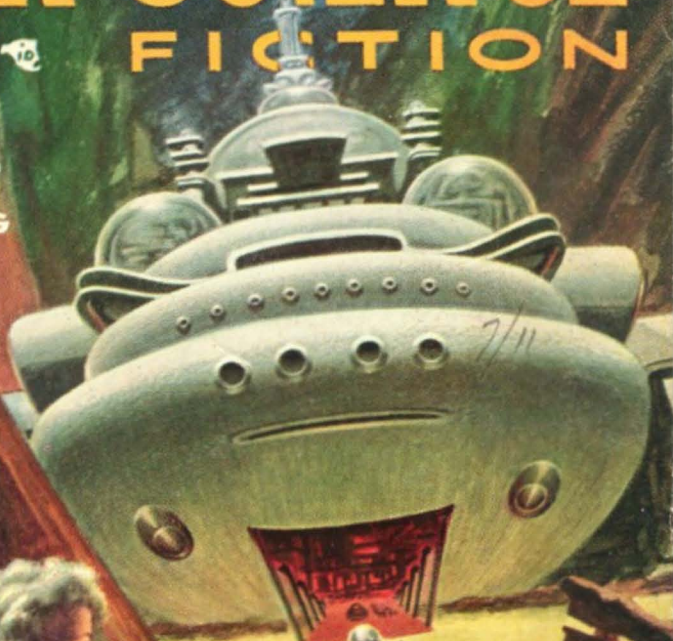


SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

OCTOBER 35¢



DEATH'S PLANET
by ROBERT SILVERBERG



**A TIME
FOR REVENGE**
by CALVIN KNOX

**THE CHILDLESS
ONES**
by DANIEL GALOUYE

SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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DEATH'S PLANET

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

NOVELETTE

illustrated by BOWMAN

Planet Seven on Star System A was a hideous place, a world where sudden, violent death was the rule not an exception. Nature was harsh, ruthless and cruel here

I found out about World Seven of Star System A quick, and the hard way. I pulled short straw and came down out of the Exploration Team's ship first. There was just about time for me to take three or four hesitant steps on the purplish grass when something came bounding out of the thick jungle and knocked me end over nose.

I got to my feet dizzy and started to grope for my blaster. This time I got a good view of the whatever-it-was. It was the size of a man, roughly, except that about a third of it was head, one-sixth stomach, and half a pair of huge coiled kang-

aroo-like legs. I caught the flash of white teeth the length of my fingers, of staring red eyes and scaly yellow skin. Then the kangaroo legs tensed, released, and the thing bashed into my chest and knocked me sprawling a second time.

I didn't have a suit on, so I couldn't radio for help. They were probably watching me, up in the ship, waiting for a clear chance to fire. I found myself facing a headful of spike-like teeth. Some getaway, I thought. Escape from a murder rap on Velliran only to be gobbled up alive in this unexplored system.

But just as those teeth



seemed ready to bury themselves in my neck, the weight began to lift. Some other friendly beast had come forth from the jungle. I was being granted a reprieve.

This new one was a lulu. It was tall and thin, maybe fifteen feet high and a foot wide. It looked like a walking telescope, green all over, with two tremendously long dangling arms, a pair of tiny legs tucked away underneath it, and a petal-like arrangement at the very top. One of the dangling arms had grabbed the thing that was sitting on me, and was now hoisting it in the air.

I got to my feet again and stepped back into the shadow of the ship, and watched. The beast with the teeth was kicking and squirming; but the telescope thing had a good grip on it and wasn't letting go. I saw the animal rise higher and higher, until the spindly arm held it over the petal arrangement on top. Then the arm let go.

The petals spread wide to receive the animal.

There was a lump, live and kicking, in the telescope thing's throat. Then, slowly, horribly,

that lump started to sink stomachward. I shuddered.

The telescope creature folded its long arms around its middle, hugged itself in a little dance of contentment and joy, and waddled back into the jungle. A second later, I was surrounded by my shipmates.

"We've been welcomed," I said.

DEATH came quick and fast and ugly on World Seven of Star System A. But it came just as fast on the allegedly civilized world of Velliran, and when it came you had to look out or it would sweep you in along with the intended victim.

That's what happened to me.

I'm from Earth, originally; I wasn't born on any of the outworlds, but right on Home-world herself. Not that that meant anything. With umpty-ump billion people scabbling for a living on Earth, I made like everybody else and took off for the outworlds, where, I thought, I could live comfortably and well and breathe fresh air.

I went to Velliran. Velliran's a world in the Pollux system; it's big but not too dense, and

so the all-important grav ratio is 1:1 with Earth. I settled on Velliran and I lived there eight years, and I probably would still be there except for the events that led me to World Seven of Star System A.

Velliran is populated chiefly by native life—small, finely-formed blue-skinned humanoids whose ancestry goes back into the dim years of the universe. They speak softly to each other in a strange, liquid language, and they keep pretty much to themselves, not mingling with the Earthmen who have built cities on their world. They have a keen sense of the ethical, and I'm told their religion is one of the galaxy's noblest. I don't know. I never had much to do with them.

I was operating a yangskin syndicate on Velliran, and bringing in a tidy profit. I employed six Terran hunters who ventured into the interior to hunt the strange eight-legged yangs, and I employed three skinners and four curers and two packers. At its best it was a medium-big syndicate, and I was bringing in some 20,000 credits a year profit, with more

orders tumbling in day by day as the women of Earth found it more and more fashionable to deck their shoulders with the soft, clinging black-and-white skins.

I was on the way to the bank one morning with the week's loot in my pocket. It was a bright, clear morning, the sky having the fantastic transparent look that makes Velliran so lovely. I remember thinking about how glad I was just to be here. The streets weren't crowded; couple of slim, soft-eyed little natives were walking up ahead, and a few Terrans.

Exactly what came next I wasn't sure. It felt like I'd been clubbed over the head and struck with lightning simultaneously, except that when it was all over I was still standing right where I was, and the street was just as quiet.

