking when Kramer shouted.

"Somebody's coming!" He stood at the scanner screen.

"You're right," agreed Velos. He looked over Kramer's shoulder. "The authorities, by the look of things!"

Val and La Noire looked at the screen. A cordon of

troops was advancing under a purposeful looking colonel. Police and firemen were moving up the road. The picture showed the panorama in beautiful detail, clear, very clear, too clear. . . .

"Dare we attempt a take-off?" asked Velos.

"It's going to be difficult to avoid making contact with those fellows if you don't," said Schafft.

"Well, will she do it?" demanded Velos.

Schafft shrugged his shoulders.

"She came down. . . ." he said, cryptically.

Val thought about the old proverb about "what goes up must come down"—was the corollary to it, "what came down must go up"? He laughed at his own mental witticism. The others looked at him with interest.

"Only thoughts," said Val, "and not particularly witty ones, either! It amused me but it probably wouldn't appeal to you. My sense of humour is not as sophisticated as yours."

"I'm going to attempt a take-off," said Velos.

"What about us?" said La Noire. "You can't just go whisking off with us into space like that! I mean——"

"I can't let you go again for several days," said Velos. "Not until we are absolutely certain that not a trace of the 'Y' culture remains."

"Well, let's see if we can get her up," said Schafft.

"Relax into that upholstery," said Velos. "Don't worry about anything. Particularly the whining noise," he gritted.

Schafft scowled. The scanner showed that the authorities and their forces were getting closer.

"Isn't that colonel pompous!" murmured Val to La Noire.

"Mmmm," she nodded, then they settled into the deep anti-grav padding of the bunk.

The take-off was a strange experience. The ship was rattling and wheezing like an old car in the London-to-Brighton race.

"Do you think we're going to make it?" asked Velos.

"I hope so," said Aster.

"She's making damn sight harder work of getting up than she did of coming down," said Plumbus.

"It's a miracle she's getting up at all," said Schaft.

Kramer stood grim-faced and silent. Under his breath he muttered something about "Y" culture" and scowled at Plumbus. The doctor ignored him.

"We're on the way up!" shouted Aster. "We're definitely on the way up."

The ship was moving. Val and La Noire clung to one another in the deep softness of the anti-grav compartment. The upholstery seemed to fold around them like soft but powerfully protective hands.

Val felt like somebody's little pet animal being lifted up by a proud owner. He was glad when the acceleration eased and released him from the soft, protecting grip of the anti-grav upholstery.

"O.K. now," said Velos.

Val staggered to his feet. The pseudo-grav that made normal movement and walking possible had been damaged by the impact. It was working spasmodically. It gave you the feeling of going down in a lift, descending in fits and starts on a slipping cable. Val and La Noire were not particularly enamoured of the sensation which was now overtaking their equilibrium.

"Can you get her into orbit?" asked Velos.

Aster shook his head.

"Stabilisers have gone, Captain."

"Oh, that's just marvellous!" exclaimed Velos.

They were speaking in their own language now, and Stearman was looking in bewilderment from one to the other. Velos quickly explained what had happened.

Val nodded.

"So you can't get into orbit," he said. "What are you going to do?"

"I shall have to fly on; a straight course," replied Velos. "Don't worry. I'll get you back to earth. Leave it to me."

"Thanks," replied Val. He spoke wryly, and gave La Noire a lop-sided grin.

CHAPTER V

THE disc ship tore on its way far from earth; as it sped on its way, like a silver coin thrown by a careless giant into the depths of the absolute void, Velos turned to Aster.

"I get the feeling that something is wrong," he said.

The navigator nodded. He was listening to the noise.

"Very wrong," he affirmed.

"What's the problem?" asked Plumbus.

Schafft the engineer appeared and raised an eyebrow quizzically. Kramer, his rock-hard face set in a ferocious scowl, stared at the Captain.

"Something's very wrong," said Velos.

"I'm aware of that," said Kramer.

Captain and navigator began checking control panels.

"Negative," said the navigator. Velos nodded.

"Mine's the same," he said.

"What does appear to be wrong?" asked Stearman.

Velos shrugged his shoulders.

"It's a kind of feeling you get. I think perhaps on your own world, if you were used to driving a certain kind of vehicle on a road or using a certain kind of boat, you would tell at once whether it was responding as it ought to respond, even though there was nothing you could put your finger on definitely."

"Oh, yes," said Val, "a kind of hunch. A feeling of foreboding, maybe."

"I think I can sense something wrong," said La Noire. She was hyper-sensitive, the kind of person who was very susceptible to atmosphere. Her dark eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "There is something," she said. "The whole ship seems to be full of a sense of impending disaster."

The warp control screen flashed the emergency signal.

"What the devil is that?" asked Stearman.

Velos told him.

"I don't like the look of it," said Aster.

Plumbus, Schafft and Kramer stood like zombies, staring at the screen. Val and La Noire looked at the myriads of coloured lights that made up the emergency signal.

A piece of thin, flexible tape started to chatter out of the computer and to coil itself in neat rolls on the floor.

Stearman touched Velos' arm.

"What's happening now?" he asked.

Velos made for the tape, ran it expertly through his fingers, reading off signals. He opened his mouth to begin answering Stearman, but there was a sudden lurching roll of movement and everything blacked out. Val clutched desperately at La Noire, put his arms around her comfortingly, and the two of them slithered helplessly to the floor, being thrown about as helplessly as dried peas in a glass jar. The rolling, pitching discomfort stopped.

Stearman sat up, feeling battered and breathless. He couldn't see La Noire, although he could feel her very close to him, his arms were still round her.

"Are you all right, darling?"

"Yes, I'm all right," she answered. "I wouldn't have

been if you hadn't grabbed me. Whatever happened, darling?"

"I don't know, but I will in a minute! Velos!" he called. "What happened?"

There was no answer.

"Velos!" he called again. There was a feeble moan in the strange grey mist. They could see nothing.

"Don't leave go of me," commanded La Noire. "I'm frightened we couldn't find each other again, if we got separated."

"All right," consoled Val. "Give me your hand."

He took it gently. "I'm going to crawl forward, come with me," he said. His groping hand encountered a piece of machinery. He skirted round it.

"Velos! Aster!" he shouted.

"Help!" cried a voice feebly. "Help me!"

Val and La Noire crawled in the direction of the sound.

"It's Plumbus!" said Val, feeling the bulky outline. "What is the matter?"

"I'm trapped under something," said Plumbus. "It's crushing my life out, crushing——" His voice trailed away.

"He's unconscious," said Val.

It was a strange game of blind man's buff that he and La Noire played, trying to gauge the limits of whatever it was that pinned Plumbus beneath it.

"I wouldn't have thought the pseudo-grav up here," said Val thoughtfully, "would have been hard enough to hold anything down on top of a man, as this appears to be doing."

"I don't think it's the grav that's holding it, I think it's

just come down," said La Noire. "It's got itself wedged between its base and the side of the cabin."

She guided Val's hand along the slanting piece of apparatus. He felt where its top was jammed against the cabin partition wall.

"This will be the place to push from," he said. "Make sure I haven't got my heels on anybody's face, won't you?" he grinned in the strange grey fog.

"I don't think you're on anything, as far as I can make out," she said.

"O.K.!" said Val. He straightened his enormously powerful back, flexed his gigantic shoulder muscles, and heaved. There was the screech of tortured metal as he forced the apparatus clear.

"Let's see if we can drag him out," he said.

The apparatus sloped over sideways. Groping blindly, Val lowered it to another part of the cabin floor.

"I hope I haven't dropped it on top of anybody else," he said grimly.

"What's going on?" asked a voice in the distance.

"Kramer, is that you?" asked Val.

"Yes, what's happening?"

"I don't know. I'm trying to get Plumbus out from under something that fell on him."

"Keep talking," said Kramer. "I'll get over there to help you." They heard the sound of his movement..

"This way," said Val. "Come on, keep coming. I'm over here." A hand touched him.

"Got you!" said Kramer. "Where's Plumbus?"

"Down here," Val told him. "What is this gey stuff, Kramer?"

"Hyperspace effect; we've fallen through the warp!" Val and La Noire listened in silence. "Of course, it's just our luck that the man who gets clobbered is the medico," said Kramer, as much to himself as to Val and La Noire.

"It had crossed my mind," agreed Stearman.

"How long will this grey fog last?" asked La Noire.

"Just a few more seconds," Kramer informed her. "You've got him free, anyway," he said to Val. "Let's see if we can get him over to the other side. There could be a bunk over to your left, as you stand now."

"Right!" said Val. He felt La Noire clutching tightly at his arm.

They carried Kramer to an anti-grav bunk and laid him carefully down. The grey fog was beginning to thin. Val could see La Noire's face a few inches from his own. Then he saw Kramer. Finally he looked down at the recumbent Plumbus, who stirred feebly and opened his eyes. He tried to sit up, but slumped back with a groan.

"Where's Aster and Velos?" asked Kramer.

"Where's Schafft?" asked Val.

Kramer shrugged his big, thick shoulders.

"Stay with him and I'll go and have a look." He went in search of the missing crew men. He called back:

"Schafft is all right, he's just coming. Aster and Velos are unconscious, but I don't think they've got anything more than very nasty headaches. Nobody killed outright, anyway."

"Does this always happen when you go into the warp?" asked La Noire.

"No. Under controlled conditions there's no trouble at all, but that feeling we had that something was wrong was

the ship sliding into the Warp. Even with deliberate Warp control entry there are occasional pockets, you could almost liken them to air-pockets when you're flying in atmosphere, and if you come across one of them, then the ship rolls into them; it drops into the warp."

"Where do you come out?" said Val, interrogatively.

"That's the point," replied Kramer. "It could be just anywhere. We shan't know till Velos and Aster come round—we may not know even then, if the apparatus has gone."

"I see," murmured Val.

There was a sudden horrible, whining noise. Velos came staggering towards them, his hand to his head. There was a nasty-looking contusion above his left ear.

"To hell and back!" he said. "That was some blow I copped!" he was looking decidedly sorry for himself. . .

"All right, Skipper?" asked Kramer.

"Be all right in a minute," answered Velos. "Aster's wandering round there on his hands and knees. Go and bring him in here. I think he's dazed."

"Right!" said Kramer.

Plumbus made another effort to sit up, and this time he was more successful.

"Ohhh," he moaned feebly, feeling his ribs.

"What's the matter?" asked Stearman.

"I think I've got some ribs gone," said Plumbus. "I shall complete my diagnosis in a minute."

Stearman watched while Plumbus ran fingers expertly over his own torso.

"Could have been a lot worse . . . three cracked, but there's no penetration, Just painful! Will you bring——" he gasped and hesitated.

"Will you bring me the bone-growth stimulator phial from the cupboard over there, Mr. Stearman? And you'll find a syringe of an analgesic solution; I'd be obliged if you'd fetch that for me." He was speaking with considerable difficulty.

Stearman opened the cupboard so that Plumbus could see what medicaments it contained.

Each was clasped carefully inside a rubber holder. If they had not been, everything would have been smashed and shattered together.

"That's the one, Mr. Stearman, the third from the right. The other one is on the next shelf, second from the left."

Stearman brought the objects which the doctor had asked for. Plumbus rolled up his tunic sleeve and gave himself an injection.

"Ah," he said, "now we can think about setting the ribs." The pain had gone out of his voice and out of his eyes. "Wonderful stuff that analgesic. Now," he took a deep breath, pushing his ribs back into position by scientific use of the diaphragm and the intercostal muscles. "That would have been an extremely difficult feat to perform if I had not used the analgesic solution first," he said with a smile. "Now, bone-growth stimulator — that's better!"

"How long does this take?" asked Stearman.

"Ten, maybe fifteen minutes."

"You're joking!" gasped Stearman.

"No, we have quite an advanced medical science."

"I'll say you have," exclaimed Stearman. He looked at the bone growth-stimulator. "You mean to say that this stuff can actually heal broken or cracked ribs in fifteen minutes?"

"Yes," said Plumbus. "I shall be as right as rain then. I wouldn't have been if I'd been under that thing much longer. I gather that you got me out. I remember hearing you answer when I shouted for help."

"Yes, I heaved it off you," agreed Val.

The whining noise grew louder and louder.

"I think she's breaking up," said Velos.

"Are we all together?" asked Val.

"I think so," answered Velos. He turned to Val. "Sorry to have got you into this."

"It's all right," answered Stearman.

"Our two guests, Plumbus, Kramer, Schafft, Aster, myself, seven of us," said Velos.

"It's a lucky number on Earth," said Stearman.

"Let us hope that we are not so far from Earth's benign influence that it will continue to be a lucky number," said Velos.

"Any idea where we are, Skipper? I couldn't calculate the square root of four at the moment," said Aster.

"Never mind about calculating our position; we shall just have to do without it until such time as you have got yourself thinking again," answered the Captain.

"What's that?" asked Kramer, pointing through an observation panel.

The whining noise had become terribly loud.

"It's a planet," answered Velos.

The ship broke up, leaving them with the life capsule.

In the life capsule they began to drift, seven desperate survivors, drifting helplessly in a life capsule. . . . Time seemed to stand still, or at least to move extremely slowly.

"The antigrav landing shield is only working spasmodically," said the Captain.

"Do you think we're going to make it?" asked Aster.

"We'll try," answered Velos. "We can only try."

"I'll do what I can with those landing shields," said Schafft, "but it won't be easy. Ideally I want to get out there and do something about them."

"That wouldn't be a very healthy thing to do, would it?" said Velos.

Schafft said, "No, it wouldn't, Skipper."

Kramer sat rock-like, a monolith of a man, staring through the observation port. The life capsule went on towards the strange, uncharted world.

Aster was staring out at the constellations behind it.

"Can't recognise a thing," he said. "We're in some crazy backwater of the universe. Could be almost anywhere. . . . We're so many galaxies away from our own sphere of existence. . . ."

"That must have been a pretty big pocket of hyper space we hit," said Plumbus, his ribs now completely healed.

"It must have been," agreed Velos. "You're sure you can't recognise anything, Aster?"

"Nobody has a memory that big," said Aster, holding his aching head, "and I've got no damned equipment now."

"Nobody's blaming you, Aster," said Plumbus. "Take it easy."

"Thanks," murmured the astrogator.

"I've done the best I can with those antigrav shields," said Schafft. "They're not going to hold long."

Kramer still sat staring out of the window, as the life capsule drifted down with the planet's gravitation.

"Thank goodness it's not particularly high," said Aster.

"What isn't?" asked Velos.

"The planet's pull, he means," said Schafft, the engineer.

"I suppose if it was very strong it would just haul us helplessly down?" suggested Plumbus.

Kramer came out of his reverie by the observation panel.

"What do you estimate that it is, Velos?" he asked.

"I should say that it is about .75 of our world normal," replied the Captain. The navigator went over to the grav shield indicator.

"Yes, it is," he agreed. "If it was anything above normal, we'd be going down there like a rocket bomb!"

Kramer continued to stare out of the window.

Aster looked again at the metering on the grav-shielders. "Schafft," he called, quickly, "starboard grav-shield is breaking up!"

Schafft put his foot on the safety trip and grinned.

"This'll hold it," he said.

He reminded Stearman of the famous "Steamboat Bill" on board the "Whipoorwill," sitting on his safety valve to break the record!

"What happens if that safety trip can't come out?" he said.

Schafft grinned.

"That's my problem. If the grav shield doesn't hold," he went on, "we shall come down so fast we shall fry before we get anywhere near the surface."

Velos was watching the approaching planet with an experienced eye.

"Landing orbit one," he called suddenly.

Aster and Plumbus sprung into action. Kramer still sat staring through the observation window.

"Come on, Kramer!" snapped Velos. "This is landing orbit one."

"Oh, sorry, Skipper."

The geologist got slowly to his feet. There was busy activity inside the ship for a few minutes while Aster and Velos made last-minute adjustments.

Schafft stuck to the safety trip and bounced up and down as the trip tried to throw him off. "Can't hold it!" he cried with sudden desperation.

Val was altogether much bigger and heavier than he was. "I can," he said. "Slide one of your feet off, and put your weight on the other."

La Noire steadied Schafft as he balanced on one foot. Val drove his massive weight down on the space which the engineer had made.

"O.K., get you other foot off, and I'll slide along," said Stearman. "They probably need you to help with the landing work."

The engineer looked at him gratefully.

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks a lot. It will make things a bit easier if I am free to do any emergency work."

He moved across to where Aster, Velos and Plumbus were delicately adjusting controls and nursing the capsule down.

"By the way," said Stearman, "just for the record,, what happens if this trip blows?"

"I'm afraid you'll find yourself spread thinly on the ceiling," returned Schafft.

"Never mind," consoled Plumbus, "it's rather a nice ceiling."

Stearman laughed.

La Noire was looking grim and anxious. "Val," she said, "do be careful."

"If this trip blows, none of us will get down, anyway," returned Val.

He had the impression that he was standing by the rim of a live volcano, watching the lava bubbling and boiling in the crater beneath, wondering how long it would be before that seething mass rose in a great torrent of boiling, flaming death.

Figuratively speaking, the power in the anti-grav shielding was, size for size, proportionately as great as the power of a volcano that was about to erupt.

"Do you think we shall get down?" asked La Noire suddenly.

"Oh, we shall get down," said Stearman. He held her hand and smiled. "The question is, my darling, whether we get down at the speed we want to get down, or at the speed at which the gravity is inducing us to get down!"

She nodded and smiled bravely.

"I know," she agreed.

"Landing orbit two," called Velos.

The planet seemed to be rushing up to meet them now. Velos, Aster, Plumbus, Kramer and Schafft were working frenziedly at the controls. They looked grim-faced and tight-lipped.

"I have a feeling," said Val, as he jerked his weight on the safety trip, "that we shall be very lucky if we get down."

"You're doing a grand job," said Aster. "Keep it in."

"I'm only standing here," said Stearman.

Inch by inch the trip began lifting him.

"It's weakening," said Plumbus from his dial.

"La Noire, come and stand on my feet," said Val.

Obediently she did so, and the trip subsided a fraction.

"Still not enough," said Val. He stretched his hands up to the ceiling above him, straightened the iron-hard muscles of his back, and rammed down hard with all the power of his body.

The trip went down and stayed down!

"That's fine. That's just what we need," called Plumbus. "How long can you hold it?"

"I'm gonna hold it till we get down," said Stearman.

Sweat stood out on his forehead; his muscles stood out like iron bands. The veins in his neck came forward like whipcord. Sweat poured down his face into his eyes; every bone and muscle in his body felt as though it was on fire. Every sinew strained to the utmost. He felt like a gigantic bow that has been pulled back until it must either release the arrow at a thousand miles an hour—or snap in the process.

La Noire wiped the sweat out of his eyes.

"Thanks," he gritted.

"Hold on!" implored Aster. "For God's sake hold on, Stearman!"

Val inclined his great head. Every ounce of his strength was concentrated in making his body rigid. He was a human bar holding down that safety trip. Horrible, acrid fumes began to rise from around the trip, a smell of burning plastic, melting insulators.

"Twenty seconds and we'll be there," said Velos. "Hold on!"

