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face
of
evil

by . . . Vincent S. Larkin

Warnick didn't like the way the natives were behaving—and how his own men seemed to accept all this rubbish.

THE expedition had been on the planet barely a week when the men of Kuldar came to Major Warnick with their story. At first he refused to see them. Their names weren't on his list of officials, and he was interested only in the ruling class of Terpac.

As leader of the first expedition from Earth to break the space boundaries of the solar system, Warnick was an explorer, an ambassador, and, in his own mind at least, a conqueror.

In 2094 the Intra-Galactic Institute had determined that MS9 was the nearest star to Earth with a planetary system. The North American Division was assigned the project of building the largest rocket ship ever designed.

After the technical details were worked out, the IGI recommended that a scientist head the expedition. In fact, every scientific organization and Geo-Politic Division on Earth had its own man for the job. Finally the Joint Chiefs of Staff, World Police Authority, decided that a military man should head the flight. And so when the ship blasted off in 2096, Major Leslie Warnick was in charge.

A typical New Yorker, in that he was born in California and raised in upstate New York before coming to the city in 1955, Vincent S. Larkin, who works in an advertising agency, makes a first appearance in FU with this story of the formless horror that broods on the moors by the sea.

Now, sitting at his desk in the plastex prefab that was expedition headquarters, Warnick glanced at the note left by his first sergeant. Five inhabitants of Kuldar were waiting to see him. He scanned his list of VIP's, then flipped a lever on the intercom. "Grandell."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell them I'm busy."

"Yes, sir."

Warnick snapped off the intercom. He reached for an ethno-social prelim report by Dr. Vesey, head anthropologist at the World University. Crossing out the words THE PLANET TERPAC, he pencilled in MS9-P4. He looked over the heading again and then went on to the report itself:

"While we were completing the atmospheric tests preparatory to leaving the rocket, we discerned signs of life through our portholes. Living creatures could be seen at a distance. They were extremely cautious in approaching the ship. But by the time we had opened the airlock, these beings had moved in quite close.

"Despite the strangeness of our appearance to them, the Terpatians were—"

The Major crossed out "Terpatians." He wrote, "natives of the planet." He looked at this phrase for a second and then glanced at the heading. He crossed out "natives of the planet" and put in a question mark.

Before he could continue, the buzzer sounded.

"What is it, Grandell?"

"It's these Terpatians, sir. They won't leave. They're from Kuldar and—"

"Kuldar?"

"Yes, sir. It's a small village northeast of Kainai." There are spirits or something and they—"

"That's nonsense. I don't have time for nonsense, you know that." He snapped the small lever and turned back to Vesey's report.

A minute later the intercom again buzzed. "This is Jenkins, sir. Headquarters linguist."

Warnick shut his eyes for a second. "Yes, Jenkins, what is it?"

"Sir, these Terpatians seem quite sincere. There really appears to be some kind of trouble near their village. As far as I can make out it's more or less an apparition. They say it's evil. I think it might be wise to at least hear their story."

"Are you telling me how to run things around here, Jenkins?"

"No, sir. It's just—"

"That's enough, Jenkins. I don't want explanations. And I don't want ghost stories or whatever it is these guys are selling."

"Yes, sir."

Major Warnick didn't like the tone of Jenkins' voice. Tomorrow he'd transfer the linguist to one of the field groups. Meanwhile there were five Terpatians cluttering up his office.

"Jenkins!"

"This is Grandell, sir."

"Send one in, Grandell. Tell him I only have a minute."

"Yes, sir."

The intercom clicked silent. Warnick took a sip of water from the plastic canteen on his desk. He licked the corner of his mouth. He still wasn't used to seeing these "natives." For the first few seconds it was always a shock.

When the knock came, the Major glanced down at the report on his desk. "Come in."

Opening the door, Jenkins stepped aside. The Terpatian walked into the room and stood before Warnick. Jenkins closed the door and moved up to the desk.

After perhaps thirty seconds Major Warnick glanced up. Sitting in his chair he was at eye level with the Terpatian. He nodded and said, "Get on with it, Jenkins."

Before Jenkins could speak the Terpatian broke into a staccato of excited monosyllables.

Jenkins translated, "My name is Metoc. I am Chief Golar of Kuldar." Jenkins glanced at the Major. "As far as I've been able to find out, sir, a Chief Golar is a combination mayor, police chief and high priest. They head a Golaric Council which runs each village."

"Go on, Jenkins, what else did he say?"

"Kuldar is a village of importance. It is a village of the sea. We have harvested the sea for many centuries. By harvest, sir, he means the gathering of that seaweed the Terpatians practically live on. Apparently it's very nutritious."

Major Warnick glowered at his translator. "Thank you, Jenkins, but I hardly think it's necessary for you to add footnotes. You may not believe it, but I, too, read Dr. Zeiter's ecologic reports."

