

SUPER-SCIENCE

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MONSTERS THAT ONCE WERE MEN

They were like creatures painted by a drunken artist, ghastly, utterly repulsive caricatures of humanity! Yet, twisted though they were, they were still human

by ERIC RODMAN

WE were en route from Arenack to Delimion XI when some trouble developed in the gyroscopic drive stabilizers, and so we decided to lay over for repairs at the nearest planet. We weren't in any real hurry to get to Delimion XI, because we were flush from our last hauling job, and didn't need cash in a hurry. That's our trade, you see—interstellar hauling. I've been a free-lance transport man for the last twenty-eight years, and I like the work just fine. I carry a crew of eight, charge top rates and get them too, and the work is pleasant if you have the right kind of disposition for it, which I happen to

have. But the events of that simple little stopover for stabilizer repairs nearly soured my disposition for good.

The nearest planet lying in our direct path did not have a name. It was listed on my charts as uninhabited and uncolonized, but Earthtype and suitable for emergency landings. That sounded fine with all of us. It would take us, I figured, about three days to make the necessary repairs in the stabilizer. A couple of the men were in favor of going straight on to Delimion XI and getting it fixed there, but I damped out that idea in a hurry: spacehopping with defective drive stabilizers is the sur-



est way of getting lost and winding up in one of the Nowhere Galaxies. So we headed for the nearby uninhabited planet.

We got there later that day. It was the fourth planet of a goodly-sized sun, a yellow one that had somehow acquired a dark-star companion. We went into a landing orbit around the planet.

When we were twelve thousand miles up and dropping planetward fast, Sid Hammermill, my first mate and the only man on the tub who calls me "Johnny" instead of "Captain," came into my quarters with a puzzled frown on his face and said, "Johnny, are you sure this planet is uninhabited and uncolonized?"

"That's what it says on my charts, Sid. Why?"

"We're picking up something funny on the mass-detector screen. It's hard to tell from this high up, of course, but the reading indicates a metal object pretty close to a mile long down there. Best guess I could make is that it's a spaceship sitting down there."

"Any sign of a colony?"

"Nope."

I scratched my chin reflectively. "Have you tried to make radio contact?"

Hammermill nodded. "Sparks has been twiddling his dials the last ten minutes. No answer, not even a CQ."

I began to smile. "Maybe it's a wrecked liner, then. And lots of salvage money for us, maybe. Order course corrections that will put us down next to that ship—if it is a ship."

HAMMERMILL vanished down the companionway to relay my orders to our astrogator, Mike Thorne, while I sat back and contemplated the pleasant thought of pulling in a salvage fee for a lost spaceliner. The ship itself, of course, would probably be pretty near worthless—it doesn't pay to haul scrap metal over interstellar distances—but there might be furnishings on board, valuable luggage, still-useful parts of the ship's drive equipment, and the like—enough to add up to a comfortable few hundred thousand

Galactic Units in fees. Not bad for a repair stopover, I thought. Not bad at all.

The course corrections were made and the ship dipped lower toward the planet. At the three-thousand-mile level, Hammermill phoned from the astrogation coop to report that he had taken a close-gauge reading on the mass-detector, and the mysterious object below was definitely a spaceship, and a big one—not a piddling three-hundred-foot job like ours, but one of the massive five-thousand-footers used on the luxury interstellar lines, and capable of holding quite a few hundred well-heeled tourists.

Planetward we spiralled, and when the automatics took over and lowered us the last few thousand feet through the planet's atmosphere we could see for ourselves: it was a wrecked superliner. The big ship had come down with an awful impact, flattening the thick jungle for a couple of miles all around it. We made our landing in the cleared area, not far from the ship itself.

After the routine atmosphere checks, I left the ship with two of the men to have a look at the wreck. It was lying in a sort of crater, shallow but broad, which indicated that it had come down bellywise and hard. The rear end of the ship, where the drive compartments normally would be, were just so much shattered and twisted junk. No salvage back there, I thought ruefully.

It looked as though there had been a major explosion that had practically ripped the ship apart. And the accident had happened a long time ago. Weeds and even small trees were sprouting in the fissures along the ship's weather-pitted skin. I could just barely make out the faded lettering along the tarnished hull: EMPRESS OF SATURN.

Wheels began to turn in my head. The EMPRESS OF SATURN had vanished on an Earth-Capella run back in—oh, maybe 2431 or so. At least thirty years back. I was a freshman spacer with a brand-new ticket when it happened. It was one of the all-time major space accidents, since there

were more than 800 people on board, and the ship had never been found.

