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INVASION

by A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

For generations they had wandered about the universe looking for a planet on which to settle. And now at long last they seemed to have found a suitable home

ROGEREZ and Suset were in their tiny cabin, about to retire, when the bulkhead speaker coughed twice and then began to talk in a crisp, authoritative voice.

"This is the Captain speaking," it said. "The Department of Astrophysics has just informed me that the star that we are approaching has a family of ten planets, as well as many satellites and planetoids. It is possible that our voyage is over. In any case, we have been ordered by the Commodore to make the preliminary investigations. If our findings are hopeful, the Main Fleet will be diverted to this system. All departmental heads will report at once to Control. That is all."

Rogerez, who was half way out of his trunks, pulled them on again. He got back into the

shirt that carried the silver, crossed-quill pens on its epaulettes. He slid his feet into his sandals. Suset sat on the bunk and watched him. Her thin, fine-featured face was thoughtful and serious under the pale yellow hair.

"Rog," she said, "do you think that this is the real thing this time?"

"It could be," he said. "It could be."

She smiled faintly. "But you're the Chronicler, and you keep the records, and you have access to the records of the Chroniclers before you. You could tell me just how many sterile balls of rock or mud or water we've investigated since the beginning of the exile."

"I could," he said. "I advise you, Sue, not to get any false hopes."

"But the Captain said that it was possible that our voyage was over," she said. "What will it be like to live on the surface of a planet, with room to stretch? What will it be like to have all the food we want, instead of rations, all the water we want? What will it be like to be a real gardener, a real farmer, not a bio-chemist dabbling with seeds and shoots in tanks full of chemicals? What will it be like to be able to have children when we want to, not when some damned committee decides that it's our turn to be parents?"

"I hope," he said, "that you find out, that *we* find out. But I must get along to Control."

"One departmental head in the family is one too many," she said, smiling. "I wish that you could stay with me, to hear the news as it's released."

"So do I," he said.

He kissed her briefly, opened the door and almost ran out into the alleyway.

HE was the last to reach Control.

All the others were already there—Captain Maris, Kane, the Chief Officer, Blish and

Katt, the two Chief Engineers, Crandell, the Communications Officer, Deel, who commanded the ground forces, Hayn, the Surgeon, Pamel, the Bio-Chemist, Claver, the Purser, Keen, the Astro-Physicist.

Rogerez stood in the doorway looking at them, at the men and women who were the rulers of this little, man-made world. He looked beyond them to the banked instruments and controls, to the big screens upon which the stars were, to the layman, meaningless swirls and eddies of light against the blackness. He tried to get the *feel* of the occasion, began to toy with the phrases that he would use when writing his official account.

"Sit down, man!" snapped Captain Maris.

"Don't interrupt his train of thought, sir," said Pamel cat-tily. "Who knows what beautiful, purple prose is running through his mind?"

Rogerez glared at her, but said nothing. After all, she was Suset's chief and could make life hard for her. He took his seat at the foot of the long conference table. It's been worn shiny, he thought, by the el-

bows of the generations. . . It's old, and the ship is old, and we are growing old with her. Will there never be an end to this voyaging?

"Keen," said the Captain, "tell us of your findings."

"With your permission," said the Astro-Physicist, "the interstellar drive was shut down, and observations made. The tenth, ninth, eighth, seventh, sixth and fifth planets seem to be utterly incapable of supporting life as we know it. It would be barely possible to establish a colony on the fourth planet. We have not yet been able to decide whether or not the second planet is suitable. The first planet would be most unsuitable."

"Come to the point, man!" said Colonel Deel impatiently.

"On my own time, Deel," replied Keen. "After the preliminary observations, our attention was concentrated upon the third planet. Its mass is almost identical with that of the home world, so is the relative distribution of land and water. The same may be said for atmospheric density and composition."

"Is it inhabited?" asked Deel.

"There is life," replied the scientist. "Pamel will bear me out on that."

"Is there intelligent life?" asked the soldier.

"That does not concern us yet, Deel," said Captain Maris. "My instructions from the Commodore are to make the preliminary survey from a safe orbit. No landing is to be attempted until the arrival of the Main Fleet. If there is intelligent life we shall not strike until we are ready."

"Need there be war, Captain?" asked Hayn. "Might it not be possible to establish friendly relations with the natives?"

"Was it possible," asked Maris, "when the Glormingen landed on our home world? Between different races there is only one possible state of affairs—war. Our world was taken from us by force—we shall take a new world by force."

