

# PLANET STORIES



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# Among The Scented Ones

By **BASIL WELLS**



*His captor grunted . . . and Besan's head was rocked by a club . . .*

**To Besan Wur this backward planet of stampeding monstrosities and stinking humanoids was Sanctuary. Here he could be free—until they discovered he gave off no odor . . .**

*Illustrated by* MARTIN

**A** VAST DARK FLOOD SPREAD across the matted green of the broad Saaaran plain. It rolled westward relentlessly, its outer flanks washing around and over the lower hills and lapping deep into the fringes of the jungle. A rolling endless thunder of countless pounding feet went before its tossing crest.

Past the ruins of a score of ancient cities the stampeding herd of green-crested saurians thundered. It seemed a world devoid of intelligent life that they traversed in their unreasoning terror. Only the jungle-grown walls and splintered streets showed that man had once been here. . . .

The great salmon-hued sun was directly

overhead as the maddened *denars* poured through a five-mile gap between twin ranges of low hills. Twelve miles further their thundering progress was checked.

And along the line of the northern cluster of hills a giant tube of unrusting metal mesh was laid. Lianas and other vegetation half-swallowed its forty-foot diameter, but inside there was a smooth hard-surfaced roadway where thirty-foot wheels, with cabins for passengers between their twin tires, raced swiftly.

Even as a group of twenty wheels spun eastward through the tube the stampeding *denars* crashed through the stout metal mesh guarding the highway. . . .

BESAN WUR SHOUTED, terror-stricken, as an avalanche of huge green-crested saurians surged toward them through the disintegrating sides of the tubeway. He tasted the salt of bitten lips.

The giant double tires smoked as Nard Rost, the gray-haired Garro at the controls, spun the wheel tightly about and sent it hurtling back along the way they had come.

"That was—close!" Besan's voice was shrill. His fingers were biting into the back of his seat as he peered backward at the hissing horde of *denars*.

"Ras Thib — Walof Jemar — all the others!"

Nard Rost nodded grave assent. At least twelve of the wheels had been swallowed up by that churning death from the open plains.

"There isn't any chance they could have survived," Besan said numbly. "The wheels are flattened and broken already."

Besan gasped and his hand went to his throat. For by now the acrid musty scent of the older Garro pervaded the narrow drum of a cabin. That scent was the natural protection of the men of Saaar; only a mindless stampeding herd of *denars*, or other men, would brave contact with his kind.

Besan Wur's eyes leaked moisture. He nudged the valve that released the counter-acting fumes of the tank under his left armpit. Unlike the older man he was not immune to the product of Garro scent glands.

He was an Earthman, one of a hundred-odd Terrans living secretly among the Garros on forbidden Saaar. His dark hair was artfully dyed blonde along the central stripe, and his oversize ears and the flaring tip of his nose were the result of surgery in his youth. Even his red blood was rendered purple by regular injections of an innocuous fluid.

"I know, Besan Wur," said the older man quietly. "All dead. All our friends and fellow students." He paused. "And soon, perhaps, we shall join them."

His hand indicated the slight bulge of the hill beside which the vehicular tube ran. It was a low hill, less than a hundred feet long and half as wide, covered with the coarse grass of the plains of Saaar. Only a thin belt of trees touching the

further extremity of its crest offered any protection.

"Perhaps the trees will shelter us," he said. "If not..."

Behind them the sea of hissing thundering life chewed nearer and nearer. In a matter of seconds it would engulf the hill and sweep beyond it, isolating them among the trees... If they reached them.

"See there, Nard Rost!" cried the Earthman. "Two of the wheels behind us—broke through the mesh—headed for the trees!"

Nard swung into the gap in the wall; the wheel tilted and rocked, the inner drum's gyros groaning in protest, and then they were racing after the other vehicles.

"*Denar!*" shouted Besan Wur, even as an elephantine hammer seemed to crash against the thin metal skin of the cabin.

The great wheel toppled, righted itself, and toppled again as the weight of another *denar's* vast bulk bludgeoned it. The ragged outer fringe of the great herd had reached them even as they came into the shadow of the trees!

With a crash the thirty-foot wheel and its inner cabin went over. The two occupants were unhurt save for a few bruises, and they wasted no time in racing to the shattered port between the two huge tires. Nard Rost led the way, a knobby metal wrench in his fist to clear away the broken shards yet remaining in the frame.

