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**STORIES**

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# Beyond The Snake Planet

by Bill Wesley

*Suddenly, Dave Norwood realized what he had let himself in for, taking the post of commander of this expedition. There was nothing for him on whatever planet he helped them find—but Norwood could never go back. But—if something happened to colonist Lor Halvorsen, and Lor's lovely blonde wife became a lovely blonde widow...*

Complete Novelet

**C**APTAIN DAVE NORWOOD stood in the pilot room of the *Pegasus* and watched a blue-nosed space-taxi glide out toward the big ship.

"That's the last cargo," his radio operator said. "One more passenger load on the way."

Norwood said, "All right, Radio silence now on everything but intercom."

He switched on a viewscreen that gave him an external picture of the ship and watched the crew of men loading the last few crates from the preceding cargo-taxi. It was hard to keep from shouting at them to get the lead out. They weren't experienced spacemen, just some volunteers he had called for from the passenger list—even so, they were far too clumsy, he thought—too clumsy and too slow. Not one of them was able to hop out into space without glancing back a half-dozen times to make sure that the big ship didn't move away while he was out there fumbling with a crate.

Norwood grimaced. "Crate" was right. That's what the whole ship was—a crate. A big, awkwardly-built, dumb-bell-shaped crate—with passenger quarters at each end, and the crew and power plant housed in a smaller bulb in the middle. What a puzzle it would be for some future generation of explorers when they found it rusting on a distant planet some day. It had been assembled mostly from parts taken from derelict space stations and twentieth century rocket ships

abandoned on the Moon and Mars. The only thing new about it was its nuclear power plant—that had cost Dr. Kettering's group a good part of their treasury.

Well, Norwood sighed, it was their money. He'd try to see that they got the most out of it. The ship could probably outrun anything but a government hot-shot; they'd just have to trust to luck on that.

**F**OR THE hundredth time Norwood asked himself how he had gotten mixed up with such a motley crowd as John Kettering's Galactic Exploration Group. Not only had he thrown his ten year career as a government space pilot out the window; he had probably committed suicide as well. The expedition had not been approved by the government. Unapproved flights such as these were considered treasonable, and they'd be attacked once they were clear of the atmosphere. Somehow, such traitors were never brought back to Earth for trial; the ship and its entire personnel was always destroyed trying to escape.

And since they had enough

fuel for only seven star-orbitings, and about the same number of planet-orbitings, Norwood figured the chances of finding a livable planet were about as thin as cosmic dust. Even if they did find a planet, he shuddered to think what it would be like leading an expeditionary force of Kettering's colonists against whatever wild creatures they might encounter on it. Worst of all, suppose everything worked out just fine and dandy, what would Dave Norwood do then? Build a log cabin and become a farmer like the rest of the fanatics? So what, if Earth had become crowded, and laws had become too strict! It hadn't bothered him; he was a spaceman, not a weed-puller...

**H**E TURNED his attention back to the men outside and spoke into a microphone hanging around his neck.

"Lieutenant Clive, Captain Norwood. Last cargo coming out. Slight mix-up I guess. Taxi has blue nose cone. Double-time the loading; give preference to fuel and food. Be prepared to jump aboard on sixty-second notice. Over."

He watched on the view-screen as his space-suited supply officer detached himself from the loading crew and looked around for the next cargo-taxi.

"Roger," came the reply. "This ought to do it. Wilco."

Norwood clicked off his microphone and muttered under his breath, "It had better do it. There aren't any supply depots in space."

He turned to his radar operator. "Any patrol ships in sight?"

The radar man's eyes never left the fourteen inch scope before him as he said, "Negative, sir."

Norwood then signaled to his executive officer, Commander Mel Durkin, to take over the ship's instrumentation. He twisted a remote control selector switch hanging from his belt and clicked on his microphone again. "Dr. Kettering," he called. "I have some time now. I can talk to the latest arrivals if you'll assemble them, please. Over."

The group chief acknowledged the call and said, "I'll have them in the main lounge right away."

**N**ORWOOD then switched the viewscreen to the interior of the ship's lounge and let his eye wander over the faces of the men and women who began filing in. Damn if they didn't look like colonists already, he thought. Then his gaze flicked over the pert nose and blue eyes of a slim blonde girl, and he felt a surge of warm blood course through him. Now there was the kind of doll who belonged in a colonizing cadre! Then he saw that she was walking beside a well-built young man who obviously adored her, and who carried a baby in his arms that looked like both of them. Well, so much for that! He might have known that there wouldn't be any of that kind of stuff kickin' around loose...

He cleared his throat and began to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain Norwood, your ship's commander. I want to welcome you aboard the *Pegasus* and give you my word that my crew and I will do everything possible to assure your comfort and safety from here to your ultimate destination. I assume that you have already

reached an agreement with Dr. Kettering regarding your obligations to him as colonists; all such arrangements are strictly between yourselves and Dr. Kettering. As commander of this ship, however, and therefore responsible for the safety of everyone aboard, there are certain obligations which I must demand of you, too.

"I must ask that you obey the requests of my duly commissioned officers with respect to all items directly or indirectly connected with the operation of the ship, especially in cases of emergency. I must ask that you submit without equivocation to the order of suspended animation as set forth by my command. This order will not necessarily be by families, but will be by assignments. All women and children will go into suspended animation as soon as we clear the solar system. The men will go in as they can be spared from their assigned duties. For some there will be shifts of perhaps six months work out of each five or six years of elapsed time.

"This is unavoidable. The ship is not one hundred percent automatic. Star systems must

be investigated. Lookouts must be established to guard against seizure by alien forces—if there are any. Radio contact with the other Galactic Exploration Groups must be maintained if we are to take advantage of their discoveries. We will do everything in our power to see that no man ages more than a few years over his wife and family, but please do not expect us to be able to predict what emergencies we may encounter in interstellar space. Suffice it to say that everyone will be expected to do his part according to the circumstances.”

**H**E PAUSED and glanced again at the blue-eyed blonde. He was coming to realize more and more that he had been an idiot to undertake the mission in the first place. Of course all the women would be married—the least he could have done was to bring along a woman of his own. What the hell was he going to do for the rest of his life—wait for some colonist to die?

