

★ PLANET ★

★ STORIES ★

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Planet of No-Return

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

The orders were explicit: "Destroy the 'THING' of Venus." But Patrolmen Kerry Blane and Splinter Wood, their space-ship wrecked, could not follow orders—their weapons were useless on the Water-world.

OLD Kerry Blane exploded. "Damn it!" he roared. "I don't like you; and I don't like this ship; and I don't like the assignment; and I don't like those infernal pills you keep eating; and I—"

"Splinter" Wood grinned.

"Seems to me, Kerry," he remarked humorously, "that you don't like much of anything!"

Kerry Blane growled unintelligibly, batted the injector lever with a calloused hand. His grizzled hair was a stiff wiry mop on his small head, and his oversize jaw was thrust belligerently forward. But deep within his eyes, where he hoped it was hidden, was a friendly twinkle that gave the lie to his speech.

"You're a squirt!" he snapped disagreeably. "You're not dry behind the ears, yet. You're like the rest of these kids who call themselves pilots—only more so! And why the hell the chief had to sic you on me, on an exploration trip this important—well, I'll never understand."

Splinter rolled his six foot three of lanky body into a more comfortable position on the air-bunk. He yawned tremendously, fumbled a small box from his shirt pocket, and removed a marble-like capsule.

"Better take one of these," he warned. "You're liable to get the space bends at any moment."

Old Kerry Blane snorted, batted the box aside impatiently, scowled moodily at the capsules that bounced for a moment against the pilot room's walls before hanging motionless in the air.

"Mister Wood," he said icily, "I was flying a space ship while they were changing your pants twenty times a day. When I want advice on how to fly a ship, how to cure space bends, how to handle a Zelta ray, or how to spit—I'll ask you! Until then, you and your bloody marbles can go plumb straight to the devil!"

"Tsk! Tsk! Tsk!" Splinter reached out lazily, plucked the capsules from the air, one by one.

Kerry Blane lit one of the five allotted cigarettes of the day.

"Don't 'tsk' me, you young squirt," he grunted around a mouthful of fragrant smoke. "I know all the arguments you can put up; ain't that all I been hearing for a week? You take your vitamins A, B, C, D, all you want, but you leave me alone—or I'll stuff your head down your throat, P.D.Q.!"

"All right, all right!" Splinter tucked the capsule box back into his pocket, grinned mockingly. "But don't say I didn't warn you. With this shielded ship, and with no sunlight reaching Venus' surface, you're gonna be begging for some of my vitamin, super-concentrated pills before we get back to Earth."

Kerry Blane made a rich, ripe noise with his mouth.

"Pfui!" he said very distinctly.

"Gracious!" Splinter said in mock horror.

THEY made a strange contrast as they lay in their air bunks. Splinter was fully a head taller than the dour Irishman, and his lanky build gave a false impression of awkwardness. While the vitriolic Kerry Blane was short and compact, strength and quickness evident in every movement.

Kerry Blane had flown every type of ship that rode in space. In the passing years, he had flight-tested almost every new experimental ship, had flown them with increasing skill, had earned a reputation as a trouble shooter on any kind of craft.

But even Kerry Blane had to retire eventually.

A great retirement banquet had been given in his honor by the Interplanetary Squadron. There had been the usual

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speeches and presentations; and Kerry Blane had heard them all, had thanked the donors of the gifts. But it was not until the next morning, when he was dressed in civilian clothes for the first time in forty years, that he realized the enormity of the thing that had happened to his life.

Something died within Kerry Blane's heart that morning, shriveled and passed

away, leaving him suddenly shrunken and old. He had become like a rusty old freighter couched between the gleaming bodies of great space warriors.

Finally, as a last resort so that he would not be thrown entirely aside, he had taken a desk job in the squadron offices. For six years he had dry-rotted there, waiting hopefully for the moment

Illustrated by Fox



Kerry and Splinter retreated, their guns hot in their hands, seeing the crabs erupting from the ocean in a never-ending stream.

when his active services would be needed again.

It was there that he had met and liked the ungainly Splinter Wood. There was something in the boy that had found a kindred spirit in Kerry Blane's heart, and he had taken the youngster in hand to give him the benefits of experience that had become legendary.

Splinter Wood was a probationary pilot, had been admitted to the Interplanetary Squadron because of his inherent skill, even though his formal education had been fairly well neglected.

NOW, the two of them rode the pounding jets of a DX cruiser, bound for Venus to make a personal survey of its floating islands for the Interplanetary Squadron's Medical Division.

"Ten to one we don't get back!" Splinter said pessimistically.

Kerry Blane scrubbed out his cigarette, scowled bleakly at the instrument panel. He sensed the faint thread of fear in the youngster's tone, and a nostalgic twinge touched his heart, for he was remembering the days of his youth when he had a full life to look forward to.

