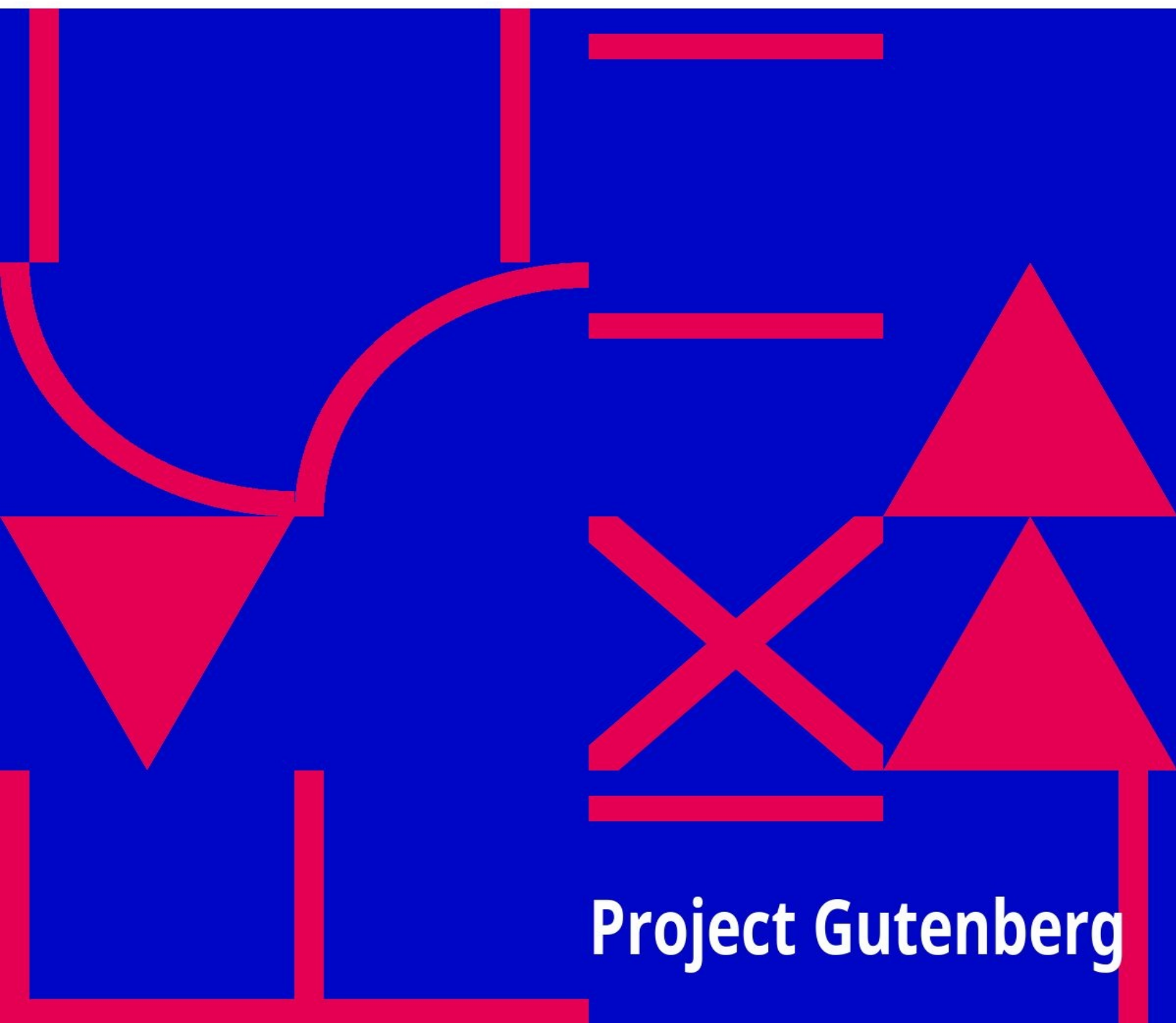


The Judas Valley

Randall Garrett and Robert Silverberg



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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE JUDAS VALLEY ***

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He had lost all sense of right or wrong. Justice and injustice were the same, and his only thought was, kill—kill—kill!

THE JUDAS VALLEY

By GERALD VANCE

Why did everybody step off the ship in this strange valley and promptly drop dead? How could a well-equipped corps of tough spacemen become a field of rotting skeletons in this quiet world of peace and contentment? It was a mystery Peter and Sherri had to solve. If they could live long enough!

PETER WAYNE took the letter out of the machine, broke the seal, and examined it curiously. It was an official communication from the Interstellar Exploration Service. It read:

FROM: Lieutenant General Martin Scarborough, I.E.S.
TO: Captain Peter Wayne, Preliminary Survey Corps

Report immediately to this office for assignment to I.E.S. *Lord Nelson*. Full briefing will be held at 2200 hours, 14 April 2103.

By order of the Fleet Commandant.

It was short, brief, and to the point. And it gave no information whatsoever. Peter Wayne shrugged resignedly, put the letter down on his bed, walked over to the phone, and dialed a number.

A moment later, a girl's face appeared—blonde-haired, with high cheekbones, deep blue-green eyes, and an expression of the lips that intriguingly combined desirability and crisp military bearing.

"Lieutenant James speaking," she said formally. Then, as Wayne's image appeared on her screen, she grinned. "Hi, Pete. What's up?"

"Listen, Sherri," Wayne said quickly. "I'm going to have to cancel that date we had for tomorrow night. I just got my orders."

The girl laughed. "I was just going to call *you*, I got a fac-sheet too. Looks as

though we won't see each other for a while, Pete."

"What ship are you getting?"

"The *Lord Nelson*."

It was Wayne's turn to laugh. "It looks as though we *will* be seeing each other. That's my ship too. We can keep our date in the briefing room."

Her face brightened. "Good! I'll see you there, then," she said. "I've got to get my gear packed."

"Okay," Wayne said. "Let's be on time, you know how General Scarborough is."

She smiled. "Don't worry, Peter. I'll be there. So long for now."

"Bye, Sherri." He cut the connection, watched the girl's face melt away into a rainbow-colored diamond of light, and turned away. There were a lot of things to do before he would be ready to leave Earth for an interstellar tour of duty.

He wondered briefly as he started to pack just what was going on. There was usually much more notice on any big jump of this order. Something special was up, he thought, as he dragged his duffle-bag out of the closet.

He was at the briefing room at 2158 on the nose. The Interstellar Exploration Service didn't much go for tardiness, but they didn't pay extra if you got there a half-hour early. Captain Peter Wayne made it a point of being at any appointment two minutes early—no more, no less.

The room was starting to fill up, with men and women Wayne knew well, had worked with on other expeditions, had lived with since he'd joined the IES. They looked just as puzzled as he probably did, he saw; they knew they were being called in on something big, and in the IES big meant *big*.

At precisely 2200, Lieutenant General Scarborough emerged from the inner office, strode briskly up the aisle of the briefing room, and took his customary stance on the platform in front. His face looked stern, and he held his hands clasped behind his back. His royal blue uniform was neat and trim. Over his head, the second hand of the big clock whirled endlessly. In the silence of the briefing room, it seemed to be ticking much too loudly.

The general nodded curtly and said, "Some of you are probably wondering why

the order to report here wasn't more specific. There are two reasons for that. In the first place, we have reason to believe that we have found a substantial deposit of double-nucleus beryllium."

There was a murmur of sound in the briefing room. Wayne felt his heart starting to pound; D-N beryllium *was* big. So big that a whole fleet of IES ships did nothing but search the galaxy for it, full time.

"Naturally," the general continued, "we don't want any of this information to leak out, just in case it should prove false. The prospect of enough D-N beryllium to make fusion power really cheap could cause a panic if we didn't handle it properly. The Economics Board has warned us that we'll have to proceed carefully if there actually is a big deposit on this planet."