Five feet away the thick bole of a forest giant lifted. They had come that close to its shelter. Without a moment's hesitation the two men raced up the knotty protuberances of the trunk to the lower branches. There, twenty feet above the ground, they paused momentarily.

Well that they had quitted the wheel when they did. The solid secondary flood of the *denar* tide swept over the vehicle, churned, eddied, and pounded onward again unchecked over the flattened scraps of metal and resilient *durnb*.

And now the other wheels suffered a like fate. They too pulped and disappeared. Besan Wur's square face brightened. He shouted something against the all-pervading din of the stampeding lizard horde.

"*Relsa Dav!*" he shouted into Nard Rost's elongated ear cup.

He had glimpsed the trembling slim form of the girl clinging to a massive hori-

zontal branch a scant three feet above the tossing green crests of the lizards. Now he hurried along a higher branch interlacing with those of the other three where the girl had found refuge.

A moment later he had pulled her to the safety of a higher limb and the girl was sobbing against his tunic's soft brown cloth, her arms about his neck.

He caught a suggestion of moisture in the violet eyes of the older man as he joined them. Nard Rost's mate, Ilva, had perished up ahead there. And with her had died the twenty-four other students and their three instructors bound for a four month's course of practical study in the tin and copper mines of the Durlu Hills.

Only they three had escaped because of the temporary check of the hill and now the sheltering trees. How long the battered lower boles, massive though they were, would remain upright, was doubtful. And the unending flow of squealing whistling *denars* might continue unchecked for more than two or three days!

**A**S BESAN HELD the soft warmth of the terrified girl in his arms a great gladness fought with the despair in his heart. Relsa Dav, whose least glance in the classrooms of Rhilg University made him more aware of his hopeless love, was alive. . . . And he was an Earthman, a renegade son of an alien race who could never hope to mate with a Garro!

The System that ruled Terra, and a score of other lesser and greater worlds, was responsible for their exile. The System's rigid code of controls over all the activities of its citizens—even to what they ate, and wore, and what they thought—invariably produced a diminishing handful of rebels with every generation.

The punishment for any infraction of the rules was invariably amnesia; the child-like result of this operation being trained again in the frozen tenets of the System until the least spark of individuality was extinguished. There was no bloodshed in all the System's worlds and prisons were forgotten mounds of crumbling masonry and metal. Instead there were the gentle blanking rays of the System Police and the inevitable hospitalization afterward.

From this threat of complete forgetfulness Besan Wur's father and mother had

escaped by spacer to this forbidden jungle planet of Saaar. Her RZX rating and that of Besan's father had not coincided within the narrow limits prescribed. But they had mated and stolen a System police craft in making their getaway.

They found that Saaar was a tropical savage world alive with ferocious and gigantic animals. The System's aversion for shedding blood—even animal blood—had led them to bypass Saaar until the semi-civilized natives of that world would have tamed it. So it was a safe refuge for the parents of Besan. . . . as long as they could evade the bloodthirsty denizens of the steaming jungles and broad grasslands!

Strangest of all was the discovery that the cooler uplands of Saaar supported a well-advanced civilization: the Saaaran bipeds who called themselves Garros. Their cities were underground, in the cavern-honeycombed cliffs and deep canyons, and they were linked together by highways that ran through great tubes of a rustless metal mesh. These tubes were designed to prevent the encroachment of vegetation and wandering animals on the roadway—no animal would face the threat of the stripe-headed men's scent but their vehicles were so swift they had little warning of the Garros' approach.

And so they had disguised themselves, as other Terrans before them had done, and mingled with the Garros of the cone city of Rhilg.

"We must leave these trees, Besan," Nard Rost shouted, his voice jolting the Earthman back to reality.

The tree was jolting and swaying as the mighty press of saurian juggernauts lumbered madly beneath. Inevitably it would be torn from its roots if the stampepe continued. Nor was there any apparent end to the green-crested flood that rolled out of the northern purplish horizon.

"Think you can climb now, Relsa?"

The blonde-striped head of the girl nodded. Her deep blue eyes smiled into his own purple-tattooed ones.

"Forest widens out that way." Nard Rost's muscular arm pointed out the north-western loom of hills and the belt of vine-festooned trees linking them with it. "That's our road."