"If you're afraid, you can get out and walk back," he snapped disagreeably.

A grin lifted the corners of Splinter's long mouth, spread into his eyes. His hand unconsciously came up, touched the tiny squadron pin on his lapel.

"Sorry to disappoint you, glory grabber," he said mockingly, "but I've got definite orders to take care of you."

"Me! You've got orders to take care of me?" Kerry Blane choked incoherently for a moment, red tiding cholericly upward from his loosened collar.

"Of course!" Splinter grinned.

Kerry Blane exploded, words spewing volcanically forth. Splinter relaxed, his booted foot beating out a dull rhythm to the colorful language learned through almost fifty years of spacing. And at last, when Kerry Blane had quieted until he but smoldered, he leaned over and touched the old spacer on the sleeve.

"Seventy-eight!" he remarked pleasantly.

"Seventy-eight what?" Kerry Blane asked sullenly, the old twinkle beginning to light again deep in his eyes.

"Seventy-eight new words—and you

swore them beautifully!" Splinter beamed. "Some day you can teach them to me."

They laughed then, Old Kerry Blane and young Splinter Wood, and the warmth of their friendship was a tangible thing in the small control-room of the cruiser.

And in the midst of their laughter, Old Kerry Blane choked in agony, surged desperately against his bunk straps.

He screamed unknowingly, feeling only the horrible excruciating agony of his body, tasting the blood that gushed from his mouth and nostrils. His muscles were knotted cords that he could not loosen, and his blood was a surging stream that pounded at his throbbing temples. The air he breathed seemed to be molten flame.

His body arced again and again against the restraining straps, and his mouth was open in a soundless scream. He sensed dimly that his partner had wrenched open a wall door, removed metal medicine kits, and was fumbling through their contents. He felt the bite of the hypodermic, felt a deadly numbness replace the raging torment that had been his for seconds. He swallowed three capsules automatically, passed into a coma-like sleep, woke hours later to stare clear-eyed into Splinter's concerned face.

"Close, wasn't it?" he said weakly, conversationally.

"Close enough!" Splinter agreed relievedly. "If you had followed my advice and taken those vitamin capsules, you'd never have had the bends."

Kerry Blane grinned, winced when he felt the dull ache in his body.

"I've had the bends before, and lived through them!" he said, still weakly defiant.

"That's the past," Splinter said quietly. "This is the present, and you take your pills every day, just as I do—from now on."

"All right—and thanks!"

"Forget it!" Splinter flushed in quick embarrassment.

A buzzer sounded from the instrument panel, and a tiny light glowed redly.

"Six hours more," Splinter said, turned to the instrument panel.

His long hands played over the instrument panel, checking, controlling the rocket fire, adjusting delicate instruments to hair-line marks. Kerry Blane nodded in silent approval.

They could feel the first tug of gravity on their bodies, and through the vision port could see the greenish ball that was cloud-covered Venus. Excitement lifted their spirits, brought light to their eyes as they peered eagerly ahead.

"What's it really like?" Splinter asked impatiently.

Kerry Blane yawned, settled back luxuriously. "I'll tell you later," he said, "I'm going to take a nap and try to ease this bellyache of mine. Wake me up so that I can take over, when we land; Venus is a tricky place to set a ship on."

He yawned again, drifted instantly into sleep, relaxing with the ability of a spaceman who sleeps when and if he can. Splinter smiled down at his sleeping partner, then turned back to the quartzite port. He shook his head a bit, remembering the stories he had heard about the water planet, wondering—wondering—

II

VENUS was a fluffy cotton ball hanging motionless in bottomless space. Far to the left, Mercury gleamed like a polished diamond in the sunlight. Kerry Blane cut the driving rockets, let the cruiser sink into a fast gravity-dive, guiding it only now and then by a brief flicker of a side jet.

Splinter Wood watched breathlessly from the vision port, his long face eager and reckless, his eyes seeking to pierce the clouds that roiled and twisted uneasily over the surface of the planet.

Kerry Blane glanced tolerantly at his young companion, felt a nostalgic tug at his heart when he remembered the first time he had approached the water-planet years before. Then, he had been a young and reckless firebrand, his fame already spreading, an unquenchable fire of adventure flaming in his heart.

Now, his aged but steady fingers rested lightly on the controls, brought the patrol cruiser closer to the cloud-banks on the line of demarcation between the sunward and sunless sides of the planet. He hummed tunelessly, strangely happy, as he peered ahead.

"Val Kenton died there," Splinter whispered softly, "Died to save the lives of three other people!"

Kerry Blane nodded. "Yes," he agreed, and his voice changed subtly. "Val was a blackguard, a criminal; but he died in the best traditions of the service." He sighed. "He never had a chance."

"Murdered!"