"Yes, sir. We . . ." Jenkins turned to the Terpatian and spoke slowly. After the reply he continued, "We are people of peace. We harm no one. But there are evil ones near our village. They live on the moors by the sea. They stalk the night. It is unsafe to leave the village at night. We are afraid. Only . . ." Jenkins again questioned Metoc. "Only Xannu, the Great One, knows what they will do next."

Major Warnick sat back in his chair. He forced himself to look at the Terpatian. Metoc's lower jaw protruded hideously, the thick greenish skin twitching near the corner of his mouth.

"Ask him, who these 'evil ones' are, Jenkins, and why the local authorities haven't handled the situation."

Metoc extended his arms and leaned against the Major's desk. A rubbery webbing stretched between his fingers. Answering Jenkins he spit out a torrent of words, hardly more than grunts and whines to an Earthman's ears. The Terpatians spoke a highly inflected language with irregular cadences. Using the Contextual Lingual Analyzer, Jenkins had picked up a considerable fluency in Terpacan. Yet he still had trouble following Metoc, who gasped out the sounds, his large,

milky eyes bulging uncomfortably from their sockets.

"I'll have to paraphrase, sir," Jenkins said. "The evil ones are ancient forces. No one knows where they come from. Some say from the center of Terpac, others say from outer space where the evil forces always hover. The old women sometimes say the evil ones have been on the Moors of Gulac a hundred years, sometimes they say a million years.

"All Metoc knows is that in recent years the evil ones have been getting either stronger or bolder. Where before only an occasional stock animal wandered near the moors and was lost, now people from the village have begun to disappear. In the last month three men of Kuldar have passed by the moor at night, never to be seen again.

"Recently many drying barns have been broken into and great quantities of seaweed stolen. Always there's a trail leading back to the moors.

"The evil ones are said to dwell in caves. But the men of the village will not go into the moors. They fear not only the treachery of the land, but also the power of the evil ones.

"There is one boy who is said to have seen one of the evil ones. But he speaks of horrors that cannot be believed, for he is now mad."

Major Warnick pushed his chair back and walked to the window. "That's rank superstition." Still

with his back to the other two he continued, "You know these people are centuries behind us in everything. They live in the dark ages. If we're going to eventually use them and their planet we must eradicate nonsense like this.

"Tell him that as leader of the liberation expedition from the planet Earth I cannot recognize any 'evil ones.' That these are only stories made up by their old women. And that if the moors are dangerous that's a problem for the local government."

"Is that all, sir?"

"Of course, that's all." Warnick spun around. "Tell him and get him out of here."

When Jenkins translated, Metoc spoke again, this time quite slowly.

"He says, sir, that he must get some help. That he was counting on the great men from Earth to fight the evil ones. That he can't go back to Kuldar without help."

Major Warnick strode back to his desk. "Take him out, Jenkins. If he won't go away, boot him out."

"Pardon, sir, but he *is* a Chief Golar."

"Okay, Jenkins, *you* fight these things on the moors. Wait a minute. Take him to Vesey. He's an anthropologist. Let him track down these specters. I haven't time."

"Yes, sir." Jenkins spoke to Metoc, who bowed to the Major and quickly left the room.

After Jenkins had closed the door, Warnick reached in his desk

and drew out a box of tranquilizers. He popped one in his mouth and took a long drink from the canteen.

That night Major Warnick was working late when Dr. Vesey knocked on his office door.

"Come in—oh, hello, Doctor."

Paul Vesey closed the door behind him. He was of medium height, slightly built. His movements were quick and sure. Although his hair was graying, his eyebrows were jet black and bushy. He was almost dwarfed by Warnick. Only their eyes were the same, clear, alert, and at times cold.

"Have a seat." Major Warnick stretched. "It's about time I quit, anyway."

"Thank you, Major. I'll get down to business. When I came in this afternoon, I found a Terpatian waiting. He'd been there all day."

"Yes, I sent him over. I thought you'd be interested in these stories. They're a little out of my line."

"They shouldn't be if they're true."

Warnick smiled, "You don't really believe this stuff about evil ones, do you, Doctor? Why, you're a scientist."

"Exactly, Major. I want to be shown. But before I'm shown I won't say something can't be. If we on Earth had refused to act because things were said to be impossible, we wouldn't be here now."

"Hardly a good analogy, Doctor. After all, this is something

supernatural, isn't it? We can't afford to believe in ghost stories. Let's leave that to the local priests. We aren't children anymore."

Paul Vesey watched the Major's weathered face: the firm set of his jaws, the wrinkles around the eyes, the hairline that had started to recede. "Our job has many facets, Major. One of them is to study the people. That's why I'm here. And to do my job I may have to investigate things you think unnecessary."

"You may have a job here, Doctor, but I have the responsibility. Don't forget that. I've got to account for everything. For every success and every failure—and that includes wasting time."

"Do you think my work is a waste of time, Major?" Vesey's voice was level, challenging.