Val gritted his teeth for a supreme effort. Everything was swimming around him in a red mist.

"Fifteen," said Aster, "fourteen . . ."

Val's great body was shuddering with the strain; the pressure was incredible, immense, enormous. He heard Plumbus say:

"Switch off! Switch off!" and then everything went black.

He opened his eyes to find that Aster and Velos were supporting him, helping him across to the couch.

"That was terrific!" said Schafft enthusiastically.

"What happened?" asked Val. His great heart was beating like a trip hammer; the blood was pounding in his ears. . . .

"We're down, darling!" said La Noire. "You just held it! We're down!"

"Look at that trip!" said Schafft.

Val looked. It was bent, distorted; the pressure on it must have been fantastic.

"I don't know how you held it!"

"Neither do I," said Val. "It felt like being run over by a double-decker bus and then lifting it off yourself with your feet!" He was breathing deeply, his head was throbbing. He was aware that Plumbus was giving him an injection of something. The pain was subsiding, his strength began to return.

"How does that feel?" asked the doctor.

"Terrific!" answered Val. "It feels like three square meals and two days' sleep. What was it?"

"Something that we have for emergencies of this nature," replied Plumbus.

Val sat up and flexed his muscles.

"Terrific!" he said again.

"We're down," repeated La Noire, as though she could not really believe it. "Val, we've landed on an alien world. We're not just the first earth people to land on a planet of our own solar system, we're the first to cross perhaps a hundred galaxies. We've been through hyperspace. I can't believe it."

"Neither can I," said Val, "but it's really happened."

"Sorry we got you involved in all this," said Aster.

"It doesn't matter," answered Val.

"I've finished sampling the atmosphere," said Kramer, "It's all right; we can get out."

Schafft slid back the lock of the life capsule. The seven survivors stepped out.

CHAPTER VI

THE landscape all around was extremely weird, bizarre and peculiar. As far as the Stearmans were concerned, the environment was a particularly alien one. It was equally strange and alien to the space men. The sky above them was a pale purple dome, the degrees of purple varied. Around the horizon it was quite deep. Elsewhere it was lighter until at the zenith, almost immediately above them, here there seemed to be a brightness which indicated the presence of some illuminating orb.

The atmosphere is pretty dense," remarked Velos. "The lumino must be almost directly above us, but it's completely shielded."

"There must be a thick cloud layer up there somewhere," agreed Plumbus.

Kramer, the geologist, was looking round him.

"The atmosphere must be pretty dense," he agreed, "yet it is not heavy or oppressive as far as the breathing goes. I would think there is some peculiar sort of cloud layer up there. . . ."

"That would seem to account for it," agreed Schafft. "Yet I wasn't particularly conscious that we were coming through a thick cloud layer."

"It needn't be all that thick if it's dense," said Stear-

man, and he grinned. "Far be it from me to put forth an opinion in the midst of so many experts."

"You may be right," put in Kramer. "Could well be a thin but dense layer. Some form of iodine clouds," he suggested.

"Well, now that we've discussed the atmosphere," said Velos with a smile, "what do you think of the atmosphere itself, as far as breathing goes?"

"Very pleasant," said Plumbus. "Tests show it is in every way safe, but you can have a safe atmosphere which is at the same time far from pleasant. There are some worlds in our own system," he said to Stearman, "which have air which is safe to breathe, you could stand there for the rest of your life and take no harm, but there's a smell to them which is offensive and obnoxious."

"Yes, you're quite right," agreed Velos.

"There are other worlds with safe atmospheres," said Aster, "which have the effect of making you feel sleepy and lethargic. This world doesn't. There's something —" he shrugged his shoulders as though at a loss for words.

"Bright, stimulating, about this world," concluded Val, putting the words into the navigator's mouth.

"Yes, that's it," said Aster, "something stimulating. It makes you want to get up and go."

"I'd like to get up and go," said Val. "Frankly, I'd like to get up and go home! In spite of all the traditional grumbles, I *like* earth!"

"There's a lot to be said for Earth," agreed La Noire. "This——" She made an expansive gesture. "I don't know what to say about it, but it's not the same, somehow.

There's a kind of challenge here. Earth seems such a peaceful, friendly world."

"It's not all peace and friendliness," reminded Val. "But I know what you mean, darling. There are places where you find peace, friendliness, and a sense of welcome . . . a sense of belonging. Those things are missing here."

"I suppose we shall get used to it in time," said La Noire.

"I don't like the way you said that!" replied Val.

"Neither did I," said Velos, with a smile, "but I know what you mean, Mrs. Stearman. We may be here for some considerable time."

"If this world is uncharted," said Val, "as far as your people are concerned, is there any possibility that it will be visited?"

"Not a very strong possibility. You see, we don't even know which galaxy we're in! I get the feeling that we're a long, long way from the trade routes. Once you're through hyperspace, there's an awful lot of worlds to find," said the Captain.

Aster the navigator nodded.

"A purple sky, and air like champagne," said La Noire. "All the light we need, but no glaring sun beating down on us."

Val stooped and began to examine the vegetation at his feet.

"This seems interesting stuff," he said. "I've never seen plants like this on earth. I suppose they are plants?"

Plumbus and Kramer were also examining the plants.

"Not exactly like plants I have seen anywhere before," commented Plumbus, "but they seem to be botanically

functional. Nothing mysterious or sinister about them. Nearly every planet has its own particular flora and fauna. Sometimes that flora and fauna represent particular epochs of development. This stuff, for example," he was pulling the plant to pieces as he examined it, "this stuff," he repeated, "is comparatively primitive."

"How primitive?" asked Val.

"Well—I would say that it went back as far as the reptilian age."

"You don't think that there's likely to be humanoid life on this planet?"

"Oh, I didn't say that," returned Plumbus.

Kramer nodded.

"There are many worlds," he put in, "where humanoid life has developed in environments which were otherwise primitive."

"How do you account for this?" asked Val.

"From what we know of the history of your planet," said Aster, "humanoid life, mammalian life, developed after certain other forms had been destroyed. . . . Destroyed by vicissitudes and vagaries of climate among other things. These vicissitudes of climate have not taken place on every world. In several parts of the universe you find humanoid life, or at least semi-humanoid life in some form or another, existing alongside primitive forms, while primitive forms have been mainly confined to reservations, if the humanoids have developed sufficient technology. In other worlds natural barriers separate the growing humanoid cultures from the other life forms."

"I see," said Stearman. "It all makes pretty good sense."

Captain Velos went back to the capsule.

"I think we ought to have some weapons," he said, "we never know what we're going to run into."

They took weapons from the capsule. Val, who habitually carried a heavy Browning automatic, looked at the strange weapons with just a trace of suspicion.

"These are energy blasters," explained the Captain.

"Sounds like something out of science fiction," said Stearman.

Velos smiled enigmatically.

"You will find that they are effective," he said.

"More so than my automatic?" asked Val.

The Captain looked at Stearman's big Browning.

"For what it is, it is an excellent piece of machinery," he said. "It looks accurate and well balanced."

"It is!" said Stearman.

"On the other hand," said the Captain, "the finest bow and arrow would be useless against a man armed with one of those?"

"Of course!" answered Val.

"You would not find that very effective against an opponent using one of these blasters."

"Show me," invited Stearman.

"All right," said the Captain. "See that rock? Fire a shot at it."

Val took careful aim and pressed the trigger of the Browning. There was a roaring crash and a smell of cordite; a heavy slug hit the rock, twenty yards away, and split it.

"Good shooting!" congratulated the Captain. "Now, you see that much larger rock, fifty yards beyond your target?"

"Yes."

"What would happen if you fired at that?"

"I don't want to waste ammunition," said Stearman. "I could hit it, but the bullet would have lost quite a bit of its power by the time it got over there. It certainly wouldn't shatter it, just flatten against it."

"Precisely!" said the Captain. "Now watch this." He called to Kramer. "Can you hit that?"

"Easily," replied Kramer. He swung up the energy blaster and pressed the trigger for a second.

Something like a ball of white fire enveloped the rock. There was a crackling sound. The rock disintegrated to powder.

"Stars and Stripes!" ejaculated Stearman.

"You try it," said the Captain.

Stearman brought up the energy blaster that Velos gave him and pointed it at a rock a little further away than the one Kramer had just fired at. He pressed the trigger and obtained the same results that Kramer had obtained, a ball of white fire dancing around the top of the rock; there was a sensation of vibration from the gun, and then the rock ceased to be.

"Fantastic!" he said.

There was a certain amount of noise accompanying the disintegration of the rock; it wasn't as loud as heavy gunfire; it didn't have the boom of the old *soixante-quinze*, the 75 mm. guns of the first World War but, nevertheless, it produced a sound which must have been audible over a wide area.

The party from the life capsule made their way forward. It was not by any means difficult going, rather like walking across springy turf or heathland. . . .

They climbed to the top of a small knoll and looked all around them.

"What do you think that is over there?" asked Aster.

"A bog, or a marsh of some kind," said Val. It was steaming in the purple light overhead.

"I would say you're right," agreed Velos. "This firm land that we're on seems to stretch through that bog like a natural causeway. I suggest that we stay on this tract of firm ground and see where it's taking us."

They moved on. On the other side of the knoll the surface was pretty much the same as it had been when they left the capsule.

"How far are you intending to go, or is this just a reconnaissance?" asked Val.

"Just preliminary reconnaissance," said Velos. "If there is any intelligent life on this planet, our best way of getting back again is to contact that life to see if they can give us any help."

"Makes pretty good sense," agreed Stearman.

"It's the usual procedure, if you find yourself on a strange world," remarked the Captain. "You find a dominant life form and try to get it to co-operate with you. But you usually find there is something in their culture, in the way of a need, which you can fill from some of the other cultures you've visited, particularly on an uncharted world like this, where space men are few and far between. We may even be the first that they've ever encountered."

"That's a pretty sobering thought," said Val.

"On the other hand, they may have been visited several times if there are any trading goods here which are worth stopping for."

"I suppose," said Val, "that even on civilised places there are bogs and open land where you can wander for hours without seeing anybody?"

Velos nodded.

"There certainly are."

The party continued to move along the natural causeway between the great marshes. Suddenly La Noire clutched Val's arm.

"What's that?"

The seven of them spun around and looked. By the time they did so the only things to be seen were ripples on the surface of the bog.

"What did you see?" asked Val.

She shuddered.

"Something huge and green came out of that marsh. It flashed down again before I could cry out."

"What sort of a something?" asked Val.

"Probably I'm being silly——"

"I've never known that before," said Val. "What did you see, darling?"

"I thought it was a *prehistoric monster*," said La Noire, "one of the great saurians."

"Nothing impossible about that," said Stearman, "especially on an alien world."

"Not even improbable," said Plumbus. "They are great marsh dwellers, you know, Mrs. Stearman."

Val and La Noire stood very close together.

"It was horrible," she said. "It frightened me."

"It would frighten anybody," said Plumbus.

"We'll watch these marshes very carefully from now on," said the Captain. "I suggest three of you watch the

left-hand side, three others the right, and I'll concentrate most of my attention on what's ahead of us."

The party from the capsule kept on moving. The purple light was no longer centred directly above them; it was sloping about 45 degrees.

"Mid-afternoon, I'd judge from that," said Stearman.

"I think you're about right," said Velos.

"It wouldn't be a bad plan to turn around about now," suggested the navigator.

"We'll just move as far as that next hillock, and see what's on the other side," suggested the Captain.

They moved forwards again, topped the hill, and looked all around them.

"What's that?" asked Stearman.

They all looked.

"It's a humanoid, down by the marsh," said the Captain.

CHAPTER VII

"IT is," commented Kramer.

"What the devil is he, or she, doing down there?" asked Plumbus.

"We'd better find out."

La Noire screamed suddenly and pointed. Something had reared its great ugly green head out of the marsh. They all saw it this time.

"You were right," said Val, "it's a monster!"

With one concerted movement the seven survivors from the life capsule began running towards the distant shore.

"Why doesn't he, or she, get up? They must know that thing is there!" panted Plumbus.

The distant figure was writhing as though he, or she, was trying to get up.

"My God!" said Stearman, whose eyes were exceptionally keen. "It's a girl, and she's tied down!"

"She's been put out there deliberately, I would guess," said the Captain, "as a sacrifice to that thing."

"Well, that can't indicate a very high level of culture," said Stearman.

The thing now had its great head and shoulders out of the marsh. Its tree-trunk-like legs were obviously touching the bottom where the marsh was shallow towards the edge. A huge, scaly forelimb came out. The bound girl

was screaming desperately. The hideous head turned on one side as though listening. The great glaring red eyes regarded the helpless girl balefully.

Velos, who ran like a hare, was ahead even of Stearman, and Val, despite his massive build, was no mean runner. Velos fired his energy blaster. Val fired as he ran. Kramer and Plumbus also opened fire. Schafft and Aster brought their weapons into play. La Noire used her gun. Seven balls of white fire raked the head, neck, shoulders and upper thorax of the great beast. It crumpled all at once, disintegrating as the rock had done.

"Hold your fire!" called the Captain.

They stopped firing simultaneously. Velos reached the girl. She looked at him with a mixture of terror and disbelief.

"I know you won't understand a word I'm saying," panted Velos, "but you're safe now. The monster is dead."

"Look!" shouted Aster.

Another huge green head reared itself, and then another and another. The marsh was full of them. They looked angry and organised, like the Spanish Armada bearing down upon the English fleet; a great armada of green, monster saurians closed in.

"The marsh must be full of the devils!" ejaculated Stearman.

"Fire for the heads," ordered Velos calmly. "I'll take this one. You take that one, Val; the one with the little horns."

"Right!" said Stearman. "And we'll work off to the left from there."

As calmly as though they were at a shooting gallery, the seven survivors began hurling energy blasts at the colossal saurians. A dozen of the monsters slumped, headless and dead, back into the marsh. The armada stopped as suddenly as it had started.

"They've had enough," said Val.

"I don't like the way they came as quickly as that!" commented Velos.

"Neither do I," said Aster. "It was almost as if they were organised."

"Almost as if they were demonstrating some kind of *intelligence*," said Plumbus.

"They acted in co-ordination, more like one great living entity than a number of individual monsters," said Schafft. "If you will pardon the engineering simile," he grinned, "they were like a number of synchronised pistons, working together."

"They are not like the saurians of geology," said Kramer.

"In what way?" inquired Aster.

"Certain modifications," answered Kramer. "The heads —"

"What about the heads?" demanded Velos.

"Too big," replied Kramer.

"Too big?" said Plumbus. "I thought they looked in proportion."

"Yes," answered Kramer, "that's what's wrong."

"How do you mean—'wrong'?" insisted Schafft.

"They're too big," said Kramer, "because they *are* in proportion. Normally the heads were much smaller than that. There's *brain* in those heads.

"Brain?" exclaimed Aster. "I always thought one of the principal features of those things was the *lack* of brain?"

"It is—normally," said Kramer.

"What does it mean, then?" asked Velos.

"I think they're a damn sight more intelligent than any creatures of that kind I've encountered anywhere before," said Kramer.

"Their behaviour, as I've already remarked," said Plumbus, "would seem to indicate a very high degree of intelligence. Not only the fact that they rallied, after we had destroyed the first one, but the way that they soon cottoned on to the fact that they were in danger."

"Yes, that's a good point!" said Schafft.

"There is something about them, about this intelligence particularly," said Kramer, "which I find very disturbing."

While they were talking Velos was unfastening the girl. She had been staked down, her ankles and wrists being secured with crude-looking leather thongs. He held up one of the stakes, with the leather attached to it, which he had just cut.

"Doesn't seem to imply a very high degree of intelligence or culture, does it?" he said.

"No," agreed Aster.

The girl put her head on one side and looked at Aster and then at Plumbus. She said something in a small, rather timid voice, which none of them understood.

"A completely alien language," commented Plumbus.

"Afraid so," agreed Schafft.

"What are we going to do?" asked Aster.

"Sign language, possibly," replied the Captain.

He beckoned to the girl, and smiled. She repeated her first remark. Aster put a hand to his ear and shook his head to show that he didn't understand. Whether she followed the implication of the sign, he didn't know.

"We'll try her with all the languages we know," said Velos. He spoke to the girl in six or seven different tongues. She looked at him in bewilderment.

"No good," said Plumbus. "Sign language, or nothing."

Velos took the girl gently by the hand and began leading her back along the way they had come. She pointed off in the other direction, and tugged at him gently as though to say that she wished to go that way.

"It looks as if she wants to go back to her own people," said Kramer.

"Well, as they left her out as monster bait," said Velos, "I'm not inclined to let her go back."

"You've got a point there," agreed Schafft.

Kramer took the girl's other hand and, though she still tugged a little and looked over her shoulder, she came with them fairly amicably.

Looking at her, Velos decided that she was attractive, even if she was from an uncharted alien world. She had a light brown skin, that spoke of healthy open-air life. Her hair was long and black; it cascaded down over her beautiful young shoulders in rich waves. Her eyes were also brown. Although her cast of features was Eurasian, or almost Eastern, as opposed to certain European standards of beauty, she was nevertheless very, very attractive, Val thought.

Plumbus moved a little way away from the group and whispered to Stearman.

"I think there may be trouble if we're here for any length of time."

"How do you mean?" asked Val.

"Cherchez la femme!" said Plumbus.

"You didn't suggest there would be trouble because my wife was here," said Stearman.

"That's a different matter. Mrs. Stearman is an accepted fact because she is with you. Besides which, you're a big man! I don't think anybody would make a play for her, even if you were here for ten years."

"You sound cheerful," commented Stearman.

"On the other hand," said Plumbus, "there could be big trouble over this native girl."

"What do you want me to do?" asked Val.

"I want you to back any play that I may ultimately have to make. Everything may be all right," he said reassuringly. "Then again, it may not!"

"I'll look after her," said La Noire.

"I was hoping that you would be able to help in that way, Mrs. Stearman," said Plumbus. "That's extremely kind of you." He moved back with the others before any significance could be attached to the swift words that he had had in Stearman's ear.

Schafft, who was bringing up the rear, glanced over his shoulder.

"We got company," he said.

Half a dozen scantily clad war-painted natives stood in a surly knot, looking at the backs of the spacemen.

They stopped. An arrow whistled savagely towards the girl. It was followed by a spear. . . .

"What the devil's the matter with the natives?" grunted Stearman.

"I don't know," said Aster.

"They seem very hostile," said Velos.

"Must be something to do with the girl," remarked Plumbus.

"Not necessarily," grunted Schafft.

"I think Plumbus is right," said Kramer. "It is the girl." He looked at the native girl with a certain amount of hostility in his eye.

"Perhaps we shouldn't have interfered," said Aster.

"We couldn't just leave her for those things!" said Velos.

"It would give you a helluva guilt complex if you did," said Plumbus.

"They might have been hostile even if it hadn't been for the girl," said Schafft.

"I think if we let her go she may run back to them," said Kramer. "That would solve the problem!"

Aster turned to the girl, pointed to the natives. . . More arrows and spears showered down around them. The girl shook her head violently and made to run from the natives.

"Well, she certainly doesn't want to go back," said Velos.

"Thought she did a little while ago," said Plumbus.