Kerry Blane smiled grimly. "I guess I used too broad an interpretation of the word," he said gently. "Anyway, one of our main tasks is to destroy the thing that killed him."

His lean fingers tightened unconsciously.

"I'd like nothing better than to turn a Zelta-blaster on that chunk of living proto-plasm and cremate it."

Splinters shivered slightly. "Do you think we'll find it?" he asked.

Kerry Blane nodded. "I think it will find us; after all, it's just an animated appetite looking for food."

He turned back to the controls, flipped a switch, and the cutting of the nose rocket dropped the ship in an angling glide toward the clouds a few miles below. Gravity was full strength now, and although not as great as Earth's, was still strong enough to bring a sense of giddiness to the men.

"Here we go!" Splinter said tonelessly.

The great cottony batts of roiling clouds rushed up to meet the ship, bringing the first sense of violent movement in more than a week of flying. There was something awesome and breath-taking in the speed with which the ship dropped toward the planet.

Tendrils of vapor touched the ports, were whipped aside, then were replaced by heavier fingers of cloud. Kerry Blane pressed a firing stud, and nose rockets thrummed in a rising crescendo as the free fall of the cruiser was checked. Heat rose in the cabin from the friction of the outer air, then dissipated, as the force-screen voltmeter leaped higher.

Then, as though it had never been, the sun disappeared, and there was only a gray blankness pressing about the ship. Gone was all sense of movement, and the ship seemed to hover in a gray nothingness.

Kerry Blane crouched over the control panel, his hands moving deftly, his eyes flicking from one instrument to another. Tiny lines of concentration etched themselves about his mouth, and perspiration

beaded his forehead. He rode that cruiser through the miles of clouds through sheer instinctive ability, seeming to fly it as though he were an integral part of the ship.

Splinter Wood watched him with awe in his eyes, seeing for the first time the incredible instinct that had made Kerry Blane the idol of a billion people. He relaxed visibly, all instinctive fear allayed by the brilliant competence of his companion.

Seconds flowed into moments, and the moments merged into one another, and still the clouds pressed with a visible strength against the ports. The rockets drummed steadily, holding the ship aloft, dropping it slowly toward the planet below. Then the clouds thinned, and, incredibly, were permeated with a dim and glowing light. A second later, and the clouds were gone, and a thousand feet below tumbled and tossed in a majestic display of ruthless strength an ocean that seemed to be composed of liquid fluorescence.

Kerry Blane heard Splinter's instant sigh of unbelief.

"Good Lord!" Splinter said, "What—"

His voice stilled, and he was silent, his eyes drinking in the weird incredible scene below.

THE ocean was a shifting, white-capped wash of silvery light that gleamed with a bright phosphorescence of a hundred, intermingled, kaleidoscopic colors. And the unreal, unearthly light continued unbroken everywhere, reflected from the low-hanging clouds, reaching to the far horizon, bathing every detail of the planet in a brilliance more bright than moonlight.

Splinter turned a wondering face. "But the official reports say that there is no light on Venus," he exclaimed. "That was one of the reasons given when exploration was forbidden!"

Kerry Blane nodded. "That was merely a pretext to keep foolhardy spacemen from losing their lives on the planet. In reality, the ocean is alive with an incredibly tiny marine worm that glows phosphorescently. The light generated from those billions of worms is reflected back from the clouds, makes Venus eternally lighted."

He turned the ship to the North, re-

laxed a bit on the air bunk. He felt tired and worn, his body aching from the space bends of a few hours before.

"Take over," he said wearily. "Take the ship North, and watch for any island."

Splinter nodded, rested his long hands on the controls. The space cruiser lifted a bit in a sudden spurt of speed, and the rocket-sound was a solid thrum of unleashed power.

Kerry Blane lit a cigarette, leaned toward a vision port. He felt again that thrill he had experienced when he had first flashed his single-man cruiser through the clouds years before. Then the breath caught in his throat, and he tapped his companion's arm.

"Take a look!" he called excitedly.

They fought in the ocean below, fought in a never-ending splashing of what seemed to be liquid fire. It was like watching a tri-dim screen of a news event, except for the utter lack of sound.

One was scaly, while the other was skinned, and both were fully three hundred feet long. Great scimitars of teeth flashed in the light, and blood gouted and stained the water crimson whenever a slashing blow was struck. They threshed in a mad paroxysm of rage, whirling and spinning in the phosphorescent water like beings from a nightmare, exploding out of their element time and again, only to fall back in a gargantuan spray of fluorescence.

And then the scaly monster flashed in a half-turn, drove forward with jaws agape, wrenched and ripped at the smooth black throat of the other creature. The second creature rippled and undulated in agony, whipping the ocean to foam, then went limp. The victorious monster circled the body of its dead foe, then, majestically, plunged from sight into the ocean's depths. An instant later, the water frothed, as hundreds of lesser marine monsters attacked and fed on the floating corpse.