"I am ready," said Deel quietly. He looked around the table, a small, hard smile on his hard face. He sees us all carrying guns, manning his artillery, thought Rogerez. After

years of playing at soldiers, of studying strategy and tactics, he sees a chance of achieving what he thinks is his proper place in the scheme of things. . .

"Katt," asked the Captain, "how are your rockets?"

"Ready, Captain," replied the Reaction Engineer. "They are always ready. My fuel tanks were refilled, as you know, only twenty years ago, and the only consumption since then has been for the annual tests."

"Claver, in the unlikely event of our being ordered to send down a landing party before the arrival of the Main Fleet, how are your boat provisions?"

"All boats are fully stocked," said the Purser. "As always."

She looks, thought Rogerez, like a plump, competent housewife in the old stories—and that, with any luck at all, is what she will be soon, with her own little home to worry about and not a ship. . .

"Rogerez," Maris went on, "I suppose that your records are up to date?"

"They are, sir."

"Then get them transmitted to the flagship for recording, and make it, from now on, a half-daily routine. Crandell—is all your equipment in good order?"

"It is, Captain."

"Keep it so. The Commodore must be kept informed of everything. *Everything.*"

"How much can we tell the people, Captain?" asked Claver. "I realise the dangers of raising false hopes—but there has been considerable despondency of late."

"You can tell them," said Maris, "that we have found our new world. You can tell them, too, that we may have to fight for it."

"**W**E shall have to fight," said Rogerez.

"Put me in the picture," said Suset. "Nobody ever tells us anything in Hydroponics. That bitch Pamel knows what's going on, but it'd break her heart to pass on information. What's the use of having a husband who's Chronicer if I can't get inside information?"

"This *is* inside information," said Rogerez. "For some reason

the Old Man's decided to keep it secret. This is rather too big for him to handle, and he's waiting for instructions from the Commodore.

"As you know, we're in an orbit around the third planet. It's all that Astrophysics said it was—mass, atmosphere, climate and all the rest just right. But it's inhabited. We can see the city lights gleaming from the night hemisphere. Crandell has been able to pick up what seem to be radio broadcasts—voices talking in some odd language, weird music.

This much we know for certain—these people have electricity and they have radio. It's fairly certain that they haven't space flight—there're no signs of colonisation on their satellite—but, even so, their technological level is uncomfortably high. They may have atomic power—the scientists are still trying to make up their minds about that."

"What harm can it do if the people *do* know?"

"Plenty. If the Commodore decides to carry on without making a landing, an attempt at conquest, think of the dis-

appointment. There might be mutiny, even. The technique for handling such a situation has to be worked out."

"I've a good mind," she flared, "to go out into the alleyways, the public rooms, and shout what you've told me throughout the ship."

"As wife of the Chronicler," he told her, "you've taken the oath of loyalty and secrecy."

"This is more important than any oath!" she snapped.

"It is not."

The lights flickered.

"What was that?" she demanded.

"Crandell's taking some more recordings of the native radio signals," he said. "They've had to switch off the meteor screen."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"No. The chances of our being struck are infinitesimal."

The lights went out.

Rogerez realised that he was on the deck, with Suset in his arms. He was deafened by the concussions that had slammed through the huge hull, heard only faintly the thudding shut of airtight doors, the thin, high scream of escaping atmosphere. Somebody was whispering—it

was, he realised, the bulkhead speaker.

"Spacesuits... Put on your spacesuits... The ship is holed..." Another voice was heard. "There aren't enough, you fool! Attention, all! Attention, all! This is the Chief Officer. The Captain is dead. I am in command. The ship has been badly damaged. All navigation personnel will report to Control, all engineering personnel to the engine room. The rest of you stay in your cabins and dormitories and prepare for landing. Prepare for landing. There will be brief period of weightlessness when the ship's revolution about her axis is halted; weight will return with deceleration. Secure everything. Secure yourselves."

Rogerez got unsteadily to his feet, pulled Suset to hers. Together, groping blindly in the darkness, they found the bunk, fell into it, strapped themselves in. They heard the roar as the rockets were fired, felt the dizziness that came when the rotation slowed and halted, when centrifugal force no longer played the part of gravity.

Then, after what could have been either centuries or sec-

onds, weight returned as the ship shook to the blasting of the rockets.

"Deceleration," said Rogerez.

"We're going down," came Kane's voice from the speaker.

Again the rockets fired, and again. There was the whine of the gyroscopes as the ship was turned, there was the thin, barely heard keening of the first tenuous wisps of atmosphere along her sides. There was the screaming roar, the ear-piercing whistle, as the air through which they were rushing found the holes punctured in the sleekness by the meteor swarm.