"Hills of Cratur, aren't they?" Besan's voice was tense. He had seen some of

the reddish-haired bearlike brutes captured there by Rhilg hunters. They were unlovely elephantine creatures.

"Yes." Nard Rost's answer was short. He had knotted a slender rubbery liana around his waist and now he passed its pliant length to Besan and the girl.

A moment later they were creeping carefully out along a pitching branch's narrowing path, their bodies linked by the slim rope of vine.

Two trees — three trees — they had reached a clump of three interlocking giants when the trees they had first climbed went grinding over and were swallowed up. A moment later another tree toppled drunkenly and the dark avalanche of saurian flesh flowed over it.

Underneath their feet the broken bodies of *denars* heaped higher and higher until a temporary island of mauled bloody flesh fended off the stampeding herd's all-but resistless current.

"Do we stay here?" gasped the girl.

Besan shook his head. "We aren't safe until we reach the hills," he told her. "The pressure is increasing as their broken bodies heap up and these *node* trees are brittle."

Already Nard Rost was leading off. The girl was between them and Besan saw her shudder as she glanced downward into the roaring death. Her shoulders stiffened and she smiled faintly back at him.

"Come along," she said, shouting the words, "or must we drag you?"

Besan grinned back at her. There was a quaver in her voice that her brave words did not dispel. *She has what it takes*, he thought as they inched along precariously high above the *denars*.

**T**HE GREAT SALMON-HUED sun of Saaar was almost touching the distant loom of hills to the west as they slid down a natural ladder of lianas to a rocky ledge. For two hours and more they had been moving through the trees' sketchy byways, expecting at any moment to be hurled into the maelstrom of maddened saurians boiling underfoot.

Now they were safe atop a sheer cliff lifting forty feet above the branch-roofed bed of an unnamed stream. . . A stream that now flowed with hissing reptilian monsters.

"Tomorrow we cross the Cratur Hills," Besan told the girl sagging wearily now

against his shoulder, "and then reach Rhilg."

Nard Rost shook his head. "I wish we had weapons," he said. "We're safe from animals, yes, but the wild men. . ."

Besan nodded, lips tightening. For the thousandth time he deplored his lack of the natural defense glands of the Garros. His supply of artificial scent, nestling under his right armpit, was low. Unlike his two companions he must depend on his fleetness of foot and his cunning to escape should he become separated from them.

"We should find a cave nearby," Relsa Dav said hesitantly. "I can't take another step, I'm afraid."

Nard Rost's lips smiled encouragement. "A few moments of rest and you'll be fit again. Besan and I will look around."

Besan squeezed her arm. "Be with you in a minute."

The ridge climbed steeply for a score of feet above the ledge. It leveled off then into a narrow uneven ribbon of rocky brush-spotted earth and fell away again into a jumbled region of twisting ravines, canyons, and wooded ridges. The wind that had been blowing from the south had died and they could see three distant threads of smoke lifting gracefully into the reddening twilight sky.

"Savages." Besan's scalp tightened. The logical path for them to take back toward the dead volcanic cone housing Rhilg lay in that direction.

"Look here, Besan," Nard Rost's voice was muffled.

The instructor was not to be seen. Besan, after a quick look around, made out a crevice in the rocky slope below him. The opening was large enough for a man to squeeze through. He jumped down and entered it.

There was no sign of Nard Rost at first; yet he felt sure that the older man had entered the split rock before him. Then the walls widened, a few feet from the entrance, and he found himself standing inside a large cave. Light filtered weakly from a crevice above.

His friend was examining the dead ashes of a fire. Beside it a disorderly jumble of dead branches was stacked.

"Cold," the instructor said. "And no recent tracks in the dust."

"Should be safe enough for one night."

Nard Rost's voice was doubtful. "If it wasn't almost night I'd say we better move long. But we need shelter—and rest."

"The entrance is too small for *craturs*," argued Besan, "and the night-flying *wadts* should keep away any roving savages."

"Go for the girl," decided the older man, "while I kindle fire."

And now reaction was setting in. Besan Wur felt his knees sagging as he climbed to the upper level. Son of a Terran civilization that for a score of generations had shunned violence and bloodshed, he had forgotten his aversion for the more primitive emotions these last few hours. Again he was feeling the nameless dragging pain of disgust and terror that the savage life of Saara created in all Terran hearts.