Only now I was holding a jewelled knife tight in my right hand. It was dripping bright red. *Blood* red—but not Earthman red. Oh, no. The only people who had blood as flame-red as that were the native Vellirani.

There was one of them at

my feet, looking peaceful even in death. But he hadn't died peacefully at all. His blue body had been ripped open with a knife. With the knife I now was staring stupidly at.

THEY reeled me into court a little while later—naturally, a Corpsman came strolling along while I gaped at the murder-weapon I held—and the trial took about six minutes. The judge was a stranger to me, which was too bad.

He squinted down from the bench and said, "Defendant Crawford, you have slain a Vellirani in broad daylight. Do you have any explanation for this crime?"

I blinked. "None."

What else could I say? I couldn't argue with the bloody knife in my hand.

The judge said, "The crime lies outside the jurisdiction of Terran court on Velliran. But, of course, this does not mean you will go unpunished."

I stared at him. "I didn't do it. It couldn't have been me"

"The Vellirani have ways of justice of their own. To them do we commend you."

And they turned me loose.

I stood outside the courtroom a few minutes, looking up at the transparent sky and wondering how it was that your life could crumble to hell inside half an hour. The deposit was still in my pocket. Two thousand credits, backed by pretty Terran platinum. They weren't going to get to the bank, now. I was going to need them. And there wasn't much time.

Someone had put the frame to me, but there was no point trying to convince anyone of my innocence. The Vellirani would never understand the concept of falsely blaming another for a crime he hadn't committed. To them, I had killed their countryman, and I had to die. That was the way Vellirani justice worked. And, I knew, their methods of execution were unpleasant.

There was a man I could see, though. His name was Geoffrey Hallan, and he was an Expediter. He made things easy for people.

He was a small, squint-eyed man with a sharp nose and a pale face. He said, "You really didn't kill the alien?"

"Honest. Unless I had a sudden kill-fit and now I can't remember it."

He shrugged. "Well, it doesn't matter whether you killed him or not, does it? As far as the Vellirani are concerned, *someone* has to die for the crime, and it might as well be you as anyone else."

"Exactly." I took out my bank deposit, flicked the bills with my fingers, and slapped them down on my desk. "Here's two thousand, Hallan. Can you get me off Velliran by night-fall?"

HE took the bills, riffled through them speculatively, studied the serial numbers, rubbed his thumbs over the portrait in the middle. At length he said, "Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"There's an Exploratory Corps ship in town, due to leave tonight. Their ecologist died in space, and they asked me to find them a new one. I contacted the Corps headquarters and had them ship a replacement out here. His name is Paul Markham, and he's here in the city."

"So?"

"Suppose," he said, "I got *you* aboard that ship instead of Markham."

"Me? I'm no ecologist! I don't know anything about—"

Hallan smiled bleakly. "You don't have to. All you need to do is get aboard that ship. They're bound for unexplored territory in the Andromeda region, and if you can bluff your way until you're in hyperspace, you've got it made. They won't turn back on your account. If there's any trouble, I'll make up some story or other. When they return, you go to some other planet and change your name. The galaxy's big; the Vellirani won't bother you."

"What about this Markham?"

"Him? He'll just miss the boat, that's all. There are plenty of ways of delaying a man past blastoff time."

THE three moons of Velliran were high overhead, casting their orange light, when I arrived at the spaceport. I had spent the day at Hallan's, arranging things. He would hold all my property and my bank account for me, and when I re-

turned from my exploratory jaunt he would forward them to me on my new world. I didn't trust him too much, but under the circumstances I was happy to get away from Velliran alive, let alone with any property.

He drove me down to the spaceport at 1945, and the ship was there—tall, slim, glittering faintly in the moonlight. He escorted me to the ship's elevator.

"Okay. You should make it clear from here, Crawford—ah, *Markham*. Take it smooth, and I'll watch for the word from you."

"Thanks, Hallan. Thanks."

I stepped into the elevator and rode up into the ship. Eight or nine men were waiting for me.

"I'm Markham," I said. "The new ecologist."

A tall man in blue-and-gold uniform said, "Welcome aboard. I'm Captain Hendrin. These are the men you'll work with."

He introduced me rapidly around: there was a biologist, a medic, an anthropologist, a botanist, a chemist, and so on—all the usual manpower of an exploratory mission. Cap-

tain Hendrin said, "We're bound for the Andromeda system, as you may have heard. It's going to be the standard six-month jaunt. We're beginning in Star System A, and the orders are to name and survey as many worlds as we can within our time period."

I grinned, trying to make it look scientific. "Glad to be aboard, Captain."

Gradually I settled into shipboard routine, bluffing mightily as I went. Actually, it wasn't too hard. The Exploratory Corps has been dealt with pretty frequently in adventure fiction, and from the novels I'd read I had a fair knowledge of shipboard routine and the like. Of course, I didn't know a thing about ecology, but from my readings in the ship's tape-library I slowly acquired a working knowledge of my subject.

All that mattered was that I had gotten off Velliran alive. I didn't know who had framed me or why, nor did I think at the time that I'd ever find out, but all that was behind me. I had been put in a situation where it was get offworld or else, and no time to argue about

the rights and wrongs and moral undertones of the thing.

It was a three-week journey—the first two days in standard ion drive, then, when we were clear of the Pollux system, the conversion and wrenching screech into hyperdrive. Three weeks in the nothingness of warp, as the ship gulped up space.

Then we were out of our galaxy altogether, and into the Andromeda cluster. It hung all around, bright strange starry dots against the black field of space. In the first few minutes after we emerged from warp, I peered out the viewplate, looking at the immensity of stars.

I was thinking that the universe was appallingly big. Here we were, exploring a galaxy the size of our own—and, on and on through the endless night, there lay galaxy after galaxy, millions of them, each with its thousand billion stars or so. Man could send out Exploratory Teams from here to the end of time and probably not have a chance to touch down on each world of space as much as once.