I grinned gleefully. "Maybe there won't be any salvage dough in this for us, but there'll be plenty of publicity! This old heap is famous! Soon as we radio the news back to Arenack—"

They weren't listening to me. Danny Tsung grabbed me by the elbow and turned me halfway around.

"Chief—look over there—at those *things*—"

Things was the only way to describe them. There were perhaps nine or ten of them, standing just on the other side of the line that divided the clearing from the forest, and they looked like things out of a *nargheel-smoker's* worst nightmares.

They were roughly human in shape, and I mean *roughly*. There was no hair on them, nor any clothing. And their bodies were unutterably repulsive. I felt like vomiting at the sight of them.

They looked like living corpses, with their white domed skulls and the big star-

ing eyes. One of them had an extra set of limbs sprouting out of the sides of his chest—not arms, but boneless tentacles that flailed around nervously like pale whips. Another had disgusting slimy skin that oozed little blisters of pus.

A third had no shoulders; his head was joined to his chest by an inch or two of neck, and the effect was grotesque. Next to him was something whose body was covered with quills like a hedgehog, and another of the creatures might have been a woman, only she had a double row of breasts running all the way up the front of her body, animal-fashion.

Nightmare creatures. Monsters painted by a drunken artist. But these were real. They were standing perhaps a hundred yards away, looking at us with deep curiosity and a certain bold defiance.

Danny Tsung said thickly, "Of all the sickening sights I ever don't want to see again—"

"I thought the survey team report said this planet had no

native life," Marty Brecht murmured.

"This isn't native life," I said. "Unless I miss my guess, these are the descendants of the survivors of the EM-PRESS OF SATURN."

"What?" Tsung and Brecht asked at once.

I nodded. "Mutants, all of them. Makes you sick to look at them, doesn't it? But they're the descendants of Earthmen. We're going to have a pretty story to take back when we leave here," I said grimly.

As I finished speaking the mutants turned with one accord and fled like shadows into the forest. A moment later, I heard a creaking sound behind me, coming from the wrecked ship.

I turned. A hatch was opening. And a man was climbing down to greet us. Not a mutant, but a *man*.

HE looked terribly old. His hair was white and fell in unkempt tangles to his shoulders; his beard, also white, fluttered in the wind. He wore faded rags and walked with a

stiff arthritic limp. He came toward us unsteadily, stopped a few yards away, and said in a voice that was obviously rusty from long disuse, "Are—you—from—Earth?"

"We're Earthmen, yes. I'm Captain Johnny Harmon of the freight-ship *Marie*. We stopped here for repairs and saw the wreckage from above."

The old man smiled painfully, showing time-rotted teeth. "You're—a little late—for rescue," he said, and every word was an effort. "I'm the only survivor left. And I'm—not going to last—too much longer—"

He coughed suddenly and came toppling forward. Tsung caught him before he hit the ground.

"The old man passed out. What should we do with him?"

"Take him to the *Marie*," I said. "He probably needs medical care. We'll let Kryholt have a look at him."

We carried the old man delicately aboard our ship. The crew came crowding round; they had seen the weird mutants and the old man, and they

wanted to know what was going on on this planet. I shut them up and got them assigned to jobs, putting three of them to work on fixing the drive stabilizer, which was, after all, the main reason why we were here.

Taking the old man into my quarters, we laid him out on the hammock and Tom Kryholt, who doubles as our medic and as ship's purser, had a look at him. Kryholt reported that the old fellow was in reasonably good shape, no organic diseases, but that the excitement of our landing had conked him out. An injection of luthenosil brought him around quickly enough. And a strange story began to emerge, told in lame, halting gasps.

His name was David Matson and he said he had been born in 2401, which made him only fifty-nine; he looked at least eighty. He had just turned thirty, and newly married, when he took passage aboard the ill-fated liner **EMPRESS OF SATURN**.

The first two weeks of the luxury cruise had been splendid. But tragedy struck on the

fifteenth day; an explosion ripped the drive compartment apart. The ship was crippled but not seriously damaged, and the officers decided to limp down on this planet and send out an S.O.S., rather than risk further travel.

But there was a second explosion while landing, and a third. As Matson told it—his face contorted with the pain of memory, even after thirty years—the ship was raked with fire from end to end. It tumbled down through the atmosphere. Hundreds of passengers died—including, Matson told us quietly, his wife of two weeks.