"Perhaps she wasn't counting on that kind of reception," put in Schafft.

"Very likely," said Kramer.

"The problem is now," began Aster, as another arrow narrowly missed his ear, "what the hell are we going to do?"

"I think that, reluctantly or otherwise, we shall have to

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start polishing off some of the young lady's fellow villagers—assuming that they come from her village, if they have reached that level of development,” said Plumbus.

“All right,” answered Stearman. “Here goes!”

He fired a warning shot with the energy blaster; the ball of white fire exploded in hissing, violent steam at the edge of the marsh, a few feet away from the group of hostile natives.

They stopped firing arrows, the hail of spears died away.

“I think they got the message,” said Stearman.

One of the hideous, giant heads appeared out of the water.

“By all the gods of the galaxy!” said Velos. “Another of those gigantic saurians.”

“I wonder why it appeared like that?” said Plumbus rhetorically.

“I don’t know,” responded Schafft. “There’s some connection somewhere, I’m sure of it.”

“Definitely!” agreed Kramer. “That thing didn’t jump up there by accident!”

“Wait a minute,” said Stearman. “Watch the brute.”

“It’s moving towards the natives,” said Aster.

“But they’re not backing away,” commented the Captain. “A most unusual phenomenon.”

“What do you think?” began Schafft.

“It is communicating with them,” said Kramer.

“Communicating?” asked the navigator.

“Yes, he’s right,” said the Captain. “Watch!”

“He’s absolutely right,” said Plumbus. “That thing *is* in communication with them. Look at its eyes, staring at them! Almost as though it’s hypnotising them, to put it in primitive terms. But it can’t be!”

A gargantuan forelimb slurped up out of the marsh and moved unmistakably in the direction of the spacemen.

“It’s *pointing* at us,” said Plumbus.

“By the gods of the galaxy, what intelligence!” ejaculated Schafft.

“Fantastic!” uttered Kramer.

“I don’t understand this,” commented Aster.

“Neither do I,” said Stearman. “I don’t understand it, and, what’s more, I don’t like it. What do you think, La Noire?”

“I think it’s horrible!” exclaimed his wife. “Hideous and horrible! Intelligence in a body like that! Ugh!” She shuddered. La Noire was a highly sensitive woman. The native girl appeared to be in a condition of terror which bordered on complete collapse. Aster and Velos were supporting her. Plumbus raised one of the lowered eyelids and looked at the cornea beneath it.

“She’s under some peculiar mental strain,” he said. “I would suggest that there is some kind of telepathic control from that thing.”

“Impossible!” said Schafft.

“I don’t know that it is impossible,” commented Kramer. “Sometimes I wonder whether we expect too much from humanity.”

“What do you mean by that?” demanded Aster.

Velos was looking expectantly at Kramer, so was Plumbus. The geologist shrugged his rock-like shoulders.

“I dunno!” he replied. “Maybe I get out of my depth sometimes.”

“Tell us what you were going to say,” urged Schafft thoughtfully.

"Yes, go on," prompted Aster.

"I was just thinking," said Kramer, as he looked towards the monster and the villagers, and then glanced back at the girl, "I was just wondering——"

"Well, what the hell were you wondering?" demanded Stearman, growing impatient.

There was anger in the geologist's eyes, as though he disliked being spoken to harshly by this stranger from Earth.

"We're getting on each other's nerves," murmured Plumbus very quickly, his voice half an octave above its normal pitch. "Be calm, gentlemen, there's nothing for us to get unnerved about."

"Who's getting nervous?" demanded Kramer.

"Maybe I am!" laughed Plumbus.

"Physician, heal thyself," murmured Stearman.

"What's that?" inquired Plumbus.

"A saying, from a Book, *the Book*," said Stearman.

"I'm not familiar with it," said Plumbus.

"Let it pass," said the big journalist.

"What I was going to say," cut in Kramer, harshly, "was, you always assume that where there is a humanoid species on a planet, it will be the dominant force."

"I don't like the way you said 'assume'," returned Aster.

"I see what you're driving at," put in Velos.

"You could be right," agreed Plumbus. "You could be right, and it's a horrible thought."

"As I see it," said Schafft, "that thing is definitely giving them orders and directions."

"And they're obeying!" said Kramer. "Look!"

"Here they come!" said Stearman.

"Give them another warning shot," suggested Velos.

"Right!" answered Val.

The others looked to their guns. Stearman fired, very close to the villagers. The energy ball exploded in vivid white fire.

They didn't blink. Not one of them flinched; impassive, remorseless, they walked on to the very edge of the blasted area where the energy had struck.

"Damn and blast them!" gritted Stearman.

"Losing your nerve?" demanded Kramer.

Val flashed him the kind of glance that he normally reserved for garden parasites. The meaning of the look was not lost on Kramer.

Plumbus glanced from one to the other and looked anxious.

"Gentlemen, please," he said quietly. "If we do not hang together, we shall hang each other!"

Stearman and Kramer looked at each other for a second as though hanging each other would be a singularly pleasant pastime. Val set his great square jaw and got a grip on himself.

"One thing at a time," he conceded.

"All right," concurred Kramer, "one thing at a time."

Each knew what the other meant.

"I'm afraid we shall have to kill them," said Velos. He said it with very real regret in his voice.

"I see no alternative," sighed Schafft.

"It is unfortunate," agreed Plumbus.

"Very unfortunate," agreed the navigator.

Aster levelled his energy blaster to the geometric centre of the group of natives.

"All right, let them have it," said Velos, his voice loaded with regret.

Aster fired. The white energy blast crackled like the jaws of a hungry carnivore. The natives disappeared in those allegorical jaws. Flesh and blood became fodder in that metaphorical mouth. The energy ball had become the teeth of death. Only two of the natives escaped the blast. They stood stock still, staring unemotionally ahead of them. Then, as one, they turned and looked at the hideous green saurian head with its unnaturally developed brain cavity. The vast forelimb gestured them back.

"Duty," muttered Stearman under his breath. "'Stern daughter of the voice of God'."

"What's that?" inquired Plumbus.

"Another quotation," said Stearman under his breath.

"Oh!" replied Plumbus.

There was silence. Aster picked nervously at the tips of his nails. Velos bit his lip grimly. Plumbus looked for all the world like a distressed seal trapped on an ice-floe. Schafft, the engineer, leaned on his nearest companion; Kramer, looking over his shoulder, like a broken con-rod coming out of a cylinder block.

"Get off me," growled Kramer. "Stand on your own feet!"

"Sorry!" said Schafft. "I—I——"

"I know what's the matter with you," said Kramer, "you can't bear the sight of death. Death is a reality, Schafft, and it's no good backing away from it."

"I know," replied Schafft, "and I'm a realist, Kramer. I'm not afraid of death, I just dislike it."

"Fear and dislike are very close bed-fellows," retorted Kramer.

Schafft looked at him. There was hostility in the engineer's eyes.

"You're not a friendly man, are you?"

"Why should I be? Who was ever friendly to me?"

"Gentlemen," said Plumbus. He said it in the conciliatory tones of a young and rather anxious Rector in his first living, trying to quieten the quarrels of an aggressive church council. Looking at him, Val got the impression that Plumbus was almost offensively inoffensive. He was like a living drop of oil.

Aster the navigator turned to Captain Velos.

"I think I shall have to fire again, sir."

"Wait a minute," put in Stearman. "Not them—him!"

He pointed to the great green saurian; its huge eyes rested on him and, with a splash, before Stearman could bring the gun up, the vast bulk disappeared into the swamp. There was a thrashing movement, and a green forelimb broke surface. Stearman fired again, and part of the forelimb disappeared in the energy blast.

A huge fountain of slimy water and mud splashed upwards. Stearman fired at the base of the fountain. The two natives had stopped, like puppets whose strings have been cut.

"You were right," conceded Velos, "that thing was controlling them."

"What did I tell you!" said Kramer.

CHAPTER VIII

"I THINK we ought to get back to the ship," said Aster.

"You're right!" agreed Velos. "The sooner the better."

They began moving back swiftly towards where they had left the life capsule. The girl was moving less reluctantly now. La Noire signalled to the men who were holding her to release her hands. They did, and she walked quite happily. La Noire walked beside her and smiled. . . .

After a few sullen moments the girl looked at La Noire intently, thoughtfully, and smiled back.

Val's wife pointed to herself and said, "La Noire."

The girl's face lit up as though she suddenly understood. She pointed to herself in the same way that La Noire had done, copying the gesture with almost perfect exactness.

"Alane," she said.

La Noire repeated it, and pointed to her, "Alane." This process went on; they pointed first to the ground on which they walked, and then to the sky above them; to the marsh; La Noire made movements in the air signifying the outline of the monster, she opened and closed her hands in an impersonation of the movement of massive jaws. She opened her eyes very wide and stared as the monster had done. Alane got the message, and nodded.

The language which the girl spoke was quite simple, which was what La Noire and the spacemen had expected. The nouns were mostly onomatopoeic as were the verbs. The tenses were simple. By the time they reached the ship Alane and La Noire had mutually mastered fifty or sixty words of one another's languages; but when they got back to the spot where the life capsule should have been, *there was nothing there.*

"Must have made a mistake," grunted Kramer.

Velos rounded on him.

"I am captain here, and I don't make a mistake!"

"Just what are you captain of? I don't see any ship," said Kramer cynically.

"I see no ships," quoted Stearman under his breath.

"You trying to be funny?" asked Kramer.

"I shall be funny when, where and how I like," returned Stearman.

"Gentlemen!" put in the rather pathetic Plumbus. He sounded more like the overwhelmed young curate at a ferocious Easter Vestry than ever before.

"Plumbus, you talk too much!" said Kramer.

"What's got into you, Kramer?" demanded Velos. "You're acting as though everybody's against you. You seem to be inflamed, irritable, about something. I don't understand you."

"I don't understand myself sometimes," replied Kramer.

"I wonder whether he's sick?" said Plumbus.

"Don't talk *about* me. Talk *to* me," said Kramer. He made a threatening movement towards the psychologist. Plumbus backed away, looking more like a distressed seal on an ice floe than he had done yet. Kramer drew back

his fist as though to crash big, iron-hard knuckles into the face of the plump psychologist.

"I wouldn't do that," murmured Stearman.

"Drop dead!" snarled Kramer. "Who's asking you? Primitive!"

"Who's primitive?" asked Stearman.

"You, and your crazy little planet!"

"As a representative of my crazy little planet," said Stearman, "I resent that."

He felt a new sensation, a feeling that he had never really been aware of before. He was proud of being an Earth-man. Not an Englishman, not a European, an *Earthman!* He had suddenly formed a concept of a wider, more embracing, international unity than he had ever formed before. He liked the sound of the phrase. It had a new import to it. *Earthman!* He bit his lip. As an Earthman he wasn't going to have his world insulted. Not by Kramer or by anybody else!

"I said there'll be another time," he said to Kramer. "I think this is as good a time as any. . . ."

La Noire hurried to his side, ignoring Alane. She put a restraining hand on his arm.

"Val," she urged, "don't—don't do anything foolish!"

"It's all right, darling," he said, "don't worry!"

"Please!" urged La Noire.

"I said it's all right," replied Val. His voice was a whiplash. "Kramer, I don't know whether you're sick, or whether you're stupid, or whether you're a mixture of both. You called me a primitive. All right. I'll show you a primitive solution to an insult!" His great jaw set like a steel trap. Stearman clenched his fist and swung

a punch at the geologist. Kramer ducked. He moved swiftly for a big man, and came back with hammer blows to Stearman's ribs. The big journalist gasped and went back a pace. He was an experienced roughhouser; he had boxed, wrestled and fought around most of the world, and there were few men who could match Val Stearman. He had been hit before, and he had been hit hard. Few opponents whom he had ever met could hit as hard as Kramer. Still back-peddling, Val got his jaw tucked down on his chest and manœuvred himself into a more lateral position. A straight left forked out like the tongue of a striking snake. It caught Kramer high on the forehead, jerking his head back sharply. Val felt the impact, like an electric shock, down his arm.

Kramer bored in, both fists going. He fought hard. Val feinted with the left and suddenly leapt forward and smashed home a sledge-hammer right. Kramer's knees buckled a fraction, and just for a split second his eyes looked glassy. Stearman pressed home his advantage. A singing, curling left hook crunched against Kramer's temple. The big geologist sagged again, but he recovered himself and came back with two vicious body blows. Val wheezed and gasped. . . .

There were men who would have crashed home with a knee or boot; Stearman had half expected Kramer to do so. The geologist didn't. There was another stinging uppercut landing in the geometric centre of Stearman's jaw and, for a second, he saw stars. Sheer fighting instinct took him back into the battle. He crashed home with a volley of lefts and rights, high on Kramer's head, too high to be really effective, but a man as big, as strong,

as tough as Val Stearman cannot land such a thing as an ineffective or ineffectual punch.

Both men were beginning to look decidedly the worse for wear. Kramer's nose was bleeding, his eyes were blacked, his lip was split. Stearman was in pretty much the same condition. He punched again, full in the mouth. Kramer spat out a tooth and replied with a sledge-hammer blow that raised a welt at the back of Stearman's right ear. Stearman sagged again but came back two-fisted and dangerous. The attack on Kramer's head didn't seem to be getting him very far. He suddenly switched his punching downstairs and now it was Kramer going back, wheezing and whistling, as Stearman hammered in at the solar plexus and ribs. A hard left, driven straight into the pit of the stomach, made Kramer double up.

There were men against whom Val would have delivered a *coup de grace* with his boot or knee at that juncture, but Kramer had fought clean, and Stearman had never been the first man to start the really vicious stuff against his opponent. He paused, breathing hard; it gave Kramer a breathing space; he came back with a vicious left and right to the head. Stearman replied with body punches. Both men paused for a longer breather. Kramer came in again. It was a cart wheel of a punch that caught Stearman once again on the geometric point of the jaw. Val crashed over backwards like an oak tree that has been stuck by lightning. He was up in a couple of seconds and his left uppercut exploded under Kramer's face like a ton of TNT. The rock-hard geologist leapt a foot in the air before he, too, stretched his length. He staggered to his knees and rushed at Stearman again with fists clenched.

Velos threw himself between them. It was quite a plucky move, for Velos was not big compared to Stearman and the rocky geologist.

"I think that's just about enough, boys," he said quietly.

Kramer suddenly burst out laughing.

"I guess so," he agreed.

Val wiped blood from his lip and held out a bruised and battered right hand. He shook firmly with the geologist.

"You can fight!" said Stearman.

"I wouldn't have classed you as an amateur," said Kramer, thickly.

"If there was anywhere in sight that sold beer," said Stearman, "I should be inclined to buy you a drink."

"You know, in a funny, twisted kind of way," Kramer said, "I enjoyed that!"

"Relieved the tension, eh?" rejoined Stearman.

"I'm sorry I called you a primitive," said Kramer.

"Yeah, and I'm sorry I said that you were either sick or stupid," replied Val. "I think things have been getting both of us."

"I think things are playing on all our nerves," put in Plumbus.

"Hallo, here comes the little dove of peace!" said Kramer.

Plumbus looked at him angrily, and then swallowed his anger.

"Seriously, though," said Stearman, "you're doing a great job, Plumbus."

La Noire laughed.

"What's the joke?" asked Kramer thickly.

"Take a long time to explain," said Val, "but there's an outstandingly good TV programme on earth, a kind of satirical review; it's one of the catch phrases from that!"

La Noire was giggling.

The girl Alane, who had watched the proceedings with an appearance of great anxiety, began to laugh also.

"I think she's fallen for you," said Val.

"Huh!" grunted Kramer. "I'm a misogynist."

"I can't recommend it," replied Stearman.

"What can't you recommend?" demanded La Noire. "Misogyny—or——"

"Misogyny," returned Stearman, with a smile.

"Oh! Just for a minute you had me worried!"

"No cause to," said Val.

"You're a mess!" commented La Noire. She looked at Kramer. "So are you!" she said frankly.

She tore a strip from her blouse and began patching up the worst of the damage on Stearman's face. Kramer took out his handkerchief and mopped blood from his lip and nose. Alane looked around the group and then moved swiftly forward, took the handkerchief swiftly from Kramer's fingers and, cradling his head in her arms, she began gently tending his injuries.

"Hercules being attended by nymphs!" grinned Val.

"Who in heck was Hercules?" asked Kramer. "You know, this intensive English language course we've got gives us a few classical illusions, but not many. It doesn't tell us how, or why, they came to be in the language. It just gives us instant translations from our own stuff. Those planned courses are peculiar things."

"That I can imagine," said Val. "I wouldn't like to

learn a language that way. I should be frightened of doing some brain damage."

"Oh, they're quite safe," said Kramer.

"To get back to the point at issue, before you gentlemen regaled us with the classic bout of fisticuffs," said the Captain.

Stearman ignored him.

"Hercules was one of the classic Greek heroes. His name is sometimes rendered Heracles, or Herakles."

"Clear as mud!" ejaculated Kramer.

"He was a great muscle man; you'd have liked him!"

"I've had my share of muscle men for today," said Kramer. "I think I'm going to stick to hitting rocks for a few days—they don't hit back!"

"To get back to the point at issue," persisted Velos, sounding almost petulant.

"Sorry!" apologised Val. "Go ahead!"

The Captain grinned.

"The question is—the ship!"

"That reminds me of a joke," said Stearman.

"It's a funny time to be thinking of jokes, isn't it?" asked Schafft.

"I think of jokes at all sorts of 'funny' times," said Val.

"Let's hear it," urged Aster.

"It concerns a sailor who did conjuring tricks," said Stearman. "He had a pet parrot. It used to stand on his shoulder while he rehearsed his tricks. . . . It watched. It knew where everything went, and in its wily old head it knew how everything was done. It was during the '39-45' war, and the hero of our story was due to give a turn at a concert in the mess, before the whole ship's company. The

day of the concert came. He practised his tricks for hours a day. . . . He was a sleight-of-hand expert. Nervously, he went on to the stage, the faithful parrot sitting on his shoulder. He got a penny from a member of the audience, flicked it into the air, said 'Hey Presto!' and the penny disappeared.

"At that moment the parrot opened its great hooked beak and let out a squawk.

"I know where it is. I know where it is. It's gone up his sleeve. It's gone up his sleeve."

"Everybody laughed at the poor conjurer, who was red-faced and embarrassed. He borrowed half a crown from another member of the audience, flicked it up into the air and that, too, disappeared. Before anybody could applaud the parrot squawked: 'I know where it is! I know where it is! It's gone in his hair. It's gone in his hair!'

"This time the laughter nearly brought the house down. The sailor wished the parrot was anywhere but sitting on his shoulder. He did the best he could in the circumstances. He grinned and borrowed a pound note from a member of the audience. He made a quick flick and that, too, seemed to disappear. Once more the parrot screamed out:

"I know where it is! I know where it is! It's in his waistcoat pocket! It's in his waistcoat pocket!"

"At that moment," said Val Stearman, his voice suddenly grave, "a torpedo struck the ship, and she went down with all hands, except the conjurer and the parrot. For three days they sat in the lifeboat and neither of them spoke; they just stared at each other. At last the parrot said:

"All right! You've beaten me this time! What have you done with the ship?"