The autopilot homed in on

the arbitrarily-named System A, a group of eleven worlds revolving around a bright young yellow main sequence sun. We'd spend our next six months in System A, and probably not even do that job thoroughly. Near-infinite worlds, near-infinite life-forms—

I realized I had been developing a pretty provincial attitude, in my previous life as a prosperous yangskin-exporter on Velliran. The universe was a big place. I was only now getting to appreciate that.

The eleven worlds of Star System A hung outside our viewplate like spinning bright-colored globes. Two of the planets were ringed; one spun so close to the sun that it could not possibly have any form of life; two more, double worlds, revolved about each other in a strange orbit that would require detailed investigation.

But Captain Hendrin selected World Seven of Star System A as our first port of call. We swung into a landing orbit, and as the ship spiralled down the chemical team studied the atmosphere and reported that it would be breathable.

We landed. The tests were

checked and double-checked. It was clear that we could go out without spacesuits. Custom now dictated a lottery; we drew, and I got the short straw.

Captain Hendrin chuckled. "I suppose it's fitting that our ecologist should be the first one out on World Seven. You'll be the first to see the fauna."

I stepped through the lock and out. I was the first to see the fauna, all right. But the fauna saw me, too—and they moved faster than I did.

MY nine shipmates were standing around me, looking worried.

"You all right?" Hendrin asked.

"Pretty good. That beast with the teeth took me by surprise. I guess I'd have been down the old alimentary canal by now if the other one hadn't come along."

I flicked some sweat from my forehead and stared at the dark forest. The air was thick, hot, hard to breathe; a sort of sweltering moistness about it made it unpleasant. Far within the thicket of sharp green leaves I heard a cry: a harsh, croaking, desperate cry.

A death-cry.

"This is a rough, primitive world," said Lazenby. He was the biologist. "It's a young world. Life is cheap here."

Hendrin nodded. "We'd better operate in teams on any explorations," the Captain said. "And go about heavily armed. Wide-beam blasters for everyone. There's no telling what strange beasts are lurking in there."

I was still shaking a little. That sudden encounter with the toothed creature hadn't done my nervous system any good. I said, "Maybe we'd better leave this world, Captain. It's too dangerous for us. We ought to go on to some of the other planets in this system."

Hendrin wheeled around to face me, and I saw all the Joviality drain from his face. The *real* Hendrin poked forth for the first time since I had come aboard. His face was the face of an ascetic; of a man dedicated to his job, ready to perform it no matter what the cost. I felt chilled.

"Markham," he said, "You haven't been with us long, so I can forgive you for that re-

mark. But coming from a member of the Exploratory Corps, and from an ecologist as well, your words shock me. Once an Exploratory Corps ship lands on a planet, it stays there until its job is done. I've operated that way for thirteen years, and I'll keep on operating that way." His voice crackled like a whip. He turned to the other men of the team. "Is there anyone else who feels like leaving now?"

No one spoke.

I nibbled my lip unhappily. Part of me wanted to tell Hendrin that I was no ecologist, no Exploratory Corps man at all, just a fugitive yangskin-exporter who was fleeing a phony murder rap and had used his ship as a handy way out. But I saw that would never do at all. Hendrin was too dedicated to his lofty principles to let me stay at large if he knew the truth. From the expression on his face, I knew he was the sort who would bring me for the duration of the voyage and return me to Veliiran when it was all over.

Geoffrey Hallan probably had known that. Well, Hallan was just out for a buck, like

the rest of us. I was going to have to keep up the pretense of being an ecologist until Hendrin decided he'd explored World Seven of System A fully enough. It wasn't going to be easy.

Another death-cry sounded in the forest.

"I'm sorry, Captain," I said, making my voice appear humble. "The experience of being suddenly a t t a c k e d—my nerves—"

"Okay, Markham," he said. His voice was gruff but sympathetic. "I understand. But no more talking of leaving here until our job is done!"

I forced a grin. "Right, Captain!"

But as I heard the sounds of rending and killing coming from that wild, steaming jungle all around us, I wondered whether I would have been safer back on Veliiran.

WE began formal full-scale exploration of World Seven an hour later, after a quick briefing aboard ship.

By this time I had soaked up enough of standard exploration procedure to be fairly

confident of passing as a genuine Corps man, provided no one studied me too closely. I knew the general routine.

The purpose of the Exploratory Corps was to size up each of the worlds of the universe, of which there were billions, and to file a full report with Central Control back on Earth. Central Control, the vast computer that made existence in a galaxy of a hundred billion people possible, would digest and tape the reports.

We were supposed to bring back, primarily, a yes-no statement on the world's value as a potential Terran colony; a comprehensive report on the planet's natural wealth, its minerals and soil fertility and livestock; a comment on the presence of intelligent life on the world. All this data went into the great hopper of Central Control, and the Exploratory Corps moved ever onward into unexplored regions of space.

My job as ecologist was to study the relationships between animals and their environment on World Seven, and prepare a report indicating how these relationships could be put

to use in the event of Earth colonization of the planet: which animals controlled the breeding of which other animals, how the extermination of certain forms of plant life would effect the distribution of life, etc. In a way, it was an easy job; in another way, it was an overpoweringly hard one—because it required me to get out there and explore that jungle.

Which was one thing I had little desire to do. Murray, the cartographer, had it easy: he spent his hours aloft, in the tiny copter the ship carried, mapping out the world. Unless there were monsters of the air, he'd be in no danger.

But me? I was going to have to get a first-hand look at life on World Seven.

I was teamed with Lazenby, the biologist. He was a slim, stoop-shouldered man in his middle forties, mild-mannered, quiet. Just the sort who would spend his life roving from world to world, collecting algae and protozoa. I had been hoping to be matched with Bartlett, the anthropologist—a big, square-built, blocky man who would be of some value in case of

trouble. But Bartlett was paired with Dorvin, the chemist, and I drew little Lazenby.