Major Warnick looked into the Doctor's eyes. "You were assigned to this mission. It's my duty to help you, consistent with the aims of the expedition and the welfare of the men under my command."

"You sound like a manual, Major. Did you have that memorized? Do you have a punchcard of rules you can stick in that machine you call a brain to meet any situation? Is that the way it works?" Vesey was sorry the moment he said it. He was tired of arguing, of fighting Warnick and trying to hurt him with words. For the first time since he entered the room, he looked down at the floor, waiting for Warnick to speak.

"Get out of here, Doctor."

Vesey forced himself to look up. Yes, there was hate in the Major's eyes. Suddenly Vesey felt very old. He started to rise.

"Wait . . . I'm sorry. Please stay."

Vesey sank back in his chair. "I want to apologize for what I just said."

"I had it coming. You're about the only one with enough guts to say it, that's all."

"But it's not true."

Major Warnick smiled. "Only partially." He got up and crossed to the window. He stood for a second, his hand rubbing the back of his neck, staring out at Terpac's broken land. "Look at this godforsaken place. It's like a perpetual twilight out there."

When the Doctor didn't speak, Warnick turned around. "You know, I've dreamed of this since I was a little kid. Of being in the space service, of running a show like this. I remember reading about the *Dauphin* and her crew. The first one ever to try for Mars. That was over a hundred years ago. You know how they wrote it up later. The goodbyes, the take-off. How they tracked the ship through space until it was lost. Completely and thoroughly lost."

Dr. Vesey looked away. He had never before heard the Major speak quite this way. But, of course, he had never before been alone with the Major late at night, the pale night of Terpac filtering through a

window. He said, "They never came back, did they?"

"No." The Major's voice was flat. "They never even made Mars. We know that. They just disappeared and became a legend.

"They were the first. But there were others. I used to read everything about those early pioneers I could lay my hands on. My first hero was Colonel Krasnov. I remember the papers the day he finally made Mars. There were banner headlines. For years I kept that front page tacked up on my wall."

Warnick came back to his desk. He poured himself a drink and held the canteen out to Dr. Vesey, who shook his head.

"Didn't you serve under Krasnov?"

"Yes. It was his last trip to Venus. I was quite young. Just a green ensign. At the time, I thought that was all I could ever want."

Neither man spoke for awhile. Major Warnick turned back to the window, his hands behind his back. Distant noises sifted in from the other rooms of the base prefab.

Paul Vesey rose and walked over to the window. For a reason he could not quite put into thoughts, he felt that they should stand together.

Outside the jagged purple and green terrain faded away into the gray blur of night. There was a strange aura about Terpac, a ghostly beauty that eventually conquered one.

"And do you now," said Vesey

quietly, "have what you want?"

It was an unreasonable question, a rude question, one that should never have been asked. Yet when Major Warnick turned, there was no anger in his eyes. There was, instead, a trace of warmth, almost of need, and a lost quality that Vesey had never seen before.

"Do we ever find, Doctor, what we want?"

Since they both knew the answer there was no need to reply. They stood at the window for a minute or so and then walked back to Warnick's desk.

"What do you want, Doctor?"

"A couple of your men when I go to the moors."

The Major sat and began putting papers away, straightening his desk for the next morning's work. "I can spare one—two at the most."

"That's all I need."

"For the morning only. That's the best I can do."

"Thanks." Vesey stuck out his hand. The Major said nothing for a few seconds, then he rose and accepted the Doctor's hand.

"It's part of the job, I think you said."

"I'm sure a worthwhile part. Good night, Major."

"Good night."

After Vesey left, Major Warnick snapped off the light. He swung his chair around and sat slightly hunched, staring out into the half-night of Terpac.

The next morning in the briefing

room Dr. Vesey was assigned two armed controlmen. Jenkins was his new interpreter.

The group left the base building and started towards the pick-up point which the Terpatians had provided for their visitors. They walked slowly. Although there was enough oxygen in Terpac's atmosphere for survival, the heavy, humid air made breathing difficult. Earthman had found that strenuous activity soon exhausted them.

It never rained in Terpac. There was an incessant condensation and evaporation that still intrigued Baxter, the meteorologist. Thus the light of MS9 filtered through a thin oppressive haze. One could see surprisingly far in this lambent mist of Terpac, yet it seemed to close in about one, like flabby fingers pressing against the throat.

Neither Dr. Vesey nor Jenkins spoke as they followed the controlmen. Their boots left heavy marks in the damp purple soil. When they hit the patches of green mold the effect was like walking on sponge. There was a tendency to bounce and spring about that was almost irresistible. Some of the men had broken curfew and tried it at night. They had returned exhausted, many of them also bruised—a memento of the huge rocks scattered about the fields.