He forced his thoughts back to the moment and continued

with his prepared speech. “In order to cut down on the aging time as much as possible, I would like to talk with any passengers who have had training or experience in any of the sciences or technologies—particularly radar, radio communication, astronautics, or nuclear mechanics. The more people we have who can work a shift in one of these fields the shorter the shifts can be.”

**H**E WENT on to tell them of the itinerary of the *Pegasus*, explaining that it would pass the other two ships and investigate the star systems further out. The first star to be investigated was Gamma Pegasi, for which the ship had been named. The only familiar stars to be visited were Castor, Pollux, and Capella. The others were the lesser known Delta Herculis, Beta Cassiopeia, and Gamma Virginis. These star systems—if any of the stars on the list had system—plus those to be investigated by the first two groups, represented the most likely prospect within a reasonable distance of the solar system.

Pollux was the furthest one out, and it was fifty light years away. If they had to go that far, it would take them at least eighty years. Even if they found a planet revolving about Gamma Pegasi, they would be well over fifty years reaching it.

"I don't tell you all this to dishearten you in any way," he concluded. "I simply want you to understand that this is no picnic we're on, and that we may have to take some drastic measures before we're finished. As for our chances of success, I'll say only this. I have every expectation of reaching all the stars on our list. If one of them has a livable planet revolving about it, I promise you we'll find it."

He switched the screen back to an outside view and started to call his supply officer. The radar operator stopped him.

"A patrol ship at eleven thousand, sir. They may have spotted us. They're accelerating."

**N**ORWOOD glanced at the radar panel. There was a

blip at eleven thousand miles, and it was closing steadily.

"Put it on PPI," he said. "Let's have a better look at its bearing."

The radar man flipped the Plan-Position-Indicator switch and the scope presentation changed instantly to polar coordinates, oriented with respect to the Earth's center. The *Pegasus*' own position was marked by a luminous dot moving about the Earth at a distance of four thousand miles from the surface. The patrol ship showed as a fainter dot two thousand miles out. But while the *Pegasus* was in free fall and orbiting the Earth slowly, the patrol ship was swinging out in an ever-widening spiral and moving much faster.

"Don't mind using the government's fuel, do they?" Norwood muttered. "See what the computer says about contact time—and give me the time for three thousand, too. They won't fire before then."

He turned to his radio operator. "Any interrogation?"

The technician shook his head.

## II

NORWOOD glanced at the outside view and swore. The blue-nosed cargo-taxi had just jettisoned its load and had made a sloppy job of it. "What the hell happened out there?" he called over his intercom.

Lieutenant Clive's voice answered him bitterly. "The damn fool matched our course speed okay but he was still moving out. Now we'll have to use nozzles to go after the cargo."

Norwood exhaled through his teeth and clenched his fists. "All right, do the best you can," he said, with forced calmness. "Remember—fuel and food first. There's a patrol ship at eleven thousand—might catch us in a half-hour or so. Change sixty second alert to three minutes. You'll need it, the way that stuff is scattered."

He watched his supply officer take off after a volunteer who was having trouble with his repulsion nozzle. The hardest thing to teach a beginner was to point the nozzle away from where he wanted to go. It

was like teaching a center fielder to run toward the wall while looking toward home plate. Invariably a novice with a repulsion nozzle went into a small panic as he approached an object in space. He either gave it a far wider berth than necessary, or he became confused and plowed into it.

Norwood turned away from the screen with a pained expression on his face. He couldn't spare any more of his regular crew to help with the loading—not with a patrol ship bearing out toward them. His agreement with Kettering was that the *Pegasus* would avoid combat as long as possible—but that didn't include defensive measures. He would need all of his instrument technicians and anti-missile men, and he might need more than that. Agreement or no agreement, he wasn't going to be anybody's clay pigeon...

"Twenty-seven minutes to contact," the radar operator said.

NORWOOD relaxed a little at that. At least it wasn't a hot-shot. He turned to Durkin, his executive officer, and said,



"Anti-missile positions in ten minutes. Target will be in plane of ecliptic, between six and nine o'clock. Fire at my command."

To his radar operator he said, "Give me a quick reading on anything they shoot at us."

The radar man nodded and said, "Here comes a taxi. The last passenger load probably."

Norwood studied the scope. It showed a small ship about a thousand miles out from Earth. Apparently it had already cut acceleration. It was moving considerably slower than the patrol ship. It was much closer, too, however, so it wasn't easy to estimate its contact time.

"Okay, keep your eye on it," he said. "Let me know if the patrol takes any action against it."

He glanced toward the view-screen again to check on the loading operations. Some of the crates were several hundred yards away already, drifting along with the ship, but seeking their own balance between, centrifugal force and the Earth's gravitational attraction—each one trying to become an independent satellite of Earth. Lieutenant Clive had

given up trying to instruct his makeshift crew in the use of propulsion nozzles; now he was rounding up as many crates as he could handle at one time and shooting them back to the ship. The crates had no weight in space, and theoretically a repulsion nozzle could move an indefinite number of them, but they had inertia, and it took forever to get them moving if a man tried to push too many at once.

"Twenty minutes to contact," radar said. "Twelve minutes to missile range."

"They're interrogating the taxi," radio reported.

**N**ORWOOD grabbed a spare earphone and listened in. The taxi pilot was saying that he had a ship full of tourists, cruising out to the five thousand mile zone. The interrogator wanted to know why his ship carried an orange nose cone.

"We had trouble with some of our ships," the pilot replied. "I know it's a misdemeanor, but, golly, you wouldn't want me to lose the gravity from twelve bug-eyed tourists, would you?"

Norwood checked the PPI screen. "They've got a telescope," he said, half-aloud. "They wouldn't be able to see the color of his nose cone without it—not at that range. That means they'll be reading our markings next."

He called Lieutenant Clive on the intercom again. "May have to order you in pretty damn quick. Concentrate on fuel. Let everything else go."