Captain Wayne stared uneasily at Sherri James, who frowned and chewed her lip. To his left, a short, stubby private named Manetti murmured worriedly, "That means trouble. D-N beryllium always means trouble. There's a catch somewhere."

General Scarborough, on the platform, said, "There's a second reason for secrecy. I think it can better be explained by a man who has the evidence first-hand."

He paused and looked around the room. "Four weeks ago, the Scout Ship *Mavis* came back from Fomalhaut V." There was a dead silence in the briefing room.

"Lieutenant Jarvis, will you tell the crew exactly what happened on Fomalhaut V?"

Lieutenant Jarvis stepped forward and took his place on the platform. He was small and wiry, with a hawk nose and piercingly intense eyes. He cleared his throat and smiled a little sheepishly.

"I've told this story so many times that it doesn't even sound real to me any more. I've told it to the Supreme Senate Space Committee, to half the top brass in the IES, and to a Board of Physicians from the Medical Department.

"As well as I can remember it, it goes something like this."

Laughter rippled through the room.

"We orbited around Fomalhaut V for a Scouting Survey," Jervis said. "The planet is hot and rocky, but it has a breathable atmosphere. The detectors showed various kinds of metals in the crust, some of them in commercially feasible concentration. But the crust is so mountainous and rocky that there aren't very many places to land a ship.

"Then we picked up the double-nucleus beryllium deposit on our detectors. Nearby, there was a small, fairly level valley, so we brought the ship down for a closer check. We wanted to make absolutely positive that it was double-nucleus beryllium before we made our report."

He paused, as if arranging the story he wanted to tell in his mind, and went on. "The D-N beryllium deposit lies at the top of a fairly low mountain about five miles from the valley. We triangulated it first, and then we decided we ought to send up a party to get samples of the ore if it were at all possible.

"I was chosen to go, along with another member of the crew, a man named Lee Bellows. We left the ship at about five in the morning, and spent most of the day climbing up to the spot where we had detected the beryllium. We couldn't get a sample; the main deposit is located several feet beneath the surface of the mountaintop, and the mountain is too rough and rocky to climb without special equipment. We got less than halfway before we had to stop."

Wayne felt Sherri nudge him, and turned to nod. He knew what she was thinking. This was where he came in; it was a job that called for a specialist, a trained mountaineer—such as Captain Peter Wayne. He frowned and turned his attention back to the man on the platform.

"We made all the readings we could," Jervis continued. "Then we headed back to our temporary base."

His face looked troubled. "When we got back, every man at the base was dead."

Silence in the room. Complete, utter, deafening silence.

"There were only nine of us in the ship," Jervis said. He was obviously still greatly affected by whatever had taken place on Fomalhaut V. "With seven of us dead, that left only Bellows and myself. We couldn't find out what had killed them. They were lying scattered over the valley floor for several yards around the ship. They looked as though they had suddenly dropped dead at whatever

they were doing."

Peter Wayne made use of his extra few inches of height to glance around the briefing room. He saw row on row of tense faces—faces that reflected the same emotions he was feeling. Space exploration was something still new and mostly unknown, and even the experienced men of IES still knew fear occasionally. The galaxy was a big place; unknown terrors lurked on planets unimaginably distant. Every now and then, something like this would come up—something to give you pause, before you ventured into space again.

"We couldn't find out what had killed them," Jervis said again. "They were lying scattered every which way, with no clues at all." The small man's fingers were trembling from relived fright. "Bellows and I were pretty scared, I'll have to admit. We couldn't find a sign of what had killed the men—they'd just—just *died*."

There was a quiver in his voice. It was obvious he could never take the story lightly, no matter how many times he had to tell it.

Wayne heard Private Manetti mutter, "There's always a price for D-N beryllium."

"The Scout Ship hadn't been molested," Jervis went on. "I went inside and checked it over. It was untouched, undisturbed in every way. I checked the control panel, the cabins, everything. All unbothered. The ship was empty and dead. And—outside—

"When I came out, Bellows was dead too." He took a deep breath. "I'm afraid I panicked then. I locked myself inside the ship, set the autocontrols, and headed back to Earth at top velocity. I set the ship in an orbit around the moon and notified headquarters. I was quarantined immediately, of course, to make sure I wasn't carrying anything. The medics checked me over carefully. I wasn't and am not now carrying any virus or bacteria unknown to Terrestrial medicine.

"Since I'm the only one who knows exactly where this valley is, the general has asked me to guide the *Lord Nelson* to the exact spot. Actually, it could be found eventually with the D-N beryllium as a guide. But the *Mavis* was in orbit around Fomalhaut V for two weeks before we found the D-N beryllium deposit, and the Service feels that we shouldn't waste any time."

The lieutenant sat down, and General Scarborough resumed his place on the platform.

"That's the situation," Scarborough said bluntly. "You know the setup, now—and I think some of you see how your specialities are going to fit into the operation. As Lieutenant Jervis pointed out, we don't know what killed the crew of the *Mavis*; therefore, we are going to take every possible precaution. As far as we know, there are no inimical life forms on Fomalhaut V—but it's possible that there are things we don't know about, such as airborne viruses that kill in a very short time. If so, then Lieutenant Jervis is immune to the virus and is not a transmitter or carrier of it.

"However, to guard against such a possibility, no one will leave the *Lord Nelson*, once it has landed, without wearing a spacesuit. The air is breathable, but we're taking no chances. Also, no one will go out alone; scouting parties will always be in pairs, with wide open communication with the ship. And at no time will more than ten percent of the ship's company be outside at any one time."

Wayne made a rough mental computation. *The Lord Nelson holds sixty. That means no more than six out at any single time. They really must be worried.*

"Aside from those orders, which were decided on by the Service Command, you'll be under the direct orders of Colonel Nels Petersen. Colonel Petersen."

Petersen was a tall, hard-faced man with a touch of gray at his temples. He stepped forward and stared intently at the assembled crew.

"Our job is to make the preliminary preparations for getting D-N beryllium out of the crust of Fomalhaut V. We're supposed to stay alive while we do it. Therefore, our secondary job is to find out what it was that killed the scouting expedition of the *Mavis*. There are sixty of us going aboard the *Lord Nelson* tomorrow, and I'd like to have sixty aboard when we come back. Got that?"

He leaned forward, stretched upward on his toes, and smiled mechanically. "Fine. Now, you all know your jobs, but we're going to have to work together as a team. We're going to have to correlate our work so that we'll know what we're doing. So don't think we won't have anything to do during the two weeks it will take us to get to Fomalhaut V. We're going to work it as though it were a shakedown cruise. If anyone doesn't work out, he'll be replaced, even if we have to turn around and come back to Earth. On a planet which has wiped out a whole scouting expedition, we can't afford to have any slip-ups. And that means we

can't afford to have anyone aboard who doesn't know what he's doing or doesn't care. Is that clear?"

It was.

"All right," said the colonel. "Let's go out and get acquainted with the *Lord Nelson*."

The briefing session broke up well past midnight, and the group that shortly would become the crew of the *Lord Nelson* filtered out of the building and into the cool spring air. Each man had a fairly good idea of his job and each man knew the dangers involved. No one had backed out.

"What d'ye think of it, Pete?" Sherri James asked, as they left together. "Sounds pretty mean."

"I wish we knew what the answers were beforehand," Wayne said. He glanced down at Sherri. The moon was full, and its rays glinted brightly off her golden hair. "It's a risky deal, as Petersen said. Nine men go out, and eight die—of what? Just dead, that's all."

"It's the way the game goes," Sherri said. "You knew that when you joined the corps." They turned down the main road of the IES compound and headed for the snack bar.