They landed, somehow, and there was a final explosion at landing which virtually split the ship apart and showered the survivors with atomic radiation. There was a fierce scramble to get out of the ship, which was thought to be on the verge of yet another explosion.

No explosion came. The dazed and burned survivors gathered in the forest nearby. Only about three hundred of the ship's passenger list had survived.

The radio equipment was totally wrecked. Most of the officers and crew had perished. There was nothing to do but to settle down on this uninhabited planet and wait for rescuers, rescuers who were not to arrive for thirty years.

The survivors built crude shelters in the forest. As the days passed and their burns healed, they took stock of the situation and decided that they would have to consider themselves involuntary colonists. Couples who had survived the disaster together began to have children. Other couples were formed. Matson, out of grief for his dead bride, chose to live alone.

And then, nearly a year after the crash, the first children were born on the new world.

They were monsters. Loathsome monsters.

Many of them died at childbirth. But a good portion survived. There was not one normal birth. The hellish atomic fury that had sleeted through the exploding ship had played havoc with the genes of the passengers, and their children

were hideous deformed mutants.

A number of the survivors killed themselves. Others refused to have children again. But still, the monster-children continued to be born. Their numbers mounted. Fifty, sixty, a hundred of them, no two alike in superficial detail, every one a creature out of nightmare.

A turning-point came six years after the crash, Matson said, when it was discovered that there were more of the monster-children than there were of human survivors. And the proportions mounted. By the tenth year, only a hundred eighty of the survivors remained, and there were some five hundred mutants living in the little crude village.

And, when the first mutants were twelve and thirteen, they began to reproduce themselves. A war of extermination followed, the mutated children turning on their normal parents. More than a hundred died the first week. The rest fled back to the safety of the shattered ship, using it as a fort.

During the years that followed, Matson said, the normals gradually died off or were killed, while the monsters in the forest thrived and became more numerous.

"Eight years ago," the old man finished, "the only remaining survivor beside myself died. Since then I've been alone, living in the ship. The monsters don't seem to care about me.

"Several times they've come upon me while I was in the forest gathering food, and they've left me alone." Matson grinned feebly. "Maybe they're letting me live as a kind of walking souvenir," he said. "I don't know. But that's the story of the EMPRESS OF SATURN. A race of monsters sprang up. There are thousands of them in the forest now—they breed fantastically fast. They die young, of course, but there are always more to take the place of the dead ones."

OLD Matson was obviously exhausted by the telling of his story, so we let him be. I called the crew together in the galley and repeated the entire

tale, just as I had heard it from the old man.

Marty Brecht nodded. "And you can see the monsters looking at us, Captain. They're all around. Peeping out of the forest at us. Afraid to come near."

"The sooner we get off this planet," Danny Tsung said, "the happier I'm going to be. How long do you think we'll be here, Captain?"

I shrugged and glanced at Hammermill. "Sid? When do you figure the stabilizer will be in shape?"

"At least another two days of work, Johnny. And I wouldn't want to rush away without giving it a good flight test first. Make it three days altogether."

"Three days!" Tsung cried. "And those damned *things* making eyes at us from the woods!"

"They're probably more afraid of us than we are of them," I said crisply. "Carry sidearms at all times when you're outside the ship, and don't stray very far. I don't expect any trouble from those creatures."

As I spoke, I walked to the port and peered out. Tsung hadn't been joking: repulsive-looking heads were popping out behind every tree. I counted at least twenty mutants watching us.

But I didn't think we were due for trouble from them. I was dead wrong.

I sent the men about their jobs and started work on my daily log entries. About an hour before mess time, Tom Kryholt came to see me. He had bad news. Old Matson was dead.

"His heart just couldn't take all the excitement," Kryholt said. "Eight years of absolute solitude got him out of the habit of seeing people. Our arrival got him worked up and put an overload on his heart. He died in his sleep a few minutes ago."

"Well, at least he'll get a decent burial from us," I said. "On your way out, tell Hammermill about it, and have him send a couple of men outside to dig a grave near the wreck."

AHERNE and Fremantle dug the grave, not far

from the crumpled nose of the EMPRESS OF SATURN, and just before sundown we held the burial service. We wrapped the old man in a sheet of plastifilm, lowered him gently into the grave, and planted a cross; I didn't know whether he would have wanted the cross or not, but I figured it was a good thing to do anyway.

I said a few words over the grave—nothing much; I've never been too good in the speech-making department—and we trooped back to our own ship. Long shadows were slanting across the clearing now, as the sun got lower in the sky.