*By God, if we starve to death we'll do it at high speed,* he thought. Then to Durkin he said, "Get your men set at anti-missile stations. Don't shoot at Pyros. Wait for confirmation."

"They've ordered the taxi alongside," radio said, "but they're going too fast for him."

Norwood laughed. "Good! That shows they're confused. What's the time to missile range now?"

"Eight-thirty."

**N**ORWOOD caught a glimpse of someone entering the pilot room from the passenger shoot. It was the nusky young man he had noticed sitting beside the blonde in the lounge a few minutes earlier.

"Yeah, what do you want?" he asked bluntly.

"My name is Lor Halvorsen," the man said. "I—I've had a little radar school. I didn't know if you."

"How much?" Norwood snapped at him.

"A year and a half—at Evanston."

Norwood examined him critically. "Why didn't you finish? Get washed out?"

Halvorsen appeared embarrassed. "I just decided to try something else. I didn't want to go into space then. I wish now that I had."

Norwood made a face. He hated himself for his attitude. After all, the guy was volunteering for ship's duty—he wasn't asking any favors. It was just that—well, looking at Halvorsen, Dave Norwood kept thinking of the blue-eyed blonde with the slim figure—and the easy way of walking—and of smiling...

"We're busy as hell right now," he said. "Sit down by Blake there and keep your eyes open—and thanks for coming in," he added reluctantly. "I appreciate it."

"They shot at the taxi sir," radar said.

**N**ORWOOD turned to the radar scope. The radar man increased the intensity and they watched a faint pin-point of light move away from the patrol ship and curve in toward the taxi. When it was somewhere within a hundred miles or so, it suddenly disappeared. For a moment Norwood didn't know what had happened. There was no flare—no explosion...

"Pyro," the radar man said.

Norwood almost contradicted him. Then he remembered that they were watching on a radar scope, not a television screen. Of course they wouldn't see the flare.

"Yeah," he said self-consciously. "Now we'll see what they do. If they go after the taxi, they won't catch us; if they don't go after the taxi we'll know they're on our tail for sure."

He felt foolish inside. Foolish and angry with himself for getting upset over a slim blonde girl who was already married and who didn't know

that Dave Norwood was alive anyway...

"What was that shot?" Durkin asked from across the room.

"They shot a pyro at the taxi," Norwood told him. Then he realized that Durkin couldn't see the taxi on his firing scope. Naturally he'd have a blow-up of the area around the patrol ship. "There's a taxi coming out," he said. "For God's sake, don't mistake it for a missile when it comes onto your scope."

"One minute to missile range," radar said.

"Eyes open now," Norwood told Durkin. "Don't get over-anxious. When they shoot at us you'll have plenty of time for counterfire after we determine the course of their missile."

"Here it comes," radar said.

Norwood stepped to his side and waited. The radar man checked the computer. After about three seconds he said, "Negative, sir."

**N**ORWOOD tapped Durkin on the shoulder. "It's a miss, but heads up. They didn't

bother to interrogate. That means they know who we are. They'll stay outside and try to destroy us. If they change course, don't wait for a command; blast 'em out of space."

He switched the large view-screen to a general outside picture and everyone watched for the missile.

"Missile coming," he told Lieutenant Clive over the intercom. "Try to keep the panic down. It's a miss. Probably a pyro."

Clive had no sooner said, "Roger," when the missile appeared as a fast streak on the viewscreen. Then all of space seemed to light up with a blinding glare as thousands of tiny particles, exploding from the pyrotechnical shell, shot out a hundred yards or so and then exploded themselves. The intensity was almost unbelievable. In the old days of war on Earth, the artillery had sometimes used a shell called a *screamin' mcemie* that had made a weird noise as it went through the air and then had exploded with a tremendous bang. It had not had much destructive power, but it had been a terrible thing to hear,

according to the accounts that Norwood had read of it. Well, he doubted that it had been any worse than a pyro. There was no noise in space, and really no glare either—it just seemed that way from the blinding effect. Even when he knew what to expect, a pyro always gave him a strange feeling that he didn't care to analyze. He could imagine what the reaction had been among the passengers—and among the men working outside.

**T**HE RADIO reported, "They've ordered us to stand by for boarding."

Norwood snorted. Capitulation would save no one now, but the patrol had to go through the motions. There had to be the pretense that an unauthorized expedition *could* surrender and come back for trial. Few, very few, realized that one or two "traitor" expeditions had changed their minds at the last moment and cooperated. The patrol liked that; it made for less danger in the destruction. Then the reports would show virtuous indignation and sorrow that the "surrender" was just a trick by means of which

traitors could escape from good-hearted patrolmen.

"Stand by? We're in free fall." Very probably, none of the colonists realized their exact situation. He added, "I'll bet a hundred bucks that's Syzmanski's ship. He's probably turning pages right now to see what he's supposed to do next."

He glanced at the computer tape. Five and a half minutes to contact. No time to pick up the last load of passengers—unless.

He studied the PPI scope, estimating times and drawing imaginary vectors in his brain. Finally he shouted, "By God, we'll try it. Contact the taxi with your tightest beam. Two degrees ought to pin-point him. Tell him to stand by for instructions. Don't let the patrol intercept your call."

He turned to the intercom and shouted, "Clive! Drop everything. Get in here pronto. Two minutes."

"Taxi standing by," radio reported.

Norwood leaned over the operator's shoulder and spoke into the microphone. "Listen fella. Listen carefully. Maintain present bearing with re-

spect to Earth, but dive tangentially. Dive with all you've got. Blackout your passengers if you must, but dive. Right now!"

The taxi pilot didn't bother to acknowledge. He dived.

NORWOOD watched the radar scope long enough to see if the man had understood, then he fairly yelped with excitement. "Wait'll old Syzmanski sees this maneuver. He'll throw his book out the discard tube."

He ran around the pilot room checking instruments. "Stand by for eight *g*'s acceleration," he told Durkin. "Get the passengers all strapped down. Same in here. We'll see how good our automatic is. I'll ride herd from a stand-up chair. Everybody else down. Is Clive in?"