"Brrrr!" Splinter shivered in sudden horror.

Kerry Blane chuckled dryly. "Feel like going for a swim?" he asked conversationally.

Splinter shook his head, watched the scene disappear from view to the rear of the line of flight, then sank back onto his bunk.

"Not me!" he said deprecatingly.

Kerry Blane chuckled again, swung the cruiser toward the tiny smudge of black on the horizon. Glowing water flashed beneath the ship, seeming to smooth into a gleaming mirror shot with dancing colors. There was no sign of life anywhere.

Thirty minutes later, Kerry Blane circled the island that floated free in the phosphorescent ocean. His keen eyes searched the tangled luxuriant growth of the jungle below, searching for some indication that the protoplasmic monster he sought was there.

"I don't see anything suspicious," Splinter contributed.

"There's nothing special to see," Kerry Blane said shortly. "As I understand it, anyway, this chunk of animated appetite hangs around an island shaped like a turtle. However, our orders are to investigate every island, just in case there might be more than one of the monsters."

Splinter buckled on his dis-gun, excitement flaring in his eyes.

"Let's do a little exploring?" he said eagerly.

Kerry Blane shook his head, swung the cruiser north again.

"Plenty of time for that later," he said mildly. "We'll find this turtle-island, make a landing, and take a look around. Later, if we're lucky enough to blow our objective to Kingdom Come, we'll do a little exploring of the other islands."

"Hell!" Splinter scowled in mock disgust. "An old woman like you should be taking in knitting for a living!"

"Orders are orders!" Kerry Blane shrugged.

HE swung the cruiser in a wide arc to the north, trebling the flying speed within minutes, handling the controls with a familiar dexterity. He said nothing, searched the gleaming ocean for the smudge of blackness that would denote another island. His gaze flicked amusedly, now and then, to the lanky Splinter who scowled moodily and toyed with the dis-gun in his long hands.

"Cheer up, lad," Kerry Blane said finally. "I think you'll find plenty to occupy your time shortly."

"Maybe?" Splinter said gloomily.

He idly swallowed another vitamin cap-

sule, grinned, when he saw Kerry Blane's automatic grimace of distaste. Then he yawned hugely, twisted into a comfortable position, dozed sleepily.

Kerry Blane rode the controls for the next three hours, searching the limitless ocean for the few specks of islands that followed the slow currents of the water planet. Always, there was the same misty light surrounding the ship, never dimming, giving a sense of unreality to the scene below. Nowhere was there the slightest sign of life until, in the fourth hour of flight, a tiny dot of blackness came slowly over the horizon's water line.

Kerry Blane spun the ship in a tight circle, sent it flashing to the west. His keen eyes lighted, when he finally made out the turtle-like outline of the island, and he whistled softly, off-key, as he nudged the snoring Splinter.

"This is it, Sleeping Beauty," he called. "Snap out of it!"

"Huh? Whuzzat?" Splinter grunted, rolled to his elbow.

"Here's the island."

"Oh!" Splinter swung his feet from the bunk, peered from the vision port, sleepiness instantly erased from his face.

"Hot damn!" he chortled. "Now we'll see a little action!"

Kerry Blane grinned, tried to conceal the excitement he felt. He shook his head, his fingers flickering over the control studs.

"Don't get your hopes too high, lad," he counseled. "With those super Zelta guns, it won't take ten minutes to wipe out that monster."

Splinter rubbed his hands together, sighed like a boy seeing his first circus. "Listen, for ten minutes of that, I'd ride this chunk of metal for a year!"

"Could be!" Kerry Blane agreed.

He peered through the port, seeking any spot clear enough for a landing field. Except for a strip of open beach, the island was a solid mass of heavy fern-like growth.

"Belt yourself," Kerry Blane warned. "If that beach isn't solid, I'll have to lift the ship in a hell of a hurry."

"Right!" Splinter's fingers were all thumbs in his excitement.

Kerry Blane set the controls for a shallow glide, his fingers moving like a concert pianist's. The cruiser yawed slightly,

settled slowly in a flat shallow glide. "We're going in," Kerry Blane said quietly.

He closed a knife switch, seeing too late the vitamin capsule that was lodged in the slot. There was the sharp splutter of a short-circuit, and a thin tendril of smoke drifted upward.

"Damn!" Kerry Blane swore briefly.

There was an instant, terrific explosion of the stern jets, and the cruiser hurtled toward the beach like a gravity-crazed comet.

Kerry Blane said absolutely nothing, his breath driven from him by the suck of inertia. His hands darted for the controls, seeking to balance the forces that threw the ship about like a toy. He cut all rockets with a smashing swoop of his hand, tried to fire the bow rockets. But the short had ruined the entire control system.