We rode down the ship's elevator together, out of the ship and to the ground. This time, before venturing into the little clearing that surrounded the ship, I looked around in all directions. I wasn't taking chances.

The coast was clear, though. "Come on," I said to Lazenby. "No trouble in sight."

We were armed with stubby blasters, but we were weighted down with note-taking apparatus too, and Lazenby carried a couple dozen collecting bottles slung in a harness around his waist.

The jungle was heavy with moisture: not rain but dew, precipitated straight from the air and beading out on anything and everything, leaves, stones, ground, us. I glanced at my watch. We had arranged to cover as much ground as we could in an hour's time, and then return to the ship.

I kept my ears tuned. I knew this forest was full of strange and probably dangerous creatures, and I wanted to be ready for them.

It didn't take long.

We had been walking for perhaps five minutes when I heard rustling up ahead. I glanced at Lazenby. He was kneeling over a tiny pond, scooping up samples of its water for later bacterial analysis. I said, "Better look sharp. Something's coming."

"Where? I don't hear anything."

"Listen up ahead."

The sound of thrashing vines and splintering saplings came to us—and then, thundering toward us like a runaway express, came an animal. I caught Lazenby's arm and dragged him into the shade of a thick, gnarled tree.

THE creature was perhaps twenty feet long, glossy brown in color. It had four legs that terminated in splaying toes, a long, thin neck, an equally long tail at the other end. It weighed perhaps ten tons, and it was moving fast.

It had no head.

At the end of that neck was a jagged slash, and then nothing but welling gouts of blood that pulsed forth with each con-

vulsion of the animal's heart, and squirted out over the trees. The beast was dead, but it was so slow-witted it hadn't realized it.

"We ought to follow it," Lazenby said. "It's bound to drop soon. I'd like to examine it close-up."

I shook my head. "Uh-uh. That boy may be dead, but I'll bet the thing that did it to him will be along any minute now. Let's wait."

I was right.

The animal that appeared moved with almost sickening grace: it slid through the forest as if it were on wheels, gliding along effortlessly. It was ten feet high, standing upright on two tapering legs with two more up beneath its throat. A mouth full of razors yawned at us, and dripped blood. It sped past us and pounced on the headless beast we had seen first, which had stumbled and fallen in the underbrush ahead.

I watched, chilled, as the killer dug its two tiny forepaws deep into the still-quivering flesh of the other, and brought its teeth down for the first bite. I couldn't stand the sight. Before I knew what I

was doing I had the firing stud of my blaster yanked back, and gave the killer full beam.

He sizzled and fried for a second or two before he knew what hit him. Then he reared up from the dead or dying body, came at me, and actually travelled three or four feet before he fell. I finished ashing him and lowered my blaster. I realized I had been shouting incoherently all through it.

Within moments half a thousand tiny creatures had come from nowhere—out of the trees, out from under rocks, up from the pond. They began to feed on the two hulking corpses. The smell of death pervaded the place.

I turned and saw Lazenby staring at me in utter horror. For the first time in minutes I regained self-control.

"I've never seen anything like that," he said, in a hushed voice.

"The killer? Vicious bastard, wasn't he?"

"No," Lazenby said. He looked pale and uneasy. "I mean *you*. The sadistic joy with which you killed the animal! The cries of hate! Markham, it was horrible!"

"Look here, Lazenby—that animal was a killer. I had to blast him."

"Why?"

That stopped me. I didn't have any answer.

He said, "It had already killed its prey. It hadn't attacked you at all. Your job was to record the feeding process, not to interfere with that damned blaster of yours. But you did."

"I lost my head. Something just broke open inside me and I had to fire. Silly of me," I said.

"Silly? It was downright criminal! For an ecologist to destroy life wantonly when he could have been observing the process of—"

That was when the tree wrapped its arms around Lazenby and lifted him off the ground.

"Lazenby!"

He was pinioned by a thick green tendril that had wrapped itself three or four times around his waist. His face was gray ashen; he was ten feet off the ground, and rising. I saw the treetop writhing in anticipation; there was something un-

comfortably like a mouth up there.

Carnivorous trees?

"For the love of God, get me out of here!" Lazenby was pleading. I drew my blaster and tried to aim it, but he was kicking and squirming wildly, trying to fight the inexorable lift of that tendril.

"Hold still," I shouted. "I don't want to hit you."

I fired above his head, at the tendril, and missed. I caught a limb of the tree instead. The tree shook convulsively. I fired again, and this time I nailed the tendril squarely.

The tree screamed.

It was a bellowed howl of pain and rage that wrung itself up out of the thick trunk and sounded all over the forest. Lazenby came tumbling down, bouncing from branch to branch. I caught him and broke his fall. The seared-off tendril still clung to his middle, and his face was pale green.

I unwrapped the tendril and flung it to one side. He got up, shakily.

"Thanks," he said hoarsely.

I looked up at the tree, which had resumed its station-

ery position now. It looked totally innocent. Scowling, I looked at the ground at my feet, as if I expected it to open a fanged mouth and swallow me.

"Let's go back to the ship," I said. "We can explore some other time."

BACK in the safety of the ship, I was able to let my tight-strung nerves slacken a little.

Hendrin had been aboard ship, dictating log notes, and he came forward to demand why we had returned so soon. I told him.

"Carnivorous trees?" he repeated. "We'll have to send Grover out for a look at those." Grover was the botanist of the group. "Did you get films of the attack, Markham?"

"I was to busy getting Lazenby out of that tree," I said. "I couldn't think about films."

Hendrin frowned. "Saving Lazenby was important, of course. But you should have taken films. And I hope you don't expect to take the rest of the day off, do you?"

"We're a little shaken up, sir," Lazenby began diffident-

ly. "Some time to rest before we go back out—"

"All right," Hendrin said. "Take half an hour. But don't waste any more time than that. I don't want the schedule chopped up."

We left the Captain, heading for the ship's lounge to have a drink or two before returning to the job outside. "He really means business, doesn't he?" I said.