The laughter was more than the joke deserved. It was another release for the nervous tension, and it was not lost on Plumbus, the psychologist.

"Where is the ship?" asked Schafft, when the laughter had subsided.

"Yes, that is what we would call the 64,000 dollar question on a Quiz Show," said Stearman. "Where is the ship?"

"It looks as if it's been dragged," said the Captain.

"But not far," said Stearman. "Look, the drag marks finish here."

La Noire pointed soundlessly to an enormous footprint.

"That explains a lot," said Val.

"Yes," said the Captain, "it does. That explains a helluva lot."

"There's another," said La Noire, "and another."

Alane pointed to the prints. Her eyes opened very wide. Her face creased into a frown of concentration. She looked at La Noire as though for inspiration. She was trying hard to think of the word.

"Monsters," she said brightly.

La Noire smiled, a smile of encouragement. It seemed singularly brave in the circumstances.

"Monsters," she repeated quietly. Alane looked quietly from one to the other and then, glancing over her shoulder to make sure that the rest of them were following her, she began to follow the trail.

"Shall we go?" asked Aster.

"I think so," said the Skipper. "Come on!"

They made their way in pursuit.

"Do you think it's carrying the ship?" asked Velos.

"It wouldn't be difficult for a beast that size," said Plumbus.

"It certainly wouldn't," said Schafft.

Kramer and Val were walking rather tiredly and dejectedly. Suddenly the geologist gave Stearman a friendly dig in the ribs.

"What happened to you, boy? You look as if you've been in a fight?"

"Ha, ha!" said Val. "What did you do—run into a bus?"

"Ha, ha, yourself," said Kramer.

It was strange how quickly men can undergo an almost complete reversal of feelings. Half an hour previously Stearman had regarded Kramer with hostility tantamount to suspicion. He had had the impression that this had been Kramer's feeling towards him, too. Now a sentiment not unlike that expressed in the immortal Kipling's "Ballad of East and West," had come upon Stearman. There was no doubt, he told himself, that a recognition of mutual strength leads to a kind of mutual respect which is the foundation of something that could be friendship.

Kramer had the kind of personality which you could not ignore. Kramer was the kind of personality whom you could hate, or whom you could regard as a loyal friend; Kramer could never be a nonentity. It was the very antithesis of Kramerism. There were things about him which Val did not take to instinctively, but there were other things—his cleanness in the fight, for example—which seemed to be redeeming features.

Val had not been very impressed by the way in which Kramer had suggested sending the girl back to her people. But maybe Kramer was changing his mind about Alane! Val watched as the big, rugged geologist slid his arm around the native girl's waist. There was, he decided, quite probably a greater depth of humanity and sympathy in Kramer than he had been willing to credit the man with originally.

There was still a lot he did not know about Kramer, he reflected. Their acquaintance had not been a close one. On the other hand it had been quite close enough!

With all honesty he tried to recall any other opponent who had ever knocked him down . . . *and he couldn't!* He wondered whether Kramer's native world boasted a denser gravity than Earth and, if it did, whether that would account for Kramer's great toughness and powerful, muscular development. That was something that he must go into, decided Stearman.

His mind full of these and similar thoughts, he walked on, hand in hand with La Noire. Alane and Kramer were out in front, for she had been leading them before Kramer moved up beside her and put his arm around her waist. The other spacemen were strung out in line; Val and La Noire had dropped back. Every few minutes La Noire cast a glance behind them.

"'A good soldier never looks behind!'" quoted Stearman.

"He does—if he wants to live," answered La Noire.

"Why?" demanded Val. "The enemy is supposed to be in front!"

"In a place like this the enemy is all around us," reminded La Noire.

"Your tactics are at fault," said Val, grinning. It was difficult to grin, he had a mouth like a balloon.

"How are my tactics at fault?" demanded La Noire.

"An army has a front, two flanks and a rear," said Stearman. "You expect an attack on the front, you anticipate the possibility of an attack on either flank, and there ought not to be an attack at the rear."

"We're not an army," said La Noire, "and anyway, a force as small as this hasn't got flanks and a rear; we're all front."

"I think," said Stearman, "that you're probably right. I withdraw my earlier condemnation of your tactical capabilities!"

"Thank you, kind sir!" said La Noire.

"It's a good job one of us can fight," said Stearman, ruefully.

"You did very well," said La Noire, "for a beginner!"

Stearman grinned; it was not an easy thing to do. . . .

"Beginner!" he grunted angrily.

"He was very good, wasn't he?" said La Noire.

"In just a minute," threatened Val, "I shall get jealous."

"You were very good, too," said La Noire.

He squeezed her hand. They continued trudging in the wake of the strange procession.

"I wonder where those monsters have gone?" said La Noire.

"Yes, that's something I'd rather like to know," said Val. "It's bad enough when you can see them, but it's a thousand times worse when you can't," complained La Noire.

"True—very true," agreed Val.

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They kept on walking. The prints disappeared into the marsh. The girl pointed.

"That's the end of the capsule-ship, then," said Velos. "We shan't get it out of there."

"Pretty bad," said Val. "That means we're stuck here for good."

"Well, that capsule would never have taken off again," said Aster. "At least it wouldn't have taken off with me on board. I was glad to get even solid *alien* soil under my feet!"

"No, she wouldn't have been a flying proposition," agreed Velos.

"The engines might have been repairable," said Schafft, "but not with the facilities I have here."

"I don't think any of us would have trusted it again."

"No ship—what do we do, Captain?" asked Aster. Velos raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"I don't know," he answered. "I only wish I did."

"Well, let's put this thing down into terms that I can understand, as a mere primitive Earthman," said Val.

Kramer grinned ruefully.

"Salt in the wound!" he said.

Val laughed.

"You deserve it," he said gruffly.

"What were you going to say?" asked Plumbus.

"I was going to suggest," said Stearman, "that we start considering our position as though we were marooned on a desert island, on one of the oceans of earth."

"That may help *you* to think of a solution," said Velos, "but it won't make much difference to *us*."

"I would have thought," said Stearman, "that certain

broad, general principles obtained in the same way throughout, at least in outline."

"Yes, possibly," said Velos.

"The first of these being," went on Stearman, rather remorselessly, "that if you are on an island without a boat, you either build a boat—which is quite impossible here—out of such raw materials as are available. . . ."

"I don't know whether those intelligent monsters have got any space technology?" suggested Schafft.

"Very, very doubtful," replied Plumbus.

"They're intelligent, and they appear to be the dominant race," said Stearman, "but I shouldn't think they've got space ships."

"We don't know quite *how* intelligent they are," said the Captain.

"I shouldn't think they have any technology at all," said Aster. "If they have cities, if they have any kind of organization or culture, where is it?"

"At the bottom of the marsh! It's down there if it's anywhere!" said Val.

La Noire shuddered.

"Ugh, how horrible! Think, reptile cities under the marsh! Unfathomable depths of slime and brackish water; what goes on in those dark, submerged cities?"

"We don't even know they exist yet," said Velos.

"They might!" said La Noire. "That's the horror, knowing that they *might* exist." Her voice sank to a sibilant whisper.

Stearman swallowed hard.

"It's not a pleasant thought," he said. "Even allowing for the fact that the monsters had some kind of sub-

marine, or sub-slime culture, I don't think that a space technology would be very likely to develop at the bottom of a marsh."

"On the other hand," said La Noire, "truth is said to be found at the bottom of a well."

"That's an allegory," replied her husband with a smile.

The Captain and spacemen were exchanging puzzled glances.

"I'm sorry," said Stearman. "I'm wasting your time, gentlemen. What I was going to suggest was this—on a desert island you build a boat, which you can't do—or you wait to be picked up . . . or you swim. We can't swim off this planet, and we can't build a boat. . . ."

"So we wait to be picked up!" ejaculated Captain Velos. "Who by?"

There was a noise over their heads. La Noire, with her hypersensitive hearing, glanced up.

"There is your miracle," she said quietly.

"By the gods of the galaxy," exclaimed Schafft. "A ship!"

"A ship!" echoed Plumbus.

"It's one of ours," said Velos, "by the look of it!"

"How very curious!" exclaimed Stearman.

CHAPTER IX

"THEY'RE coming down," said Stearman.

"I think they must have seen us," said Aster.

"They would use detector gear," said Velos. "I don't think we would be visible from that height. Yes, they're definitely coming down. . . ."

"We might have waited years," said Schafft.

"What the devil are they doing on this out-of-the-way planet?" demanded Kramer. "It doesn't make sense."

"I'm not altogether sure that I like it," said Velos.

"What don't you like?" asked Val.

"The fact of their being here at all," said Velos.

"We're here," reminded Val.

"True," said Plumbus, "true."

"What reasons are there on your world," asked La Noire, "why ships shouldn't put down on a planet like this?"

"It's an uncharted planet, an unexplored planet," said Plumbus.

"There might be sickness on board," said Kramer, thickly, looking at Schafft.

"Why would they put down on an unknown world if there was sickness on board?" asked Val.

"Because it might be a kind of sickness they didn't want to take back to the empire," said Kramer, choosing his

words with care. "You see, even with our tremendously advanced medical sciences, science, as Plumbus will tell you——"

"Yes," said Plumbus.

"What is it that Plumbus will tell me?" asked Val, looking at the doctor.

"In the first place, I was thinking," said the doctor, "that if the capsule hadn't disappeared, I should have been able to get you and Kramer patched up."

"Thanks for the thought," said Val, "but what is it you could tell me about this microbe business?"

"There are certain viruses," said Plumbus, "which are apparently indestructible. They'll stand incredible temperature—extremes of temperature. You can't freeze them to death. You can't kill them by heat without killing the host first. They don't seem to respond to either acid poisons or alkaline poisons. . . . Most peculiar."

"They sound singularly deadly," said Stearman.

"They are exceptionally deadly," replied Plumbus in his most serious voice. "If an outbreak of that kind is suspected, then I'm afraid, for the sake of the rest of the people on board, a man is dumped, and a planet is charted as infected."

"Do you mean to say that they would dump one of these disease carriers on another planet?"

"Only on an uninhabited world."

"They may be coming down to see if this place is inhabited."

"Oh, I see," said Stearman.

"You see, it's a question of unloading a disease-laden victim on an uninhabited world, or killing him," said Plumbus.

"Does this disease kill quickly?" asked Stearman.

"Oh no, it would be possible for a man to have another three or four years of life after he's been attacked."

"I see," said Stearman. "Rather maroon them, than death."

"Well, this is the principle by which we try to work," said Plumbus. "If we can't save life, at least we don't want to take it away."

"I should want a little more time to think about the ethics of that," said Stearman. "It seems a rather questionable proposition to me."

"It always causes a pretty serious debate among our people," said the Captain. He looked at Kramer.

"It always has," agreed Plumbus.

"What's your view?" Stearman asked Kramer.

"Well, if I'd got one of these deadly diseases," said Kramer, "I'd as soon be shot there and then, out of hand, I think. I wouldn't like to be dumped on an uninhabited planet and allowed to rot away quietly."

"No, it's not a very pleasant prospect. Of course, food and supplies would be left with the man," said Plumbus. He rounded on Kramer.

"In spite of what you say, you know," he announced turbulently, "I think in the final extremity you would want to postpone death as long as possible."

"Do you call being alone on an uninhabited planet—alone, except for a cargo of bugs—*living*?" asked Kramer.

"I don't know," replied Plumbus. "I don't know how I myself would react to that kind of situation."

"Can't we change the subject?" asked Velos. "It's a singularly unfortunate topic."

"If, as you say, they have detected our presence," said Stearman, "would they still be coming down if they *had* this disease on board—or one of these diseases that you have been describing?"

"No, they wouldn't, they'd probably make off again without making contact," said Aster.

"On the other hand," said Velos, "they might want to make contact to find out what we're doing here. In that case they'd pick us up."

"I'm not sure that I'd want to go," said Stearman, "if there's a disease like that on board. It sounds worse than radiation poisoning."

"It is," said Aster, "a great deal worse."

"Our medical science can overcome radiation poisoning of almost any kind," said Plumbus.

"It's a secret which would be worth incalculable amounts on earth," said Stearman. "Any humanitarian or, for that matter, any government, for possibly less sublime motives, would be willing to pay whatever price you wanted."

"Our medicine isn't for *sale*," said Plumbus. "We would gladly give any knowledge we have to any other humanoid group . . . gladly."

"I like your ethics, doctor," said Stearman.

"If you were as good a peace maker as you are a doctor, we shouldn't now be needing your services," Kramer said.

"There's nothing I can do that the girls haven't done already," said Plumbus.

"It was your own faults, gentlemen. "I did ask you to stop!"

"Yes, I'm afraid we didn't take much notice. Still, we shall heal in the natural course of events."

"I hope for your sakes there aren't any dangerous alien bacteria floating about in the atmosphere of this planet," said Plumbus.

"You're a Job's comforter!" said Stearman.

"I know the meaning of that phrase, but what was its origin?" asked the doctor.

"A fellow in the Old Testament," said La Noire Stearman.

"The first part of our greatest Holy Book," said Val.

"Oh, yes," said Kramer. "Yes, we have that in my vocabulary knowledge."

"His name was Job," said Val. "He had certain misfortunes, and a number of 'friends', one of whom was called Elihu, and another Bildad, gathered round and told him, in effect, that it was largely his own fault for being such a wicked man! Hence anyone who gives *discouraging* 'encouragement' is said to be a Job's comforter."

"That's a nice paradox," said Velos, "'discouraging encouragement'—a happy turn of phrase, Mr. Stearman!"

"Oh, I'm quite a literary giant in my own way," said Val.

Aster smiled.

"They're definitely landing," said La Noire.

"Yes, they won't be long now, either," said Velos.

"You can read the markings," exclaimed Plumbus.

"Intergalactic police!" exclaimed Schafft. He looked at Kramer. "What have you been up to?"

"Fighting in public," said Kramer.

"I wonder what they're doing here?" said Schafft.

"Let's go and see!" said Val.

Plumbus and Schafft began moving towards the ship. Kramer, Aster and Velos were a little way behind them. Kramer was walking a few paces in front of the girl. Val was a little way behind La Noire, who was hurrying forward as though to catch up with Alane.

The air was suddenly filled with a peculiar vibration. A weird, high-pitched, humming oscillation gripped them. Val could neither move nor speak, but he was still conscious, and he could still see and hear. La Noire and Alane were by themselves, a little apart from the others.

The lock of the ship opened slowly; a man came down the ramp, a tall, scarred, rough-haired, tough-looking character with a black patch over one eye, followed by a short, broad-shouldered individual, as hairy as an ape, and as low of forehead. Neither of them looked as if they had enough intelligence to fly a ship.

A third man appeared on the gangway, and then a fourth. Half a dozen came through the lock. Val felt the immobilised blaster being lifted from his hands. When they had collected all the weapons, they tossed them into a careless heap at the base of the ramp.

One of them called up through the open hatch.

"Switch it off!"

The words "force-field" sprang into Stearman's mind. Stearman had read of these things in science fiction, but had never regarded them as a practical possibility. He had never imagined that he would get himself caught in one.

The strange newcomers dragged La Noire and Alane back towards the ramp. Stearman found his strength re-

turning and leapt forward. One of the newcomers thrust an energy blaster hard against his chest.

"Stand still," said a guttural voice, "or I'll kill you. We're taking these women as hostages. We don't want any trouble while we're here. Is that clear?"

"Who are you?" asked Velos.

"Oh, we're just visitors."

"You're not intergalactic police," said Velos, "that I do know."

"Now ain't that smart!" said the man with the black patch. "All right! We're not intergalactic police."

"Who are you?" demanded Velos.

Stearman was looking desperately from one to the other for these men were not speaking English as the crew men had done after taking that course for Stearman's benefit, they were speaking the original language that Velos and his crew spoke. Velos interpreted swiftly to Val.

The horrible truth dawned on Stearman. These men were *convicts*. Somehow they had taken over a police vessel. Perhaps they had been in process of being transported from one jail to another. Perhaps they had been able to overcome the police guard and crew? Perhaps they had escaped and captured the first ship that came near the convict colony, which happened to be this police vessel? Whatever the exact circumstances, it was obvious to Stearman why they were there. This uncharted world provided them with an ideal hideout.

All kinds of horrifying possibilities went through Stearman's mind. He thought of La Noire being dragged on board that ship. If these men had been in a prison colony they would not have seen a woman for a long time, and

La Noire was magnificently attractive at any time, by any standard.

He thought of the native girl, Alane. He flashed a swift glance at Kramer. The big geologist's face was an impassive mask, but his eyes were burning like two coals of liquid fire, and Stearman knew that if any rescue operation was going to be attempted, he could count on Kramer. Kramer was the kind of man on whom it was good to count.

Even with Kramer, he thought—for his mind was already racing ahead to a rescue attempt—it was not going to be easy. These convicts looked like hard men, tough cases every one of them. The black-patched leader had all the trimmings of a 17th century pirate. Looking at him, Stearman was filled with an overwhelming desire to take the tall ex-prisoner and break him across his knee, in the way that a powerful man breaks kindling.

He was aware that Kramer was looking at him, and he wondered whether Kramer was thinking what he was thinking.

Dragging the two women with them, the convicts went back to the ship.

"Now what are we going to do?" Val asked, turning desperately to Velos.

"They've got our women, and they've got our guns," said Aster. "If we attempt any kind of attack—" he left the sentence unfinished.

"We can't attempt any kind of attack," said Val, "not open attack . . . they've got the girls in there."

"You're right," agreed Kramer.

"I thought you were in favour of sending the girl back to the natives?" said Plumbus to Kramer.

"Shut up!" snapped Kramer. "Sometimes, Dr. Plumbus, you have the gift for making fatuous remarks."

"Sorry, I'm sure," said the psychologist.

"We've got to do this by brain work, if we're going to do it at all," said Schafft.

"Things are very sticky," said Aster.

"Very sticky indeed!" agreed Velos.

"I think we ought to try a psychological approach," said Plumbus.

"I think you're on the ball, doctor," said Stearman. "What do you suggest?"

"I'm not sure yet," replied Plumbus. "Let me think. This takes time."

"I don't know how much time those girls have got," said Aster.

Stearman closed his eyes in horror.

"We've got to move fast!"

"If we made a frontal assault on that thing they could do what they liked to the women and cut us down before we could get anywhere near it," said Plumbus.

"That's true," said Schafft.

"We haven't all day," said Stearman desperately.

"Come on, think, Plumbus, think!" said Kramer.

"I'm doing my best," said the psychologist, "give me a chance, Kramer."

"I'm sorry," said the geologist. "I don't like to think of that poor little frightened girl——"

"I don't like to think of La Noire in there," said Stearman.

There was a sudden scream of either fear or pain from the inside of the ship. . . .

CHAPTER X

STEARMAN and Kramer began moving towards the ship simultaneously. The hatch above them disgorged the figure of a man. It was one of the convicts. A leer split his vicious mouth from side to side. He held an enormous energy blaster, he pointed it directly at Stearman and Kramer. He said something in a language that Val didn't understand. Kramer scowled up at him darkly.

"What did he say?" asked Stearman.