The ship was tilting, tilting, and Rogerez was afraid until he realised that what had been down could no longer be down, that Kane was turning her again so that she was approaching the planetary surface stern first, dropping down and down the long column of fire of her exhausts. Creaking, protesting, the long untried mechanism of the bunk adjusted itself to the change of conditions. Somewhere children were crying and a man was swearing.

The roar of the rockets was

steady now, drowning all other noises. More frightening than any sound was the shuddering of the ship. She was old, thought Rogerez, and the metal of her parts must, over the centuries, have crystallised. She was old, and the damage caused by the meteor swarm must have weakened her still further.

He tried to visualise the scene in Control—Kane and his officers intent over their instruments, the body of the Captain flung carelessly and unregarded in some corner.

Was it in daylight that they were coming down, he wondered, or was it at night? Was it clear air that they were dropping through, or cloud and storm?

One of the rockets was faltering, stammering. Suset cried out in fear as the ship tilted again. Rogerez held her tightly to him. He was muttering to himself, "Fire, you bastard! Fire, you bastard!" Another rocket cut out—and the ship righted.

"If we could only see what was happening!" cried Suset.

"We can guess," said Rogerez. "We're coming down on six

jets instead of eight. Kane had to cut out one of the good ones to counterbalance the bad one."

Again there was the uneven, terrifying hammering. Again the ship tilted. Again she righted—and the diminution of the rockets' thunder was more frightening than the tilting had been.

"Control here," came Kane's voice. "We are coming down too fast for a safe landing. I am trying to bring her down in what appears to be a body of calm water. Be ready to throw off your safety belts the moment we touch. The ship is badly holed and will not stay afloat for long. Get ready to abandon ship as soon as we touch!"

Rogerez remembered how, at every council meeting, there had been those who had maintained that the space occupied by the ship's swimming pool could be put to much better use. He was glad that they had never been able to carry their point.

SHE hit, not too hard, and there was a great hissing and bubbling as her incandescent

exhausts boiled the water around her. She went down, and down—and then, swaying gently, floated to the surface. Rogerez unsnapped the buckles of the belt holding Suset and himself to the bunk. He jumped down on to what had been a bulkhead and was now the deck. He managed to open the sliding door.

There were dim emergency lights burning in the alleyway outside, and they were shining on the crowds of people making their way to the axial shaft.

There was little panic—but there was a determination to get out of the ship as soon as possible. Rogerez knew that should he or Suset fall they would never be able to get up again.

He took her hand and tucked it in the waistband of his trunks. All they could do thereafter was go with the crowd.

The alleyway had been crowded, but the axial shaft was almost jammed. Rogerez and Suset were pushed into it by the crush behind them, then went up it almost without touching the ladder rungs.

Below them there were gur-

glings and splashings, sounds that told of the encroachment of water into the ship. There was an occasional cry, an occasional curse. Somewhere, with idiot persistence, a speaker was repeating, "Abandon ship. Abandon ship."

Then Rogerez and Suset were at the forward airlock. There was no holding back, no chance of a pause to evaluate, to decide upon a plan of action. They were swept through the little compartment by the press of bodies behind them until, in a matter of seconds, the deck was gone from beneath their feet and they were falling.

The Chronicler glimpsed grey sky and tall, incredibly tall, trees looming through the mist as he fell—and then all was blotted out by the water.

He fought, viciously, to free himself from the entwining arms and legs of those who had fallen with him, after him. He broke surface at last, coughing and spluttering. He looked around him frantically until he saw Suset's pale hair and paler face. Together they struck out for the dark line of the shore.

KANE, aided by Deel and Claver, called the roll. Rogerez—his stylus and notebook were little the worse for their immersion—wrote down the figures and, after them, *We were lucky. Seven men—including the Captain—five women and sixteen children died in the meteor shower. Three men, eight women and six children are missing, presumably drowned, after the landing. Over a thousand of our ship's company has survived...*

"Lucky?" demanded Deel, who was holding the hand lamp while Rogerez wrote. "Lucky, you say? All of our heavy weapons have been lost with the ship—with them we could have destroyed a city." He turned to Kane. "As for you—why couldn't you have landed near one of their cities? Why couldn't you have landed on solid ground?"

"If I had," replied Kane, "we'd have been lucky to have had ten survivors—and the people of the city could have finished us off with ease. I got us here. I did my job. You're in charge now, soldier. Let's see what you can do."