Lazenby grunted. "It's the right way to run an Exploratory Team. You get the job done, that way."

We had a couple of drinks each, and I saw the color come back into Lazenby's face. He wasn't as ruffled by his narrow escape as I might have expected him to be; he took it more in the line of an occupational hazard, which it was—something that might happen in the course of everyday work.

He turned to me and said, "There was something I was meaning to ask you before that tree got me."

"Shoot."

He paused for a second, then said, squinting up his eyes, "Who are you, Markham? Really, I mean."



I put my drink down. "Huh?"

"Don't play innocent." There was a sudden strength behind the watery eyes. "I know damned well you're not Paul Markham of the Exploration Corps. Suppose you tell me just who you *are*."

"Lazenby, has that tree-thing driven you nuts? Of course I'm Markham!"

I'm afraid I wasn't a very good liar. The little biologist smiled wryly. "You're no more of a trained ecologist than I am a circus strongman, *Markham*. You might as well admit it. The real Markham had been in the Corps five years. I don't know him, but I know damned well you aren't any ecologist with five years' field training. The way you blasted down that killer animal before—"

I looked at him coldly. He had me nicely pinpointed. "Suppose I'm not Markham. What of it?"

"Nothing. You saved my life, whoever you are, and I don't intend to turn you in. But it's unusual, to say the least, to have an impostor in an Exploration Team. For my

own curiosity, I'd like to know why."

I took a deep breath. "My name is Ree Carpenter. I'm a native of Earth, and I lived on Velliran for eight years. Somebody framed me while your ship was down to pick up the real Markham, and I had to get off planet in a hurry. This was the quickest way."

"And what happened to Markham? The *real* one?"

I shrugged. "A friend of mine was supposed to arrange that he show up late at the spaceport. I don't think they did anything to him."

Lazenby smiled and said, "How much of this am I supposed to believe?"

"As much or as little as you want," I said. "It all happens to be true. I was framed for murder—they accused me of having killed a Vellirani native. It wasn't so. But the evidence made it look that way, and on Velliran that's enough. So I'm here, on this hellworld."

He was looking at me strangely. "You were accused of killing a Vellirani native?"

"Damned right! I don't know how it was done, but I found myself holding a bloody

blade, with a dead Vellirani lying in the street at my toes. I didn't kill him."

Lazenby smiled. "I'm sure you didn't. That reminds me of a very funny story. Remind me to tell it to you some time."

HE wouldn't elaborate on that, though I tried to pry it out of him. After a while we decided we had rested enough, and went back outside for another survey of the forest.

Lazenby was very helpful. As we advanced warily, inch by inch, through the sweating jungle, he made occasional comments that were designed to help me in compiling my report, pointed out things that I, as a presumably skilled ecologist, should have noticed, and was generally of assistance. We didn't encounter any other carnivorous trees, or anything else that was really dangerous. But every minute I spent in the jungle of World Seven, I liked the planet less.

There was something *sick* about it—something broodingly rotten. Every manifestation of life shared that characteristic.

"Look here," Lazenby said.

He pointed down, at a pool of water perhaps three feet across. There were tiny creatures swimming in it.

"So? A puddle with tadpoles in it."

"Take a look at the tadpoles," he said.

I knelt while he stood guard, and peered into that puddle. The "tadpoles" were small dark things about an inch long—with bright little teeth, jagged and sharp. They moved fast, those "tadpoles." And they were busy.

A snakelike creature about twenty inches long lay beneath the muddy water, wriggling slowly—while the tadpoles energetically picked away pieces of its flesh. The snake evidently had taken a shortcut through the puddle, or perhaps he had wanted a bath. But the tadpoles had been lying in wait.

"It's the same everywhere on this planet," I said. "The animals are killers. The plants are killers."

Lazenby nodded. "Life is short and tough, here. You have to be fast to survive, and you need a good pair of teeth."

"It's a vicious world," I said.

"No. Nature isn't vicious, or ugly, or any of the other moralistic tags you're probably getting ready to toss up. That's just life, you see down there. And on World Seven life is a tough proposition."

"It's a tough proposition anywhere," I said. "But here it's more obvious."

"Exactly."

I looked down at the hungry little beasts in the puddle and shuddered, "I'm a lousy excuse for a scientist," I said. "I can't be cool and detached in a place like this. Not where even the trees try to eat you. I'd like to get the hell off this planet. There's something filthy about it."

He only smiled. "You don't have the true scientific mind. You aren't detached."

"I won't have to bluff being a scientist for long," I said. "Just till Hendrin decides he's ready to return to civilization. If I'm still alive by then," I said, looking at the quivering fronds of a huge fern nearby. "If this planet doesn't get us all first."

AS it happened, not every member of the team

seemed to share Lazenby's calm, precise, scientific attitude. That became clear that evening, when we were gathered back aboard the ship to compare notes on the day's work.

Murray, the cartographer, said, "This is the nastiest world I've ever seen."

I snickered. "You see it from a thousand feet up. Go take a walk through the jungle if you want to find out how nasty it can be."

"I did," he said. "I brought the copter down to let Chung, here study some geological formation. We weren't on the ground ten minutes when a brawl started. Some big blue and red beast the size of a hill came toward us looking mean. But before he got anywhere, three jag-toothed flying creatures came swooping down like dive-bombers on him. Sliced his neck open and had themselves a feast."

"I didn't get to see the formation I was interested in, either," Chung, the geologist who had flown with Murray, said. "We decided not to wait."

"It's the same everywhere," said Grover, the botanist. "I

went out to examine that devilish carnivorous tree that nearly swallowed Lazenby."

"Did it perform for you?" Lazenby asked.

"Damned right it did! I had no sooner got there than it lashed out with a tendril and swooped up a hulking deer-like creature. I filmed the whole thing. It wasn't pretty."

Fernandez, the medic, a swarthy heavyset giant, looked up from his brooding silence in the corner and said, "This is no world for a ten-man team. We ought to go on to the next place, and let Earth send a fully-armed expedition out here if they're interested. We're risking our lives every time we step outside the ship."