Wayne nodded. "I know, kid. It's a job, and it has to be done. But nobody likes to walk into an empty planet like that knowing that eight of the last nine guys who did didn't come back."

He put his arm around her and they entered the snack bar that way. Most of the other crew-members were there already; Wayne sensed the heightening tenseness on their faces.

"Two nuclear fizzes," he said to the pfc at the bar. "With all the trimmings."

"What's the matter, Captain?" said a balding, potbellied major a few stools down, who was nursing a beer. "How come the soft drinks tonight, Wayne?"

Peter grinned. "I'm in training, Major Osborne. Gotta kill the evil green horde from Rigel Seven, and I don't dare drink anything stronger than sarsaparilla."

"How about the amazon, then?" Osborne said, gesturing at Sherri. "Her too?"

"Me too," Sherri said.

Osborne stared at his beer. "You two must be in Scarborough's new project, then." He squinted at Peter, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

"You'll need luck," Osborne said.

"No we won't," Wayne said. "Not luck. We'll need more than just luck to pull us through."

The nuclear fizzes arrived. He began to sip it quietly. A few more members of the crew entered the snack bar. Their faces were drawn tensely.

He guzzled the drink and looked up at Sherri, who was sucking down the last of the soda. "Let's get going, Lieutenant James. The noncoms are coming, and we don't want them to make nasty remarks about us."

The *Lord Nelson* blasted off the next evening, after a frenzied day of hurried preparations. The crew of sixty filed solemnly aboard, Colonel Petersen last, and the great hatch swung closed.

There was the usual routine loudspeaker-business while everyone quickly and efficiently strapped into his acceleration cradle, and then the ship leaped skyward. It climbed rapidly, broke free of Earth's grasp, and, out past the moon, abruptly winked out of normal space into overdrive. It would spend the next two weeks in hyperspace, short-cutting across the galaxy to Fomalhaut V.

It was a busy two weeks for everyone involved. Captain Peter Wayne, as a central part of the team, spent much of his time planning his attack. His job would be the actual climbing of the mountain where the double-nucleus beryllium was located. It wasn't going to be an easy job; the terrain was rough, the wind, according to Jervis, whipped ragingly through the hills, and the jagged peaks thrust into the air like the teeth of some mythical dragon.

Study of the three-dimensional aerial photographs taken from the *Mavis* showed that the best route was probably up through one end of the valley, through a narrow pass that led around the mountain, and up the west slope, which appeared to offer better handholds and was less perpendicular than the other sides of the mountain.

This time, the expedition would have the equipment to make the climb. There

were ropes, picks, and crampons, and sets of metamagnetic boots and grapples. With metamagnetic boots, Wayne thought, they'd be able to walk up the side of the mountain almost as easily as if it were flat.

He studied the thick, heavy soles of the boots for a moment, then set to work polishing. Wayne liked to keep his boots mirror-bright; it wasn't required, but it was a habit of his nonetheless.

He set to work vigorously. Everyone aboard the ship was working that way. Sherri James, who was in charge of the Correlation Section, had noticed the same thing the day before. Her job was to co-ordinate all the information from various members of the expedition, run them through the computers, and record them. She had been busy since blastoff, testing the computers, checking and rechecking them, being overly efficient.

"I know why we're doing it," she said. "It keeps our mind off the end of the trip. When we spend the whole day working out complicated circuits for the computers, or polishing mountain boots, or cleaning the jet tubes, it's just so we don't have to think about Fomalhaut V. It helps to concentrate on details."

Wayne nodded and said nothing. Sherri was right. There was one thought in everyone's mind: what was the deadly secret of the valley?

There was another thought, after that:

Will we find it out in time?

After two weeks of flight through the vast blackness of interstellar space, the *Lord Nelson* came out of overdrive and set itself in an orbit around Fomalhaut V. Lieutenant Jervis, the sole survivor of the ill-fated *Mavis*, located the small valley between the giant crags that covered the planet, and the huge spherical bulk of the spaceship settled gently to the floor of the valley.

They were gathered in the central room of the ship ten minutes after the *all-clear* rang through the corridors, informing everyone that the landing had been safely accomplished. From the portholes they could see the white bones of the *Mavis's* crew lying on the reddish sand of the valley bottom.

"There they are," Jervis said quietly. "Just bones. Those were my shipmates."

Wayne saw Sherri repress a shudder. Little heaps of bones lay here and there on

the sand, shining brightly in the hot sun. That was the crew of the *Mavis*—or what was left of them.

Colonel Petersen entered the room and confronted the crew. "We're here," he said. "You know the schedule from now on. No one's to leave the ship until we've made a check outside, and after that—assuming it's OK to go out—no more than six are to leave the ship at any one time."

He pointed to a row of metal magnetic tabs clinging to the wall nearest the corridor that led to the airlock. "When you go out, take one of those tabs and touch it on your suit. There are exactly six tabs. If none are there, don't go out. It's as simple as that."

Four men in spacesuits entered the room, followed by two others. The leader of the group saluted. "We're ready, sir," he said.

"Go out and get a look at the bodies," the colonel told the men, who were Medical Corpsmen. "You know the procedure. Air and sand samples too, of course."

The leader saluted again, turned, and left. Wayne watched the six spacesuited figures step one at a time to the wall, withdraw one of the metal tabs, and affix it to the outer skin of his suit. Then they went outside.

Captain Wayne and Sherri James stood by one of the portholes and watched the six medics as they bent over the corpses outside. "I don't get it, I just don't understand," Wayne said quietly.

"What don't you get?" Sherri asked.

"Those skeletons. Those men have only been dead for two months, and they've been reduced to nothing but bones already. Even the fabric of their clothing is gone. Why? There must be something here that causes human flesh to deteriorate much faster than normal."

"It does look pretty gruesome," Sherri agreed. "I'm glad we've been ordered to keep our spacesuits on. I wouldn't want to be exposed to anything that might be out there."

"I wonder—" Wayne muttered.

"What? What's the matter?"

Wayne pointed to one figure lying on the sand. "See that? What's that over his head?"

"Why—it's a space helmet!"

"Yeah," said Wayne. "The question is: was he wearing just the helmet, or the whole suit? If he was wearing the whole suit, we're not going to be as well protected as we thought, even with our fancy suits."

Fifteen minutes passed slowly before the medics returned, and five minutes more before they had passed through the decontamination chambers and were allowed into the ship proper. A ring of tense faces surrounded them as they made their report.

The leader, a tall, bespectacled doctor named Stevelman, was the spokesman. He shrugged when Colonel Petersen put forth the question whose answer everyone waited for.

"I don't know," the medic replied. "I don't know what killed them. There's dry bones out there, but no sign of anything that might have done it. It's pretty hard to make a quick diagnosis on a skeleton, Colonel."

"What about the one skeleton with the bubble helmet?" Peter Wayne asked. "Did you see any sign of a full suit on him?"

Stevelman shook his head. "Not a sign, sir."

Colonel Petersen turned and glanced at Lieutenant Jervis. "Do you remember what the circumstances were, Lieutenant?"

Jervis shrugged. "I don't recall it very clearly, sir. I honestly couldn't tell you whether they were wearing suits or bubble-helmets or anything. I was too upset at the time to make careful observations."

"I understand," Petersen said.

But the medic had a different theory. He pointed at Jervis and said, "That's a point I've meant to make, Lieutenant. You're a trained space scout. Your psychological records show that you're not the sort of man given to panic or to become confused."

"Are you implying that there's something improper about my statement, Dr. Stevelman?"

The medic held up a hand. "Nothing of the sort, Lieutenant. But since you're not the sort to panic, even in such a crisis as the complete destruction of the entire crew of your scout ship, you must have been ill—partly delirious from fever. Not delirious enough to cause hallucinations, but just enough to impair your judgment."

Jervis nodded. "That is possible," he said.