The pick-up point was on the nearby waterway leading to Kainai. Most of Terpac was criss-crossed with these natural canals. Although their courses were irregular, they

provided the easiest line of transportation. The geologist Karl Zulrac and an assistant were waiting impatiently for a Terpatian steam launch. He greeted Vesey with, "Their damned taxi service got fouled up this morning. How can we do our work when we can't get there?"

"Good morning, Karl." Vesey smiled at the mild explosion. "You know you're a lazy man. You probably planned it this way."

"Bah! They're always supposed to have a launch here. One of these mornings I'm going to steal that jet-scooter Warnick uses."

"I think I see one coming."

The Terpatian on duty was frantically waving a launch on.

While they waited Vesey said, "Karl, you know Jenkins, don't you? He's one of our linguists."

"Yes, of course I do. How do you do." He nodded to Jenkins, his beard digging into his jacket, then he turned to Vesey. "A linguist! What a job you have. I wish I had it. I like to talk to people. But do I get a chance? No. Nothing but chipping and drilling and running that electrostratograph."

"You love it and you know it. Where are you going today?"

"Oh, up beyond some place called Kuldar."

"Ah." Vesey's eyes narrowed. "I'm going near Kuldar myself. Out on the Moors of Gulac."

"The Moors." Zulrac raised his eyebrows. "You must be crazy. I've never seen such dismal land. It's

near the sea. I went off the road a bit, but not far. Nothing but miles of rock and fungus, and more fungus. It's not like this stuff here. It grows higher, in ugly clumps. I thought at first it was men crouching, but it was just that soft fungus. I had to scrape some away to get samples. Touched it. Once, just once, though, never again."

"Sounds unpleasant enough," Jenkins said. "No one living there?"

"Not that I saw. It's a strange, dreary land. Worse than the rest of it. Can you imagine that?"

"I can," said Vesey. He looked at Jenkins, "Here's the launch."

Dr. Vesey's group was met near Kuldar by Metoc. Since the Moors of Gulac were not on the waterway, it was necessary to travel the rest of the way in a Terpatian version of an automobile.

Through Jenkins, Metoc explained that because the Moors were dangerous only he had come to guide them. Dr. Vesey said, "Tell him we understand. And that we must hurry."

For no reason Metoc smiled, showing one row of small teeth, most of them black. He appeared nervous. The incessant tic twisted one side of his face. He motioned the others to climb aboard his vehicle, which was apparently a truck. The motor, a primitive steam engine, hissed and sputtered.

Once, as they bounced along a twisting road, Metoc shouted and

pointed vaguely to their right. "I think," Jenkins said, "that's Kuldar over there."

The four Earthmen looked. Through the thin haze they could see a part of the Aydac Sea blending into the faded reaches of Terpac's land. The shoreline was surprisingly smooth, except for one patch of blurred gray. There the outlines of low buildings tangled in a small lump.

"So that's Kuldar," said Vesey thoughtfully.

A moment later, when Metoc turned around, Dr. Vesey glanced towards the scrap of village and smiled. Metoc's eyes half closed in pleasure. Then he whirled back again and they clattered on towards the Moors.

A few minutes later the truck topped a hill and slowed to a stop.

"That must be it, Jenkins."

"Wow," said one of the controlmen, "that other guy sure wasn't kidding. Look at it."

The road bent away sharply to the left. Before them, as far as they could see, lay the Moors of Gulac.

"There's something about it," Jenkins said, "just looking at it, I mean. I can't pin it down, but it's there. A kind of feeling."

"I know," Dr. Vesey said. He motioned Metoc to go on. As they rolled down the hill, he thought: it's as if a huge animal had clawed up this part of the coast and left it to die.

Metoc pulled off the road and stopped the engine. He turned,

waiting for the Earthmen to act. No one moved. They sat there staring out towards the sea, hidden by the jagged silence of the land and the eternal mists. They sat and unconsciously listened for the sound of waves breaking upon the shore. They listened and heard nothing and gradually they became aware of the stillness. Slowly it tightened around their hearts.

Vesey took a deep breath. He climbed down from the truck. "Come on, we don't have much time."

Metoc explained that the men from Kuldar had disappeared somewhere along this road. The caves where the evil ones lived were deep in the Moors. He would take them so far and then they would have to go on alone. Vesey nodded agreement and they followed the small figure into the wastelands.

Near the road the land was fairly level. What soil there was faded from purple to a dark gray. Most of the underfooting was gray rock and the inevitable green mold. Soon they came to patches of waist-high fungus growing as brush would on Earth. They were sometimes forced to fight their way through. When this happened only Metoc's head would show, yet he slithered between the fungus faster than the Earthmen.

The already damp air grew rank with a heavy odor of rotting plant life. The rocks beneath their feet were slimy. The plant life closing in about them gave way before their

bodies like stiff jelly, the broken pieces oozing thickly to the ground. The fetid aftersmell of the paths they broke followed them like a living creature.