"He said go back or he'll kill us. He means it, too," added Kramer.

"I can see that," growled Stearman. "What are we going to do?"

"The only thing we can do at the moment," said Kramer.

Plumbus beckoned them towards him. The escaped convict with the gun shouted something derisive. Kramer shook his fist at the convict. A half-charge energy capsule exploded a few feet away from where Kramer was standing, and the blast singed him.

Kramer threw a hand across his eyes, dazzled; and he was choked by the acrid fumes.

"I'd like to get my hands on that thug on the level," gritted Kramer.

"So would I!" agreed Shearman. "What did he say that time?"

"He said they'd started to enjoy themselves, we could probably hear it."

There was another pitiful scream from the interior of the ship. Stearman's face went deathly white. His eyes burned like molten steel.

"It's no good," said Kramer. "There's nothing you can do against that energy gun."

"I can get killed trying," said Stearman.

"Would it accomplish anything?" asked Kramer.

Stearman's blood was pounding around his body.

"No," he gritted at last.

"Anger is a form of temporary insanity," said Kramer. "A madman accomplishes nothing."

Val nodded, his eyes still burned like wrecker beacons on a rock-bound coast.

"Come here," said Plumbus quietly.

Well back out of earshot, they moved away; there was a small depression in the sandy soil; Plumbus, Aster, Kramer, Schaffit, Velos and Stearman sat in the declivity. They were hidden from the ship by the earth banks.

"Now," said Plumbus, "I have a plan, gentlemen."

"You think fast," said Aster.

"Not fast enough," said Stearman, as there came another pathetic scream from the ship.

"Gods of the galaxies," said Kramer, "what are they doing?"

"Use your imagination," said Velos.

"I'd rather not," said Stearman.

"My plan is this," said Plumbus quickly. "Somehow we have to give them the impression that there is something valuable on this planet, something very valuable. We must give them the impression that we know where it is and what it is. We can't do this obviously, by shouting up to them that we have a treasure; it must be implied, apparently accidentally."

"Have you worked out how it can be implied?" asked Stearman urgently.

"Not yet—but we'll think of something."

"Think fast, then," said Kramer.

Stearman nodded.

"Think fast!" he reiterated.

"If we could get them fighting over a non-existent treasure," said Aster suddenly, "we could split them up."

"Divide and conquer," said Stearman, "that was the old Roman motto."

"Divide and conquer, eh?" said Velos. "That's good—that's really good."

"It's not something you can do quickly," said Stearman.

"We've got to do it quickly," said Kramer.

"I know," said Val. "I know."

"The most valuable thing I can think of," said Aster, "would be some kind of isotope, some kind of naturally occurring radio activity."

"Yes, but that has a commercial value," said Stearman, "and I don't think those gentlemen will be interested in anything having a commercial value."

"Well, what do you suggest?" asked Aster.

"It's got to be something that will appeal to them."

"They've got what appeals to them at the moment!" said Kramer.

Stearman closed his eyes as though trying to shut some hideous picture from his imagination.

"Well?" asked Kramer.

"Power," said Velos. "Power would be what they would go for. Men who have been deprived of power, of even the opportunity of making the simplest decision, dream of power."

"What kind of power can we offer them?" Kramer asked.

"The kind of power that would appeal most to men like that," suggested Aster.

"Such as?"

"The power of life and death over other men. Some new weapon, something that would make even an energy blaster look tame by comparison."

"You're on the right lines, I'm sure of it," said Schafft.

"I know he is," said Kramer. "That would appeal even to a normal man. To those swine it should appeal a great deal more."

"How do we convince them that we have such power?" asked Velos. He stood up and took a turn around the hollow place where they sat.

"The difficulty, as I see it," said Plumbus, "is to be convincing. . . ."

"We could be quite vague about the source of power."

"It could even be something that hadn't been examined yet," said Stearman.

"I'm not quite sure that I follow you," said Kramer.

"The age-old appeal of the mystery weapon," said Val.

"The mystery weapon?" echoed Aster.

"I think I know what he's getting at," said Velos.

"So do I," agreed Plumbus.

"You mean something that doesn't really work at all, don't you?" said Schafft interrogatively.

Stearman nodded.

"Yes, I do," he agreed.

"I see," said Plumbus, "we do a little masquerade for them, a charade, put it that way."

"Yes, a charade, a mime. . . ."

There was a tense silence, then Schafft said:

"Suppose we took something innocuous like a stone." He scabbled about in the soil and then picked up an oddly shaped translucent crystal.

"That will do beautifully," said the psychologist.

"It has a rather mysterious appearance to it," said Schafft.

"All the better," agreed Velos.

Plumbus took the stone in his hand as though he had something tremendously valuable.

"I'll run with it, as though I have something very valuable I want to keep for myself," he said. "You chase after me. I'll turn and fire it as though it is a weapon."

Aster set off, and they went after him. Looking up, Stearman, Kramer and Velos saw a dark figure framed in the open aperture of the lock.

"Fingers crossed," said Stearman.

Plumbus glanced over his shoulder as Aster came in pursuit. Aster began shouting violently at Plumbus in the language which Stearman did not understand. Plumbus

shouted back in the same language. Aster shook his head.

"What's he saying?" demanded Stearman.

"Aster is calling on Plumbus to stop, and bring back the power crystal; Plumbus says that if Aster doesn't go back he'll use the power crystal on him."

Aster shouted something else.

"What was that?" demanded Val.

"He said that if Plumbus discharged the power crystal, it would be no more good to either of them."

More shouting. . . .

"What was that?" asked Stearman once more.

"Plumbus said that if he discharged the power crystal at Aster, Aster would be dead, but that he, Plumbus, would be able to pick up other power crystals."

There was silence for a moment as the gap between the two men narrowed. Then Aster shouted again.

Val looked inquiringly at Velos.

"Aster says that Plumbus is a fat coward and wouldn't have enough courage to use the crystal."

Plumbus stopped; he waved the crystal in the direction of Aster. With a look of dramatic agony on his face, Aster clutched at his body as though in intense pain, rolled over, and lay very still.

"First thing," said Velos, "did they see that? Second thing—are they likely to bite?"

"I hope so," replied Stearman fervently. "I most certainly hope so!"

The convict on guard duty came down the steps. With his gun trained on Plumbus, he looked at the fallen figure of Aster.

He jabbered at Plumbus in the strange language which Stearman did not understand.

Velos whispered: "He wants to know what happened to Aster. He doesn't believe him. This is going to work better than we thought."

A sudden thought occurred to Val.

"Tell him I'm the doctor," he said to Velos.

"Don't try anything crazy," said Velos.

"I'll try anything I damn well like," said Stearman. "Just tell him!"

Velos stood up and called.

The guard with the energy blaster beckoned. Stearman went over. He began examining Aster with what he hoped was expertise. There was a suspicious look on the guard's face. Stearman deliberately took his thoughts right off the guard, and tried to make Aster look as convincingly dead as possible.

There came another scream from the ship. Val had had thoughts about overpowering the guard by a surprise move, snatching the gun and making a raid, commando style, up the landing steps. He realised just how ineffectual such a course of action would prove to be should he attempt to put it into practice. The muffled screaming from the interior had produced first of all a terrible anger in Stearman, and then a fear; now the fear and anger turned ice cold. Stearman was just a living vengeance machine. His mind, cool, calculating and inscrutable, told him that his idea of an attack on the guard was all wrong. He called back to Velos, in English:

"I've changed my mind; it wouldn't work; we have to be more subtle."

"Now you're being sensible," said Velos.

"Try and get him interested in the crystal," said Val. "Go out and argue with Plumbus for its ownership."

"Right," said Velos in English, and left the declivity. In his own language he said to Plumbus:

"Give me the crystal."

"It is practically useless now; its charge is gone," said Plumbus.

"Nevertheless, there is still a little power left in it. Give it to me! You are not fit to control such power! You have already killed one of our own people!"

Velos sounded very convincing as he came forward. Plumbus looked at him sheepishly, and then handed over the stone. . . .

"What is that?" asked the guard, the convict with the energy blaster.

"I'm not exactly sure," said Velos, edging away and thrusting it deep into his tunic pocket.

"Give it to me," demanded the convict.

"No!" said Velos. "It's not important."

The convict swung up the energy blaster threateningly.

"All right, all right!" cried Velos. He passed the little translucent stone over.

"It's only a stone," said the guard. "What happened to him?"

"The stone killed him," said Velos.

The convict looked at the stone with a renewed interest and respect.

"He's biting," thought Val. "Let him bite it!" He offered up a silent prayer. Let him swallow it hook, line and sinker, he thought; he's got to!

A sobbing moan could be heard from the interior of the ship. Stearman's blood turned to ice in his veins. Oh, why did it take so long? He thought of the girls in the

ship. Every second must be a thousand aeons to them, and longer. And things were taking so long out here. . . .

The convict-guard was examining the translucent stone fragment. He scowled and screwed up his face. Then he held it up and waved it as Plumbus had done. Instinctively Val, Plumbus and Velos ducked. Velos said:

"It is not much use now; it has been discharged. There is a little power left in it, but certainly not enough to kill. Not enough even to produce any serious injury."

The guard looked again at the recumbent form of Aster. He slipped the crystal into his pocket and made as though to retrace his steps. Another guard appeared.

"What's going on?" shouted the second guard.

"Nothing!" said Velos.

"They seem to have found something," said the first guard.

"Such as?" asked the second one.

The first guard took the crystal from his pocket.

"This," he said thickly.

"What's that?" asked the second guard, showing no particular interest.

The first guard pointed to the motionless form of Aster.

"Somebody hit him over the head with it?" asked the second guard.

"No," answered the first, "he just held it in the air and waved it. . . . Some kind of radiations?"

"From a thing that size?" asked the second guard.

There was silence for a moment.

"Is it dangerous now?" asked the second guard.

"He says no," said the first guard, pointing to Velos, who nodded his head in agreement.

"It's been used," he said. "Half the power's gone. It will build up again, but it may take many hours."

"I don't think this would be any use as a weapon," said the second guard.

"Why not?" asked the first.

"It takes too many hours to build up."

"Oh, but you don't just have *one* of these——" said Velos.

"Shut up!" snapped Plumbus, very convincingly.

The first guard pointed his blaster at Plumbus.

"You let him talk," he commanded.

"I haven't got anything to say," replied Velos, and he looked at Plumbus meaningfully.

"Don't say anything at all," said Plumbus.

"I told you to shut up," said the guard.

"See what you've done now!" snarled Plumbus, roundly in well-acted anger on his captain.

"Me?" said Velos, in mock indignation. "It was you, you fat imbecile. It was you who let them see how it worked!"

Plumbus looked at the 'body' of Aster.

"It was his fault," he said. "He came after me. I found the crystal."

"Your rashness has given it to them," said Velos angrily. They were doing it very realistically, as though so engrossed in their quarrel that they were oblivious to the presence of the eyes and ears of the convicts above them.

Two more guards came down the ramp. There were no more screams from inside the ship. It looked as if Plumbus' psychological plan was beginning to work. At least it had given someone a temporary respite. . . .

CHAPTER XI

SEVERAL more of the convicts appeared on the ramp of the ship. There was a heated exchange of words. Val wished desperately that he knew the language. He would have liked to have known what was being said. One or two of the convicts began looking shiftily at each other. The great black-patched leader came down the steps. He moved across to Plumbus and took his arm savagely, twisting it.

"Show me where you found it," he ordered.

Plumbus reluctantly led him over to the hollow declivity where he had found the crystal.

"How do you recognise the stuff?" asked the convict.

"By its appearance, mainly," exclaimed Plumbus. "Please let go my arm—you're hurting!"

"I'll hurt you a lot more if you don't find me one and find it quickly," said the convict.

Interest had now centred in the hollow. Aster still lay motionless. Schcafft moved forward reluctantly, prodded on by the energy gun of one of the other convicts. Stear-

man and Kramer made as though to take a stealthy pace towards the ship. Energy blasters flicked in their direction. One of the convicts said something that Stearman did not understand. He turned to Kramer for interpretation.

"They want us to go and dig for crystals."

"Well, at least it's worked so far," said Val in English.

"What did he say?" demanded the convict, in Kramer's language.

"He said we'd better do as you say, he's frightened of the gun," said Kramer.

The convict waved the gun under Stearman's nose.

Kramer hissed: "I told him you were scared of the gun; act scared!"

Stearman backed away, put a hand in front of his face; the convict grinned.

Stearman and Kramer found themselves prodded back towards the declivity. They joined Velos, Schafft, and Plumbus.

Aster was forgotten. Stealthy as a ghost, he crept, inch by inch, towards the convicts' hi-jacked police ship. Stearman and Kramer both knew what Aster was doing, they dare not look—they dare not even think, in case some tell-tale glance attracted the guards' attention to the creeping "corpse."

It was a nightmare journey for Aster. He dare not lift his head up to see, and with his face only the barest fraction of an inch above the ground, he crawled on his stomach, like a mole, worming his way like a caterpillar over the ground. The men in the depression were digging, pausing to examine any translucent stone that they turned

up, rejecting it with a shake of the head, making some excuse to the bandits, and then digging on again.

Stearman could feel cold drops of perspiration on his forehead. He had never known time to move so slowly. Only by the most supreme effort of will could he prevent himself from looking to see whether Aster was making any real progress. Kramer, too, had broken out in a sweat. He forced himself to concentrate on the digging. . . .

There was only one convict left inside the ship. He sat lounging against a bulkhead. He was chewing a pale green object, long and thin. La Noire could only guess what it was. Looking at the man, she guessed it was some kind of natural narcotic. He appeared to be deriving great enjoyment from it. La Noire was tied by wrists and ankles to the bulkhead on the opposite side of the cabin in which she and Alane were being held prisoner.

With the psychology of little boys who have learnt that it is a good thing to save the icing sugar till last and to eat the cake first, the convicts had devoted their attentions to the native girl, while La Noire was forced to watch. It had not been a particularly pleasant spectacle, especially when she realised that this was only the *hors d'œuvres*, as far as they were concerned. Alane had been tied naked to the top of one of the metal alloy tables that were bolted to the floor. As far as La Noire could tell, the native girl was now unconscious. She had no idea what it was that had attracted the convicts down the landing steps before they had dragged her to the table.

She wondered how long it would be before they did so. A desperate daring plan flashed through her mind. The look of disdain that she had kept on her face since the

pirates had dragged her aboard was dropped, to be replaced by a welcoming smile. She wished she knew their language, but a smile like that transcended any language barrier.

The convict who had been left to guard them glanced up and saw the invitation in her eyes. He came across, leaning his gun carefully against the side of the bunk. He said something in the language La Noire couldn't understand, but she wriggled as if she found it pleasant, and smiled even more encouragingly.

The convict's fangs were exposed as his lips parted in a hideous, voluptuous grin. Mentally La Noire felt sick; physically she kept on smiling invitingly.

The convict moved around behind her and undid the ropes securing her wrists. She ran dainty finger-tips over his unshaven cheeks, the voluptuous grin widened.

He unfastened her ankles. La Noire put her arm around him encouragingly. He began moving significantly over towards the bunk, *the bunk against which the energy gun was propped*. La Noire moved towards the bunk seductively. She could read the convict's mind as though it were a piece of cheap pornography. . . .

Still caressing his cheek, she moved round carefully between him and the energy blaster, then still smiling sweetly, she chopped him savagely across the Adam's apple.

Clutching his throat, he flopped backwards, coughing, trying desperately to shout.

La Noire picked up the energy blaster and stove in the top of his skull as though she were breaking a cocoanut.

The native girl strained feebly at her bonds, She had awoken, and she looked at La Noire in amazement. La

Noire swiftly unfastened the ropes holding the native girl to the table. She helped her to her feet.

Alane's eyes were red with unshed tears. Her long dark hair was her only covering. Slowly, dispassionately, La Noire tore off the dead man's jacket and draped it round the girl's shoulders. It was a big jacket; it came almost to her knees. The convict whom La Noire had just killed had been a big man.

Softly as a creeping shadow, La Noire moved towards the observation port. She peered very carefully at the scene below.

The convicts stood round excitedly while Val and the spacemen dug desperately. She wondered what was happening; then she saw Aster, unnoticed, creeping, inch by inch, towards the ship. She realised that whatever was going on in the shallow hollow had been engineered deliberately to enable Aster to creep towards the ship. This was part of some carefully planned rescue attempt.

But her killing of the convict had forestalled anything that Aster might have hoped to achieve. She couldn't let him go on taking that risk when it was no longer necessary.

But how? she asked herself. How could she communicate with him? He didn't look up at all; he was simply crawling as unobtrusively as possible. She wondered how long he would continue in that way. Maybe at the last moment he was going to stand up and sprint for the ship? She didn't know quite how Aster's mind worked. There was no knowing what course of action would appeal to the astrogator most.

La Noire felt that she was in a particularly unenviable

position. She was the reason—she and Alane—for the risk that Aster was taking. Only the reason for the brave rescue attempt was no longer as desperate as it had been. The tables were already turned. Even from here she could see that Aster's nerve was almost at breaking point. He was twitching and jerking convulsively as he crept.

Suddenly, unable to stand the strain any longer, Aster sprinted towards the ship. The sudden flurry of movement attracted the attention of one of the convicts. There were wild cries of consternation.

Clutching the energy gun, La Noire ran towards the open hatch. Alane slumped down weakly on the bunk. An energy ball cracked within a few feet of the sprinting Aster. He zig-zagged and swerved desperately as he ran.

La Noire reached the lock aperture. A convict at the edge of the hollow was drawing a careful line on the wildly running Aster. La Noire fired a split second before his finger could tighten on the trigger of the energy gun. She was frightened that her aim might not be good enough. She did not want to hit any of the spacemen. More important than anything else, as far as she was concerned, she didn't want to hit Val.

But Stearman was an old campaigner. With a roar of "Down!" he hurled himself flat. The convict who had been about to annihilate the sprinting Aster was engulfed in a brilliant flame of indescribable power. There was no more convict.

The peculiar acrid fumes drifted down into the hollow. The convict nearest to Stearman seized him by the arm and made the mistake of trying to force him on to his feet. It was a serious tactical blunder as far as the convict was

concerned. Val, threatened by the gun, might have been forced to stand, but he was not threatened by the gun. He was being tugged by a man with a gun in his *other* hand. Val wondered what the convict had been in for, prior to his escape. He was certainly dealing with this situation in a very amateurish manner.

Val half-rolled, half-crouched; his powerful right leg swung round and took the convict at the back of the knee, the knee upon which his weight rested. His legs buckled and he crashed over backwards. Stearman's left came over like a sledge-hammer. The side of his hand connected with the convict's larynx; for a second there was pain; then there was a kind of choking oblivion, during which Stearman got the convict's gun. He was shouting orders in English. Velos might bear the Captain's rank, but there was no doubt about who had taken over in the crisis.

"Flat and keep flat!" roared Stearman.

An ape-like convict was in the act of firing a blast into the lock behind which La Noire crouched; Kramer took him in a flying tackle. Kramer's great shoulder caught the convict's shin savagely, and so vicious was the tug that there came the sickening crack of a breaking bone before the convict's body hit the ground. Disentangling himself from the broken leg, Kramer kicked viciously at the head of the convict. There was another sickening crunch and then Stearman was not the only member of the party with a gun.