A shadow seemed to move toward him and he yelped, a dry-lipped whisper. He heard a weak, terrified cry from ahead and the shadow was forgotten for the moment. Relsa Dav needed him. He hurried to her side.

"Besan!" She clung to him, sobbing. Her face was a dim oval.

"We have found a cave," he told her. "Come. The *wadts* will be aloft now that darkness has come."

"I hear — things — moving!" The girl's voice quavered.

Besan thought of the shadow and the sense of oppression that had again overcome him. And then he laughed, shakily, as he led.

"Nothing could reach us here save the *wadts*," he said, "and in a moment we will be safe from them."

So it was that they went warily along the shadowy ridge down to the rift in the opposite slope. Twice their soft shoes knocked unseen pebbles clattering downward, but other than that there was no sound.

And from the crevice a flicker of flame revealed that Nard Rost had already kindled a fire. Besan opened his mouth to call out a greeting.

But he never spoke. A great hard-palmed hand clamped across his lips and an arm crushed his ribs together. Dimly he could see a savage face and the naked body of his assailant. There were other shadowy shapes, too. He felt Relsa Dav's fingers torn from his grasp. His knotted fists slammed into the hard flesh of the savage.

His captor grunted. The hairy body shifted and Besan's head was rocked by a club in a bony fist. He sank down into a pain-throbbing gulf that was not completely without sound and sight.

In a detached sort of way he knew that he was being dragged into the cave and bound with stinking rawhide ropes. He lay in a corner of the cave beside the bound shapes of Nard Rost and the girl. And by the fire a dozen half-naked man shapes crouched, harsh voices rumbling.

Relsa Dav was calling to him but he kept slipping further and further away into the blackness of the cavern until he heard her no more.

**T**HE HAFT OF a spear thudded alongside his skull. Besan shook his head and found that he was walking along a sunken game trail in a patch of the yellow-green jungle flooring a narrow valley. His hands were roped behind him and his lips were cracked and dry. Overhead the sun was hand-high in the sky.

From behind him Nard Rost spoke.

"Better now, boy?"

Besan grunted. A sullen growing anger was blotting the fear and acquired timidity of Terra from his mind. If his hands were free...

"I'll do." He turned to see Nard Rost, and behind him the girl, with the balance of the fierce-looking savages strung out behind them.

"They're taking us to their caves," Nard Rost told him.

"To eat, I suppose." Besan turned his face to the front again.

Nard Rost's chuckle reached him. "Nothing so bloody as that. We're to be slaves, cultivating their patches of vegetables and *goorn*."

"Relsa too?"

"Unless Detch—he's the sub-chief who captured us—wants her."

Besan stumbled and the huge warrior ahead of him, the leader apparently, swung his spear again. It caught Besan across the ear and cheek. He staggered and his hatred for this grinning pulpy-nosed brute grew. Once he got his hands on a spear, or a club, or a knife—then let this gargoyle giant watch for his life!

He who had never killed an animal, or struck a blow in anger, was praying to

all the unknown powers of space that he might strike the life from Detch's hulking body!

The trail wound between a series of ragged gigantic boulders; black, gray, and red-mottled and layered white. A guard in a thatched shelter high above welcomed them and shouted the word along ahead.

The guard cranked at a rude windlass, the rope disappearing lumpily into the rocks ahead, and when they rounded another black barrier of stone they saw a stout barrier of logs lifting to shoulder-height even as they reached it.

They stooped and passed beneath (apparently the gate lifted no higher) and were in a long, narrow valley.

Cultivated fields and groves of tall slender trees checkered the valley floor. In the low cliffs on either hand black openings gaped, cave entrances, and before these scantily clad children and women moved or sprawled lazily in the sun.

Overhead a rude network of interlaced vines, poles and twisted grasses sheltered the cultivated patches of ground. Besan saw now the purpose of the regular groves of trees—they were to support the guarding nets sagging overhead. It was only thus that the nocturnal raids of the bat-winged *wadts* could be checked.

Detch strutted proudly as he called out to the cave dwellers.

"I have taken slaves," he bragged. "Two strong men fit for the fields. Them I will sell."

A sleek-bodied girl, her central stripe almost pure white, pushed out from among the admiring group before the caves. Her small rounded hands perched atop her generously wide hips and her head tilted.