For one interminable second, he saw the uncanny uprush of the island below. He flicked his gaze about, saw the instant terror that wiped all other expression from his young companion's face. Then the cruiser plowed into the silvery sand.

Belts parted like rotten string; they were thrown forward with crushing force against the control panel. They groped feebly for support, their bodies twisting involuntarily, as the ship cartwheeled a dozen times in a few seconds. Almost instantly, consciousness was battered from them.

With one final, grinding bounce, the cruiser rolled to its side, twisted over and over for a hundred yards, then came to a metal-ripping stop against a moss-grown boulder at the water's edge.

III

KERRY BLANE choked, tried to turn his head from the water that trickled into his face. He opened his eyes, stared blankly, uncomprehendingly into the bloody features of the man beheading over him.

"What happened?" he gasped.

Splinter Wood laughed, almost hysterically, mopped at his forehead with a wet handkerchief.

"I thought you were dead!" he said simply.

Kerry Blane moved his arm experi-

mentally, felt broken bones grate in an exquisite wave of pain. He fought back the nausea, gazed about the cabin, realized the ship lay on its side.

"Maybe I am," he said ruefully. "No man could live through that crash."

Splinter moved away, sat down tiredly on the edge of a bunk. He shook his head dazedly, inspected the long cut on his leg.

"We seem to have done it," he said dully.

Kerry Blane nodded, clambered to his feet, favoring his broken arm. He leaned over the control panel, inspecting the dials with a worried gaze. Slowly, his eyes lightened, and his voice was almost cheerful as he swung about.

"Everything is more or less okay," he said. "The board will have to be rewired, but nothing else seems to be damaged so that repairs are needed."

Splinter looked up from his task of bandaging his leg. "What caused the crash?" he asked. "One minute, everything was all right; the next, Blooey!"

Anger suddenly mottled Kerry Blane's face; he swore monotonously and bitterly for a moment.

"Those gol-damned pills you been taking caused the crash!" he roared. "One of them broke and shorted out the control board." He scowled at the incredulous Splinter. "By the three tails of a Martian sand-pup, I ought to cram the rest of them down your throat, boxes and all!"

Splinter flushed, seemed to be fumbling for words. After a bit, Kerry Blane grinned.

"Forget it, lad," he said more kindly, "those things happen. Now, if you'll bind a splint about my arm, we'll see what we can do about righting the ship."

Splinter nodded, opened the medical locker, worked with tape and splints for minutes. Great beads of perspiration stood out in high relief on Kerry Blane's forehead, but he made no sound. At last, Splinter finished, tucked the supplies away.

"Now what?" he asked subduedly.

"Let's take a look outside, maybe set up the Zelta guns. Can't tell but what that protoplasmic nightmare might take a notion to pay us a visit in the near future!"

"Right!" Splinter unscrewed the port cogs, swung the portal back.

He swung lithely from the portal,

reached down a hand to help the older man. After much puffing and grunting, Kerry Blane managed to clamber through the port. They stood for a moment in silent wonder, staring at the long lazy rollers of milky fluorescence that rolled endlessly toward the beach, then turned to gaze at the great fern-like trees that towered two hundred feet into the air.

"How big do you feel now?" Kerry Blane asked quietly.

Splinter Wood was silent, awed by the beauty and the tremendous size of the growths on the water world.

Kerry Blane walked the length of the cruiser, examining the slight damage done by the crash, evaluating the situation with a practiced gaze. He nodded slowly, retraced his steps, and stood looking at the furrow plowed in the sand.

"Won't be any trouble at all to lift the ship," he called. "After rewiring the board, we'll turn the ship with an under-jet, swing it about, and head her toward the sea."

Splinter nodded, dropped into the open port. A moment later, he flipped a rope ladder outside, where it dangled to the ground, then climbed out himself, carrying the two Zelta guns.

"We'd better test these," he said. "We don't want any slip-ups when we do go into action."

He climbed down the ladder, laid the guns aside, then reached up a hand to aid Kerry Blane's descent. Kerry Blane came down slowly and awkwardly, jumped the last few feet. He felt surprisingly light and strong in the lesser gravity.

He stood, leaning against the ship, watching as Splinter picked up the first gun and leveled it at a gigantic tree. Splinter sighted carefully, winked at the older man, then pressed the firing stud.

Nothing happened; there was no hissing crackle of released energy.

Kerry Blane strode forward, puzzlement on his lined face, his hand outstretched toward the defective weapon. Splinter gaped at the gun in his hands, held it out wordlessly.

"The crash must have broken something," Kerry Blane said slowly.

Splinter shook his head. "There's only one moving part," he said, "and that's the force gate on the firing stud."

"Try the other," Kerry Blane said slowly.