Aster had reached the base of the ship. He dodged round behind it. One of the convicts discharged an energy blast in his direction. He just made it around the curva-

ture before the great fire ball kissed the spot where he had stood a second before.

The black-patched pirate began roaring orders.

"Don't shoot at the ship, you dam' fools! How're we going to get off this planet if we destroy the ship?"

"Perhaps they've got a ship," suggested the convict who had been about to fire at the hi-jacked police vessel.

"Have you?" demanded the black-patched leader, turning his one glaring orb on Velos.

He never got the answer. An energy blast from La Noire's gun crackled into the middle of the convicts. The great black-patch leader went down.

Aster, at the far side of the ship, reached the open end of the garbage ejector chute. He began scrambling up it, agile as an ape. A few minutes later his head appeared in the room where Alane and La Noire had been held captive.

All hell had apparently broken loose in the hollow. Stearman and Kramer each battled an ape-like thug. Plumbus found himself opposed by a ferrety little man with vicious teeth and eyes like slits in a theatrical mask.

Velos was engaged in a life and death bout with a short, square-shouldered brute, who looked like a pocket-sized heavyweight. There was one convict more than there were spacemen, but it was impossible for any of them to use energy blasters. The spare convict looked around to see where he might be of most use. He looked at the mighty-shouldered Kramer and the steel-hard Stearman, and decided that he would be of more significance if he got Plumbus out of the way. This would mean the ferret-faced man, who was now engaged with Plumbus, would

be able to assist him with either Stearman or Kramer. Three-to-one against either of the two big men might give the convicts a chance of success.

Glancing swiftly towards the loose member of the *mélée* Stearman could almost see the man's brain going round. As the spare convict dashed towards Plumbus with the intention of attacking him from the rear, Stearman brought his knee up sharply in his opponent's stomach and grabbed the convict's hair as he passed.

With a scream of pain he stopped dead in his tracks and swung round to meet his opponent. The convict into whose stomach Stearman had so recently thrust his knee was by no means *hors de combat*. He was a tough character, and he was coming back for more, looking vicious and angry. He was slinging his energy blaster like a club. He could have done Val no small amount of damage if it had landed, but Kramer was on the *qui vive*. His own man was out of the way; he had just received a colossal punch that had sent him staggering backwards when Kramer saw the upraised club that was aimed at Stearman. He had no time to intervene but he shouted a warning, and kicked at the back of the convict's legs. He didn't go down, but he staggered, and the warning shout had been enough to give Stearman time to twist lithely out of the way; he saw the doom that was coming towards him. He chopped downwards with his right and then picked up the semi-conscious convict and hurled him at the erstwhile club wielder. Club wielder and spare man went down together, and Stearman had no intention at all of letting them get up. Kramer slid the boot in again for good measure, and Stearman pounced on top of the threshing

heap like an old-time Western hero diving from his mustang after the fleeing villain. Stearman's weight was composed almost entirely of muscle and bone. The muscle was as hard as well-tanned leather and the bone had the tenacity and tensile strength of old Scotch granite. There were cracking sounds from the men beneath Stearman, and then, holding their heads like cocoanuts, he cracked them together with a resounding *thwack* that left both convicts senseless at his feet.

"You O.K.?" he gritted to Kramer as he got up.

"Fine," said Kramer. Stearman decided that Plumbus was probably in most need of help. There was something almost comically incongruous about the fight that was raging between the pudgy psychiatrist and the rodent-like convict who faced him. The little man's blows were raining into Plumbus' midriff like rain falling on a haggis left out to cool on the kitchen step.

"You're not tall enough," said Stearman, who was not without a certain laconic sense of humour, even on the grimmest occasion. He seized the little man by the collar of his tunic and hoisted him off the ground at arm's length—a very considerable feat of strength. The ferret-faced convict threshed wildly at Stearman with his feet.

"Naughty, naughty temper," reproved Stearman, knowing that his words were incomprehensible. "Daddy'll have to spankums." He dropped the little convict and stood on his back. The man writhed and squirmed. His vicious little eyes pointed death over his shoulders.

"Better stun him," he said to Plumbus, "he's vicious."

Plumbus bent down, puffing and blowing, and delivered a neat though rather flabby-handed rabbit punch to the

back of the little convict's neck. The vicious light in the eyes went out.

"That'll hold him," said Stearman. "Go and give Velos a hand; I'll sort this other fellow out with Kramer."

"There's no need," gritted Kramer, "but—thanks—all—the—same." Every syllable was accompanied by a punch to his opponent's body. The convict looked decidedly the worse for wear. He bore an expression on his battered features which proclaimed to the world in general that he wished he had not initiated the contest! Kramer's final blow of the fight was an uppercut that exploded on the geometric centre of the convict's jaw. The convict's eyes glazed, his knees buckled, and Kramer, grinning broadly, puffed a breath in the direction of his sagging opponent.

"Blow the man down," grinned Val.

Kramer looked at him inquiringly.

"Another of our earthly quotations!" said Val.

The convict collapsed.

Plumbus tapped Velos' opponent on the shoulder.

"Excuse me," he said, "I have something for you!"

The convict half-turned in amazement, then Plumbus brought up his hand, cupped so that the palm landed joltingly against his victim's jaw. The convict's head rocked back and then Velos exploded a crushing punch to the temple. The convict dropped.

"Reminds me of the ancient joke," said Stearman.

"What ancient joke?" panted Velos.

"Two lions were going through a wood, or somewhere, and they came upon a herd of gnus. The lion said to the lioness, 'Excuse me a minute, dear,' and he went and killed the entire herd. He came back licking his lips and

smiling, and said, "That is the end of the gnus, the time is ten past one!" "

Velos looked puzzled. It was Kramer who saw it first.

"I got it!" he said.

"Then explain it to me," said Velos. "I wish somebody would."

Aster, La Noire and Alane came slowly down the ramp of the ship which had so recently belonged to the convicts. Velos and Plumbus had carefully gathered up the energy blasters again.

"Now," said Val, as he took La Noire in his arms, "what did they do to you, my darling? The screaming was driving me mad."

Kramer lifted Alane down the last few steps, and held her tightly to him with surprising tenderness for so strong a man.

"I wish I could speak your language," he said. "I wish I could make you understand."

"I'm all right," said La Noire, "they didn't touch me, but the girl—poor little Alane," she shuddered, she could not bring herself to put it into words. Finally she murmured: "They did what you'd expect men like that to do. They tied her down to the table."

Stearman looked at the recumbent forms in the hollow that were now beginning to stir. . . .

"They're inhuman," he said.

"No, they're not inhuman," said Velos, "just *too* human. Imagine what it's like in prison, Stearman."

"There's no excuse for what they did," said Val.

"Think of it," said Velos, "months, years of deprivation, and suddenly the chance to release your feelings

again, to find an outlet for biological urges and drives."

"Don't whitewash them!" said Stearman.

"I'm not trying to whitewash them," said Velos. "I'm only saying that they acted as you would expect them to act. It was human; it was natural; it was normal."

Val raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"So what do we do? Tell 'em to be good boys in future?"

"They aren't going to have any future," said Kramer.

"What do you mean?" asked Velos sharply.

"I mean what I say," said Kramer. "They aren't going to have any future, any of them!"

Velos put a restraining hand on his arm.

"Shut up!" snarled the geologist.

"Take it easy," said Val. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to kill them for what they did for her." Gently he took his arm from around the native girl.

"But you've hardly met her," protested Velos.

"You wouldn't know, would you, Velos?" said Kramer. "You *think* too much, you're all brain."

"I thought you were all muscle," said Velos.

"Drop dead!" snapped Kramer. It was a favourite expression with him. It appeared to be the nearest English equivalent to some phrase or other in his own language, some acidulous, bitter phrase which had been an integral part of his vocabulary. He drew a deep breath and, before anyone was aware of what he was going to do, he swung up his energy gun. A chain of white fire balls played around the hollow.

La Noire covered her eyes for a second. Alane caught her breath and gasped. Kramer flung the gun down.

"Murderer!" exclaimed Velos.

"Murderer be damned!" said Kramer. "Executioner if you like!"

"But those—those—men——"

"Listen!" snapped Kramer. "I'm not concerned with the psychology of it. I'm not concerned with the humanity of it—what did you suggest we do with them? Take them back with us? Fly them back to some prison colony? How do you know that they aren't murderers already? The law is too soft."

"You're too hard," said Velos.

"What do you think, Stearman? You're the kind of man who understands me. We talk the same language."

"Not quite," said Val.

"Your woman was all right!" reminded Kramer. "They hadn't touched her."

"That makes a difference," agreed Val.

"What would you have done if they had?" demanded Kramer.

"I don't know," replied Stearman.

"Would you have killed them?"

"I think I very probably would," agreed Val.

"Then don't side with them!" said Kramer, jerking a derisory finger in the direction of Velos and Plumbus.

"I'm not siding with either of you," said Stearman.

"I'm trying to be honest, I'm trying to produce a straight judgment."

"You're like a man made of rock," exclaimed Aster, looking at Kramer.

Kramer rounded on him savagely.

"Listen!" he said, pointing to the smoking crater which

was all that remained of the convicts. "Do you know what would have happened if any of them had seen you crawling towards the ship?"

"I know," agreed Aster. "I was prepared to take the risk."

"And don't think that we don't appreciate it," said Val. "We knew what you were doing, Aster!" He looked at La Noire. "By the way, you haven't said yet how you got free."

Briefly La Noire told him what had happened.

"I see," said Val.

La Noire turned to Kramer. "I killed the one in the ship," she said. "I had to. After what he and the others did to Alane, I *had* to! It was horrible!"

Alane had nestled up tight against Kramer again.

"I wish I could tell her that she's safe, that it's all over," he murmured.

A huge green head slurped up out of the marsh and looked at them with great round, baleful eyes. Kramer discharged the energy gun which he had picked up straight in the direction of the huge green head. The ball of white fire danced in a strange curved path, and then fizzled out in the empty air. The head continued to regard them balefully.

"By the gods of the galaxies!" said Velos. "They've got a force field!"

"A force field that'll withstand energy charges," said Kramer.

The head was followed by a neck, shoulders and two massive forelimbs. The thing was coming out of the marsh, moving towards them.

"Ship!" bellowed Velos. "Get into the ship!"

They scrambled up the ramp as fast as their legs could carry them.

Velos, Captain again now, and feeling far more sure of himself in a familiar ship-environment, had reassumed command naturally and automatically. The thing was about a hundred yards from them and lurching towards them fast on its tree-trunk-like legs.

"No time for standard safety procedure," roared Velos. "Everybody stand by. Grab what you can and hold tight!"

He threw the switches that activated the main motors; there was a roar, a sensation of vibrant power; then the ship was lifting on a plume of flame, lifting from the terrifying planet's surface.

The expressions on every face spoke of the agony of the gravity that they were undergoing. . . .

CHAPTER XII

AS the power of the acceleration gripped them, each in his own way, or her own way, reflected the physical strain of the take-off. Their faces were distorted by the peculiar pull of the increased g. The ship began to level out.

Velos drew a deep breath.

"That's better," he said.

"That's a whole lot better!" agreed Stearman.

Alane was looking around her in absolute terror.

"It's all right," said Kramer, holding her tightly to him. She looked up, trustingly, with big round, dark eyes.

"It's all right," murmured Kramer again. "This is a space ship—oh, blast! I wish you knew what I was talking about!"

She looked at him in bewilderment.

"Space-ship?" she said uncertainly.

Kramer smiled.

"That's it! *Space ship!*"

She smiled too. Some of the pain and terror had gone out of her face. She still looked as though she had received a terrible shock.

Plumbus staggered off in search of the ship's medical equipment.

"Kramer," he called, "would you like to bring Alane through and I'll see what I can do for her. I don't know

how much stuff there is on this type of ship. I haven't flown in one of these before, but there's bound to be sedatives and pain alleviators. I'd better give her one of the universal anti-biotic injections. I shouldn't think some of those characters were particularly hygienic. . . ."

Kramer nodded and led Alane through to the medical department in Plumbus' wake.

She looked completely different when she came back. The strain and the pain had gone. The shocked, dazed look had been replaced by one of intelligence and interest.

Kramer was showing her round the ship like a proud father showing a child around a zoo, or a funfair, for the first time, and enjoying the wonder on the girl's face.

Val and La Noire were sitting on one of the comfortably upholstered bunks, lost in each other's presence.

Velos locked the controls on to automatic and got Aster working on their position.

"Splendid computer," said Aster. "Makes a change from drifting God knows where in a life capsule, doesn't it?"

"It certainly does," agreed Velos. "Can you discover where we are?"

"Roughly where I thought. Way out on the rim of some uncharted galaxy. I've got one or two recognisable co-ordinates going. It won't be long before we find somewhere worth while."

"We shall have to go through the warp, of course," said Kramer.

"Yes, of course."

"I wish I could explain to Alane what it is. She'll be frightened by the greyness. . . ."

"Can't be helped," said Velos.

"Still a pity, though," replied Kramer.

"By the way," said Velos, "I wonder how we're going to explain about the convicts?"

"Explain what?" demanded Kramer. "They were killed in a fight!"

Velos nodded.

"Kramer, what you've done is between you and Almighty God. My report will be, if and when we reach the empire again safely, that they were killed in a fight with us. I shall give no more detail than that."

"I have said several harsh things to you," said Kramer. "He held out his hand. 'I'm sorry, terribly sorry.'"

"That's all right," responded Velos, "perfectly all right. We have all been through a very considerable strain. I understand how you felt. I may not have reacted as sympathetically to your feelings as I ought to have done."

"Now what?" asked Stearman. "All safely set for home?"

"I don't see why not," replied Velos.

"One thing's puzzling me," said Aster, looking up from the computer.

"Oh, what's that?" asked the Captain. There was a happy, relaxed atmosphere in the ship at that moment.

"It's this," said Aster, and raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"Go on, shoot the works!" said Stearman.

"I can't understand why they put down on that planet, unless there was something wrong with the ship or they were short of supplies."

"The oxygen guage isn't working."

"We shan't be the first ship to fly out on a broken guage," said Schafft.

"I wonder if we ought to have a look at the hydroponics tanks and see how the chlorophyll is getting on."

A small, cold fear tugged at Plumbus's ample stomach like a little cold hand. Plumbus, psychiatrist that he was, was still desperately afraid of some things, some of them irrational. Plumbus had a horror of suffocation.

"You don't think——" he began hesitantly.

"It doesn't pay to think," said Velos, "unless you're a psychiatrist, or psychologist."

"Very funny," said Plumbus. He looked a little ruffled and put out.

"I think you ought to have a look at the hydroponics tanks, Skipper," said Aster.

"Blast, they're bolted down by the bulkhead; they're all right."

"How do you think that guage got broken?" asked Kramer.

Plumbus looked at it.

"I think somebody's hit it," he said.

"Why do you tap a guage?" asked Aster, rhetorically.

"Why—if the pointer's stuck, or if the level indicator isn't moving."

"Exactly!" said Kramer.

Schafft disappeared into the engine room and came back with a tool kit.

"I'm going to unbolt that hydroponics inspection cover, with your permission, Skipper."

"What I think," said Kramer, "is that somebody tapped that guage because it showed something they didn't want

it to show, and one of the clumsy idiots tapped it too hard."

"The nuts are loose," reported Schafft.

"So?" said the Skipper.

"So that means it's been off. You weren't very keen to take it off, Captain, and you're an experienced skipper."

"I think, perhaps, there may be something in what we've been saying, gentlemen. All right, Schafft, get it off quick," ordered Velos.

"I'm doing my best," returned Schafft. He undid the last nut of the protector cover and slid it to one side.

A foul smell wafted through the air towards them.

"By the gods of the galaxy," gasped Kramer, "look at it."

Stearman and La Noire leapt to their feet.

A hideous putrescent mess was bubbling in an enormous glass tank.

"What is it?" demanded Val. "What's wrong?"

"The oxygen supply of a space ship depends entirely on the chlorophyll tank — and something's infected it. Those fools knew nothing about flying a ship. You have to be very careful of these things."

"I can imagine that," agreed Stearman, "especially when your life depends upon the oxygen that they supply."

"Normally, they wouldn't go wrong once in a thousand voyages," said Velos. "It's the sort of universal bogeyman that never really appears."

Stearman nodded his comprehension.

"Now that it's happened, what do we do?" he asked.

"Not much we can do," said Velos. "Despite the evil appearance, and still worse smell, some of that stuff is still

functioning; we have a reserve supply of oxygen but that isn't going to last very long. And there's not enough healthy chlorophyll left to transform carbon dioxide back to oxygen."

Aster went back to the computer and worked feverishly for several minutes. He came back and shook his head sadly.

"The best hyperspace route I could find," he said, "would still take us a minimum of thirty-six hours."

The Skipper shook his head.

"We haven't got that much time," he said.

"You mean we've got to go back?" asked Stearman, a look of horror on his face.

"Well, it's the monsters or we suffocate," said Velos.

"What can we do if we do go back?"

"That's pretty easy," said Plumbus. "We empty this lot out, sterilise the tank, and fill it up again."

"How long will that take?"

"A week or ten days."

"In the meantime, monsters with force fields will come and trample all over us, just as they wish," said Stearman.

"Maybe we could find a part of the planet where there aren't any monsters."

CHAPTER XIII

THEY were coming in on an observation orbit; it was a wide, low orbit and, in the course of it, they got a fairly good impression.

Vast tracts were marsh, broken up by haphazard strips, promontories, capes and peninsulas of rough, sandy soil, contrasting strangely with the succulence of the swamps. . . . On the continent over which they were now passing a range of mountains could be seen.

They were not particularly tall by earthly standards. Val judged them to be three or four thousand feet above the surface of the marsh at their highest point, but a small mountain is better than no mountain at all. They did not look as if they would be easily vulnerable to the hideous saurian giants.

"Any chance of landing there?" said Stearman to Velos. "I know I'm only a layman; maybe it's impossible?"

"No, I wouldn't say it's impossible," answered Velos. "Tricky, perhaps. I'll have a word with Aster."

"Yes? Somebody taking my name in vain?" He looked puzzled. "I'm quoting something, but I don't know what."

"Never mind," consoled Stearman, "it would take a long time to explain it to you. . . . It's a good phrase to use, though."

Aster grinned.

"Thank you for nothing," he said.

"Pleasure," returned Val, "any time!"

"That I don't doubt," retorted Aster.

"Could you cut out some of the verbiage and give me the benefit of some of your so-called expertise," ordered the Captain.

"Sorry," murmured Aster.

"The mountains over there, what do you think about trying a landing?"

Aster's eyes narrowed.

"I don't like the look of it very much," he confessed.

"It's not the sort of place you'd pick on a normal world, I know," replied Velos, "but this isn't a normal world. We want somewhere where we shall be undisturbed while we work."

"Yes, I think I'd rather risk the mountains than go down near that marsh," replied Aster thoughtfully.

"Got any ideas on the subject, Plumbus?" asked the Captain.