Somebody said yes. Norwood checked the position of the patrol ship once more. Four and a half minutes to contact. "Hah! That's what *they* think!"

He strapped himself into a vertical contour chair, then pulled an auxiliary control panel within reach. He glanced

around to see that everyone was tied down, then said, with a calmness that surprised even himself, "Okay, I've got her now. Stand by to grab the brass ring."

He eased the ship out of orbit with a blast from the starboard rockets, then, stage by stage, he punched in full power.

**T**HE WEIGHT was terrific, but the feeling of exultation that came over him more than made up for it. For six days the *Pegasus* had fallen around Earth from four thousand miles out, storing cargo and picking up passengers. The patrol watched idly, he knew, waiting until their quarry would be at fullest concentration. Why annihilate a handful when all could be wiped out?

Norwood had just about gone stir-crazy. Now, at last, there was action. It might be his last chance to play space-poker with one of his brother-alumni from the Academy, and he was going to make the most of it.

He watched on the PPI scope as the dot that represented the taxi began moving faster and

faster as the pilot dived back toward Earth. He watched his own dot begin to gain, to draw into a slight trail on the scope. Damn, the ship had guts! Too bad the taxi wasn't a hot-shot; then he'd really show Syzmani-ski something.

He kept his fingers hovering over the control panel, but the automatic pilot took care of everything, slowing the ship into a matching trajectory with the diving taxi.

Two hundred miles from Earth, with the taxi travelling close to eighty thousand miles an hour, the *Pegasus* drew alongside and threw out her clamps. As smoothly as if they were performing on a motion picture set, the passengers walked across from the taxi to the *Pegasus*.

Norwood invited the pilot and crew to come along, but they declined. "We're safe enough," the pilot said. "They got our number all right, but the ship that's registered under that number can prove it wasn't out today. They'll never find us."

**N**ORWOOD waved him off and disengaged the clamps.

The *Pegasus* roared around Earth barely a hundred and fifty miles out. It orbited with a terrific kick and swung half-way to the Moon on the other side. Syzmanski in the patrol ship—if it was Syzmanski, and Norwood refused to think otherwise—was nowhere in sight. That is, he was nowhere until the radar operator turned up the intensity to near-maximum. Then they saw him almost enveloped in ground-clutter as he poured government money out through his tailpipes, but to no avail. The surprise move had left the patrolman flatfooted in space; he had no hope of catching them.

Norwood grinned faintly. It had worked only because this was the first time an unauthorized expedition had had an experienced hand in command, who knew fully what they were up against. Ordinarily, one patrol ship handled the situation. And even then, he admitted to himself, he'd had the advantage of knowing that man opposing him.

*Syzmanski would have gotten anyone else*, he thought; *and anyone else might have gotten Dave Norwood*. He'd

planned the attempt for a time when he was sure Syzmanski would be on duty.

"Somebody's reporting our antics to a hot-shot on the Moon," radio reported.

Norwood only smiled. "Too late," he said. "By the time we come around again, we'll be a million miles out. They couldn't catch us either."

He unstrapped himself from the vertical chair and turned the controls over to the technicians. The excitement was over now. Time to settle into space routine. "Durkin, Clive," he called. "Let's go. Ask the other officers to come in. See if we can get something organized around here now."

### III

**D**R. JOHN KETTERING didn't work a regular shift aboard the *Pegasus*; as colony chief, he felt that his responsibility should begin when a potential homesite was being explored. In space, he was perfectly willing to let the ship's commander maintain full control. Kettering left instructions to be awakened, however, when the ship

orbited a planet of any description, no matter how unlikely a living place it might appear. Thus it was, early in the twenty-second century, when the *Pegasus* was fifty-two years out from Earth, Kettering was awakened.

After hurrying through the standard medical check-up, and swallowing a half-dozen anonymous pills, he moved through the passenger shoot to the pilot room. There he found Captain Norwood and three other men gazing at a tiny glob of light on the large view-screen.

"Well, good morning, Doc," Norwood said, somewhat boisterously. "Sleep well?"

Kettering couldn't repress a grin. He wondered how many times in the fifty-two years those same words had been spoken.

"We just swooshed around Gamma Pegasi," Norwood told him. "There's a planet there all right, but it looks dead to me—and it's awful damned small."

Kettering studied the view-screen. They were too far from the planet for him to see anything but a tiny disk. Apparently the *Pegasus* had made

one tour of the system and was coming in closer. The star itself—Gamma Pegasi, for which their ship had been named—was somewhere behind them, he guessed. He kept his eyes on the viewscreen nevertheless; he wanted to regain his composure before facing the captain again. It had been something of a shock to him to see the change that had come over the man. It wasn't simply that he appeared older by a year or two; he looked weaker somehow—dissipated, perhaps, or sick; Kettering wasn't sure.

**K**ETTERING could easily imagine what the trip had been for the space commander—standing short watches over a period of fifty-two years, brooding over his decision to leave everything behind and join forces with a group of colonists. It had occurred to Kettering, too late for action, that the officers of the *Pegasus* might prove to be a troublesome element once the colony was established. Not one of them had brought along a wife and family; and, if he remembered correctly, the oldest unmarried girl on the ship was



only about thirteen or fourteen. Most of them were much younger.

"There's a liquid vapor of some kind," Norwood was saying. "Might be water; might not. We'll know when we get a little closer. Whatever atmosphere there is, it seems confined to that vapor, and it isn't very damn thick."

Kettering nodded absently. He was wondering if either of the two authorized expeditions had found anything. He was about to ask, when Norwood anticipated him.

"You'll want to study the radiograms from the other ships," he said. "Number One is in its fifth orbiting; that's around Procyon. They haven't found anything yet. Number Two is looking at Fomalhaut. Negative all around so far. Half a dozen planets reported, but most of them dead. One had a poisonous atmosphere. One was all water. I suspect that's what we're about to find here."

**M**UCH TO Kettering's disappointment, the captain proved to be right. The only planet revolving about Gamma Pegasi checked out to be a soft

little ball only fifteen hundred miles in diameter, and completely covered with water. Kettering felt the first hint of doubt creep through him as he heard Norwood give the order to resume stellar cruising. He tried to tell himself that it was only none-out-of-one so far, but the fear was in him and it wouldn't go away.