The planet had no moon, and the sky was as black as I've ever seen anywhere, broken only by the brightness of the stars. We spent an uneasy night. There was plenty of noise in the jungle, and even though we had the ship shut up tight as a clam I couldn't help shivering at the thought of those creatures in the forest, those degenerate sons of mankind, with their extra limbs and dappled skins and bulging heads and all the oth-

er weird deformities I had seen earlier.

They had even been watching us while we performed the burial; I had seen them lurking behind the trees, eyeing us with their piercing stares, and I was doubly glad I had ordered all men to wear side-arms outside the ship.

So far the mutants had not made a single aggressive gesture toward us, but I remembered Matson's vivid tale of the war between the mutants and the normals—a war that had ended in almost total extermination of the normals.

When morning came, we found that Matson's grave had been opened and the body was gone.

Hammermill made the discovery, while the rest of us were waking up. Sid had gone outside to have a look around and get some morning air. He came back to the *Marie* on a bound, shouting, "They've opened the grave! They've opened the grave!"

We came flocking out to see. The cross was down, and the grave had indeed been dug up—not with shovels, it

seemed, but with hands and feet, the way a dog would dig up a bone. Heaps of loose soil had been sprayed all over, and the only thing in the grave was the plastifilm we had wrapped the body in.

"The filthy ghouls," Kryholt muttered. "They must have come during the night, while we slept—"

The grisly grave-robbing episode cast a pall of gloom over us all morning. The old man had been a game fighter, and he deserved to remain at rest. Although simply to look at them was to be convinced of the hellishness of the mutants, this incident clinched in our minds the fact that they were a degraded form of life that no longer could be thought worthy of being called "human."

Hammermill, Fremantle, and Brecht, the three men who had been assigned to repairing the drive stabilizer, worked like demons all morning. I didn't discourage them from working hard, either. I wanted to get off this foul planet just as fast as we could get the ship safely aloft.

It was early in the after-

noon when Tim Aherne came to me and reported that no one had seen Danny Tsung since lunch.

"I thought he was working with Fremantle and Brecht on the stabilizer," Aherne said. "But when I went looking for him up front they told me they thought he'd been working with *me*, cleaning out the rocket tubes. And he isn't in the radio room with Sparks, he isn't with Kryholt, he isn't with Mike Thorne in the control room. So where is he?"

"We'd better find out in a hurry." I yanked down on the gong-handle that sounded a general alarm, and waited for everyone to come running. Sparks was there first, then Kryholt, then the three from the stabilizer compartment. Following Hammermill in came Mike Thorne. I counted up. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, and I made the eighth. The *Marie* carried nine. One was missing—Tsung. Where was he?

"Anybody seen Danny?" I demanded.

"Not since lunch, skipper," Sparks said.

"I thought he was working on the rocket tubes, Johnny," Hammermill said.

"And I thought he was up front," said Aherne.

"Maybe he took a walk over to the other ship," Kryholt suggested. "Looking for a souvenir from the EMPRESS OF SATURN, or something like that."

"Maybe," I admitted tightly. "I think we'd better have a look. Aherne, Brecht, come with me. The rest of you stay busy. And yell if you notice anything peculiar going on outside."

FULLY armed, Aherne, Brecht and I left the *Marie* and headed for the wrecked liner. I was worried. Danny Tsung was the newest member of our crew—he had signed on voyage before last—and though he was only a fuel technician, and therefore not essential to our safety, I hated to lose him. And somehow I knew that something had happened to him—something nasty.

We reached the EMPRESS. I cupped my hands to my

mouth and yelled, "Danny! Danny Tsung!"

No answer.

I yelled again, hoping to see his grinning yellow-skinned face come popping out of a porthole high up on the liner, but there was no response. Aherne and Brecht joined in, and we shouted until mocking echoes drifted back from the dark forest.

No Danny. No sign of him at all.

Then Brecht bent, picked up something, and waved it in the air for us to see. "Look here!"

"What's that?"

"A strip of leather. Torn from Danny's jacket. It was lying here on the ground."

I looked toward the forest. Unseen eyes seemed to be looking back at me. "I think," I said in a quiet voice, "that we'd better organize a bigger searching party to look for Danny."

We returned to the ship and I showed them what we had found. Then we split up to look for him. At my orders, Hammermill and Fremantle stayed behind to continue

working on the stabilizer repairs; the work had to go on, no matter what, or we'd never leave here. I divided the rest of us into three teams of two: Brecht and Sparks, Aherne and Thorne, Kryholt and myself.