"Okay!"

Splinter lifted the second gun, pressed the stud, gazed white-faced at his companion.

"It won't work, either," he said stupidly. "I don't get it? The source of power is limitless. Solar rays never—"

Old Kerry Blane dropped the first gun to his side, swore harshly.

"Damn it," he said. "They didn't think of it; you didn't think of it; and I most certainly forgot! Solar rays can't penetrate the miles of clouds on Venus. Those guns are utterly useless as weapons!"

NEITHER of them moved for a long moment, then their eyes swung automatically toward the restless ocean. Kerry Blane jerked his head toward the ship.

"Get in there," he ordered, "and start that rewiring job. I'll stand guard out here, and, if anything shows up, use the hand guns we've got."

"But—" Splinter began.

"Damn it!" Command was in the old man's tone. "If we're attacked, we won't stand a chance without the big guns. There are animals on this world that have digestive juices more corrosive than hydrofluoric acid—they could wreck the cruiser in ten minutes."

Splinter darted to the rope ladder, swarmed upward. He paused at the port, his youthful face concerned.

"I'm sorry about causing the short," he said. "I didn't—"

"Get that job done," Kerry Blane snapped. "You're not to blame for anything that has happened."

He watched the younger man disappear within the port, then shook his head slowly, peered about the long stretch of silver beach. He swore bitterly for a moment, realizing the full import of the stupid line of reasoning that had equipped them with the wrong style of weapons on their expedition. Should they be attacked by the monster of insatiable protoplasm, their chances of survival were almost none.

He swung in a slow circle, studying the forest edge, seeking any sign that would indicate the presence of an alien danger. Tree fronds moved gently in the soft breeze, giving an uncanny life to the vines

and creepers whose tips lay on the silvery sand. He had the weird prescience that he was being watched, but could not detect the watcher.

He turned to face the ocean, sat on the dry sand, a dis-gun clutched within the curl of the fingers of his good hand. His broken arm throbbed unmercifully, a slow streak of pain traveling into his shoulder. He sighed unconsciously, lit a cigarette, then gripped his weapon again, the slint cigarette canted upward in his firm mouth.

Sand rustled a bit a dozen feet away. The old space-pilot watched the sand bulging slightly, then sliding softly to one side as a blunt, scaly head poked through into the atmosphere. He lifted the gun a bit, felt the skin crawl on his back, as a scaly lid peeled back from a single eye which stared at him with unwinking malevolence.

The head emerged from the sand, was followed by the sinuous length of a snake-like body. Eight tiny legs made little scraping sounds in the sand. Feelers, like thick antennae, unfolded from cavities in the head, flicked slowly back and forth. The creature hissed suddenly, moved slowly toward the seated pilot.

Kerry Blane blasted it into nothingness with full power of the dis-gun. A few flakes of smoking ashes drifted lazily in the breeze for a moment, and the odor of charred flesh was a dank miasma.

"Holy Hell!" Kerry Blane ejaculated, wiped quick perspiration from his face.

He felt the slight tap on his shoulder then, turned with a quick shake of his head. "Listen, Splinter—" he began, felt a terrifying horror draining all strength from his compact body.

He tried to swing the dis-gun up, felt the double band of rubbery-like creeper flip about his shoulders, pinning his arms to his chest. Terror constricted his throat, as his gaze followed the line of creeper to its parent plant that waited with blossoms agape like some bloody, sucking mouth.

He whirled to one side in a diving plunge, surged with a desperate strength against the coil of creeping vine that was coiled so tightly about his body, was brought to a bone-shaking halt with a suddenness that jarred his injured arm with a force that cramped him with nausea.

His gun went flying to the sand, lay there, out of reach of his straining fingertips.

And now the creeper contracted with a deadly purpose and inevitability. Kerry Blane fought with braced feet to pull away, felt himself dragged toward the avid blossom.

He screamed then, called with every bit of power in his body, hoped that Splinter would hear him within the dungeon of the ship. He strained, tried to whirl, fought again and again against the uncanny strength of the creeper.

A dis-gun sang briefly; the creeper tightened as though in pain, then dropped to the sand where it writhed like the severed body of a boa-constrictor. Splinter, white faced, leaned out of the cruiser's port, blasted the parent flower out of existence with a hissing discharge of dis-rays.

"What the devil happened?" he asked. "What was that thing?"

Kerry Blane came shakily to his feet, retrieved his gun, kicked moodily at the now-silent length of creeper.

"Some aggravated form of the Earth's Venus-fly-trap plant," he explained. "I was plenty lucky it didn't get me by the throat, for then I couldn't have made a sound."

"Yeah, sure!" Splinter's freckles were dark against the sickly white of his skin.

Kerry Blane grinned reassuringly. "Better get back on the job," he said. "I'll make damned certain that nothing sneaks up on me this time!"