"How about a drink, Doc?" Norwood invited. "No use going back to bed on an empty stomach."

Kettering accepted a brandy, then shuddered as he watched Norwood drink a double shot of sixty-year-old bourbon.

"Don't let it get you down," Norwood said. "That's only our first miss, and a cheap one at that. If we can make 'em all that way we're good for nine or ten orbitings. Where the money goes is when we have to go in for a real close look at a planet. About six or seven of them, and we've had it."

All of a sudden, Kettering realized that he was seeing a side of the captain that was new to him—probably because he had been too busy to notice. The man was not going to be disappointed at all if they

failed to find a planet to colonize. Here in space, in his own ship, he was master. On a planet he would be only another colonist—and very likely a restless one at that. He might easily feel that he'd have less to lose in failure than in success.

"Sit down, Doc, I want to ask you something," Norwood said, pouring himself another double shot of bourbon and leaning forward awkwardly. "Something confidential. Just between you and me—understand?"

He shielded his mouth from the other men in the room and said, almost in a whisper, "What do you think we ought to do?"

**K**ETTERING was dumbfounded. He didn't care much for the physical state that the captain was approaching, and he cared even less for the question. It forced him to face a possibility that he had refused to face so far, even in his own mind. He especially didn't like the idea of having to face it *out loud*, and with a half-drunk space commander.

"What do you mean, what

would we do?" he hedged. "Our plan is to live out our lives aboard the *Pegasus* if necessary. What other choice would we have?"

Norwood stared at him with raised eyebrows for a moment, then snorted. "Come on, Doc, don't be so naive. They're asleep now, aren't they? What would be the sense of wakin' 'em up just to tell 'em they were going to starve to death out here in space? Come on now, what would be the sense of that?"

Kettering was beginning to feel uncomfortable. He wanted another glass of brandy himself, but he didn't want to encourage the captain to have any more. He rose from the table and took a stroll around the pilot room, trying to make up his mind what to say. There was no reason why they wouldn't be able to live indefinitely on the ship if necessary. They could grow their own food, including meat; and they could manufacture all the oxygen they needed. They would have to exercise extreme discipline of course, and that was one of the things they were running away from, but...

**H**E WAS STARTLED out of his reverie when one of the men on duty spoke to him.

"Don't you remember me, Dr. Kettering?" the young man asked. "My name is Halvorsen. We had a quick interview one night in Phoenix. Right after my wife and I were arrested for having a baby without passing the qualification tests."

Kettering blinked his eyes and examined the young fellow more closely. "Yes, of course, I remember you," he lied. "How are you taking the trip? You look great, I'd say."

"I feel fine," Halvorsen told him. "A little disappointed after the false hopes back there, but I guess you are, too. I wish I could tell you how much we appreciate the way your organization got us out of that scrape back there on Earth. They were going to take our baby away from us, and..."

Kettering mumbled something about being glad everything had worked out all right and continued moving about the room. He glanced back toward the captain once and was relieved to see him replace the cap on the whiskey bottle and store it away in a cabinet.

*Chances are he's already forgotten what he was talking about,* Kettering mused. But he knew that he, himself, would not forget. The seed was there now, and eventually something would come from it.

He watched Norwood rise to his feet and half-stagger around the pilot room, checking instruments and making minor adjustments to controls. Then he heard him shout to the room in general, "Well, I'm goin' back to sleep. Next stop Hercules. See you in about three years."

Kettering was glad to see him go. Whatever the solution to this latest problem, it was his responsibility to find it; no one else's. Maybe he had better stay up a while he thought—try to work something out...

**D**ELTA HERCULIS had two planets. One of them was obviously out of the question. It was too near the star. It had no atmosphere, and its surface temperature checked out to something more than two hundred degrees Fahrenheit. The other one was only slightly more promising. It was

about Earth-size, and not too far out to be warm, but the spectroscope showed its atmosphere to be of low oxygen content. There was nothing to be excited over, but in Kettering's opinion it definitely warranted investigation. That's why he was stunned when Norwood gave the order not to orbit.

"No use wasting the fuel," the captain explained. "Spectroscope report is almost negative. We'd have to live in bubbles if we parked there."

Kettering began arguing with him. After all, it was the first possibility they had encountered, and neither of the authorized ships had done any better. They couldn't afford to pass it up.

Norwood remained silent, almost sullen, Kettering thought. He began to wonder if the captain would deliberately sabotage their plans just to keep them all in space. He decided that it was time for a showdown.

"I insist that we examine this planet," he said emphatically. "I feel that it's within my jurisdiction to make this type of decision. The colonists have the right to choose their new

home; that's not a function of ship's command."

NORWOOD spun around and for a moment Kettering thought he was going to lash out at him. The captain relaxed however and gave out with one of his snorts of contempt.

"What's eatin' on you, Doc? Good God, you can land on any puny little planet you want to. What's it to me? I'm not going to hang around and hoe any weeds."

Instantly Kettering regretted the tone he had used. It occurred to him that he probably appeared every bit as much on edge as the captain did. He saw now that even his worst fears had been conservative—Norwood was planning to desert them as soon as they were established in their new home—maybe sooner. This he had to prevent—almost at any cost. Troublesome or not, the officers of the *Pegasus* would be sorely missed by the colonists, especially during the first few years. The ship had fire-power with which to combat aliens if necessary. It had cruising abil-

ity for scouting territory and collecting supplies. Most important of all, perhaps, it would be their only laboratory for many years to come—the proving ground for the teaching of science and engineering to the new generations. Something would have to be done to keep Norwood and the other officers in the colony—he hoped he he knew what that something was...

**H**E SNAPPED back to awareness when he realized that Norwood had been staring at him strangely for several seconds. Finally the captain said, "What have you been doing, Doc? You look older. You stay awake this last lap?"

Kettering shrugged with pretended innocence. "Part of the time," he replied. "I decided to coordinate all the data of our trip and write it into a book. The only way I could do it was to interview personally all the men who have been on duty throughout the flight—so I waited for their individual shifts."