"The female," she said harshly, "is for sale too?"

Detch laughed. "For too long have you tried my patience," he said. "No, Lifa. The girl is not for sale. She will be my new mate. Go back to your mother."

"No!" Lifa's eyes flamed. From her soiled single garment of cratur hide she snatched a slim knife and flung herself at Detch.

But Detch was familiar with the tigerish qualities of his erstwhile mate. He sidestepped her rush and the ever-present spear lashed out brutally. She went down, a great welt growing along her suddenly

white face. Detch kicked her side, and laughed.

"Drag her out for the *wadts* to pick," he ordered the admiring pack of women and children. "Or, if she lives, drive her from the valley."

Besan Wur had made his way to Relsa's side. "We'll get you out of this," he told her.

The girl's face was empty of feeling or emotion. Apparently her mind had temporarily gone numbly blank. Maybe it was better that way, thought Besan. But they'd have to escape soon.

A warrior prodded him with his spear haft. "Get along to the place-of-selling," he ordered.

The place-of-selling was a waist-high slab of brown rock before the caves. Here the savages bartered their weapons, slaves, and the products of their fields. Detch officiated as auctioneer.

Besan brought six spears, two stone axes, a slightly nicked sword-knife—manufactured in Rhilg, Besan noticed — and three small bags of narcotic *goorn* dust. Nard Rost brought Detch but five spears and four bags of *goorn* dust—he was older.

Their buyer, a corpulent narrow-eyed man named Noch, took them to his caves, four of them on valley level, and fed them. Then a collar of heavy wood was laced about their necks and they were driven out into the fields to hoe the newly planted vegetables.

NIGHT CAME ALL TOO SLOWLY in the little canyon valley. Wearily the two men from Rhilg lay in the rear of the servants' cave, their necks chafed and bloody from the heavy collars. The cold scraps of meat lay heavy in their stomachs, and the foul stench of the stew they had forced themselves to gulp down pervaded the cave's thick atmosphere.

By the fire the other slaves chattered. Their collars were smaller and their spirits unhurt. If they worked loyally for their owner they might be taken into the tribe or freed. And they were well fed and warm. Noch was a good master.

"How are we to escape?" whispered Besan. "This yoke is too heavy and clumsy and the entrance is barred at night."

"If we can get a knife and cut the lashings...They're like iron now that

they've dried but a knife could slice them. And the slaves must sleep soon."

"And Relsa Dav...that brute taking her!"

"Ssst!"

"Someone coming, Nard?"

"I heard nothing, Besan. I thought it was you."

A hoarsely feminine voice broke in. They shifted to face the rear of the cave where a small section of rock had disappeared.

"I am Lifa," said the voice, and then the woman's face emerged into the fire's half-light. "I wish to revenge myself on Detch. And on Noch who is my brother. They have driven me from the caves."

Besan felt his heart leap. "Good," he agreed. "Cut us free and we will go with you."

"Will you take me to your tribe? If I go as your mate they will welcome me."

Besan swallowed. "I will claim you as my mate," volunteered Nard Rost quickly.

Lifa sniffed. "You are too old. But the other is young and handsome." She slipped into the cave, sheltered by their bodies.

If he could be freed and so rescue Relsa Dav, Besan told himself, it would be worth mating with this stripe-haired wildcat. And she seemed the only way of escape. Probably, if he refused, she would use her knife on the both of them.

"Why, sure," he agreed, his voice strained. "But my friend's daughter must be rescued too."

Lifa was silent for a moment before her muted harsh mirth sounded. He felt Nard Rost's fingers squeeze his arm approvingly.

"Better yet," she agreed. "I cheat them of both slaves and his new mate." She peered at Besan. "Where does your tribe live?"

"In Rhilg," he told her. "In the city of the inner cone."

With an awed gasp the woman drew a well-whetted knife from within her garment and started hacking at the dried bindings of the galling wooden yoke.

"I will be dressed like the aristocrats," she whispered. "Shiny cloth, sparkling rings, polished leather, jewels. Then I can laugh at Detch."

The last strand of Nard Rost's collar

finally being loosed, they slipped into the hidden opening through which the woman had come. The deeper shadows and two heaped-up bundles of dried rushes and grass that they left behind should cover their escape for a time, Besan told himself.

They followed a low, narrow corridor that twisted along a path parallel with the cliff.