"Remember," I warned them as we set out. "Keep your blasters where you can reach them, and sing out if you get into any trouble."

We advanced into the forest, Brecht and Sparks going south of the wreck, Aherne and Thorne going north, while Doc Kryholt and I struck out westward.

We moved cautiously, staying ten to fifteen feet from each other, looking in all directions before we took each step. I kept anticipating mutants dropping from the trees or materializing out of concealed pits. We continued into the forest for nearly a quarter of a mile without seeing anything noteworthy.

Then Kryholt branched off a little, taking a side-fork to my right. I kept one eye on him, because I didn't want to get separated.

Suddenly I heard him shout. There was the sound of a scuffle in the underbrush, the bright flare of a blaster-bolt going off, and a high-pitched, unearthly scream of pain. Then, the sound of creatures beating a hasty retreat through the vegetation.

When I reached Kryholt finally, he was doubled over, upchucking his lunch. He held up one hand. "I found him. You better not look."

It was too late; I had already looked. It was not pretty. I have often wondered what sight there is loathsome enough to make a doctor lose his lunch, and now I know. I was quickly and unpleasantly sick.

Kryholt said, "There were four or five of the mutants crouched over him. They were—eating him. I got one and the rest escaped."

A mutant lay sprawled some twenty feet further away, with a charred hole blown through his middle. It was a particularly ugly mutant, with a sleek-skinned reptilian body covered with glossy blue scales.

I did not look at Danny's

body. One glance had been enough to imprint the image on my mind forever: the head and shoulders of Danny Tsung still intact, the face still smiling even in death—and the rest of the body a bloody mess, gnawed to the bone in some places, as though the mutants had gathered round, jostling each other away to grab up handfuls of his still-warm flesh.

"What are we going to do with the body?" I said. "If the men see it—"

"The men won't see it. I'll cremate it with my blaster," Kryholt said. "It's the best way. This isn't a sight for sane eyes to see."

Opening his weapon to wide-blast, Kryholt rayed the corpse to ash. "All right," he said finally. "We can go back now."

WE returned to the ship and I sounded the siren that meant *all-hands-get-back-aboard*. A few minutes later, Aherne, Brecht, Sparx, and Thorne returned from their explorations, and I told them the news.

"Killed and eaten," Fre-

mantle repeated. "Killed and eaten. And these things are the children of human beings!"

"How did they catch him?" Hammermill asked.

"He must have wandered away from the ship after lunch," I said. "And the mutants were waiting—hidden behind the wreck, maybe—"

"The hellish fiends!" Thorne rumbled. He had been a close friend of Danny's. "We ought to kill them all! Trail the ship over the jungle and blast them into atoms with our rocket-wash!"

I shook my head. "The smartest thing to do is just to finish up the repairs and get the deuce out of here. Let the Galactic Government worry about cleaning up the mutants."

"No, dammit!" Thorne cried. "They killed Danny. I'm going to even the score."

He started out the main hatch. I called after him, "Thorne! Thorne, get back inside here!"

"Sorry, Captain. This is personal!"

He leaped to ground level. I rushed out after him. He was

racing toward the forest, his blaster out and firing. As usual, there had been mutants peering at us from behind the trees. Thorne's wild fusillade of blaster bolts killed at least three of the beings before I could catch up with him. The rest of the mutants fled.

I slapped the blaster out of his hand. His face was white, his eyes strange.

"Have you gone nuts, Thorne? Get back in the ship on the double!"

He nodded, panting breathlessly. "Okay, Skipper. I got some of them, at least. That's all I wanted."

He returned to the ship. I followed him in, looking behind me—just in case.

I gave orders that nobody was to leave the ship for any reason at all. Just to make sure, I went around to each man on board and asked him privately to keep an eye on one other man; I didn't want anybody slipping off into the forest to carry out a one-man vendetta in vengeance for Danny. I wasn't interested in vengeance, just in getting away

from this planet, and one casualty was a lot more than sufficient.

Hammermill and Fremantle worked practically round the clock on the stabilizer, and by the next morning Hammermill pronounced the job done.

"We'll run some static tests today," he reported to me. "If everything's okay, we can blast off before nightfall."

"I hope so."

An hour later, I had even more reason to hope so. Brecht came to my quarters and asked if I had looked out one of the viewports lately. I said I hadn't, I had been too busy.