Norwood stared with his mouth open. "You what? You

stayed awake for three years just to interview a few guys? Why didn't you tell 'em to make notes? No use throwing away three years of your life. You got cabins to build, and corn to plant, and kids to raise."

Kettering laughed, trying his best to make it sound light-hearted. "I know; that's why I want to get this work done now. We'll be too busy later on. I even had some volunteers from the passenger list help out with the writing of the book. As a spaceman you might find it interesting. You have no idea how many startling things have happened on this trip. Unidentified objects that have passed near us, nebulous gasses, strange magnetic fields. "

Norwood made a face. "Well, you play your game the way you like, Doc. I'll read your saga later. Let's get this goose-chase underway. You want to go, or will you take my word for what we find?"

"I'll go," Kettering said. "And I'd like to take one colonist; but there's no point in your going. We can handle the taxi."

Norwood didn't answer, but

Kettering saw that he had no intention of staying behind.

**T**HE ONLY colonist who was already awake, and who could be spared from the ship, was the young man who had spoken to Kettering during their first planet-sighting, back at Gamma Pegasi. Kettering asked him if he would like to volunteer and the man accepted readily.

"I'm sorry but I've forgotten your name again," Kettering told him.

"Halvorsen. Lor Halvorsen."

Kettering nodded at him, then began checking the equipment he wanted to take in the space-taxi. He saw Norwood give Halvorsen a strange look and suddenly an unwelcome thought hit him. Halvorsen was a young, good-looking specimen. Very likely his wife was a young good-looking specimen, too. Kettering wondered if Norwood was getting any ideas based on that probability. He was tempted to warn the young man to be on his guard, then decided against it. If there was one thing the colonists needed, it was confidence in their lead-

ers. But he resolved to be on guard himself.

**T**HE PEGASUS went into orbit some five hundred miles out from the planet and they studied it tele-sonically for two revolutions before boarding the taxi. It was all-but-barren; Kettering had to admit that. What vegetation there was looked more like the lichen-like growths of Mars than the full oxygen-producing vegetation of Earth. But there was vegetation of some kind, and there was an atmosphere, so Kettering stuck to his decision to investigate. At least he had established the precedent of making the decisions as to which planets should be explored; he was glad of that.

Norwood handled the taxi's controls; Kettering kept busy with a camera. They landed on a hard, barren rock at least five hundred yards wide and Norwood suggested that they leave the taxi in the middle of it. That way they would be able to see any creatures that might try to approach it. Kettering agreed, then suggested in turn that Norwood stay with the taxi until he and Halvorsen had

taken a first look around.

"If it comes to any kind of emergency," he told the captain, "remember that you're more important to the colonists than we are."

He felt a little as if he were tempting fate, but he also felt that he had to find out just how matters stood with the captain.

He loaded himself down with a camera and some sample cases, and told Halvorsen to bring along the intercom and a high-powered rifle--then the two of them set out to explore the immediate area around the rock.

AS THEY neared the vegetation, Kettering found his doubts concerning Captain Norwood diminishing under the anticipation of discovery. It had been so long since he had been able to afford the luxury of concentrating on his own interest, biology, that he felt almost like a schoolboy on the first day of vacation. He regretted the extra weight of the spacesuits that he and Halvorsen were forced to wear; he would have liked nothing better than to have set out at a brisk pace and cover the miles the way he had done many

years before in the Amazon Valley of South America. He felt young enough to do it all right, but not while wearing a hundred pound space suit and carrying fifty pounds of equipment.

The growth was not exactly lichen; there were definite signs of flowering, but the reproduction process appeared to be a gradual thing, not seasonal. Kettering wished that he had checked on the planet's orbit and on the inclination of its axis. Chances were that the axis was very nearly perpendicular to the plane of revolution--then there wouldn't be much seasonal change.

The vegetation was higher and thicker than he had estimated from the taxi. As they entered it, he saw that individual shrubs came almost to his waist, and that some of the stems were thicker than his thumb.

He examined the undersides of the first leaves they came to, but found no insect life. The leaves appeared healthy, not as if they had ever been used as insect food. But they were thin, almost needle-like, and he

guessed that they might not be edible.

**F**OR TWO hours, he and Halvorsen strolled through the waist-high growth, squeezing leaves, pulling up roots, looking for insects, and just looking in general. They found nothing significant. No tracks that might have been made by a large animal, no sign of animal life at all—not even a bug. Kettering was about to give up and return to the taxi when Halvorsen said, "Look, there's something."

The "something" was only a hole in the ground, but as Kettering looked he saw it move. Dirt and pebbles fell into it and he thought he saw the leaves of one of the bushes disappearing into its bottom, as if pulled from below.

"There's something under there," Halvorsen exclaimed. "It just pulled a full-grown bush down through that hole."

Kettering moved forward to get a closer look. He saw the leaves of another bush begin to shudder, and soon it, too, started sinking into the ground. He turned up the volume control on his sound receiver, but all he

could hear was the sliding noise made by the stems as the bush slowly, but definitely, was drawn into the ground. There was no crunching or chewing sound, such as might have been made by a giant gopher or other type of underground animal.

Kettering motioned for Halvorsen to have his rifle ready, then he moved up to the plant and took hold of its upper branches. For a few seconds he played tug-o-war with whatever creature it was that lay beneath them. Then there was a sudden "swoosh", as if with a huge intake of breath, and the bush virtually disappeared. Kettering was left holding a few torn and crumpled leaves; the rest of the bush was underground, and the dirt and pebbles began falling into the hole it left behind.

**C**OMMON sense told him to be careful, that this was no insignificant insect he was dealing with; but the anticipation of discovery urged him on. Eagerly, and foolishly, he realized, he began poking the legs of his camera tripod into the loose dirt where the bush had disappeared. There was an



immediate stirring of the ground all around them, as if it were honeycombed just under the surface with creatures about to break through. At the same time the "smell" buzzer in his helmet began to sound off. That meant that there was a strong animal odor in the vicinity. For the first time now he felt a twinge of anxiety. Maybe he was tackling something too big for them. Maybe they should return to the taxi for additional equipment—a couple of individual helicopter blades, for one thing, so they could continue the investigation from a few feet above ground.