"Detch, and the chief alone know of this way," she confided. "Using it they can listen to the conversation of any of the caves and learn who is disloyal. Or they can kill those who sleep within."

"Nice people for in-laws, Besan," Nard Rost jibed.

Besan grunted. "How far to the cave of the—of Detch?" he demanded.

"Here it is," Lifa said, sliding a slab aside. "Won't Detch be surprised!"

Besan pushed through the opening. He was in the rear of a large cave cut into many low-walled chambers by irregular sections of fallen rock. There was a reddish flicker of flames on the walls and roof from the front of the cave. Toward this he made his way.

Beside the fire, huddled in a little pile of *cratur*-hide blankets, was Relsa. She was alone.

Besan hurried to her and explained in a few brief words that he had made a bargain with Lifa. Then he started to lead her back toward the cave's hidden exit.

THE curtains rasped at the entrance and Detch was in the cave. Besan dropped the girl's hand and his eyes darted around the firelit circle of the nearby walls. There were pegs driven into rocky crevices and from them hung short sword knives and hatchets. Other pegs supported a lethal assortment of heavy hunting spears and small bows for birds and rodents.

Besan jerked two of the sword knives from their pegs, his fingers familiar with their ridged leather grips from the required classes in fencing at Rhilg University.

"Is there meat cooked?" roared Detch.

He shook his ugly head, his pig's eyes blinking.

"Where are you?" he demanded. "Come out before I beat you again."

"Here," cried Besan, and flung himself at the giant.



In that instant a hot fire seemed to consume the chill in his bones and he felt no more fear. Detch's startled oath and his own sword knife came out together. Their blades clicked.

It was Besan's first encounter with unshielded blades. One of his weapons went spinning in that first swift onslaught and then the practiced skills of his fencing class came to his defense.

He turned the hacking sword and his own blade ripped across Detch's hairy chest. The pain drew a cry from the big savage's throat and his sword knife slashed more furiously. And already the cave was filled with the choking foul haze that was the defense of all Saaaran humanoids.

Detch roared for aid. In a few moments others of the tribe would be coming and they would be trapped. Besan drove his blade through the clumsy guard of the bigger man into the hairy chest.

Detch went down. Besan wiped his streaming eyes and darted toward the cave's rear entrance where Relsa Dav and the others were waiting.

"Good work, boy," said Nard Rost exultantly. "I hoped that you'd prove I was right."

*Right about what?* Besan wondered, as he helped roll the slab back into its appointed slot.

Nor were they any too soon. From the cave they had so recently quitted there sounded startled cries and shouts of rage. If Detch were not dead they would soon have a party of warriors on their heels.

Lifa hurried before them, leading the way. Once she stopped in a storeroom and tucked several small bags of *goorn* dust into her garment's inner pouch. To her it meant wealth and, although Besan told her Garro law forbade possession of the narcotic, she did not throw it away.

They emerged at last in the valley above the caves and beyond the barrier of logs at its upper end. A dense thicket of thorny brush shielded the entrance and sheltered them from the leathery-winged *wadts* cruising overhead, as they pushed westward toward Rhilg.

**M**ORNING FOUND THEM in a region of rocky gulches and vegetation choked streams but a score of Terran miles from the Rhilg Hills. Far ahead the majes-

tic black cone of Rhilg lifted above the heaped-up jumble of wooded hills and ridges.

But between them and the opposite hills the tide of maddened *demars* flooded onward as they had two days before. They could only hope to find a hiding place until the stampeding herds were gone, a useless plan for they had caught glimpses of a trailing party of warriors several times.

"If we could only find an impregnable position," Nard Rost told them, "until help can reach us."

"You reached them at last?" demanded Besan, tapping Nard Rost's bracelet broadcaster.

The instructor nodded. "About ten minutes ago. Signals are very faint but they're sending a dirigible. By midday probably."

"Besan," said Relsa Dav tensely, "to the right!"

Lifa whirled and her hand stole inside her scanty garment to where the sacks of *goorn* dust and her knife rested.

A smaller rift, a miniature gorge snaking down into the gulch they followed, lay revealed. And sprinting down its rocky floor came four well-armed warriors of the pursuing band! In a matter of seconds they would be blocking the trail ahead.