Splinter shook his head. "We might as well eat something," he said, some of the color stealing back into his features. "I've got some wire-plastic cooking; it'll be another ten minutes before it's ready."

"Bring the stuff out here, where we can eat and watch at the same time."

"Right!" Splinter disappeared into the port, reappeared a moment later with several cans and boxes in the crook of his left arm.

HE dropped down the ladder, squatted at Kerry Blane's side, opened the cans with twists of their keys. More composed now, he handed several boxes to Kerry Blane, grinned at the old pilot.

"Take several of those capsules, first," he ordered.

Kerry Blane grunted disagreeably, took a gelatin capsule from each of the boxes, then dropped the containers into his pockets. He popped the vitamin pills into his mouth, swallowed convulsively.

"Satisfied?" he snapped.

Splinter laughed aloud, followed the other's example. Then he handed a can of food and another of water to Kerry Blane, found cans for himself.

They ate for minutes, finding themselves strangely hungry, their eyes drinking in the strange beauty of the phosphorescent ocean, feeling contentment softening the terror and action of the past hours.

"It's just like a picnic," Kerry Blane commented whimsically, tossed a can toward the water's edge.

And then they were on their feet, cans spilling from their laps, their dis-guns alert.

The Venusian creatures were like visions out of a drunkard's dreams. They scuttled from the water on great, jointed legs, their crab-like bodies glowing from the millions of phosphorescent sea-organisms captured in the stiff hair that covered them. They screamed in a pitch so high the sound was like a knife blade cutting into the terrestrials' minds.

"This is it!" Kerry Blane yelled, dropped one of the creatures with a blasting streak of energy to its single, pupilless eye.

Splinter grinned woodenly, handling his twin guns with an inherent skill, dropping crab after crab, dull horror mounting in his eyes, as the creatures surged nearer.

The attack seemed endless. The sand was slippery with a greenish blood; and the crabs fed on smoking carcasses. Kerry's and Splinter's disruptors roared in increasing fury, blasting ragged holes in the vanguard of the attackers. A crab leaped through, knocked Splinter to his knees, was blasted into a quivering heap by Kerry Blane's instant shot.

"Back to the ship," Kerry Blane grated.

They retreated, their guns hot in their hands, seeing the crabs erupting from the ocean in a never-ending stream. Their breath was hot in their straining chests, and the high-pitched scream of the savage monsters was like a physical pain when it struck, their ears.

Splinter went up the ladder first, climbing with one hand, firing with the other.

Kerry Blane hooked his good arm through the ladder, braced his feet on a bottom loop, was hauled instantly upward. At the port, both turned and fired with a desperate, accurate fire.

THE entire world seemed to have come alive. Sinuous creepers flashed from the jungle, growing, uncurling with a fantastic speed, each capturing a dead crab, then pulling it back to the parent plant in the jungle. Scaly monsters bored up from within the sand, feasted on the shattered bodies of the sea beasts, pausing now and then to fight away the crabs that attacked them. From somewhere came a flying creature that appeared to be half fish, half animal, which swooped, then mounted sluggishly into the air, a crab's phosphorescent body dangling from its claws.

Kerry Blane shifted on his feet slightly, cleared four crabs from beneath the ladder, turned a sweating face toward his companion.

"How long will it take to fix the control panel?" he gasped.

"Thirty minutes, at least."

"Get in there and fix it."

"And leave you here, alone? To hell with you!"

Kerry Blane drew the ray of his single gun like a hose across a horde of attackers, grinned mirthlessly as they fell in convulsive heaps.

"I'm your superior," he grated. "Get in there!"

"This is no time for technicalities!"

A tiny smile etched itself around Kerry Blane's mouth, was instantly erased. He heard Splinter's gasp, felt terror driving him back a full step.

It came out of the water with a deceptive speed, great loops of itself flicking toward the crabs that scuttled wildly to escape. It had no definite shape, no arms, no features, yet it was alive! It surged up on the beach like a congealed mass of glowing syrup that rose a full hundred feet into the air. It had no eyes, yet seemed to see the entire scene with an uncanny intelligence.

"My God!" Splinter said wonderingly. "Is that the thing we were supposed to destroy?"

"That's it," Kerry Blane said tonelessly.

"And us with only four hand-guns!"

And even as he spoke, his gun went dead in his hand.

IV.

THE sea Thing was almost out of the water now, its pseudopods flicking to the bodies of the slain beasts, resting momentarily, then drawing back into the main bulk. Almost instantly, the bodies had been dissolved and assimilated; so fast, indeed, that there was no appreciable interval of time between the flicking of the pseudopod and the assimilation.

"Get in that ship," Kerry Blane barked. "Get the panel fixed the best you can. Fix up a jury-rig. But fix it so that this ship can move within seconds."