He was about to suggest this to Halvorsen when, without the slightest warning, a swarm of insects swooped down all around them.

#### IV

**I**NSTINCTIVELY, Kettering flicked at one of them with his gloved hand and felt a body as hard as a golf ball. He grabbed one and held it close to his faceplate, staring at it. He saw a pair of angry eyes and a set of sharp, hungry

teeth—otherwise, it was simply a hard, round body with tiny, squirming legs.

The scent receptor in his helmet was buzzing constantly now, but it was almost drowned out by the noise of the rapidly beating insects' wings. Then, over it all, he heard the scream from Halvorsen.

"Kettering! Good God look there!"

Out of the ground all around them came a mass of living, squirming snakes. At first he thought they were snakes, then he took another look. Their bodies were smooth, completely free of hair or scales. And they were huge—at least a dozen feet long and two feet thick. They were covered with a glistening sort of slime, as if they lived in an underground swamp, and on their bodies they carried thousands of the hard-shelled insects. The insects clung to the bodies of the giant worms until they were free of the ground, then they darted off to join the swarms already buzzing about the heads of the two humans.

Kettering was stunned. In a matter of seconds the innocent little planet had been trans-

formed into a hideous frightening jungle. Then, as if there wasn't action enough, from the distance came flights of birds, diving in among the insects, not trying to swallow them whole, as birds on Earth would have done, but pecking at them in mid-air, seeking their soft, unprotected areas.

**N**OW KETTERING understood the "economy" of the planet. The insects were parasites that lived off the flesh of the huge worms. Only when the worms came above ground did the insects break away, probably from a long-conditioned fear of their natural enemy, the birds. It was a noisy, nauseating spectacle, but was it dangerous to humans in any way? He didn't know.

The worms seemed too slow-moving to be a real threat; besides he suspected that they were herbivorous. Undoubtedly it was the worms that had eaten the plants, and—well, on Earth anyway, all large animals were herbivorous. . . .

He soon saw that whatever threat might come from the worms, there was a more immediate one from the insects. The

first hint of it was when the birds began dropping like flies in a cloud of DDT. There was a change in the frequency of his "smell" buzzer and, at the same time, he noticed a dark, heavy vapor gradually settling to the ground around his feet. The insects were exuding a poison gas.

Kettering wondered if he was going mad. What a wealth of material for a biologist in the study of just these three alien life-forms—and here he was on a colonization mission.

He was about to call Norwood and report what they were seeing when he heard a new sound inside his spacesuit. At first he couldn't place it. It wasn't coming from his speaker outlet. It was a slight hissing noise, and along with it he sensed a change in the odor of the air he was breathing. It occurred to him that something might have gone wrong with his oxygen supply. He remembered checking it before leaving the taxi. . . .

**O**UT OF THE corner of his eye he caught a movement inside his spacesuit. A pair of tiny legs were wriggling and

squirming just before his chest. Even as he watched, the angry eyes and hungry teeth of one of the insects appeared in the hole it had clawed and chewed through the tough asbestos fabric of his spacesuit. He was almost too startled to act. It wasn't possible. Not only was the spacesuit coated with asbestos, it was interwoven with tough steel thread. No insect could possibly have... Well, there was no point in pursuing that thought. An insect was definitely looking at him that very moment. In another second or two it would certainly be free inside his spacesuit and he'd have no way of combating it—after all, his hands were on the outside.

Frantically he clawed at the front of his suit. He felt a dozen of the hard bodies brush off onto the ground, but he felt other dozens still clinging to him. Dozens? It might have been hundreds. They were like a solid mass, digging in, gnawing at his spacesuit. How to find the one, out of all those, that had already penetrated?

He brushed his hands over his chest wildly, trying to knock the insects off. He called

to Halvorsen over the intercom to do the same. He heard—or thought he heard—insects falling to the ground all around him; but still, when he passed his hands over his chest and arms and legs he felt other insects clinging there.

Somehow, entirely by luck, he happened to grab the one that was struggling to squeeze in through the hole it had chewed in his spacesuit. It still had a pair of legs sticking out and he pulled on them savagely. It didn't seem possible that the skinny legs would not pull loose from the heavy body, but somehow they didn't. Slowly, and after a ferocious snapping of the sharp teeth, the insect gave way and its head disappeared from the hole in his suit. Instantly he heard the sound of his oxygen escaping and began to smell the stale, bitter odor of the alien world's atmosphere.

**I**T WAS NOT a poisonous atmosphere; he remembered that from the analysis made aboard the *Pegasus*; but it was unpleasant, and he could tell immediately that its oxygen content was low. He decided

that it was time to withdraw, at least back to the taxi.

He called to Halvorsen to let the equipment go and head for the rock where the taxi was parked. Then he saw that Halvorsen was in no position to move. He was not only battling the insects, some of which appeared to have broken in through his spacesuit, but he was being attacked by two of the giant worms. One of them had wrapped itself around his legs, while the other, as if in a coordinated operation, was concentrating on his arms and the upper part of his body. Kettering couldn't tell if they were squeezing or not; he didn't see any muscles working—just the slow, sickening squirming of the huge bodies. Already Halvorsen's spacesuit bore a coating of the filthy slime from the worms' bodies, and Kettering could hear his labored breathing over the intercom. There was no screaming, no cursing—if Halvorsen was in pain he was keeping it to himself.

**F**OR A LONG moment, Kettering was paralyzed with indecision. The only weapon they had was the rifle, and it was

being held tight against Halvorsen's body by one of the thick coils of worm-flesh. Anyway, the worms' bodies looked so soft Kettering was sure that a rifle bullet would simply pass right through them and probably lodge in Halvorsen's spacesuit, or in his body. Then he remembered the knife that he had brought along as a piece of standard equipment. Almost in a daze he grabbed for it, at the same time he stumbled forward to attack the two worms wrapped around Halvorsen's body.