Besan looked ahead and at the rocky slope to their left. A steep trail, a brushy wet-weather watercourse, led upward to the gulch's bare rim.

"Quick," he ordered. "Up with you!"

They scrambled upward, the girls ahead and Nard Rost after them. The savages realized that they had been seen and their shouts boomed through the air to their fellows behind.

The watercourse climbed yet more steeply so they were forced to pull themselves upward by projecting roots and branches. A moment later they stumbled, one by one, over the lip of the little gulch and paused to catch their breath.

They had reached a table-like flat of some sixty odd feet across. At either end jumbled rocks sloped gradually downward and directly opposite a higher sheer escarpment blocked progress. Their only escape lay to the right, away from their pursuers.

Besan led the way. He chose a course through the broken rocks that tried their wasted strength least. Yet he knew that

before long they must halt and attempt to make a stand—

Suddenly he halted and the sword knife was in his hand.

A menacing elephantine shape loomed up in his path, a reddish-haired bearlike *cratur*. And behind the foremost *cratur* a half dozen others jammed the way!

He turned—and saw the snowy-striped heads of the savage warriors already entering the rocks. They were trapped.

Lifa pushed at him. Her purple eyes were blazing.

"Drive them out of the way!" she cried. "One whiff of your scent and they will scatter."

Besan groaned. His tank of scent lay back in the cave village of Detch.

"I can't," he confessed swiftly. "I am—I was born without scent glands."

Lifa's eyes were scornful. She clawed him aside and pushed forward, laying down an acrid barrage that split the lumbering *cratur*'s living wall apart. They pushed through into the more open ground beyond the rocks.

Besan's eyes leaked but his brain was busy. If the *cratur*s could only be used to stop the savages . . .

"Give me the *goorn* dust," he told Lifa.

"I'll give you nothing," she screeched hoarsely. "I want nothing to do with a freak like you. I'll find a new mate." She turned to run toward the southern hills.

Besan spun her about and ripped the bags of *goorn* dust from their hiding place. Lifa snarled, her nails raked his face, and then her knife slashed at his forearm. The Earthman chopped his hand down on her wrist and the knife jarred free.

"Take her," he told Nard Rost and Relsa.

Back toward the *cratur*s he ran until he was within throwing distance of them. As he ran he untied the sacks, and once within range started tossing them accurately at the shaggy red heads of the bearlike monsters.

The *goorn* dust acted swiftly, deadening their senses and, at the same time rousing their notoriously short tempers to a feverish peak. For the moment they would pay no heed to the obnoxious natural weapon of the striped men.

At that moment the pursuing warriors

came into sight and darted in among the milling brutes. The *cratur*s roared and sprang upon them.

Besan turned and raced back toward the others.

Lifa was gone. She had twisted free from Nard Rost and Relsa and headed southward into the jungle-clad gorges and hills there. And directly ahead a faint trail dipped down into a tree-grown valley on the road to Rhilg.

"We must hurry," he said urgently, and then became aware of Relsa's eyes staring at his bleeding arm.

The blood welling from it was red—the purple coloring had been absorbed and he had not renewed it. He shrugged. Now she would know he was not a Garro—as would Nard Rost. That meant execution as a spy or shipment back to a System planet and amnesia.

Of course he could escape into the jungle before the dirigible came, but that would mean leaving Relsa and Nard Rost unprotected. He shook his head. His decision was made. He faced them proudly.

**B**UT RELSA WAS not regarding him with the disgust Lifa had shown. Instead her eyes were shining; her lips parting in a glad cry. Unbelieving, he turned to Nard Rost. The weary purple eyes smiled. There was no hatred or disgust here.

Relsa came into his arms, sobbing. "You're Terran too!" she cried.

Nard Rost turned. For the moment they were safe. He found a flat boulder.

"We've known all along, Besan," he said to the dazed Earthman. "Your smell is different. But race or smell mean nothing to us if you have courage." He paused. "And are level-headed under stress."

"That you have proved, even as Relsa's parents proved they were fit citizens of Saaar. With your race's greater knowledge to aid us Saaar can rebuild its cities and resume its rightful place among worlds."

Nard Rost was studying the distant horizon where the great cone of Rhilg loomed. Now he turned to see why Besan Wur had said nothing. He tugged at an earlobe and chuckled. They were not listening.

"Silly custom," he grunted and started wearily off down the trail toward the plain.