"But—" Startled knowledge came into Splinter's eyes.

Kerry Blane twisted at the gun in Splinter's right hand, tucked it into his belt, pulled at the second. His face was like chiseled stone, and he seemed strangely youthful again.

"No heroics!" he said coldly. "One of us has to get back. I've lived my life."

"Listen, Kerry—"

"Get going! If you fix things in time, I'll come aboard. If that creature ever reaches the ship, neither of us will escape."

Splinter nodded, his eyes filled with tears of mingled bafflement and rage. He touched Kerry Blane gently on the arm, then dropped through the port. Kerry Blane watched him go, shivered slightly, then lifted the port and clanged it shut. His mouth was a thin gash, as he turned to face the Venusian monster.

He felt no regrets; it was a good way to go, with flaming guns and the surge of excitement deep in his heart. Far better than to die unsung and unwanted in some bed on Earth.

He fired directly into the slimy body of the gelatinous mass, laughed aloud as the flame of the shot pulsed redly deep with the monster's bulk. The gigantic blob of protoplasm seemed to draw back a bit, then flowed silently forward again.

Kerry Blane half-slid, half-climbed down the ladder, raced along the beach to the left of the monster. He dodged the great blob of protoplasm that was spat at his running figure, felt a sick faintness creep-

ing into his mind, when he saw the mindless horror move unerringly toward the ruptured body of a crab.

He paused at a safe distance, blasted shot after shot of rending energy into the glowing bulk. A crab scuttled past him, plunged into the ocean, sank immediately to safety. The protoplasmic monster moved like glowing tar over the beach, seeking fresh food.

Kerry Blane emptied the charge of one gun, felt a sick futility beating at his mind when he saw how little damage had been done to the insatiable slime. He tossed the gun to one side, drew the second, knew its charge was already half gone.

The protoplasm flowed toward the ship, flicking loops of itself at the few remaining bodies, then stilled to motionlessness.

Kerry Blane approached its bulk slowly, knowing he had to attract the cohesive slime his way, if Splinter was to have enough time to finish his repairs and make his escape.

He flicked the dis-gun aside, fumbled for a cigarette, laughed in sudden ironic mirth when his fingers touched the boxes of vitamin capsules. He opened one box, flipped the amber balls straight into the protoplasm.

"A balanced diet is the thing you need," he cried aloud, felt the first fingers of insanity plucking at his reason.

The monster surged forward, great loops of itself questing for Kerry Blane. He dodged one, felt a second touch his jacket lightly. He tore his jacket off instantly, hurled it savagely at the towering death.

"Let's get it over with!" he screamed.

And walked directly forward into the sea-Thing.

IN the ship, Splinter finished his wiring of the panel, wiped his tear-streaked face with the back of a dirty hand. He tested the installments, found they were satisfactory, turned the ship on its belly with a brief roar of an underjet. Then he peered from the vision port.

He swore briefly, harshly, when he saw that, except for the gargantuan monster, the beach was empty. His hands were clenched until the muscle-ache traveled into his shoulders.

"Damn, oh damn!" he sobbed in futile rage and regret.

He knew now how much he had revered the old man, how much faith and reliance the years had given him in the other's judgment. He felt then that he had lost more than he could ever regain.

"That's the trouble with the service now," a voice said disagreeably. "Too damned many, wet-diapered squirts! Sitting around, balling, when they should be tailing it toward home!"

Splinter turned incredulous eyes toward the side port, stared blankly at the grinning face of Kerry Blane.

"What the—"

Kerry Blane wriggled through the port, adjusted his broken arm into a comfortable position, then went directly to the medicine cabinet. He opened the door, ignored the other's amazement, proceeded to swallow half a box of vitamin capsules.

"Bellyache!" he said succinctly.

"I thought you were dead," Splinter whispered.

"Should be," Kerry Blane admitted. "But decided to live. Guns went back on me, I had to figure out something else." He frowned. "That's the trouble with you young squirts, you never figure out anything!" he finished accusingly.

"What happened?" Splinter asked slowly.

Kerry Blane jerked his head toward the vision port. "Gave that thing a bellache," he explained. "It assimilated two hundred vitamin D capsules. And Vitamin D, which is *concentrated sunshine*, is as fatal to its sunshine-denied life as arsenic would be to yours."

Splinter gulped. "But why are you taking so many yourself?"

Kerry Blane grinned. "Just in case," he said succinctly, "that baby's got a brother who gets a bite at me. My pills and me will give it the damnedest bellyache this solar system ever saw."

They laughed then, laughed in relief and in quick, ironic amusement; and there was a mutual liking and understanding in their eyes that could never be quenched.

"Let's be getting home," Kerry Blane said. "Our assignment's finished."

Splinter nodded happily, reached for the controls.