"Good," said Stevelman. "I have two tentative hypotheses, then." He turned to the colonel. "Should I state them now, Colonel Petersen?"

"There's to be no secrecy aboard this ship, Doctor. I want every man and woman on the ship to know all the facts at all times."

"Very well," the medic said. "I'd suggest the deaths were caused by some unknown virus—or, perhaps, by some virulent poison that occurred occasionally, a poisonous smog of some kind that had settled in the valley for a time and then dissipated."

Wayne frowned and shook his head. Both hypotheses made sense.

"Do you have any suggestions, Doctor?" Petersen said.

"Since we don't have any direct information about why those men died, Colonel, I can't make any definite statements. But I can offer one bit of advice to everyone: *wear your suits and be alert.*"

During the week that followed, several groups went out without suffering any ill effects. A short service was held for the eight of the *Mavis* and then the skeletons were buried in the valley.

They ran a check on the double-nucleus beryllium toward the end of the week, after it had been fairly safely established that no apparent harm was going to come to them. Wayne and Sherri were both in the crew that went outside to set up the detector.

"You man the detector plate," said Major MacDougal, who was in charge of the group, turning to Wayne.

He put his hand on the plate and waited for the guide coordinates to be set. MacDougal fumbled at the base of the detector for a moment, and the machine began picking up eloptic radiations.

Wayne now looked down at the detector plate. "Here we are," he said. "The dial's oscillating between four and eight, all right. The stuff's here."

MacDougal whistled gently. "It's really sending, isn't it!" He pointed toward the mountaintop. "From up there, too. It's going to be a nice climb. Okay, pack the detector up and let's get back inside."

They entered the airlock and passed on into the ship.

"The D-N beryllium up there, sir," Major MacDougal said. "It's going to be a devil of a job to get up to find the stuff."

"That's what Captain Wayne's here for," Petersen said. "Captain, what do you think? Can you get up here?"

"It would have been easier to bring along a helicopter," Wayne said wryly. "Pity the things don't fit into spaceships. But I think I can get up there. I'd like to try surveying the lay of the land, first. I want to know all the possible routes before I start climbing."

"Good idea," Petersen said. "I'll send you out with three men to do some preliminary exploring. Boggs! Manetti! MacPherson! Suit up and get with it!"

Wayne strode toward the spacesuit locker, took out his suit, and donned it. Instead of the normal space boots, he put on the special metamagnetic boots for mountain climbing. The little reactors in the back of the calf activated the thick metal sole of each boot so that it would cling tightly to the metallic rock of the mountain. Unlike ordinary magnetism, the metamagnetic field acted on all metals, even when they were in combination with other elements.

His team of three stood before him in the airlock room. He knew all three of them fairly well from Earthside; they were capable, level-headed men, and at least one—Boggs—had already been out in the valley surveying once, and so knew the area pretty well.

He pulled on the boots and looked up. "We're not going to climb the mountain this time, men. We'll just take a look around it to decide which is the best way."

"You have any ideas, sir?" Sergeant Boggs asked.

"From looking at the photographs, I'd guess that the western approach is the best. But I may be wrong. Little details are hard to see from five hundred miles up, even with the best of instruments, and there may be things in our way that will make the west slope impassible. If so, we'll try the southern side. It looks pretty steep, but it also seems rough enough to offer plenty of handholds."

"Too bad we couldn't have had that helicopter you were talking about," said Boggs.

Wayne grinned. "With these winds? They'd smash us against the side of the mountain before we'd get up fifty feet. You ought to know, Sergeant—you've been out in them once already."

"They're not so bad down in this valley, sir," Boggs said. "The only time you really notice them is when you climb the escarpment at the northern end. They get pretty rough up there."

Wayne nodded. "You can see what kind of a job we'll have. Even with metamagnetic boots and grapples, we'll still have to use the old standbys." He looked at the men. "Okay; we're all ready. Let's go."

They unhooked four of the six tabs from the wall and donned them. Then they moved on into the airlock and closed the inner door. The air was pumped out, just as though the ship were in space or on a planet with a poisonous atmosphere. As far as anyone knew, the atmosphere of Fomalhaut V actually was poisonous. Some of the tension had relaxed after a week spent in safety, but there was always the first expedition to consider; no one took chances.

When all the air had been removed, a bleeder valve allowed the outer air to come into the chamber. Then the outer door opened, and the four men went down the ladder to the valley floor.

Wayne led the way across the sand in silence. The four men made their way toward the slope on the western side of the valley. Overhead, the bright globe of Fomalhaut shed its orange light over the rugged landscape.

When they reached the beginning of the slope, Wayne stopped and looked upwards. "Doesn't look easy," he grunted. "Damned rough hill, matter of fact. MacPherson, do you think you could make it to the top?"

Corporal MacPherson was a small, wiry man who had the reputation of being a first-rank mountaineer. He had been a member of the eighteenth Mount Everest Party, and had been the second of that party to reach the summit of the towering peak.

"Sure I can, sir," he said confidently. "Shall I take the rope?"

"Go ahead. You and Manetti get the rope to the top, and Sergeant Boggs and I will follow up."

"Righto, sir."

Corporal MacPherson reached his gloved hands forward and contracted his fingers. The tiny microswitches in his gloves actuated the relays, and his hands clung to the rock. Then he put his boots against the wall and began to move up the steep escarpment.

Private Manetti followed after him. The two men were lashed together by the light plastisteel cable. The sergeant held the end of the cable in his hands, waiting for the coil to be paid out.

Wayne watched the two men climb, while a chill wind whipped down out of the mountains and raised the sand in the valley. It was less than eighty feet to the precipice edge above, but it was almost perpendicular, and as they climbed, the buffeting winds began to press against their bodies with ever-increasing force.

They reached the top and secured the rope, and then they peered over the edge and signalled that Wayne and the sergeant should start up.

"We're coming," Wayne shouted, and returned the signal. It was at that instant that he felt something slam against the sole of his heavy metamagnetic boot. It was as though something had kicked him savagely on the sole of his right foot.

He winced sharply at the impact. Then, somewhat puzzled he looked down at the boot. He felt something move under the sand. He tried to step back, and almost tripped. It was as though his right foot were stuck firmly to the sand!

He pushed himself back, and with a tremendous heave managed to pull himself free. He braced his body against the cliff, lifted his foot, and looked at it.

Hanging from his boot sole was one of the ugliest monstrosities he had ever seen, unusually grotesque.

It was about the size and shape of a regulation football, and was covered with a wrinkled, reddish hide. At one end was a bright red gash of a mouth studded with greenish, gnashing teeth. From the other end of the creature's body protruded a long, needle-like projection which had imbedded itself in the metal sole of Wayne's boot.

"Good God! If I'd been wearing ordinary boots, that thing would have stuck clear into my foot!"

He hefted the weighted pick with one hand and swung, catching the monster with the point. It sank in and ripped through the creature, spilling red-orange blood over the sand. Shuddering a little, Wayne put his other foot on the dead thing and pulled his right boot free of the needle beak.

He started to say something, but he had a sudden premonition that made him look up in time. Sergeant Boggs put both hands against the Captain's shoulder and pushed.

"What the hell?" Wayne asked in surprise as he felt the shove. He almost fell to the sand, but he had had just enough warning to allow him to keep his balance. He put out a foot and staggered wildly.

A sudden strange noise caused him to turn and look back. Five needles were jabbing viciously up out of the sand in the spot where he would have fallen.

"You out of your head, Boggs?" he started to ask—but before the last word was out of his mouth, the sergeant charged in madly and tried to push him over again. He was fighting like a man gone berserk—which he was.

Wayne grabbed him by the wrist and flipped him desperately aside. The sergeant fell, sprawled out for a moment on the sand, then bounced to his feet again. His eyes were alight with a strange, terrifying flame.