Metoc had now moved back with them. They stayed close together. The cold mist had grown denser, grayer, as if to seal them in the Moors.

Soon the going became rougher. They were forced to skirt large patches of fungus. The rocks became larger, the gullies deeper. Marshy pools of black water slowed their progress.

Once Jenkins slipped and Vesey reached out, grabbing his arm. When he pulled away, the palm of his hand was wet. Already the damp foul air of the Moors was leaving a slimy film on their skin.

They reached the top of a particularly treacherous ridge and Metoc stopped. He pointed ahead. The evil ones were believed to live close. He would go no further. It was dangerous even here. Jenkins looked at Vesey. "He won't go further, Doctor. Says he'll wait here. That we should leave one of our controlmen with him. He's not afraid, but it's better not to be alone on the Moors. Even during the day."

Vesey looked out over the Moors, to where Metoc had pointed. He thought, that will leave only one controlman to go with us. He looked down and kicked a hunk of damp spongy mold out of the ground. What was the matter? Was he afraid? After all, hadn't he told

himself that the controlmen were along only as a precaution? So far nothing had happened. Nothing would, of course. It's just an unpleasant place and he was letting it get under his skin.

"Come on, Jenkins, let's go." He turned to one of the controlmen. "You stay with Metoc, we'll be back as soon as possible."

Vesey again looked out across the stifling silence of that strangely waiting land. He glanced back. The haze crouched about them as if listening for the drift of their lost voices. And suddenly he knew what had been plucking at his consciousness ever since they had entered the Moors. There was a feeling about the place. Jenkins had felt it too. A feeling that one couldn't quite catch hold of, perhaps that one had been afraid to face. But now he knew what it was. The thought sent a chill across his back and into his vitals. For despite the creeping molds, despite the fungoid trembling of the great plants, and despite the small group of men gathered there on the ridge, there was over the Moors of Gulac an aura of death.

Vesey wondered if the others felt it too. The complete deadness of the region. Or was it a waiting for death? He didn't know. All he knew was that the others were waiting for him to move, that he was after all a scientist, and that in the end he had to find the answer himself.

He wanted to speak. He had an

almost uncontrollable urge to hear his own voice. Yet there was nothing he could say. The time for words had been back in Warnick's office. He stumbled down the side of the hill; the others slid after him.

Soon they had lost sight of the ridge where Metoc and the controlman waited. With the heel of his boot Jenkins slashed at the fungus, leaving a trail to follow back. As they followed a long gully a soft, rhythmic echo began to caress their ears. The three men stopped and listened. It was an insistent brush-like sound which rolled around the rocks and the fungus.

"What is it?" whispered Jenkins.

"I don't know—unless it's the sea. Of course, that must be it. We should be nearing the coast."

"Doctor," Jenkins looked about them. "Suppose we keep going and do reach the sea. What then? What exactly are we looking for?"

"I wish I knew."

"And if we don't find anything?"

"We've found an answer."

"Maybe," Jenkins said.

Vesey looked at his linguist. "Yes," he said quietly, "you're right, maybe."

The controlman clicked off the safety on his rocket weapon. The noise sounded very loud in the rock-rimmed gully. When the other two glanced at him, the controlman explained, "The terrain here was so rough I kept it on."

"A good idea," Vesey said.

"Well, let's—"

His words were cut off by a muffled report sounding distant and forlorn.

"That was a shot," said the controlman. "And it was from a rocket weapon."

They had just turned to start back when the scream stopped them. It sounded like an animal, yet Vesey knew in his heart that it had been human.

The scream had been so horrible that he looked at the others, searching desperately in their eyes for a different answer. When he found none, he realized there was no use of hurrying. It would be much too late.

When they regained the ridge the rocket weapon lay upon a bed of gray-green mold. One of the rockets was missing from the magazine. Vesey looked about. The mist curled and thickened into strange dying shapes.

There was no one else upon the ridge.

The controlman tightened his grip on his rocket weapon. He glanced sharply around. "They have to be somewhere nearby. It was only a few minutes ago when we heard the scream. Serly!" He shouted into the mist, "Serly, where are you?"

There was no answer. Not even an echo. His voice had been smothered by the enfolding silence of the Moors.

The controlman said, "We have to find him."

Jenkins' face was an ashen gray.

"This mist could swallow a person in a few seconds. Where would we look?"

"Jenkins is right," Vesey said. "We can't do anything alone. Our best bet is to follow our trail out of this place."

The controlman said, "I don't like the idea of leaving without Serly. He's my best friend."

"This isn't a question of friendship anymore. It's a matter of survival. Don't you feel it all about us? It's waiting. The evil. The malignancy. It's slowly closing in. If we don't get out of here . . ."

There was something in Vesey's voice that finally frightened the controlman.

He nodded silently and the three men started back.

After they had gone a short distance, the controlman stopped. "We forgot the rocket weapon."

"Forget it," Vesey said. "We can't go back. Besides, it didn't help them much."