"Yeah," said Bartlett, the brawny anthropologist. "We already know this planet isn't suitable for colonization—at least not for another hundred million years or so. Why are we sticking around?"

"Why don't you ask Captain Hendrin that?" Lazenby suggested quietly. He was loyal to Hendren, I knew. "He seems very interested in giving this world detailed study. And I

am too; it's quite a remarkable primitive tropical planet."

Bartlett's eyes blazed. "Remarkable! Remarkable, when every beast in that jungle's waiting to feed on you? I'd like to get moving—to a safe planet."

"What's that, Bartlett?" said a cold voice at the door.

We all turned. It was Captain Hendrin, standing at the entrance, one hand clamping the edge of the bulkhead. "Would you care to repeat that in my presence, Bartlett?"

The husky anthropologist was pale, but he looked squarely at Hendrin and said, "I was expressing the opinion, sir, that possibly we had achieved all we could achieve on this planet and should move on, since it's obviously an unsafe world."

"Oh, I see," Hendrin said in a dead, flat voice. "You didn't hear the little speech I made to Markham when he advanced the same idea, earlier?"

"I heard it. I think it's suicide to stay here, Captain."

"Who else feels this way?" Hendrin demanded. He glared around the cabin. "Chung? Grover? Lazenby?"

"I'm not so happy here," Fernandez admitted quietly. But none of the rest of us spoke up. At length Hendrin said, "You seem to be in the minority, Bartlett. We'll stay here and do it the way the Corps always does it. This planet will need at least a month's intensive work."

Bartlett smothered down his anger. It required a visible effort.

"Let's have no more talk of leaving," Hendrin said. "Is that understood?"

IT was. But it wasn't understood or accepted gracefully, I could see. After Hendrin left, Bartlett and Fernandez had a conversation of low whispers in one corner of the room, and after a while they called Grover over. I didn't know what was going on, but I could guess they were planning some way of getting Hendrin to change his mind.

In a way I was a little disillusioned. Only Hendrin and Lazenby, of all these men, was a Corpsman in the sense I was accustomed to from reading the adventure stories. The rest of
were ordinary people like

me—scientifically trained, but not particularly anxious to martyr themselves in the name of scientific investigation. This was a bitch of a world: they recognized the fact, and they wanted out, just the same as I did.

That night, the forest howled and hooted at us from sundown to sunup. I spent a good chunk of the night staring out the viewplate at the waiting jungle outside. World Seven had two moons, but they weren't attractive golden spheres like the three of Velliran; they were jagged little rocks that cast a pale white light, old and baleful. In their glimmer I saw strange wolf-like animals range themselves around the ship and bay their anger, and slinking cat-beasts that slipped among them and fought in the World Seven; the others didn't last long at all.

The next two days saw the pattern spread out and intensify. I learned more about World Seven, and the more I learned the more anxious I was to get offworld fast—and most of my shipmates seemed to feel the same way.

Lazenby and I turned up

sights on our rambles through the forest that sickened me—and once even bent the slim biologist's scientific poise. That was the little incident where we came upon a bloated black-and-gray striped mammal lying on its side in a swamp—*her* side, I should say, because the creature was plainly a female.

She looked something like a wart-hog, something like a Minervan *brolla*, and something indescribable. She was perhaps eight feet long, and had recently given birth. A little cluster of offspring, small enough to be cute if they weren't so hideous, jostled and pushed at each other in order to suckle.

Seven of the little ones managed to get in on the food supply. Two more were left out in the cold—and, when the seven had fed, mama calmly lifted her massive head and snapped up the two weaklings in a mouthful apiece.

I looked at Lazenby. He hadn't enjoyed that.

"Survival of the fittest," I said acidly. "Mother Nature in action."

He glanced at me for a second, then back at the chop-

licking beast in the swamp. "I've never seen a world like this," he said curtly, and began to scribble notes.

That was what World Seven was like. We slogged through the mud and slime and heat, and the more I saw of it the less happy I was about the eventual report I'd be expected to file. The planet was an ecologist's nightmare, an interlocking series of biological dependencies that seemed to have no end. Even with Lazenby's help, I'd never be able to bluff my way through and fool Hendrin.

Somehow we avoided the carnivorous trees and the various toothy killers long enough to make a fairly complete survey of our sector. Work was proceeding on other fronts, too. Murray was preparing his aerial maps, and Chung, flying with him, had given the geology of the planet a thoroughgoing job. Since there was no intelligent life here, anthropologist Bartlett could not function in his speciality, so he teamed with Dorwin the chemist and served as lab assistant. The report was shaping up.

Then Evans, who doubled as radioman and assistant chem-

ist, came back from his hike carrying what was left of botanist Grover.

I didn't get a good look at Grover. I only got half a look, and that was enough. Fernandez, who's a medic and who doesn't get bothered by such sights easily, grabbed up a plastic tarpaulin and wrapped it around the body in a double hurry.

Captain Hendrin appeared, looking grimmer than usual, and glanced around.

"What happened to Grover?"

"He—fell, Captain," Evans said. The radioman licked his lips nervously. "He saw a plant he wanted to examine, and took a couple of steps off the beaten road. Then he yelled and slipped out of sight. It was some sort of trap—it looked like solid ground, but it wasn't. It—I don't know what it was. Whether it was a plant or an animal or what. He screamed a couple of times, I saw something yellow frothing around, and thin little tentacles waving."

He held out his hands. They were red, raw, blistered. "I reached in and yanked him out.

Some of the stuff spilled on my hands. It was like acid, sir. Like acid."

Hendrin was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Bartlett, Murray—get a grave dug outside the ship. And make it deep. this planet may have a few ghouls along with its other forms of life."

They shambled off to do the job. We were all pretty stunned at Grover's death—not so much the fact that a man had died, as the way he had died. He'd been eaten alive by—what? A pool of protozoa? Who knew?