Silently, he leaped for Wayne. The captain slammed his fist forward, sending it crashing into Boggs's midsection. The sergeant came back with a jab to the stomach that pushed Wayne backward. Again the deadly needles flicked up from the ground, but they did not strike home.

Wayne gasped for breath and reached out for Boggs. Boggs leaped on him, trying to push Wayne down where the beaks could get to him. Wayne sidestepped, threw Boggs off balance, and clubbed down hard with his fist.

Boggs wandered dizzily for a second before Wayne's other fist came blasting in, knocking the breath out of him. A third blow, and the sergeant collapsed on the sand.

Wayne paused and caught his breath. The sergeant remained unconscious. Wayne shook his head uncertainly, wondering what had come over the mild-mannered Boggs. A chilling thought struck him: *was this what happened to the crew of the Mavis?*

He looked up the cliff, where the other two men were still peering over the edge.

"MacPherson! Manetti! Come down! We're going back to the ship!"

He heaved the unconscious body of Sergeant Boggs over his shoulder like a potato-sack, and waited for the two men to come down. They drew near.

"Boggs must have gone out of his head," Wayne said. "He jumped me like a madman."

They had nothing to say, so he turned and began to trudge back to the *Lord Nelson*, trying to assemble the facts in his mind. They followed alongside.

What was behind the attack? After seeing the monster, why had Boggs attempted to push his superior officer over into the sand? There were other little beasts under that sand; why would Boggs want one of them—there seemed to be dozens—to jab him with its needle of a beak?

And what were the beastly little animals, anyway?

There were no answers. But the answers would have to come, soon.

He tossed Boggs into the airlock and waited for the others to catch up. They climbed up the ladder and said nothing as the airlock went through its cycle and the antibacterial spray covered them.

Colonel Petersen looked at him across the desk and put the palms of his hands together. "Then, as I understand it, Captain, Sergeant Boggs tried to push you over into the sand when this—ah—*monster* jabbed you in the foot?"

"That's right, sir," Wayne said. He felt uncomfortable. This wasn't a formal

court-martial; it was simply an inquiry into the sergeant's actions. Charges would be preferred later, if there were any to be preferred.

Sergeant Boggs stood stolidly on the far side of the room. A livid bruise along his jaw testified to the struggle that had taken place. One eye was puffed, and his expression was an unhappy one. Near him, MacPherson and Private Manetti stood stiffly at attention.

The colonel looked at Boggs. "What's your side of the story, Sergeant?"

The non-com's face didn't change. "Sir, the captain's statement isn't true."

"*What's that?*" Wayne asked angrily.

"Quiet, Captain," Petersen said. "Go ahead, Boggs."

The sergeant licked his bruised lips. "I was about to start up the rope when, for no reason at all, he struck me in the stomach. Then he hit me again a few more times, and I passed out."

"Did he say anything when he did this?" the Colonel asked.

"No, sir."

Wayne frowned. What was the sergeant trying to do? What the devil was he up to?

"Corporal MacPherson," the colonel said, "Did you witness the fight?"

"Yes, sir," the small man said, stepping a pace forward.

"Describe it."

"Well, sir, we were up on top of the cliff, and we called—or rather, *I* called for the captain and the sergeant to come on up. Sergeant Boggs took a hold of the rope and then the captain hit him in the belly, sir. He hit him twice more and the sergeant fell down. Then the captain told us to come down, which we did, sir. That was all." He gestured with his hands to indicate he had no more to say.

Wayne could hardly believe his ears. Making an effort, he managed to restrain himself.

"Private Manetti, do you have anything to add to that?" the colonel asked.

"No, sir. It happened just like that, sir. We both seen the entire thing. That's the way it happened. The captain hauled off and let him have it."

The colonel swivelled around and let his cold eyes rest on Wayne. "Captain, you have stated that Sergeant Boggs did not talk to either of these two men after you struck him. That eliminates any collusion."

"Yes, sir," Wayne said stonily.

"I talked to both men separately, and they tell substantially the same story. The records of all three of these men are excellent. The sergeant claims he never saw any monster of the type you describe, and the group I sent out to check says that there is no body of any alien animal anywhere near the spot. How do you explain the discrepancies between your story and theirs?"

Wayne glared angrily at the three men. "They're lying, sir," he said evenly. "I don't know why they're doing it. The whole thing took place exactly as I told you."

"I find that very difficult to believe, Captain."

"Is that a formal accusation, sir?"

Petersen shrugged and rubbed his hands against his iron-grey temples. "Captain," he said finally, "you have a very fine record. You have never before been known to strike an enlisted man for any cause whatever. I hold that in your favor."

"Thank you, sir."

"On the other hand, the evidence here definitely indicates that your story is not quite true. Now, we know that Lieutenant Jervis acted peculiarly after the crew of the *Mavis* met its mysterious end, and the Medical Corps thinks that whatever is causing the deaths could also cause mental confusion. Therefore, I am remanding you to the custody of the Medical Corps for observation. You'll be kept in close confinement until this thing is cleared up."

Wayne frowned bitterly. "Yes, sir," he said.

Peter Wayne sat in his cell in the hospital sector and stared at the wall in

confusion. What in blazes was going on? What possible motive would three enlisted men have to frame him in this way? It didn't make any sense.

Was it possible that he really *had* gone off his rocker? Had he imagined the little beast under the sand?

He lifted his foot and looked again at the sole. There it was: a little pit about an eighth of an inch deep.

The colonel had explained it away easily enough, saying that he might possibly have stepped on a sharp rock. Wayne shook his head. He knew he wasn't nuts. But what the hell was going on?

There were no answers. But he knew that the eventual answer, when it came, would have something to do with the mystery of the *Mavis's* eight corpses.

It was late that afternoon when Sherri James came storming into the hospital sector. She was wearing a spacesuit, and she was brandishing a pass countersigned by Colonel Petersen himself. She was determined to enter.

"The medics didn't want to let me in," she explained. "But I told them I'd wear a spacesuit if it would make them any happier."

"Sherri! What the devil are you doing here?"

"I just wanted to check on you," she said. Her voice sounded oddly distorted coming over the speaker in the helmet. "You're supposed to have blown your wig or something. Did you?"

"No. Of course not."

"I didn't think so." She unscrewed her helmet quickly. "Listen, Peter, there's something funny going on aboard this ship."

"I've known that a long time," he said.

"I think Boggs and those other two are trying to frame you," she said, her voice low. "Do you know of anyone aboard named Masters?"

"Masters?" Wayne repeated. "Not that I know of—why?"

"Well, I overheard Boggs talking to one of the other men. I didn't hear very clearly, but it sounded as though he said: 'We've got to get Moore out and turn him over to Masters.' Bill Moore is one of my computermen—tall, skinny

fellow."

Wayne nodded, frowning. "Yeah, but who is Masters? This is the queerest thing I ever heard of."

Footsteps sounded in the corridor outside.

"Better put your helmet on," Wayne advised. "Whoever's coming might not like to see you this way."

Quickly, she slipped the helmet back on. "I don't know what's going on," she said. "But I intend to find out."

One of the medics entered the cell without knocking and came up to Sherri. "You'll have to go now, Lieutenant," he said. "We're going to perform some tests on the captain now."

Sherri bristled. "Tests? What kind of tests?"

"Nothing very serious," the medic said. "Just a routine checkup to clarify some points we're interested in."

"All right," Sherri said. "You won't find anything the matter with him." She left.

"Come with me, Captain," said the medic politely. He unlocked the cell door and, equally politely, drew a needle-beam pistol. "Don't try anything, please, sir. I have my orders."

Silently, Wayne followed the medic into the lab. Several other medics were standing around watching him, with Stevelman, the head man, in the back.