Vaguely he was aware of a biting somewhere along one of his legs and he guessed that an insect had finally broken through and was gnawing at his flesh. He had all but forgotten Captain Norwood sitting back in the space-taxi, probably watching their struggles through powerful field glasses. Then he heard the roar of the taxi's jets and caught a glimpse of its exhaust as Norwood swung around in preparation for a take-off. At last he had learned the worst about the captain—he had been a fool to ignore his suspicions before. They were alone now—just he

and Halvorsen, on a strange planet, battling strange enemies. Well, Man had conquered the jungle before, by God he could do it again.

He began slashing blindly with the knife. All the rage of his frustration went into each tearing blow. He hated the little planet, with its filthy, squirming worms, and its blood-sucking insects. He'd kill it. Kill it all. The worms, the insects, the whole planet. He'd tear it apart with his knife and with his hands.

**A** GAIN AND again he slashed the sharp knife into the bodies of the two worms and finally they began to fall away. Only then did he realize that one was wrapping itself around his own legs, and others were coming at them from all directions. The insects were biting his legs and chest in a half-dozen places now, and he began to feel faint from the stale atmosphere he was breathing.

Suddenly there was a blinding flash and he felt a hundred hot pin-pricks where the insects had been biting him. He didn't know if the planet had

suddenly turned into a volcano or not; everything became unbearably hot and he felt his senses begin to leave him. The last thing he thought of was Captain Norwood sitting in the space-taxi already curving out to join the *Pegasus*, and probably making plans for running the expedition to suit himself from that point on.

**K**ETTERING awoke to find himself on the floor of the space-taxi with Captain Norwood bending over him and applying some kind of ointment to his burns. Halvorsen, too, was lying a few feet away, his head propped on a pillow, his face wearing a rather weak grin.

"That was some experience, wasn't it, Doc?" Halvorsen said.

For a while Kettering could only stare—he couldn't even return the grin. Apparently Norwood had rescued them somehow, but he couldn't remember any part of it. He thought he remembered seeing Norwood take off in the taxi—*he must have been coming to us then*, he thought wearily.

"Hell, I think you're both

going to live," Norwood said good humoredly. "I'm sorry about those blisters on your skin. I didn't know you had holes in your spacesuits when I turned on the flame-thrower. I guess I would have done it anyway though, I didn't have time to think of anything else."

Kettering looked at the blisters on his chest and arms and decided that they were a small price to pay for getting away from the worms and insects. Now he realized that the flash of light he had seen, and the heat he had felt, had been from the flame-thrower.

"That was mighty quick thinking, Captain. We're grateful to you—very grateful," was all he could say.

**A** COUPLE of hours later they were back aboard the *Pegasus* and this time Kettering felt no regrets whatsoever when Norwood gave the order to blast away.

"I think I'll stay awake a little while," he told the captain. "I want to watch these blisters heal, and I want to put the finishing touches on my *saga*, as you call it. I won't have to interview anyone for

the last couple of chapters; I lived through them myself."

Norwood only grinned and said, "Make it good, Doc. Every nation needs its Ulysses; you might as well be ours. See you on Castor in a couple of years."

Again Kettering watched the ship's commander go off to the suspended animation chamber. This time, however, it was not with the same degree of misgiving that he had experienced before. He almost danced a jig as he left the pilot room himself, but not in the direction of the "sleep room" He went back to the special study that he had furnished in one of the partly-depleted supply rooms—back to the writing of his book, and to his special crew of volunteers. . .

**S**OME TWO and a half years later Dr. Kettering was still working in his study when the excited voice of the radio operator poured out of his intercom.

"Hey, everybody! Come see what I see. Castor's got quintuplets. There's six of 'em, and they all got planets. Oh, brother! Did we hit the jackpot this

time! There's a whole sky full of planets."

Kettering joined the rush toward the pilot room and looked at the viewscreen. There was no mistake. Castor was a miniature galaxy. There were three pairs of double stars, and at least four of them had long strings of planets—the last pair was too far away yet for him to be sure. Judging from their variations in brightness, he knew that they were of different sizes—that meant that some of them were certainly large enough to have atmospheres. At last—he felt it—they had found what they were looking for.

A technician was already setting up a spectroscope, getting ready to analyze the atmospheres of the planets as they came within range. Commander Durkin, the executive officer, was on duty and had already given the order to orbit. There was so much milling about and talking that Kettering didn't see when Norwood entered the room.

When he did catch sight of the captain, he was too late to notice if there had been any trace of mixed feelings on his

face. If there had been, it had been momentary. Apparently the prospect of exploring an entire system of suns and planets was all that the spaceman needed. He began snapping orders with the same efficiency that he had shown in escaping from the government patrol ships back in the solar system. He didn't fall in with the general intoxication of the others, however, Kettering noticed. He called Durkin and Kettering aside and began plotting a course that would take them closest to the maximum number of planets with the least expenditure of fuel. Only after the first positive reports came off the spectrograph did he relax. Then he reached across and shook Kettering by the hand.

"Well, Doc, you can start uncrating your picks and shovels soon now, and getting out your corn seed. We ought to find at least one good one out of all that mess."

**K**ETTERING smiled to himself. He was imagining what Norwood's reaction would be to some of the things that he did intend to "uncrate". The

five volunteer passengers, for instance, who had helped him write the saga of the trip—and who, incidentally, had grown from little girls of twelve thirteen, and fourteen, into beautiful young ladies of seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen while doing it. Yes, that had been a good idea, writing that book. Norwood would enjoy reading it—might even enjoy reading it aloud to his children—and later on possibly to his grandchildren, somewhere down on one of those planets that was still only a blob of light.

Kettering sighed happily. It would be pleasant to get back to his own profession now, biology. Somehow he didn't feel that he was cut out to be an adventurer, or a leader of men, and certainly not a psychologist. But he had to admit that things had turned out pretty well, for all his bungling. Pretty well indeed. And now he wondered if it wouldn't be a good time to have that second shot of sixty-year-old brandy; or was it sixty-five by now? Hmmm!