He was the first human victim of World Seven. The planet's deadly spell was extending to us, now.

Grover's death cast a shadow over the rest of that day. No one went out of the ship after sundown; the moons had risen, and their cold light glittered on the crude grave outside. We spent our time filing reports, transcribing notes, doing anything at all to keep our minds busy.

LATER that night, Fernandez came over to where I sat in the ship's study, and

tapped me gently on the shoulder. I looked up, startled.

"Markham?"

"What is it?"

"Can you come to my cabin for a minute? I want to talk to you."

I didn't object. I followed the hulking medic up the narrow companionway to his private cabin and we went inside. He clicked the lock closed.

"What's this all about, Fernandez?"

He held up one beefy hand. "Patience, friend. All in good time." Going to his closet, he drew forth a drinkflask containing an unmistakably sparkling liquid, and handed it to me, grinning. "Have a drink first."

The stuff was Vellirani whiskey, one of the finest beverages known to the universe. I had missed it. "Where'd you get this?" I asked, as I punctured the drinkflask seal and took a sip. "Is it allowed on board?"

"Medicinal purposes," Fernandez said blandly. "A little privilege of my position. Have another drink."

I had another, and two or three more. Then I said, "You

didn't invite me here to drink your liquor. What's on your mind, Doc?"

"Hendrin."

"Eh?"

"Grover's death this afternoon could have been avoided—if we'd left this planet yesterday. I don't know how you feel about this, Markham. You're new to the crew. The rest of us have been together a long time, and Grover's death hurt. Hurt hard. You want me to stop talking, or should we go on?"

"Go on," I said.

"Okay. You may or may not know the clause in the Corps charter that refers to replacement of superior officer when he no longer is capable of commanding ship."

"I'm familiar with it. I saw now what Fernandez was driving at. 'I'm with you so far,' I said. 'Keep talking.'"

"Some of us—Bartlett, Murray, myself, mainly—have come to the conclusion that remaining here is not in the best interest of the group's common safety. We're not equipped for a world like this, and it's suicide to keep wandering around

on foot in that jungle. This ought to be a three-ship team, with land-crawlers and heavy artillery. You were the first one of us to be attacked by native wildlife. You know what it's like.

"In my position as medic, I can issue an opinion that Hendrin is temporarily insane. It'll stand up anywhere in the galaxy. We'll remove him from command, put him down below where he can't interfere, and get off World Seven. But I won't issue the opinion unless I have a majority behind me. That's why I have to know where you stand, Markham."

I frowned. "You're proposing mutiny, in other words?"

"No. Legal removal of a temporarily insane commander is not mutiny. And it'll mean the deaths of all of us if we stay here the full period. Well, Markham? Are you with us?"

Grinning, I said, "What do you think? I like to stay alive just as much as the next man."

I had a few more drinks and left Fernandez' cabin, and so far as I knew the mutiny remained in abeyance for the

next day or two. Perhaps Fernandez was waiting until he had a unanimous backing behind him; I didn't know. So far as I knew four of the eight crewmen were in favor of deposing Hendrin—Fernandez, Murray, Bartlett, and myself. Only one—Lazenby—seemed to prefer remaining on World Seven to complete the observations. The other three, Chung, Evans, and Dorwin, had made no definite statement, at least not to me, but I was fairly certain where their sympathies lay. None of them was the deep-down dedicated type that would vote to remain on a suicide world like this one.

But nothing happened, during the next day. I saw little of Captain Hendrin, and what little I did see I didn't like: he was dour, grim, and stern, as if he expected what was brewing and was determined to squash it the moment it started.

For some reason, the field pairings were switched around the next day. It seemed that Chung wanted to investigate the geology of our region more closely, and had requested that he be teamed with someone

who had been working in the area. I was paired with him; Lazenby was shifted over to work with Bartlett, and Murray did his stint in the copter with Dorwin. With the death of Grover the balance of the teams was disrupted; we had always had four-two-man teams out and two men guarding the ship, but now the breakdown was three two-man outfits and three men back at ship.

Chung and I set out on a parallel track to finecomb the area, and Lazenby and Bartlett roamed out somewhere near us. The forest was so thick there was no way of seeing anyone nearby.

Chung devoted most of his time to rocks and ridges, while I, feeling a little lost without Lazenby, bluffed my way through an ecology tour. Luckily, Chung didn't say much, and I wasn't forced to reveal just how ignorant of my speciality I really was.

We were gone about half an hour when I heard a very human yell echo from the left.

Chung was bent over, studying a quartz outcropping. I said, "You hear that?"

"Sorry, no. Some animal?"

"Animal hell! That sounded like Lazenby, and I'll bet he's in trouble!"

As if to punctuate my mark with an exclamation point, another yell came from the adjoining glade.

"Come on," I said. "Let's see what's going on."

WE cut our way blindly through the infuriatingly thick overhang of vines, slashing madly in the direction of the noise. I yelled, "Lazenby! Bartlett! Is there any trouble?"

After a moment Bartlett's voice, quite close, said, "No, no trouble at all."

I hesitated—but then I saw Bartlett dimly veiled by close-packed fern fronds, and decided to see what was up anyway. I stepped through the ferns, followed by Chung.

Bartlett stood there, looking down at the ground. At Lazenby.

The little biologist was lying sprawled grotesquely on his stomach, rigid, corpse-like. I felt chilled. That Lazenby, who of all of us had the most vivid interest in searching the forest

for its secrets, should meet death this way—

"What happened?" I asked.

Bartlett was very pale. The anthropologist said, "I didn't know. Something sprang at him from the tree up there, and he fell over. I couldn't see what it was."

There was a moment of silence. Then I went white as the "corpse" wriggled, painfully flopped over, and stared at us. I could see the knifewound in his chest.

"That's a lie," Lazenby said in a half-whisper. "It wasn't any animal. Bartlett knifed me . . . the way he did the Vellirani native . . . because I was going to 'kill you . . .'"