"Over this way, Captain," Stevelman called.

There was a box sitting on a table in the middle of the room. It was full of sand.

"Give me your hand, please, Captain," the medic said tonelessly.

In a sudden flash of insight, Wayne realized what was in the box. He thought fast but moved slowly. He held out his hand, but just as the medic took it, he twisted suddenly away.

His hand flashed out and grasped the other's wrist in a steely grip. The medic's fingers tightened on the needle-beam, and managed to pull the trigger. A bright

beam flared briefly against the lab's plastalloy floor, doing nothing but scorching it slightly. Wayne's other hand balled into a fist and came up hard against the medic's jaw.

He grabbed the needle-beam pistol from the collapsing man's limp hand and had the other three men covered before the slugged medic had finished sagging to the floor.

"All of you! Raise your hands!"

They paid no attention to him. Instead of standing where they were, they began to move toward him. Wayne swore and, with a quick flip of his thumb, turned the beam down to low power and pulled the trigger three times in quick succession.

The three men fell as though they'd been pole-axed, knocked out by the low-power beam.

"The whole ship's gone crazy," he murmured softly, looking at the three men slumped together on the lab floor. "Stark, staring, raving nuts."

He took one step and someone jumped him from behind. The needle-beam pistol spun from his hand and slithered across the floor as Wayne fell under the impact of the heavy body. Apparently the whole Medical Corps was out to knock him down today.

He twisted rapidly as an arm encircled his neck, and rammed an elbow into the newcomer's midsection. Then he jerked his head back, smashing the back of his skull into his opponent's nose.

The hold around his neck weakened, and Wayne tore himself loose from the other's grasp. He jumped to his feet, but the other man was a long way from being unconscious. A stinging right smashed into Wayne's mouth, and he felt the taste of blood. Hastily he wiped the trickle away with the back of his hand.

With his nose pouring blood, Wayne's antagonist charged in. His eyes burned with the strange flame that had been gleaming in Boggs's face out on the desert in the valley. He ploughed into Wayne's stomach with a savage blow that rocked Wayne back.

He grunted and drove back with a flurry of blows. The other aimed a wild blow at Wayne's head; Wayne seized the wrist as the arm flew past his ear, and

twisted, hard. The medic flipped through the air and came to rest against the wall with a brief crunching impact. He moaned and then lapsed into silence.

Quickly, Wayne grabbed the gun off the floor and planted his back to the wall, looking around for new antagonists. But there was evidently no one left who cared to tangle with him, and the four medics strewn out on the floor didn't seem to have much fight left in them.

Wayne crossed the room in a couple of strides and bolted the door. Then he walked over to the box of sand. If it contained what he suspected—

He stepped over to the lab bench and picked out a long steel support rod from the equipment drawer. He placed the rod gently against the sand, and pushed downward, hard. There was a tinny scream, and a six-inch needle shot up instantly through the surface.

"Just what I thought," Wayne murmured. "Can you talk, you nasty little brute?" He prodded into the sand—more viciously this time. There was a flurry of sand, and the football-shaped thing came to the surface, clashing its teeth and screaming shrilly.

Wayne cursed. Then he turned the needle gun back up to full power and calmly burned the thing to a crisp. An odor of singed flesh drifted up from the ashes on the sand.

He stooped and fumbled in Stevelman's pocket, pulling out a ring of keys.

"They better be the right ones," he told the unconscious medic. Holstering the needle gun, he walked over to the medical stores cabinet, hoping that the things he needed would be inside. He knew exactly what he was facing now, and what he would have to do.

He checked over the labels, peering through the neatly-arranged racks for the substance he was searching for.

Finally he picked a large plastine container filled with a white, crystalline powder. Then he selected a couple of bottles filled with a clear, faintly yellow liquid, and took a hypodermic gun from the rack. He relocked the cabinet.

Suddenly a knock sounded. He stiffened, sucked in his breath, and turned to face

the door.

"Who's there?" he asked cautiously, trying to counterfeit Stevelman's voice.

"Harrenburg," said a rumbling voice. "I'm on guard duty. Heard some noise coming from in there a while back, and thought I'd look in. Everything all right, Dr. Stevelman? I mean—"

"Everything's fine, Harrenburg," Wayne said, imitating the medic's thin, dry voice. "We're running some tests on Captain Wayne. They're pretty complicated affairs, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't interrupt again."

"Sure, sir," the guard said. "Just a routine check, sir. Colonel Petersen's orders. Sorry if I've caused any trouble, sir."

"That's all right," Wayne said. "Just go away and let us continue, will you?"

There was the sound of the guard's footsteps retreating down the corridor. Wayne counted to ten and turned back to the things he had taken from the cabinet.

The bottles of liquid and the hypo gun went into his belt pouch. He tucked the big bottle of white powder under his left arm and cautiously unbolted and opened the door. There was no sign of anyone in the corridor. *Good*, he thought. It was a lucky thing Harrenburg had blundered along just then, and not two minutes later.

He stepped outside the Medic Section and locked the door behind him with the key he'd taken from Stevelman. After turning the needle gun back to low power again in order to keep from killing anyone, he started on tiptoe toward the stairway that led into the bowels of the ship.

After about ten paces, he saw a shadow on the stairway, and cowered in a dark recess while two crewmen passed, talking volubly. Once they were gone, he came out and continued on his way.

It took quite a while to get where he was going, since it involved hiding and ducking two or three more times along the way, but he finally reached the big compartment where the water repurifiers were. He climbed up the ladder to the top of the reserve tank, opened the hatch, and emptied the contents of the jar into the ship's water supply.

"That ought to do it," he said to himself. Smiling, he carefully smashed the jar

and dropped the fragments down the waste chute. He surveyed his handiwork for a moment, then turned and headed back.

He hadn't been seen going down, and he didn't want to be seen going out. If anyone even suspected that he had tampered with the water supply, all they would have to do would be to run the water through the purifiers. That would undo everything Wayne had been carefully preparing.

He made his way safely back up to the main deck and headed through the quiet ship toward the airlock. He wasn't so lucky this time; a guard saw him.

"Where you goin', Captain?" the guard demanded, starting to lift his gun. "Seems to me you ought to be in the brig, and—"

Wayne made no reply. He brought his gun up in a rapid motion and beamed the man down. The guard toppled, a hurt expression on his face.

Wayne raced to the airlock. He didn't bother with a spacesuit—not *now*, when he knew that the air was perfectly harmless outside. He opened the inner door, closed it, and opened the outer door.

Then, grinning gleefully, he pressed the button that would start the pumping cycle. The outer door started to close automatically, and Wayne just barely managed to get outside and onto the ladder before it clanged shut. As soon as the great hatch had sealed itself, the pumps started exhausting the air from the airlock. No one could open the doors until the pumping cycle was over.

He climbed down the ladder and began walking over toward the western wall. He would have to keep away from the ship for a while, and the rocks were as good a place as any to hide out.

It was dark. Fomalhaut had set, leaving the moonless planet in utter blackness, broken only by the cold gleam of the stars. The lights streaming from the portholes of the *Lord Nelson* gave a small degree of illumination to the valley.

The valley. It was spread out before him, calm and peaceful, rippling dunes of sand curling out toward the mountains. The valley, he knew, was a betrayer—calm and quiet above, alive with an army of hideous vermin a few feet below its surface.

He started to walk, and moistened his lips. He knew he was going to get awfully thirsty in the next few hours, but there was not the slightest help for it. There hadn't been any way to carry water from the ship.

"I can wait," he told himself. He stared back at the circular bulk of the *Lord Nelson* behind him, and his fingers trembled a little. He had known, when he joined the Corps, that space was full of traps like this one—but this was the first time he had actually experienced anything like this. It was foul.

Something slammed into his boot sole, and this time Wayne knew what it was.