And so the three Earthmen stumbled and slid across the Moors. But if they had returned to the ridge, if they had looked carefully in a crevice a few yards off in the mist, they would have seen an amorphous shape convulse and slowly ooze away its life. For that one rocket had not after all been wasted.

When Vesey walked into Control back at the base, he learned that Warnick was in Kainai attending a conference of Terpatian leaders. Grandell said, "He won't be back

until tonight, Doctor. Can I help you?"

"Can you reach him, Grandell? It's urgent."

"Well . . . it's about midday. I can get his orderly on the vision-phone. Is something wrong, sir?"

"We lost Metoc and one of our controlmen."

Grandell licked his lips nervously, "Lost, sir? Out on those Moors? You don't mean . . ."

"I mean, Grandell, they disappeared. I don't know what happened to them. Whatever it was, we need more men. Major Warnick should be notified."

"Yes, sir. Communication's over here."

Five minutes later Vesey and Warnick were face to face over the visionphone.

"And that's all you know?" Warnick's voice was hard, the lines around his mouth showed a growing annoyance.

Dr. Vesey replied, "That's all."

"Why didn't you search for them?"

"If you had been there, you'd know."

"That's not an answer. It's not even an excuse."

"I don't need an excuse." This time it was Vesey who became angry. "I had a decision to make and I made it. If we had stayed there it would have gotten us too."

"It, Doctor?" Warnick's voice was edged with acid. "Are you going to tell me there are really 'Evil Spirits' out there? If one of

my men is missing, it's because of that Terpatian you had with you. I don't trust them as far as I could throw one of them."

"Major, I'm not interested in your prejudice." There was a quiet determination in Vesey's voice, "I *am* interested in the lives of Serly and Metoc, that is, if they're still alive. I swear to you, as sure as I'm standing here, there's something evil out on those Moors. I don't know what it is, but I know it's there. I felt it. I know it's hard for you to believe—it's something indescribably horrible. I think some of it's still with me. My . . . my hands still shake a bit." Vesey paused for a second. The anger had slipped away. He felt tired. It was only midday, yet he wanted to go to bed, to sleep, to forget.

"Major, I won't go back there alone. I'm afraid to. But I *will* go back if you give me some of your men. If we stick together maybe our numbers will help us. Maybe we can hunt it down. Maybe we can get it somehow, before *it* gets us."

The two men looked at each other over the visionphone.

"Okay, Doctor, you win." Warnick spoke to his orderly off-screen, "Tell Captain Lesser to take over here—give my apologies and so on, and then warm up the motor." Turning back he said, "Grandell."

"Yes, sir."

"Alert all off-duty men. Have everybody on action status when I arrive." The screen went dead.

Twenty minutes later Doctor

Vesey sat with Major Warnick as the jet-scooter roared towards Kuldar. In the rear sat six controlmen, talking in undertones. Wedged in near the pilot was Jenkins, his arm curled about a rocket weapon.

Warnick was looking straight ahead, into the haze. "If something's happened to Serly, we'll have to teach them a lesson. We can't afford to let these people think we're soft."

"I'm sure it's not the Terpatians. They're scared stiff of the Moors. You talked to Metoc yourself."

"You seem to forget savages can be treacherous."

"Savages?" Dr. Vesey's voice was incredulous. "How can you call them savages?"

"Well, primitives then—is that Kuldar?" The jet-scooter, roaring in low, approached the small village. Although the houses were drab, the streets looked clean. There was an unmistakable impression of order about the place.

"Yes," Vesey said, "that's it. Now we have to go up the coast and in a bit."

The jet-scooter veered away from the cluster of small, low homes. Vesey continued, "How can you call them primitives? Oh, technological-ly they're a few centuries behind us. But there are other factors to consider when studying a race. Where you only meet the politicians and the policemen, I meet the workers and the scholars. Terpatians, on the whole, are quiet, thoughtful people."

Major Warnick shifted in his seat. He glanced back at the controlmen waiting, their weapons by their sides.

"Well, Doctor, I know one thing. I'm going to clear up this business for once and all, and then I'm going to raise hell in Kainai."

"Maybe you'll change your mind when we get down on the Moors."

"I rarely do that, Doctor. That's one of the reasons I lead rather than follow. If there's a mystery down there, that just complicates things a bit. Is that it ahead?"

The jet-scooter was slowing up. The visibility was getting poorer, but there below lay the Moors of Gulac.

"Yes," Vesey said. "That's it."

"We better set down by the road where you went in. We can't see a thing from the air."

The Major gave the instructions to his pilot. Dr. Vesey leaned forward in his seat. "I can almost feel the evilness rising from that damnable place."

Warnick said curtly, "Look Doctor, there's no such thing as evil or good. There are only enemies or friends."

"Is it really that simple, Major?"

"It's that simple."

"For our sakes, I hope it is."