He slumped, caught at his middle, tensed. His face was a mask of agony. I looked up from him to Bartlett, and now I saw the bloody knife clutched in the anthropologist's powerful hand.

"You had to be nearby?" Bartlett asked bitterly. "You had to get here before he died? You had to hear everything?"

I saw Chung backing away, frightened. "What is this, Bartlett?" I asked in a voice I didn't recognize.

"I killed him. Sure, I killed him. Like I killed a blueskin on Velliran."

"Why?"

"I didn't mean to. Never meant to. The native wouldn't answer questions; threatened to report me for unethical practices. Lazenby . . . gave me a drug. I used it on you. It stopped your time-perception; I killed the native, put the knife in your hand, left you standing there."

My mouth sagged open. I heard the chittering of the million insects on the forest floor. "You—"

"Me. It didn't have to be you. It could have been anyone; it just happened to be you that came along. And then I saw you join the crew as Markham. Why did it have to be *you*?"

So Bartlett had killed the Vellirani, and planted the weapon on a total stranger—me. Only I had followed him to World Seven. That was the "funny story" Lazenby had enigmatically promised to tell me, someday . . . and now, never would.

I stared at Bartlett across

Lazenby's stiffening body. And then Bartlett leaped.

The knife went high, but my hands were quick. I slapped his wrist, deflecting the aim outward, and clamped my other hand down before he could compensate. I twisted; the knife fell.

"Get help, Chung! He's out of his mind!" I managed to yell. Bartlett, weaponless, pummelled me back against a tree. I caught a freezing glimpse of some forest creature crawling out to feed on Lazenby's body. I blocked Bartlett's fists as well as I could, landed a cross to the chin, followed up my advantage with a heavy smash to his stomach.

He reeled back, stunned. I hit him again. I wanted to knock him out, to bring him back to the ship and eventually back to Velliran to clear my name. But it wasn't going to be that way.

He staggered, off balance. I landed another blow and he took three awkward wide falling steps backward—

And the ground gave way.

He sank down with a little terrified gasp, and I saw something yellow and slimy in the

ground, and fifty shiny transparent tentacles twine up and wrap around him. Within seconds he was below the surface, and out of sight. The yellow liquid swirled satedly, and then the trap began to close over again.

I stood staring at it, feeling sick. The trap was simple: the fluid at the surface congealed, forming a sticky, fragile surface to which leaves would adhere, creating a seemingly-innocent patch of ground that gave way when a foot touched it. And then... it fed.

I shuddered and turned away. Chasing a small striped feeder from Lazenby's body, I shouldered the corpse and sadly made my way back to the ship to announce that World Seven had claimed two more human victims.

AS I drew near the ship, I heard a strange sound: the high sucking whine of a blaster being fired. I moved faster, despite the burden on my back.

Then I stepped into the clearing, and saw the ship. Chung lay dead some twenty yards from the ship's elevator. a blaster-hole where his chest

should be. A little closer to the ship was Dorwin, his face a crust of ash. The sound of shouting, struggles came from the ship.

Somehow my mind found time to tally the score as I ran toward the ship. Five members of the team were dead; I, the sixth, was out here. That left Hendrin, inside, holding off Fernandez, Evans, and Murray. *Damn* this world anyway, I thought.

I looked up. The hatch opened, and someone tumbled down. Murray. A second later Fernandez' head poked out. "Markham! Where's Bartlett?"

"Dead. What's going on?"

"We sprang the mutiny on Hendrin, but he's holed up in the front now with a blaster. Just Evans and me left inside. You have a gun?"

"Yes," I said.

"Come on up here. But be careful."

I heard a blaster-shot, and Evans came staggering out to fall almost at my feet. That made seven corpses for World Seven, I thought. Nice and neat.

I edged my way toward the fore cabin. The sound of struggle reached me: a fist-fight, it seemed like. But I wasn't going to risk anything foolishly. I clung to the cold metal skin of the wall, and went forward step by step.

Then I saw them in the cabin—Hendrin and Fernandez, looking like two wildmen, slugging it out with bare fists. Hendrin's blaster lay discarded, on the floor; out of charge most likely. Fernandez turned his head a second and yelled, "Markham! He's unarmed! Help me!"

Hendrin's captain's uniform hung in tatters. I crept around behind him, snaked an arm around his throat, and yanked back. I holstered my blaster and pinioned him with my other arm.

"Hold still, Captain," I said warningly. "I've got a blaster here."

Hendrin held still. But suddenly, before I knew what was happening, Fernandez grabbed the blaster from my hip and felled Hendrin with a single shot. I let the Captain's body drop, jumped forward, and

clamped Fernandez' wrist.

But I didn't need to. The gun dropped of its own accord, and Fernandez stood there, a giant of a man, brooding foolishly like a small boy over Hendrin's body.

I picked up the gun. "Why'd you kill him? He was under control. Why'd you kill him, Fernandez?"

He looked into my face, and I saw sheer horror in his eyes. "I don't know," he said quietly. "I... was out of my head. It's all over now." He was shaking convulsively. He found a seat and took it, head in his hands.

"They're all dead," I said. "Every last one but you and me. Some expedition."

Fernandez was sobbing. It hurts to see a man his size sob. He said, "I'm supposed to be a healer, a curer... and I killed him I didn't need to. I just killed him."

"You couldn't help it. There was killing in the air. This world could drive anybody

crazy."

We worked for four hours straight, and when we got through seven more graves were ranged alongside Grover's. The jungle trumpeted defiant noises at us as we worked.

When it was done, Fernandez looked up at me, an ironic smile on his heavy face. "Well, it's done with now. We know all we need to know about World Seven of Star System A. We can go back, now. I'll pilot the ship. But—"

"But what?"

"We're forgetting one thing. According to regulations, the last thing an Exploration Team's supposed to do before it winds up a tour is to name the planet. We haven't done that."

I looked at the jungle—the pestilent steaming hothouse of a jungle—and down at the eight graves. "That's easy," I said. "We'll call it *Death's Planet*."

THE END