"Persistent, aren't you!" He jerked his foot up. This monster hadn't stuck as the other one had, but he saw the tip of the needle-beak thrashing around wildly in the loose sand. Wayne thumbed the gun up to full power, and there was a piercing shriek as the gun burned into the sand. There was a sharp shrill sound, and the odor of something burning. He spat.

The little beasts must be all over the floor of the valley! Scurrying frantically, like blood-red giant crabs, sidling up and down beneath the valley, searching upward for things to strike at. How they must hate his metamagnetic boots, he thought!

He kept on walking, expecting to feel the impact of another thrust momentarily, but he was not molested again. *They must be getting wise*, he thought. *They know they can't get through my boots, and so they're leaving me alone. That way they don't call attention to themselves.*

A new, more chilling question struck him:

Just how smart are they?

He had made it to the wall and was climbing up the treacherous slope when the airlock door opened, and someone stood outlined in the bright circle of light that cut into the inky blackness. An amplified voice filled the valley and ricocheted back off the walls of the mountains, casting eerie echoes down on the lone man on the desert.

"CAPTAIN WAYNE! THIS IS COLONEL PETERSEN SPEAKING. DON'T YOU REALIZE THAT YOU'RE A SICK MAN? YOU MAY DIE OUT THERE. COME BACK. THAT'S AN ORDER, CAPTAIN. REPEAT: COME BACK. THAT'S AN ORDER!"

"I'm afraid an order from you just doesn't hold much weight for me right now, Colonel," Wayne said quietly, to himself. Silently he went on climbing the escarpment, digging into the rough rock.

He kept on climbing until he found the niche for which he had been heading. He dragged himself in and sat down, as comfortably as possible. He began to wait.

Dawn came in less than three hours, as Fomalhaut burst up over the horizon and exploded in radiance over the valley. With dawn came a patrol of men, slinking surreptitiously across the valley, probably with orders to bring him in. Wayne was ensconced comfortably in his little rock niche, hidden from the men in the valley below, but with a perfect view of everything that went on. The wind whistled around the cliffs, ceaselessly moaning a tuneless song. He felt like standing up and shouting wildly, "Here I am! Here I am!" but he repressed the perverse urge.

The patrol group stood in a small clump in the valley below, seemingly waiting for something. Moments passed, and then it became apparent what that something was. Hollingwood, the metallurgist, appeared, dragging with him the detector. They were going to look for Captain Wayne with it, just as they had searched out the double-nucleus beryllium.

Wayne frowned. It was a possibility he hadn't thought about. They could easily detect the metal in his boots! And he didn't dare take them off; he'd never make it back across that hellish stretch of sand without them. He glanced uneasily at his watch. *How much longer do I have to keep evading them?* he wondered. It was a wearing task.

It looked as though it would be much too long.

The muzzle of the detector began to swing back and forth slowly and precisely, covering the valley inch by inch. He heard their whispered consultations drifting up from below, though he couldn't make out what they were saying.

They finished with the valley, evidently concluding he wasn't there, and started searching the walls. Wayne decided it was time to get out while the getting was good. He crawled slowly out of the niche and wriggled along the escarpment, heading south, keeping low so the men in the valley wouldn't see him.

Unfortunately, he couldn't see them either. He kept moving, hoping they wouldn't spot him with the detector. He wished he had the metamagnetic hand grapples with him. For one thing, the sharp rock outcroppings sliced his hands like so much meat. For another, he could have dropped the grapples somewhere as a decoy.

Oh, well, you can't think of everything, Wayne told himself. He glanced at his watch. How long was it going to take?

He heard the scrape of boot leather on a rock somewhere ahead of him. He glanced up sharply, seeing nothing, and scowled. They had spotted him.

They were laying a trap.

Cautiously, he climbed over a huge boulder, making no sound. There was one man standing behind it, waiting, apparently, for Wayne to step around into view. He peered down, trying to see who it was. It seemed to be Hollingwood, the dignified, austere metallurgist.

Wayne smiled grimly, picked up a heavy rock, and dropped it straight down, square on the man's helmet. The plexalloy rang like a bell through the clear early-morning air, and the man dropped to his knees, dazed by the shock.

Knowing he had just a moment to finish the job, Wayne pushed off against the side of the rock and plummeted down, landing neatly on the metallurgist's shoulders. The man reeled and fell flat. Wayne spun him over and delivered a hard punch to the solar plexus. "Sorry, Dave," he said softly. The metallurgist gasped and curled up in a tight ball. Wayne stood up. It was brutal, but it was the only place you could hit a man wearing a space helmet.

One down, Wayne thought. *Fifty-eight to go.* He was alone against the crew—and, for all he knew, against all fifty-nine of them.

Hollingwood groaned and stretched. Wayne bent and, for good measure, took off the man's helmet and tapped him none too gently on the skull.

There was the sound of footsteps, the harsh *chitch-chitch* of feet against the rock. "He's up that way," he heard a deep voice boom.

That meant the others had heard the rock hitting Hollingwood's plexalloy helmet. They were coming toward him.

Wayne sprang back defensively and glanced around. He hoped there were only five of them, that the rule of six was still being maintained. Otherwise things could become really complicated, as they hunted him relentlessly through the twisted gulleys.

He hated to have to knock out too many of the men; it just meant more trouble later. Still, there was no help for it, if he wanted there to be any later. He thought of the bleached bones of the crew of the *Mavis*, and shuddered.

It was something of an advantage not to be wearing a helmet. Even with the best of acoustical systems, hearing inside a helmet tended to be distorted and dimmed. The men couldn't hear him as well as he could hear them. And since they couldn't hear themselves too well, they made a little more noise than he did.

A space boot came into view around a big rock, and Wayne aimed his needle-beam at the spot where the man's head would appear.

When the head came around the rock, Wayne fired. The man dropped instantly. *Sorry, friend*, Wayne apologized mentally. *Two down. Fifty-seven to go*. The odds were still pretty heavy.

He knew he had to move quickly now; the others had seen the man drop, and by now they should have a pretty good idea exactly where Wayne was.

He picked up a rock and lobbed it over a nearby boulder, then started moving cat-like in the other direction. He climbed up onto another boulder and watched two men move away from him. They were stepping warily, their beam guns in their hands. Wayne wiped away a bead of perspiration, aimed carefully, and squeezed the firing stud twice.

Four down. Fifty-five to go.

A moment later, something hissed near his ear. Without waiting, he spun and rolled off the boulder, landing cat-like on his feet. Another crewman was standing on top of a nearby boulder. Wayne began to sweat; this pursuit seemed to be indefinitely prolonged, and it was beginning to look unlikely that he could avoid them forever.

He had dropped his pistol during the fall; it was wedged between a couple of rocks several feet away.

He heard someone call: "I got him. He fell off the rock. We'll take him back down below."

Then another voice—ominously. "He won't mind. He'll be glad we did it for him—afterwards."

"I'll go get him," said the first voice. The man stepped around the side of the boulder—just in time to have a hard-pitched rock come thumping into his midsection.

"Oof!" he grunted, took a couple of steps backwards, and collapsed.

Five down. Fifty-four to go. It could go on forever this way.

"What's the matter?" asked the man who had replied to the first one with those chilling words.

"Nothing," said Wayne, in a fair imitation of the prostrate crewman's voice. "He's heavy. Come help me."

Then he reached down and picked up the fallen man's beam gun. He took careful aim.

When the sixth man stepped around the rock, he fired. The beam went wide of the mark, slowing the other down, and Wayne charged forward. He pounded two swift punches into the amazed crewman, who responded with a woozy, wild blow. Wayne ducked and let the fist glide past his ear, then came in hard with a solid body-blow and let the man sag to the ground. He took a deep breath.