"Take a look, Skipper. Take a look right now."

I unshuttered my port and had a look.

"Good Lord," I muttered. "Mutants—t h o u s a n d s of them!"

They were all around—advancing slowly toward the ship, coming out of the forest. Incredible hordes of them. It was a scene out of the Inferno.

I stared for a long moment at the procession of what I could only think of as living corpses: the creatures with

two heads, the creatures with practically none, the creatures whose skin glowed with phosphorescent brightness. Several of the mutants crawled on all fours—all sixes, I corrected, as I saw the extra limbs. They were blasphemous travesties of the human form. And there were thousands of them. The whole mutant population of the forest appeared to have massed for this attack on us.

I sounded the general alarm. "Check all hatches!" I called out. "Tighten the ports! Dog down the airlocks all around!"

The crew hove to, making the ship spacetight. By this time the mutants had reached us. They swarmed over the ship like a horde of nauseous vermin. Looking out the port, I could see them on the landing-fins, on the outside of the rocket-tubes. One wriggled right past the port I was looking through, climbing toward the nose of the ship with sucker-attachments that sprouted from his limbs, and when he had passed a trail of slime obscured the view.

I could hear their shrill cries of hate and the steady

hammering of their fists against the sides of the ship.

Hammermill, in the drive compartment, said, "It's risky to take off without checking the stabilizers, Johnny."

"It's a hell of a lot riskier to stay here," I said. "There are thousands of those creatures outside. If enough of them get on us, their weight may tip the ship over, maybe even crack the hull—" I shuddered. "I'd rather be lost in space than be eaten alive by the mutants," I said. "We'll risk the blastoff."

Hammermill shrugged. "Right-o. When do you want to leave?"

"How about right now?" I said.

OUTSIDE the ship, pandemonium was reigning. A vast mob of shouting mutants surrounded us, trying to get inside the ship, trying to get us out. They clung to the landing-fins, and several of them had reached the nose of the ship and hung there. It might have been my imagination, but I seemed to feel the *Marie* swaying from side to side dizzily as though the mutants

were on the verge of tipping us over.

Even though I was repelled and revolted by the horde of monsters outside, I was fascinated at the same time by their very hideousness. Heredity had run riot in bringing these creatures into being. I saw creatures with no eyes and creatures with ten, creatures whose bodies were so fleshless they looked like walking skeletons and creatures so wrapped in fat they could barely move. And each of the mutants had the aspect of death about him—death and corruption and degradation.

I gave the *ready-for-blast-off* signal and every man in the ship got to his station. Now the ship definitely *was* swaying; it was no easy trick to tip over a three-hundred-foot spaceship, but there were thousands of mutants outside, and mobs are capable of doing almost anything—especially an unhuman mob like this one.

The countdown echoed through the ship. *Ten...nine...eight...*

Three...two...

One...!

Groaning under the weight of the dozens of mutants clinging to her skin, the *Marie* belled her thunder-roar of blastoff. In the control cabin, I watched the indicator needles spin. They came dangerously close to *overload* and automatic cut-off before we lifted an inch from the ground. Carrying hundreds of extra pounds of mutants, we might not be able to get aloft.

The rockets roared. The ship quaked and bucked, rising a few feet into the air. I gave the jets full power, and acceleration slammed at us.

Switching on the rear teleview, I saw a bizarre scene. We were a hundred feet off the ground, a hundred fifty, two hundred—and we were raining mutants. They were dropping from our sides as the ship sprang spaceward, tumbling down in sprawling pinwheels of arms and legs and tentacles, landing with crushing impact on the ground below.

The flaming splash of our rocket-wash had bathed hundreds below with flame. I saw the still living ones milling

around, their bodies aflame, while one enormous area was simply one charred pit of destruction.

As the monsters dropped off, our weight-load lightened, and the rockets were able to function. By the time we had left the planet's atmosphere, the ship was moving normally and well.

Two days later we passed the Sinabar system and stopped at an orbiting space station outside Sinabar VI to have the ship overhauled and the drive stabilizers checked out. While we waited, we discovered that one of the mutants had become fouled in our antenna hoists and had remained with us on our journey through space, frozen, dead, a ghastly souvenir of our visit.

I sent Fremantle up on mag-neshoes to clear the dead creature away and destroy it. We didn't need any tangible souvenirs. We had enough memories to last us the rest of our lives, of the wreck of the *EM-PRESS OF SATURN* and of the world of living corpses.

THE END