"All right," snapped Dee. "All non-military officers will get the people formed into a column, at the head of which I shall place my own men. We shall march—" he consulted his pocket compass—"west. I suppose that this planet has got a magnetic field, Kane."

"It has."

"All right. We march west, away from the lake. We must get out of this damned jungle as soon as possible—for all we know it's teeming with night predators. At sunrise, which shouldn't be far off, we halt to take stock."

"Why not wait until sunrise before marching?"

"Because I say so," snapped Deel. "Get the people organised and we'll make a start."

"What about a rearguard?" asked Kane.

"Are you trying to teach me my business?" demanded the soldier.

Nevertheless, Rogerez noted, he made arrangements for both a rearguard and flanking parties.

Whistles sounded, and the long column began its march. The Chronicler, with Suset, took his place with Kane at

the head of the civilians. As he walked he looked around him, trying to make out as much as possible in the dim, misty light. He could see little beyond the tall, straight stems, many times the height of a man, between which they threaded their way. Now and again there were other, thicker, trunks and the tops of the growths supported by them were lost in the mist. Roots, like cables over the ground, made going difficult.

Ahead of the column Deel was blowing his whistle—a series of short, urgent blasts. Kane repeated the signal with his whistle; it was repeated again by the other officers. There were cries of alarm and apprehension as the march halted.

"There's something there," whispered Kane to Rogerez. "Do you hear it?"

There was something there, ahead, something that crashed through the jungle towards them, something big.

Rogerez saw it in the glare of the soldiers' hand lamps. It was huge, and spiny, and the mouth in the long, pointed face was open, showing sharp, yel-

low teeth. Its black eyes glared at them hungrily.

"Fire!" shouted Deel.

The rattle of the hand guns was deafening. Blinded, the beast reared up, its taloned fore paws scrabbling at its ruined eyes. "Fire!" shouted Deel again. The bullets tore into its soft under-belly. It screamed, deafeningly, fell on its side, flattening the tall, spearlike growths. It screamed again and jerked convulsively.

It was dead.

Walking slowly, Deel came back to confer with Kane.

"This was supposed to be a civilised world," he said bitterly. "How do you account for—*that?*"

"Even on our own planet," replied Kane, "there were vast areas of primitive jungle at the time of the Invasion. You, yourself, said that we should be on our guard against night predators."

"I didn't expect anything quite so *big*," said the soldier. "I didn't expect something that it would take all my fire power to dispose of."

"You disposed of it," said the Chief Officer.

"Yes—but ammunition isn't

unlimited. I hope that anything else we meet will be of a size that we can handle with our machetes."

Rogerez left them talking, walked with Suset to look at the dead animal. He didn't like what he saw. The spiny body armour suggested that it must have enemies bigger and fiercer than itself. He examined one of the smaller spikes. His hand would just fit comfortably around the base of it.

"Deel!" he shouted.

"Yes, Rogerez?"

"Come here a minute, will you?"

"What is it?" asked the soldier.

"First of all," said Rogerez, "there must be bigger animals than this one around. It's built for defense rather than for attack. We can assume that it feeds on beasts smaller than itself—such as ourselves. It can supply us with weapons against such creatures..."

"How?"

"Don't you ever read military history? Pikes, man, pikes!"

gigantic on either side, towering high above what he had called, in his notes, the spear trees, were other growths, seeming to reach to the very sky itself. Ahead of them was the vague silhouette of what could only be a mountain—but a mountain constructed on improbably geometrical lines, in whose sheer sides gleamed enormous sheets of some highly polished material that reflected the almost level rays of the sun.

"Volcanic," grunted Kane, and Rogerez agreed—but, in his mind, he wasn't sure.

Then they were out of the jungle and crossing a wide, bare clearing, stumbling and slipping a little on the coarse gravel. Deel ordered a detour—he did not, he said, like the looks of tunnels that run down into the earth at a steep angle. There was something artificial about them, he said.

Suddenly, the nearer of the tunnels erupted a swarm of glistening red bodies that deployed rapidly over the plain, that closed in on the advance guard with a pincer movement. Rogerez was shocked to see that they were not humanoid, that they ran on all six of their

THE sun was up, but the mist persisted. Looming

jointed legs, that their weapons were their vicious, laterally-hinged jaws.

Calmly, with deliberation, the soldiers were firing—at first. Then, in spite of Deel's shouts, an element of hysteria crept into their fighting—these natives were so hard to kill, pressed on to the attack with legs missing and half their bodies shot away.

Kane took charge of the rest of the column.

"Children in the centre!" he bellowed. "The rest of you—form a tight ring! Use your pikes!"