Six down and only fifty-three to go.

He crawled back to the edge of the precipice and peered down into the valley. There was no one to be seen. It was obvious that Colonel Petersen was still enforcing the six-man rule.

As he watched, he saw the airlock door open. A spacesuited figure scrambled down the ladder and sprinted across the deadly sand of the valley floor.

It was Sherri! Wayne held his breath, expecting at any moment that one of the little monsters beneath the sand would sink its vicious needle upward into Sherri's foot. But her stride never faltered.

As she neared the precipice, another figure appeared at the airlock door and took aim with a gun.

Wayne thumbed his own needle-beam pistol up to full and fired hastily at the distant figure. At that distance, even the full beam would only stun. The figure collapsed backwards into the airlock, and Wayne grinned in satisfaction.

Seven down. Fifty-two to go.

He kept an eye on the airlock door and a finger on his firing stud, waiting to see if anyone else would come out. No one else did.

As soon as Sherri was safely up to the top of the precipice, Wayne ran to meet her.

"Sherri! What the devil did you come out here for?"

"I had to see you," she said, panting for breath. "If you'll come back to the ship before they beam you down, we can prove to Colonel Petersen that you're all right. We can show them that the Masters—"

She realized suddenly what she said and uttered a little gasp. She had her pistol out before the surprised Wayne could move.

He stared coldly at the pistol, thinking bitterly that this was a hell of a way for it all to finish. "So they got you too," he said. "That little display at the airlock was a phony. You were sent out here to lure me back into the ship. Just another Judas."

She nodded slowly. "That's right," she said. "We all have to go to the Masters. It is—it—is—is—"

Her eyes glazed, and she swayed on her feet. The pistol wavered and swung in a feeble spiral, no longer pointed at Wayne. Gently, he took it from her nerveless fingers and caught her supple body as she fell.

He wiped his forehead dry. Up above, the sun was climbing toward the top of the sky, and its beams raked the planet below, pouring down heat.

He glanced at his wristwatch while waiting for his nerves to stop tingling. Sherri must have been the last one—the drug must have taken effect at last, and not a moment too soon. He decided to wait another half hour before he tried to get into

the spaceship, just the same.

The huge globe of the *Lord Nelson* stood forlornly in the center of the valley. The airlock door stayed open; no one tried to close it.

Wayne's mouth was growing dry; his tongue felt like sandpaper. Nevertheless, he forced himself to sit quietly, watching the ship closely for the full half hour, before he picked up Sherri, tied his rope around her waist, and lowered her to the valley floor. Then he wandered around the rocks, collecting the six unconscious men, and did the same for them.

He carried them all, one by one, across the sand, burning a path before him with the needle beam.

Long before he had finished his task, the sand was churning loathsomely with the needles of hundreds and thousands of the monstrous little beasts. They were trying frantically to bring down the being that was so effectively thwarting their plans, jabbing viciously with their upthrust beaks. The expanse of sand that was the valley looked like a pincushion, with the writhing needles ploughing through the ground one after another. Wayne kept the orifice of his beam pistol hot as he cut his way back and forth from the base of the cliff to the ship.

When he had dumped the seven unconscious ones all inside the airlock, he closed the outer door and opened the inner one. There was not a sound from within.

Fifty-nine down, he thought, and none to go.

He entered the ship and dashed down the winding staircase to the water purifiers to change the water in the reservoir tanks. Thirsty as he was, he was not going to take a drink until the water had been cleared of the knockout drug he had dropped into the tanks.

After that came the laborious job of getting everyone in the ship strapped into their bunks for the takeoff. It took the better part of an hour to get all sixty of them up—they had fallen all over the ship—and nestled in the acceleration cradles. When the job was done, he went to the main control room and set the autopilot to lift the spaceship high into the ionosphere.

Then, sighting carefully on the valley far below, he dropped a flare bomb.

"Goodbye, little monsters," he said exultantly.

For a short space of time, nothing happened. Then the viewplate was filled with a deadly blue-white glare. Unlike an ordinary atomic bomb, the flare bomb would not explode violently; it simply burned, sending out a brilliant flare of deadly radiation that would crisp all life dozens of feet below the ground.

He watched the radiation blazing below. Then it began to die down, and when the glare cleared away, all was quiet below.

The valley was dead.

When it was all over, Wayne took the hypodermic gun from his pouch, filled it with the anti-hypnotic drug that he had taken from the medical cabinet, and began to make his rounds. He fired a shot into each and every one aboard. He had no way of knowing who had been injected by the small monsters and who had not, so he was taking no chances.

Then he went to the colonel's room. He wanted to be there when the Commanding Officer awoke.

The entire crew of the *Lord Nelson* was gathered in the big mess hall. Wayne stared down at the tired, frightened faces of the puzzled people looking up at him, and continued his explanation.

"Those of you who were under the control of the monsters know what it was like. They had the ability to inject a hypnotic drug into a human being through a normal space boot with those stingers of theirs. The drug takes effect so fast that the victim hardly has any idea of what has happened to him."

"But why do they do it?" It was Hollingwood, the metallurgist, looking unhappy with a tremendous bruise on his head where Wayne had clobbered him.

"Why does a wasp sting a spider? It doesn't kill the spider, it simply stuns it. That way, the spider remains alive and fresh so that young wasps can feed upon it at their leisure."

Wayne glanced over to his right. "Lieutenant Jervis, you've been under the effect of the drug longer than any of us. Would you explain what *really* happened when the *Mavis* landed?"

The young officer stood up. He was pale and shaken, but his voice was clear and steady.

"Just about the same thing that almost happened here," Jervis said. "We all walked around the valley floor and got stung one at a time. The things did it so quietly that none of us knew what was going on until we got hit ourselves. When we had all been enslaved, we were ready to do their bidding. They can't talk, but they can communicate by means of nerve messages when that needle is stuck into you."

Nearly half the crew nodded in sympathy. Wayne studied them, wondering what it must have been like. They *knew*; he could only guess.

"Naturally," Jervis went on, "those who have already been injected with the drug try to get others injected. When everyone aboard the *Mavis* had been stung, they ordered me to take the ship home and get another load of Earthmen. Apparently they like our taste. I had to obey; I was completely under their power. You know what it's like."

"And what happened to the others—the eight men you left behind?" asked Colonel Petersen.

Jervis clenched his teeth bitterly. "They just laid down on the sand—and waited."

"Horrible!" Sherri said.

Jervis fell silent. Wayne was picturing the sight, and knew everyone else was, too—the sight of hordes of carnivorous little aliens burrowing up through the sand and approaching the eight Earthmen who lay there, alive but helpless. Approaching them—and beginning to feed.

Just when the atmosphere began to grow too depressing, Wayne decided to break the spell. "I'd like to point out that the valley's been completely cauterized," he said. "The aliens have been wiped out. And I propose to lead a mission out to reconnoitre for the double-nucleus beryllium."

He looked around. "MacPherson? Boggs? Manetti? You three want to start over where we left off the last time?"

Sergeant Boggs came up to him. "Sir, I want you to understand that—"

"I know, Boggs," Wayne said. "Let's forget all about it. There's work to be done."

"I'm sorry I misjudged you, Wayne. If it hadn't been for your quick action, this crew would have gone the way of the *Mavis*."

"Just luck, Colonel," Wayne said. "If it hadn't been for those heavy-soled climbing boots, I'd probably be lying out there with the rest of you right now."

Colonel Petersen grinned. "Thanks to your boots, then."

Wayne turned to his team of three. "Let's get moving, fellows. We've wasted enough time already."

"Do we need spacesuits, sir?" Manetti asked.

"No, Manetti. The air's perfectly fine out there," Wayne said. "But I'd suggest you wear your climbing boots." He grinned. "You never can tell when they'll come in handy."

THE END

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