A few seconds later they landed.

The controlmen Major Warnick had brought with him were all armed with the conventional rocket weapons. After checking their magazines and ignition switches, they went into patrol formation,

with Dr. Vesey, Jenkins and the Major in the center.

Warnick looked over his men and then glanced about him. The Moor stretched ahead, hidden in the unmoving cloak of mist. Vesey was watching him. He realized that he was breathing heavily. "Okay, let's go. Move on quickly, but be careful."

The party moved out, following the trail Vesey had taken earlier. At the start the men cursed quietly at the slippery rocks and the fungus and the gray mist. But slowly the mute hostility of the land silenced them. They slowed the pace almost imperceptibly. Warnick sensed the uneasiness in his men. He fought against it in himself, but as the small group of Earthmen penetrated deeper and deeper into that strangely fertile desert, he too felt the chill and the inexplicable fear.

Once he turned to Vesey, "What do you think it is, Doctor? Whatever got Serly and Metoc?"

"I wish I knew."

"But you must have an idea. You've talked with the people."

Vesey shrugged his shoulders. "There are stories, of course. About these Moors. About things that happened many years ago. I've written up such stories as superstitions, legends."

Dr. Vesey knew he was expected to continue. Why had he called the folk tales superstitions? They could have been history. Was he afraid to believe them?

He went on, "Metoc's version

was typical, but there are others, of course. In some of them, the ancient beings have dwelt on the Moors since the beginning of time. They are reinforced periodically. Sometimes from the blackness of space, sometimes from under the ground. One old hag said the evil ones last came a hundred years ago. From space, that time, and that these are the ones that are now causing the trouble."

"I can see," Major Warnick said with a bitter smile, "someone dropping in from space, but not out of this blasted stuff." He glanced down at the rock and slime-coated ground.

"Ah, but it's possible the evil ones do come from the center of Terpac. A flaming center. You see, Major, the Terpatians have a hell, just as we did at one time."

"Then they must also have a heaven."

"There you're wrong." When Warnick looked at him, Vesey continued, "In one way, the Terpatians are quite an extraordinary race. They have a hell—but no heaven."

Nothing else was said until they came to this ridge. The rocket weapon still lay on the ground. One of the controlmen picked it up. "One rocket gone, sir. Seems to be all right."

"Bring it along," Warnick said, then, "all right, we'll fan out in groups of two. If you see or hear anything, I repeat, anything suspicious, sound off."

After only thirty seconds, one of the controlmen shouted, "Over

here, sir. We've found something."

The controlman stood over a crevice half closed by a creeping fungus. At the bottom of the crevice lay the shattered remains of a body. Yet was it a body? Or was it a scream at night shaped into a sickening, jellied thing of horror?

Jenkins turned away, fighting the nausea that curled his stomach.

Warnick looked at Vesey. He said, "Serly must have gotten it with his rocket."

Just then another controlman shouted, "I think we found a trail of some sort, sir."

On a line leading along the ridge, then cutting off towards the sea, was a fairly recent trail. The marks were uneven, as if made by large staggering animals.

The controlman who had found them said, "They're getting fainter, sir. Sort of melting in with the soil and the vegetable stuff. But we can still follow it."

"Let's go, then," snapped Warnick. He called in the other men and re-formed the patrol.

Slowly and carefully the Earthmen moved deeper into the Moors of Gulac. The haze thickened a few yards above the ground. The pale light grew dimmer. As they made their way across the rocks and gray moss, the men became sharply aware of the silence. The only sound was the sibilant tread of their boots.

The terrain became increasingly rough. The crevices were deeper and wider, small valleys lined with

the shattered, frozen forms of the ever-present fungus. There was an ancient smell of musty decay. Yet mixed with this smell of death was an unmistakable odor of plant generation, rising from the creeping softness of the fungus. Vesey felt that the Moors of Gulac was a living thing, moving behind his back, invisible and noiseless.

The men moved ahead, following the faint marks down the length of a deep narrow chasm, passing not only the dripping flesh of the plant life but also small dark caves. Suddenly they could hear the soft distant scrape of the sea against clean rocks. The very caves they passed seemed to echo ghostly cries. The chasm widened. They came into a flat, circular place, bounded by towering rocks.

The Earthmen walked into the center of the opening and stopped. Opposite them was the black mouth of a huge cave. To the side of the cave, tangled among the rocks, overgrown and almost hidden by the fronds of huge fungus lay a twisted shell of metal.

For half a minute or more none of the men spoke. Each struggled with his own thoughts and emotions. Finally the advance controlmen looked back at Warnick.

"All right, let's see what it is. The rear guard will stay on watch in the center here."

Vesey and Jenkins stood to one side as the controlmen crowded up to the wreckage.

"Looks like a space ship."

"Can't be, these Terpatians don't have 'em."

"It sure is burned out."

"Look, here's a skeleton."

"Let's see."