The manouever was accomplished, although not without confusion, not without casualties. Kane was dead, his head ripped from his shoulders. Claver was dead, her body cut in two. Deel, Rogerez noted as he fended off attack with his pike, was down. The air was heavy with the odour of spilled blood and the acrid stench of the ichor flowing from the bodies of the natives.

The worst of it was that there were so many of them. In a seemingly inexhaustible stream they flowed from their

tunnels, rushed to the attack over the bodies of their comrades. The soldiers had exhausted their ammunition, were fighting with machetes and spears. The handful of them who survived retreated to the main body.

Rogerez was bleeding, his shirt ripped from his body by a serrated claw. It seemed that he had been fighting for an eternity, that all he had ever known, ever would know, was the thrusting of the point of his pike into the soft joints of body armour, between gaping, clashing mandibles. Beside him Suset had lost her spear—it had been bitten clean in two—and was wielding a machete taken from a dead soldier.

Rogerez realised dimly that it had been all of five minutes since he had used his spear. He looked around him. The tunnel mouths gaped black and empty. On the bloodstained gravel were the bodies of men and women, the bodies of the enemy. The human corpses were still. Those of the natives were not—clawed legs twitched jerkily, sharp mandibles still opened and shut viciously.

"Rogerez," somebody was

saying, "what do we do now?"

"Ask Deel," he said. "Ask Kane."

But Deel was dead, and with him his junior officers and his sergeants. Kane was dead, and the Purser was dead, and the Engineers had died during the landing. As Chronieler, Rogerez ranked as an officer. In the past he had enjoyed the privileges of rank, he had never thought that he would have to accept the responsibilities.

He said, "Find all the hand lights that are still working. Collect all the machetes and the shorter spears. We are going down into the city."

"But the natives..."

"We'll never be safe until we have a fortified place of our own. The natives must have sent all their soldiers out against us. Killing the rest should be easy."

IT wasn't easy—but it was not as hard as Rogerez had anticipated. There was fighting in the tunnels and passages, and there were more casualties, but they were not heavy ones. It was in the very heart of the city that the stiffest resistance was encountered—and there,

in a huge chamber, twenty guards put up a desperate and stubborn defense. They went down at last, hacked to pieces by the machetemen. Rogerez looked at the gross bulk of the being whom they had defended so grimly. He looked at the great flaccid body, at the faceted eyes that glinted in the light of the hand lamps, that glared into his.

"Kill it," he ordered.

The pikes drove home.

"What now?" asked Suset.

"This will be our headquarters," said Rogerez. To his men he said, "Drag that thing out of here, into that side tunnel. Pass word that I want all the natives' bodies dragged out and buried, and the bodies of our own people brought inside before some vile scavenger finds them. We'll make a grave of one of the tunnels.

"Then I want parties to go through the city to dispose of any survivors and to report to me on the discovery of any records or artifacts, or stores or foodstuffs..."

"We've seen no artifacts," said Suset. "There's no artificial lighting, even. What about

the city lights we saw from our orbit?"

"Civilisation and savagery can exist together on the same planet," said Rogerez. "We landed among savages."

He sat on the ground, his back against the wall of the chamber. He was tired, and his wounds were painful. He was thankful for the pain, it kept him awake. He was able to acknowledge the reports of various parties as they told him of the discovery of gardens of fungi, of the finding of a chamber in which, in silken bags, were loathsome beings that seemed to be the young of the natives. He nibbled a piece of fungus brought to him by one of the foraging parties, pronounced it edible; it was not unlike the yeast from the ship's vats.

At last, with affairs organised to his satisfaction, he felt justified in ordering a general stand down. Sentries had been posted and arrangements made to pass messages by word of mouth through the tunnels and passages. Nothing further could be attempted, he knew, until all hands had been refreshed by sleep. Thankfully, he himself

sank into unconsciousness with Suset by his side.

He was awakened, just before the end, by a confused bawling. As in a dream he heard the words, screamed rather than shouted, "Like mountains! Like mountains walking!" There was a dreadful thudding overhead that threatened to crush the underground city.

And then the scalding water, sweeping through tunnels and chambers, seeping into every last crevice, finished conclusively what had been begun by shipwreck and battle.

THE man cursed as the spines of the dead hedgehog pricked his ankle. He stooped to examine the little body.

"Hello!" he said. "I wonder what did this."

"Never mind the hedgehog," said his wife. "It's those dratted ants that I'm after!" She stood with the empty kettle in her hand, looking down with satisfaction at the steaming earth around the nest.

"There'll be more of them," said her husband pessimistically.

THE END