"I'm for the mountains!" rejoined Plumbus. "I like mountain air—but then, I'm probably biased."

"What say we attempt a landing then?" suggested Schafft.

"Kramer," said Velos, "what do you think?"

"I'm in favour," responded Kramer.

The Captain looked at them all.

"All right," he said suddenly. "The mountains it is!"

He began to put his decision into effect. The ship curved off back up towards the void, her nose seemed to thrust into the heavens, then she began to descend slowly.

Her retro-rockets fired spasmodically; Velos was a skilful spaceman; his worst enemy couldn't have denied that.

"How are we doing, chief?" asked Schafft.

"We're doing all right," answered Aster.

"I wasn't talking to you," retorted Schafft.

"Nevertheless, we're doing all right," replied Velos.

"Good!" answered Schafft.

Plumbus lowered himself carefully into his bunk.

"I hate landing in an awkward position," he said.

"You've got more upholstery than any of us," said Kramer. "It shouldn't affect you, you great bladder of lard!"

Plumbus looked at him as though the insult had gone deep.

"Don't look so hurt," retorted Kramer. "You're a psychologist; you're supposed to be able to absorb insults. Your ego should be so carefully nurtured that nothing can damage it."

"Huh!" said Plumbus. "Nobody can be that impersonal, Kramer!"

The big geologist laughed.

Aster and Schafft lowered themselves on to bunks. Kramer picked Alane up gently and put her into a vacant bunk.

"You'd better get down," he said to Stearman.

Val and La Noire lowered themselves into the merciful anti-grav padding. The ship continued its descent. Only Velos stood up. He was operating the controls with skill and precision. The ship dipped lower.

"There's a lovely plateau here, if we can make it," said Velos. He spoke jerkily and grotesquely, amid the strain

which the descent was putting on him. Gravity was pulling his larynx out of shape.

"That's all I can do," he jerked, threw the controls on to automatic, and slumped on to the last vacant bunk.

They touched down perfectly.

"I may be only imagining it," muttered Aster, "but I think the air in here is going putrescent already."

"I think you're right," said Velos.

"I'm sure you're right," said Plumbus. "I've suspected it for several minutes, and didn't like to say anything."

"I concur," said Schafft. "The air is very bad."

"I thought I was just feeling a bit of the strain of touch down," said Kramer, "but you're right, Aster; it is the air."

"I know it's the air," replied Aster.

"We're down now," said Velos. "We shall soon get some fresh!"

They moved quickly towards the hatch.

"Oh, that's better," said the Captain, as a surge of fresh clean air rushed in to meet them.

"Much better!" agreed Plumbus.

"Lovely!" said Schafft. "Like champagne!"

"Very refreshing," said Kramer. He and Stearman stood with Alane and La Noire at the head of the ramp.

"Shall we go down?" asked Val.

"Might as well," agreed Kramer. "There's no point in sitting in the ship, that won't get the hydroponics tank fixed."

"It'll take me about twenty-five minutes to get everything unbolted," said Schafft, "then I'd be glad of some help."

"O.K.!" said Aster.

"I'm going to start experimenting with some of the local plants," said Plumbus. "We shall have to synthesise a chlorophyll, or an oxygen-making substitute."

"Right!" said Aster. "Let's stretch our legs a little while."

He and Velos, together with Kramer, Stearman and the two women, strolled around the base of the ship.

"This plateau could almost have been built for the job," said Velos.

"Yes, it's natural, though, I would say," said Kramer.

"You should know!" said Stearman.

Kramer laughed.

"Natural formations sometimes look more artificial than artifacts," he said.

"Yes, there was a case on earth like that," said Stearman. "We had a colonel somebody-or-other, who went to look for lost cities up the Amazon; he thought he'd found one too, but later parties were of the opinion that all he'd really seen were a number of natural formations, eroded in a rather unusual way."

"Oh, interesting," said Kramer.

Aster and Velos sat down and began looking out over the mountain scenery. Plumbus moved a little away from the others. He gave a sudden excited shout:

"I say! I think I've found something!"

"What is it?" called Velos.

"I've found an enormous plant!" said Plumbus, from behind a big rock. "Most interesting!" He was muttering away to himself. "Incredible what some plants will do to obtain nitrogen, you know," he came back holding what

looked like a small bone. "Look at this," he said, "a navicular."

"What the devil is that?" inquired Aster.

Velos raised an eyebrow quizzically.

"Footbone," explained Plumbus.

"A foot bone," said Val. He took the navicular from Plumbus' hand and examined it. "Yes,—foot bone," he agreed.

"Human?" asked Kramer.

"Of course!" said the doctor.

"What's this about plants and nitrogen?" asked Stearman.

"Oh, insectivorous and carnivorous plants," said Plumbus, "do what they do to obtain nitrogen."

"Sounds very odd to me," said Aster.

"You go and find some nice chlorophyll," said Velos, "there's a good biologist."

Plumbus grinned.

"All right!" he said. "Most interesting, though, finding this bone," said Plumbus. He shook his head sadly, and went back to the plant. From where they sat none of them could see him, but they could hear Plumbus' voice.

"Seems to be quite sensitive," he said, "reacts with an unusual degree of rapidity. My word, surprisingly tough substance, too. . . . Oooh, OOOOOooooohhhhhh."

There was silence after that strange groaning sound.

"What the devil's happened to him?" demanded Aster.

"Probably gone to sleep on the job," returned the Captain.

There was another faint moan, and a whispered "Help!"

"He's not fooling," said Kramer. "Come on!"

Kramer and Stearman were first to reach the point from which Plumbus' voice had been coming. Kramer let out a swift, choking cry.

"By the gods of the galaxy! Look at the poor devil!"

Plumbus was entwined from head to foot in thick green tendrils. . . . They varied in diameter from the size of a man's arm to about the size of a finger. Kramer and Stearman began pulling at them.

"We're not getting anywhere," said Val.

"No, we'll get caught ourselves," said Kramer. "Back, right back, Stearman."

He and Val pulled away.

"We need a knife," gritted Val.

"What the devil is that thing?"

"What the devil is that thing? It's a man-eating plant, insectivorous, carnivorous, flesh-eating," said Kramer.

"Fancy finding a human foot bone, and then being daft enough to get tangled up in it!"

"I didn't see the full significance of that for a couple of seconds," said Kramer, "then I thought old Plumbus must have realised what was on. He's no fool as a rule."

"Curiosity must have led him forward so powerfully that he did not see the danger," said Stearman.

Aster was thinking quickly; he picked up a stone that looked like a flint, or something of equal brittleness. He crashed it against another stone and it shattered into sharp, jagged shards.

Stearman, Aster, Velos, Alane and La Noire picked up a sharp stone splinter and began hacking desperately at the tendrils that encircled Plumbus.

"Go and get Schafft," said Val to La Noire, for tendrils were already enveloping the would-be rescuers.

La Noire tugged herself free and ran back up the ship's ramp.

"Schafft!" she called. "Schafft! We want something sharp, quickly! Knives, axes, anything! You know where the tools are."

She and the engineer hurried back, carrying an assortment of sharp-edged implements of various kinds. They raced back . . . Plumbus's face had gone a rather grotesque shade. He was now Plumbus by name and plum coloured by nature! His face was going through a number of interesting chromatic translations, beginning with puce and ending with magenta. Gradation and tints, subtle hues and colours that are rarely seen in the artist's palette expressed themselves. These changing colours spurred La Noire and Schaft to even greater efforts. La Noire freed Val first and he seized a heavy shafted axe. It was a beautiful weapon, razor sharp, finely balanced; it went through the grotesque green limbs of the plant thing like a red-hot knife going through butter.

Stearman was angry, and he was a dangerous, most ruthless man when he was not angry. He had the strength and stamina of half a dozen ordinary mortals, and when that strength and stamina were combined with fury—as they were now, he was very formidable indeed.

The herbaceous carnivore seemed to be unaware that it was being attacked. Its reactions, decided Kramer, as La Noire and Schafft cut him clear, were very probably entirely motivated by some kind of chemical signal.

It certainly seemed to be devoid of anything which, by the wildest stretch of the imagination, could be called a nervous system. There were no evidences that synapses

occurred in the "creature." With Kramer and Stearman working together again and using fiendishly sharp alloy weapons, the demolition of the carnivorous plant could be only a matter of time. That time was being rapidly reduced, as Stearman, sweat pouring from his forehead, slashed and hacked with strokes of fatal power at the root of the ghastly herbal carnivore.

When they laid the apparently lifeless body of Plumbus on the ground, La Noire knelt beside him and applied the "kiss of life" restoration. At first there was no reaction, none at all; and then, with a shudder, and a choking gasp, Plumbus started to breathe. La Noire straightened up.

"There you are!" she said triumphantly.

Alane was looking at the revitalised Plumbus as though he was an object of terror.

"It's all right," said Kramer soothingly, in the native girl's ear, as he fondled her long, dark hair. "It's all right, Alane."

As he spoke her name, her fears seemed to subside and she snuggled up tightly against him.

Plumbus opened his eyes and sat up.

"The plant," he exclaimed. "It got hold of me." He coughed and then staggered to his feet. Stearman helped him to rise.

Kramer picked up one of the severed tendril-tentacles and took it back to the ship for analysis.

The others went back to the ship with him, and Alane turned her attention to one of the observation ports. Then she made little distressed noises and pointed.

Moving swiftly and stealthily towards the ship was a party of natives. Quite a large party, so it seemed, and very dangerous looking. . . .

CHAPTER XIV

"FORCE-FIELD!" ordered Velos. "Quickly! Right around the ship!"

Aster and Schafft went to work on the force-field generators. The advancing natives, armed with bows and arrows, and rather ingenious weapons that looked like the slings which had been so popular in the East back on earth, for untold centuries, came forward determinedly.

"Any minute now," said Velos, "that big fellow is going to make contact with the force-field. A more gruesome looking bunch I have rarely seen!"

"Do you think he's aware of the force-field?" asked Stearman.

"I doubt it, it's quite invisible to him."

The big painted leader of the natives encountered the force-field with his spear point, which he held in front of him in a threatening manner. There was a crackling sound, a shower of sparks, and the spear was pushed back by the force of the field.

The native who had encountered it stopped dead in his tracks as though he had suddenly been made aware of the presence of an invisible monster.

"I was just thinking," said Stearman.

"What were you thinking?" asked Velos.

"The monsters that we fired at," said Val. "They were impervious because of some kind of force-field of their own."

"Right," agreed Kramer.

"So the natives must be aware of it."

"Not necessarily," said Plumbus.

"Why not?" demanded Val.

"We have no guarantee that the monsters have ever had occasion to use their force-field against the natives. Why should they? Their own natural protection is more than ample."

"If they've never had any occasion to use force-fields," said Stearman, "how the devil did they develop them?"

The foremost native hurled his spear at the ship; it hit the force-field and rebounded into the native's chest, the end disappearing into the wound. He staggered backwards, clutching his chest, while the other natives gathered round him in consternation.

Velos made a sudden decision.

"Do you think you can do anything for him, Plumbus, if I can get him in?"

Plumbus nodded.

"If you can get him in alive, I can keep him alive," he said. "There is some wonderful equipment on board this police ship."

Schafft stood by the force-field control while Velos and Aster broke through and got the wounded native and carried him back towards the ship. Schafft snapped the force-field back into place immediately, and the astounded natives could only stare as their wounded chief was carried into the ship.

"Get him through here," said Plumbus. The native opened his eyes and glared ferociously, but there was fear hidden behind the ferocity.

"He thinks we're going to kill him," said Velos.

"He'll kill himself if he isn't careful, that wound is nasty," said Plumbus.

Alane said something in the language which none of them understood, but which Lá Noire was still trying to learn. Some of the fear and suspicion went out of the eyes of the wounded native chief.

Plumbus bathed the wound in sterilising rays, then skilfully withdrew the weapon with a swift adroit motion that was almost too swift for the eye to follow. The job was done before the native had time to realise what had happened. Plumbus gave him a sedative and an injection of super-strong antibiotics.

"He'll be out of that in about fifteen minutes," said Plumbus. "I think the best thing to do is to take him down to our side of the force-field and when he shows signs of trying to get through, throw it open for him and close it rapidly again behind him."

"That's a good policy," said Velos.

They waited a few minutes and then carried the chieftain down. He was showing some signs of stirring again by the time they had set him on the ground.

The natives stood quiet, looking at the recumbent form of their chief, pointing, and whispering softly among themselves.

"They notice that the weapon has been taken out," said Val.

Kramer nodded; it was he and Val who had carried the

recumbent chief down, now they slowly retraced their steps up the ramp.

The native sat up, and a broad smile creased his face. The treatment which Plumbus had given had included a dose of a rapid healing elixir, allied to the rapid bone healer which he had once used on his own broken ribs. To all intents and purposes, the native chieftain was as good as he had ever been.

He stood up, grinning broadly at his delighted people. They were waving their arms in what appeared to be some kind of cheering.

Alane was also smiling.

The native moved tentatively forward, he held his arms in front of him, as though groping for the invisible barrier. He touched it, there was a mild crackle. He stood perfectly still. Schafft cut off the force-field once more, the native groped ahead of him again. His grin broadened, he stepped confidently across the barrier that was no longer there. His own people gathered round him, looking at his chest, probing him inquisitively with their fingertips, making sounds of astonishment and delight.

"I wonder if we can make any sort of contact with them?" said Velos speculatively.

"It might be very valuable," agreed Stearman.

"I wonder how changeable they are?" said La Noire.

"This group doesn't look like the other group," said Val.

"I agree," said Schafft. "This lot don't appear to be under the influence of the giant saurians."

"I don't think they are, either," said Plumbus. He was washing his hands carefully, drying them on a stream of

warm air that emerged for that purpose from a special valve in an ante-room of his surgery. "This isn't saurian territory; that was the reason we came."

"We might be able to make contact with them through Alane," suggested La Noire. "I have been able to learn a little of her language, and she has been trying to learn a few words of English. If we add to that some inspired sign language——"

"Well, I'm willing to give it a go," said Velos. "I shouldn't think they'd be anything but grateful after what we've done for their chief."

"A lot depends," said Kramer, "upon the veneration or otherwise with which they regard the chief."

"Sometimes he is held in very high esteem, but there are cases in which he is just a nominal figure. . . . and he depends for his position on the goodwill of the young warriors. He has to bribe them, sometimes, and it can be a very expensive business being chief," said Plumbus, generalising as a sociologist.

"Now what are they doing?" asked Schafft, as a group of natives came up towards the ship, carrying a dead animal.

Alane was pointing excitedly down at the animal they were bringing. From the back of the group an older man came forward, wearing the most outlandish regalia that any of the occupants of the ship had ever seen. He was wearing a mask that surrounded his head like an Eskimo's furred hood. His face could be seen, like a smaller picture inset into a larger one. The features of the mask were huge and grotesque.

"They've mistaken us for divine beings, and they're

about to perform a sacrifice," said Plumbus. "They associate the miraculous with the divine, they're still in a low level of culture."

"They're striking stones together to make what looks like a spark," said La Noire.

"They lit some kind of tinder," said Val.

"The chieftain is blowing on it, the old boy is standing by, wagging his mask approvingly."

"Look at those other chaps fetching wood," said Aster. "They're building a bonfire in our honour."

"This is good for the ego," said Plumbus. "I like being mistaken for a god."

"I bet it's the first time it's happened," said Kramer darkly.

Plumbus looked a little disconcerted. Then he smiled.

"I think we should do a little something to show our approval," said Stearman.

"One of us ought to walk out on to the parapet and wave to them, or something."

"Well, you like pretending to be a god, you go."

"All right," said Plumbus, and moved on to the parapet outside the airlock. A wild shout of acclaim went up from the natives. Several of them prostrated themselves to the ground. He waved his hands benignly in the air.

"He's got a very pontifical attitude, hasn't he?" said Stearman.

The medicine man proceeded to dissect the animal, holding up the pieces for Plumbus' approval. Nearly all the natives were either kneeling or prostrate by this time. Plumbus continued to smile and wave benignly. When the last of the viscera had been held up to him, the whole

lot were consigned to the flames. Thick black, greasy smoke rolled upwards. It wafted towards Plumbus, who did his best to look as though he were inhaling it appreciatively. There was a mellow and melifluous chanting coming from the worshippers now.

The medicine man leapt through the conflagration with tremendous agility for one so old.

"These people are fit and tough," commented Aster. "He must be all of seventy or eighty."

He landed on the other side, looking like a demon that has just been born from the heart of a sulphur inferno. He advanced slowly across the line which had been demarcated by the force-field until he knelt at the foot of the ramp.

"I think he wants some token of acceptance," said Plumbus.

"There are some spare roller bearings in the locker. There are probably enough to give one of these characters one each. We shan't need them," said Schafft.

"They would probably take them as good luck charms. It would really cement the deal."

There was something noble about the old face beneath the mask as it looked up at them. Schafft carried the box of bearings to Plumbus.

"Give them to me ceremoniously, don't just hand them over!" hissed Plumbus.

Schafft knelt in front of Plumbus and held the box of bearings aloft.

Plumbus took them and nodded solemnly.

Then slowly, and with great dignity, the corpulent psychologist descended the ramp. He was holding the box of roller bearings in front of him.

The witch doctor backed away at the approach of the "god." Plumbus held the casket out; the medicine man took it. Plumbus removed the lid. He took out one of the bearings and moved it significantly through the air. Then he replaced it in the box. He lifted a handful, allowing them to trickle through his fingers. The old man's eyes were open very wide. Still without speaking a word, Plumbus pointed to the kneeling natives. The witch doctor's face lit up with the kind of enthusiasm that is very rarely seen.

"You'd think that character had just won £75,000 on the pools," whispered Val to La Noire. "I reckon those roller bearings are going to become priceless family heirlooms."

Plumbus walked with dignity back up the ramp.

"You close the doors and throw the force-field into position as soon as he's got back to the others," said Plumbus. "This will add to the air of mystery, awe and so forth."

"I don't know what you're doing to their minds," laughed Val. "Probably ruined their religious beliefs for ever!"

CHAPTER XV

PLUMBUS, Alane and La Noire descended the ramp, to try to convey their desires to the natives.

They had decided to keep the force-field in place to add

to the air of mystery and dignity. The girls acted as hand-maidens to Plumbus.

The native chief and the witch doctor came to meet them, and within a surprisingly short space of time Plumbus felt that they had managed to make the natives understand what was wanted.

Like schoolboys filing out of assembly, the natives dispersed.

The work on the chlorophyll tanks was going very well indeed now that stacks of green vegetation were being brought by these mountain men; they had scoured the mountains near and far for samples of every kind of living green thing that they could lay their hands on. They had even hacked down several of the great man-eating plants and dumped them with the heap of lesser herbs. Plumbus felt a certain satisfaction when he saw the crudely hacked remains of the carnivorous plants.

"I suppose we're as safe up here as we would be in space," remarked Val Stearman, as he looked down over the edge of the mountain plateau, at the swamps far below. "I can't imagine the saurians getting this far."

"No, I don't think they would," said La Noire.

"Do you think they are aware of what is going on?" asked Velos.