"Hey!" one of the controlmen shouted from the side, "over here, in these rocks, I'm sure they're bones."

"Watch that slimy stuff," someone said with disgust.

"There's another skeleton."

"The poor devils never stood a chance."

Major Warnick turned away. He came over to Dr. Vesey.

"I don't understand it. It looks like a space ship, all right. Almost like the DM4's they used a hundred years ago."

Vesey said, "You mean it's an Earth ship."

"I don't mean anything. I said it looks like the same general type. It's too burned out and twisted to really tell."

"And the skeletons?"

Warnick looked away. "They're not Terpatians."

Just then a controlman shouted from the cave mouth, "Hey! There's some more in here. Bring over the lights."

The group moved to the cave mouth. Two of the controlmen took out small radiant-lights from their cases. In a second the darkness of the cave was cut by brilliant beams of light. Water dripped sporadically from the lichen-covered ceiling and walls onto the rock floor. Just inside the mouth of the cave two

skeletons were heaped in an embrace of death. Farther in there were strange marks upon the walls.

Dr. Vesey looked around, then he turned to Warnick. "Some of them survived for awhile. Those bodies couldn't have been thrown into the cave."

"Just the two of them," mused Warnick.

"This cave might go back quite a ways."

Warnick glanced at Vesey, then said to his men, "Flash those lights ahead."

The Earthmen moved through the silence of the cave. The damp air was cold. Vesey felt a chill through his body. He was glad when Jenkins moved up alongside.

Warnick, leading the group of controlmen, suddenly stopped them. He motioned for Vesey to come ahead.

The cave had opened on an underground room. When the Doctor saw what the radiant-lights were flashing upon, he drew in a quick breath. It was the most ghastly sight he had ever seen. The floor of the room was covered with the stained, moldy rubble of countless bones.

Major Warnick had been hardened to carnage in the space service, yet this room of death left a hot nauseous ball in his stomach. He looked at Vesey. When their eyes met, each knew what the other was thinking. The real horror lay not in the slimy sea of blackened bones but in those scattered heaps that were still whitish.

Warnick looked back to the room. He closed his eyes, trying to think, to decide the next move. The men pushed forward, gazing at the scene. None of them spoke. It was so quiet that the shot and the scream of terror and agony which followed shattered the buried air of the cave like a thin glass.

The Earthmen had almost reached the mouth of the cave when the radiant lights picked up the things. The bloated, jelloid things slushing towards them.

Major Warnick whispered hoarsely, "Weapons, ready to fire."

The things hesitated in the glare of the radiant-lights. They were momentarily blinded. The grotesque tableau lasted only a second.

"Fire!"

The crash of rockets sucked through the quivering flesh.

"Fire!"

The cave roared in a nightmare of noise, of gurgling aborted screams.

"Fire!"

Still one of them came on, shattered and noisome.

"Fire!"

The sound of rockets echoed out of the cave. Only the soft trickle of death remained. And then the racking struggle of men being sick.

Late that night Major Leslie Warnick wrote in the logbook:

"Today three men and—" He hesitated for a second. "—a Terpatian Golar from the village of Kuldar were lost in line of duty on

the Moors of Gulac. The deaths occurred in action against a pack of wild animals which had terrified the inhabitants of the region. The animals were completely destroyed. We have assured the populace that they have seen the last of the Spectors of Gulac Moors . . ." The Major hesitated.

He was relieved to hear the knock.

Vesey came in, closed the door, and walked silently over to the Major's desk. He sat down and asked, "What did you say?"

Warnick pushed the logbook across the desk. After reading, Dr. Vesey said, "It's a very short report."

"What else is there to say?"

"That ship . . ."

"I've told the men that it couldn't possibly be from Earth. That it must be Terpatian."

"Wasn't the *Dauphin*—"

"Doctor, excuse me, but I think I know best in matters such as these."

Vesey nodded. He caught Warnick's eye. "One can't tell what will happen after a hundred years, you know."

"That's impossible."

"Is it? This climate, atmosphere.

Trauma after the crash, fear and isolation, a forced adaptation. A changed metabolism. How do we know how our bodies would react—and then our minds?"

"You're talking nonsense, Vesey. This incident is closed. It's all in the report."

Dr. Vesey rose and went to the window. He stared blankly at the graying night that differed so little from the day. "You're right, of course. It's closed."

"I'm glad you understand." Major Warnick rose wearily from his chair. He said softly, "The face of evil has a strange smile."

Vesey turned and the two men faced each other. They stood there for only a second or so, then Vesey said, "I must be going. Good night, Major."

"Good night—Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"Have you looked at yourself, your eyes, in a mirror tonight?"

"No . . . why?"

"I did. An hour or so ago. I thought I looked different. Do I . . . look different to you?"

"No," said Dr. Vesey, "you look just the same." He closed the door. Back in his room, he took out his mirror and turned it to the light.