"Could be," said Aster. He tossed a pebble lightly over the edge and watched it till it was swallowed from sight. He could still hear it rattling down the mountain side.

"Of course, if they couldn't get here," said Aster, "they might send some of their tame natives up."

"You mean those lowland natives?" said Schafft. He, too, was tossing pebbles idly over the side.

"It's a possibility," said Kramer.

"I don't think we have much to fear. Unless the tame natives could take advantage of the reptilian technology to find a way through our force-field," said Stearman.

"I don't think that's very likely," answered Plumbus.

It was a magnificent view from the plateau. The party from the ship, pausing a moment from their work, were looking out and admiring the panorama that spread before them in an endless vista.

"Is that something stirring in the swamp?" asked Val.

"I don't think they could get up here," said Velos.

"I'll get a telescope out of the ship," said Schafft. He went up the ramp and returned a few minutes later with a beautiful instrument of very high magnification. He set it up on a tripod and focused it on what appeared to be the centre of disturbance in the distant swamp.

"There is something going on," said Kramer, as he put his eye to the telescope. There was just the faintest edge of anxiety to his voice.

Schafft took his turn at the telescope.

"Here, Plumbus, come and look; what do you think they're getting up to now?"

The psychologist put down the leafy specimen he had been idly examining, and put an eye to the telescope. Sharply focused, looking as though they were close enough to touch, a dozen or so great saurians were moving together in the marsh.

"I wonder what they're up to. They seem to be having some sort of meeting. . . ."

"It doesn't bode any good for us," said Stearman. "The heads keep turning in this direction."

"You don't suppose they can see us, do you? But there's always the possibility of ESP. A thing like that would not be limited by distance."

"They've got a kind of mental radar built in."

Kramer looked darkly towards the disturbed marsh.

"I wonder if it might be policy," he said, "to keep a close vigil in future."

"I don't think those brutes are likely to be very kindly disposed, when we think of the mayhem we wrought on them at our early encounter."

"It looks like a council of war down there," said Schafft. "I wonder if we could get one of the big weapons off the ship and show them we know what they're on."

"It might save future trouble," said Velos. "Come on, let's get back to the ship and get a weapon."

They began aligning the gun, a tube of ill omen. The open muzzle of the electronic death beam probed like the snout of some metallic pig through the outer hull of the ship. It was controlled like the automatic handlers in atomic establishments.

Velos thumbed the firing button; there was very little recoil. The gargantuan white fireball descended on the conclave of conferring monsters like one of Jupiter's thunderbolts, like a weapon of an ill-tempered Zeus, the fireball crackled and hissed angrily across the top of the marsh, *but that was all it did.*

It had no more effect on the monsters than a pyrotechnic display. Schafft was watching through the telescope; he called up to the ship: "Perfectly on target, but they've got a force-field over them."

"This is something like a nightmare! Monsters with force-fields!"

"I don't know what we're going to do," said Velos.

Plumbus had replaced Schafft at the telescope. He called quietly: "Try another one."

Again a white fireball crackled and hissed round some kind of communal force-field which the monsters had erected over their conclave.

"Interesting!" said Plumbus. "Most interesting!"

"Would you suggest that they are aware of us?" said Schafft.

"Most definitely!" said Plumbus. "They have taken great pains to arrange their force-field to forestall anything we might throw in their direction."

"Try something else," said Velos.

"What do you suggest?"

"Corrosive shells," answered Velos. "This police ship is equipped with the most deadly modern weapons."

"All right, see if you can get a corrosive shell through their force-field," said Kramer.

Velos and Aster aligned the corrosive shell projector. The shell exploded with perfect accuracy above the force-field; the chemicals dripped off the force-field into the surrounding marsh.

"They're not even bothering to go for cover!" said Plumbus.

Aster and Velos aligned a photon gun. It was a beautiful precision built job, which threw a deadly white beam of super-keen dissecting power. It could cut its way through almost anything, an incredible weapon, and somehow beautiful in spite of its deadliness. Aster was an acknowledged photon gun expert. He had been a photon gunner in the ill-fated disc ship, as well as navigator.

The powerful beam was directed against the force-field, but after five desperate minutes Aster released his hold on the gun.

"I can't penetrate their force-field," he said despairingly. He spoke like a wrestler who has applied a Boston grab with all his strength and who has failed to wring a submission from a ramrod-backed opponent. He sounded like a marksman who has taken every precaution to ensure that his aim is true, but who has seen the target intact after his shot has been discharged. "I've never known a photon gun fail before," he said.

"I think we may as well all get back into the ship," said Schafft. He put the telescope against the clear glass of an observation port. He readjusted the focus. The monsters were still in conclave.

"H.E. ready now," said Aster.

"Fire!" said Velos.

Aster pressed the firing button. The H.E. shells sped on their way. Conventional high explosives ricocheted all around the force-field; great columns of marsh and grey-green water leapt into the air, but the monsters continued as though oblivious to the holocaust that was going on all around them.

"It's one of the most phenomenal force-fields I've ever come across," said Schafft.

"It can't be the ultimate defence surely," said Plumbus. "There must be something to break it."

"You think of something then," snapped Kramer. There was no love lost between the geologist and the doctor.

Velos looked angrily from one to the other. Plumbus looked as though he was about to make a reply, but he changed his mind and lapsed into silence.

CHAPTER XVI

"THEY still don't show any signs of moving," said the Chief.

"I wonder why," said Stearman.

"No doubt they've got some reason of their own," said La Noire.

"I think they're trying to play us out at some sinister war of nerves," said Aster. "They're just sitting there."

"I don't like it," said Kramer.

"None of us like it—but we're lumbered with it."

"It won't be long before the tank is ready," said Plumbus. "Do you think they're going to allow us to take off?"

"How can they stop us?" asked Velos.

"I don't know," said Aster, "but I have a nasty feeling they could if they wanted to."

"What could they do? We're well armed!"

Stearman laughed. "That's a good one!" he commented.

Velos turned to him, his voice was quiet, it matched the paleness of his face.

"You're right, of course, Stearman. Under normal circumstances, this vessel is heavily armed, but up against them we have nothing we can use as a weapon."

"We had, of course," said Velos, "but the situation seems to have changed since they discovered how to put that force-field up."

"They didn't just suddenly discover that," said Kramer. "It's been one of their little accomplishments for some time."

"Where's the generator?" asked Schafft suddenly. "That force-field appears to be doing the impossible."

"What is it doing that it shouldn't?" asked Velos.

"You tell me this, Captain, did you ever see a force-field that was apparently working without a generator? Did you ever see a force-field that wasn't drawing its energy from some central source?"

"Incredible!" said the Skipper. "I see what you're driving at. That force-field doesn't have any central mechanical point from which it is being produced."

"Precisely!" grunted Schafft. He seemed to have taken a leaf out of Kramer's book of dourness. He was normally a reasonably social individual; now he had gone as hard and cold as a crankshaft in one of his engines.

"Let me look through the telescope," said Velos. He surveyed the communing monsters. Then he straightened up and said to Stearman:

"They're right, you know; there's something very fishy about this force-field. It's got no right to exist. I could understand a technology ahead of ours, producing a force-field of such strength that it withstands any attack; I cannot conceive of a technology which can produce a force-field without a generator. . . ."

Plumbus seemed to have smoothed down his ruffled feathers by a great effort of will; he now condescended to come back into the conversation.

"What about mental beings?" he asked.

"You mean you think it's some kind of *psychic* force-field? That it's *not physical*?" asked the Skipper.

"Well, in a sense, every force-field must be non-physical."

"I'm using the word 'physical' in a scientific sense," said Velos. "Are you trying to tell me they are producing this by *mental* energy, or something like that? We are being held back by a barrier of pure thought; is that it?"

"I'm not trying to tell you anything," said Plumbus. "I'm only making a suggestion."

"At the moment, gentlemen, we are producing more heat than light," said Stearman.

"Well, what are we going to *do* about it?" asked La Noire.

"There's one weapon we haven't tried—sonic vibrations," said Aster.

"All right, we'll try sonic vibrations," replied Velos; but he said it in a tone that implied for corollary, "and much good may it do you!"

Aster and Schafft aligned the sonic vibrator so that its hideous oscillations would be directed straight towards the force-field, which the weird saurian aliens had erected around themselves, apparently without visible means. The sonic vibrator went into operation. Schafft had been an expert sonic vibrator, he was as much at home with a vibrator as Aster was with photon guns. The photon guns operator has to be deadly, swift and sensitive. The vibrator man needs the kind of persistence and determination, the mechanical aptitude and perseverance which are usually associated with the better type of space engineer. There was a kind of unwritten code among the men of the humanoid empire, in which Velos and his companions lived. To them it was a readily accepted fact that the majority of photon gun operators were navigators, and the majority of sonic vibrator personnel were engineers. It

was a matter of aptitudes and abilities. The two weapons in normal space warfare worked together.

The sonic vibrator was releasing all its gargantuan power against the saurians beneath their forcefield.

Val clicked his tongue sympathetically towards Schafft. "No go?" he asked.

"No go," replied the engineer. He, too, sounded flat and enervated. He had put all he knew into making his bombardment effective, and now he felt as the navigator had felt when the photon beam had failed to produce the desired result.

Plumbus came out of the lab-cum-surgery, holding above his head a strange-looking device surrounded by knobs and dials.

"What the blazes have you got there?" demanded Stearman. Plumbus looked like the Greek scientist about to give vent to a loud, "Eureka!"

"What a coincidence!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" asked Val.

"It's a Flazgaz heatray," explained the scientist.

"It's a *what*?"

"Oh, of course, they're outside your technology, aren't they?"

"It certainly is," agreed Stearman.

"Briefly the thing is illegal; which is probably what it is doing on board a police ship."

"You mean it's something they confiscated from somebody, much as we might confiscate a set of brass knuckles?"

Plumbus thought hard.

"Yes," he agreed, "I think that's a pretty close simile."

"This Flazgaz——" began Val.

"Flazgaz heatray," said Plumbus.

"Why is it illegal?" asked Val.

"It's been outlawed by the Convention," said Plumbus. "It's the sort of weapon that isn't used by a sort of gentleman's agreement. It is most unusual to find it even among criminal types."

"Well, what is there about this particular means of destruction that is so obnoxious?" demanded Stearman.

"It's difficult to say," Plumbus told him, "but I would say that it's not used on aesthetic grounds. If you hit a man with an energy charge, you disintegrate, or kill him. Hit him with a photon beam and you cut him to ribbons quite cleanly and scientifically. Hit him with a corrosive shell and there's nothing much left but a little pool of something that smells peculiar as it fumes into nothingness; but hit a man with one of *these* and you are left with the most indescribably revolting sight."

"I don't quite follow you," said Stearman.

"You may not kill at the first blast. You may be left with a half-cooked enemy coming towards you."

"That sounds funny!" exclaimed Stearman.

"It isn't," said Velos. "It's revolting! I've seen a thing that is somehow still alive and yet a third of it had been roasted with one of these. They die ultimately, but it is an incredible sight."

"The pain must have been intolerable," broke in La Noire.

"Yes, it was," said Plumbus.

"And are you proposing to use this against the saurians?" asked Stearman.

"Why not?"

"I thought you said the thing was outlawed?" said Val.

"Nothing is outlawed against creatures like that, surely," said Plumbus. "It's only outlawed among humanoid groups."

"Well, they certainly aren't humanoids," said Stearman.

"I'm still puzzled about this generator problem," broke in Schafft.

"Well, here goes," said Velos, "though I wouldn't like to guarantee the Flazgaz will be any more successful than our previous efforts."

"It will certainly warm the marsh up for them," said Plumbus. For a man who was supposed to be an objective, trained observer, Plumbus seemed unpleasantly vicious.

"Well, after all this talk, let's see some action," said Stearman.

The Flazgaz heatray went into operation. At first to Stearman, who had now taken his turn at the telescope, there was nothing to be seen, and then clouds of steam began to rise from the marsh, very close to the monstrosities.

"What's happening?" demanded Velos. "Are we making a break through?"

"You're cooking a few marsh plants into a singularly revolting mess of pottage," said Stearman cynically. "I don't know whether you're doing anything else. . . ."

"Wait a minute," said La Noire, "let me have a look." Val moved over and she had a look through the telescope. "I say! I think it's working," she said excitedly.

"What're you sounding so pleased for?" demanded Val.

"It is working," said La Noire, "it's definitely working."

"Let me have a look," said Velos. Leaving the Flazgaz heater on, the Captain came and viewed the saurians in detail. "They're feeling the steam from that!"

Kramer came up. "May I have a look, Captain?"

"Certainly."

Kramer put his eye to the telescope's aperture. "Hmm," he said, "they don't like it, do they."

The monsters were threshing about, huge, green and horrible. The high magnification gave the observer in the ship the impression that the saurian monstrosities were only a few feet away. It was like watching a close-up shot on a horror film, thought Stearman. It was like getting close-up shots of Conan Doyle's "Lost World."

The monsters apparently decided they had had enough and began squirming off in different directions.

"Do you think that means that they have broken the force-field?" asked Stearman.

"Let's try some of the other weapons," shouted Velos.

The ship was a sudden mad flurry of activity. Velos fired corrosive shells, Aster got the photon gun going again, Schafft busied himself with his sonic vibrators; they were throwing everything they had at the monstrous aliens.

As the thought occurred to him, Stearman realised that, from the monsters' point of view, it was they who were the invading ones, who were the 'aliens'.

"Well, we've certainly broken up the conclave," said La Noire.

"Did you notice", said Schafft, "we didn't appear to be doing them much harm?"

"No, each one has an individual force-field as far as I could see," said Kramer.

"They each had individual force-fields which were replicas of the larger one under which they had all been meeting collectively," said Schafft.

"Apart from the interest," said Plumbus, "what do you think will happen next?"

"I wish I knew," said Stearman.

"So do I," said Velos. "It would be very nice if they would inform us of their next move—possibly by greetings telegram!"

La Noire giggled. "Somebody's getting a bit cynical," she said.

"I'm beginning to feel cynical," replied the Captain.

"Definition of a cynic," said Stearman, "is a man who wins money on the pools and then says 'money is the root of all evil!'"

"I wonder what they're going to do now?" pondered Aster.

"They won't feel very loving towards us now that we have made things hot for them!" said Velos.

The moments were ticking by, silent and unobserved.

"We're wasting time," said Plumbus suddenly. "Let's get back to work on the chlorophyll, shall we?"

Velos gave the necessary orders. They filed out and renewed their efforts on the chlorophyll cultures. Plumbus' worshippers were still bringing in large quantities of the vegetable life of this mountain region.

"Puzzles me where they're getting it all from," said Plumbus.

There was no sign of activity from the marsh below.

"I almost wish we hadn't broken up that meeting," said Velos. "When you could see the devils, you knew where they were and what they were doing."

"Oh, I don't know—we could only see one small group of them."

Aster continued to load chlorophyll into the sterilised tank.

"I think we're just about there, aren't we?" said Plumbus. "It's only a matter of getting everything realigned and tested."

"I shall be very happy when we can blast off," said the Captain.

"So will I, I'm getting very tired of this planet."

Kramer looked at the native girl.

"Don't say you want to settle here and become a colonist," said Aster. "That doesn't seem your line, old man!"

The tension was mounting inside the ship.

"Get on with some work," said Velos. Kramer grunted under his breath and began heaving at the tank, then Schafft had the long process of bolting home the fastenings and covers.

The witch doctor suddenly ran towards them.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Velos.

The psychiatrist looked at the witch doctor with a mixture of interest and curiosity. "I get the impression that he has some rather urgent news to impart," he said.

Other natives were running, too, but they were keeping a respectful distance from the ship. Only the witch doctor seemed to dare to approach.

"Whatever it is they're scared of, they're still more scared of us," said Plumbus.

"Hello," suddenly said Stearman, "behold the what's-it cometh."

"What is coming?"

"Lots of rather jolly little men," said Stearman. The mountain below the plateau was alive with natives. "They look like an ant colony rather than human."

"They're not mountain natives," said La Noire. She took Alane by the hand, led her to the lock and pointed. Alane closed her eyes as though to shut out some horrible vision. Then she put her hand over her face and retreated back into the ship.

"She doesn't like the look of them, does she?" said La Noire.

"Frankly, I can't blame her. They're the lowland natives."

"Alane says they are her people, the lowland natives, and they are in the control of the monsters," said La Noire.

"They can't get through the force-field," said Velos.

"Because the mountain natives couldn't get through the force-field," said Val.

"I don't understand your reasoning, Stearman," said the Captain, interrupting.

"If they are in the control of the monsters," said Val, "the monsters didn't just send them up here to crawl round a force-field."

"We sent several of them to their deaths earlier on," reminded Velos.

"I think that's what that council of war was about," said Aster. "They were trying to discover a way to get through the ship's force-field."

"I get the impression they're on to something," said Val. "Look at them! Like the Spanish Armada!"

"Only the Spanish Armada didn't sail up mountains!" said La Noire.

"When I was in the Korean war, the Chinese used these 'human sea' tactics. The same sort of thing is happening here, look! There's something very frightening about an enemy that comes towards you using human sea tactics," went on Val.

"There certainly is," agreed Velos. "They have a disconcerting habit of refusing to drop dead when you shoot them."

"All you need is guts!" said Kramer. "One man with guts is worth five hundred in human sea tactics!"

"You're talking about if that man has a machine gun," said Stearman.

"O.K. We've got energy blasters and corrosive shells, we'll cut 'em to ribbons."

"We may not have to," said Plumbus, "it looks as if my worshippers resent the intrusion!"

The wildly painted mountain men were moving with a kind of rhythmic, unwritten, barbaric co-ordination towards the edges of the plateau.

"I think they're standing by to repel boarders," said Stearman. . . . "There they go!" A shower of spears, rocks and arrows descended on the climbing invaders.

"That's the stuff to give 'em!" said Stearman. His words were suddenly cut short. "They're not stopping," he cried.

"Force-fields again," cried Plumbus. "The monsters have surrounded their natives with a force-field. Look!"

It was true. The stones, rocks and projectiles which the mountain men were hurling down were bouncing off invisible electronic defences that surrounded the climbing lowlanders. Disconcerted and bewildered, the mountain natives drew back.

"We'd better let them into the ship's force-field," said Plumbus. "After all, they look to me for protection."

"All right, let them in," said Velos. Plumbus, accompanied by Alane and La Noire, appeared on the parapet. There was a cheer from the terrified natives. He beckoned to them. They ran forward anxiously and eagerly.

When all who were within sight were clustered round the base of the ship, Plumbus signalled to Schafft to throw the force-field into position. The first of the climbing plainsmen had now climbed over the edge of the plateau. They came on like zombies, weird, grotesque, bizarre, frightening, and intensely horrible. The first wave of lowland invaders reached the force-field.

"What the devil's that they're bringing up?" asked Aster.

"I don't know, said Velos, "but I bet it will penetrate our force-field."

"Get our men out again, out of range. We shall have to blast off. I don't suppose the lowlanders will attack our men once we've gone. It's us the monsters want," suggested Aster.

Plumbus cleared the highland natives from the area. They blasted off. Soon the ship was safely in hyperspace. The Stearmans were on their way home.

THE END

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