

Galaxy

SCIENCE FICTION

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Cover by KIRBERGER Showing THE JUNGLE CLAIMS ITS OWN

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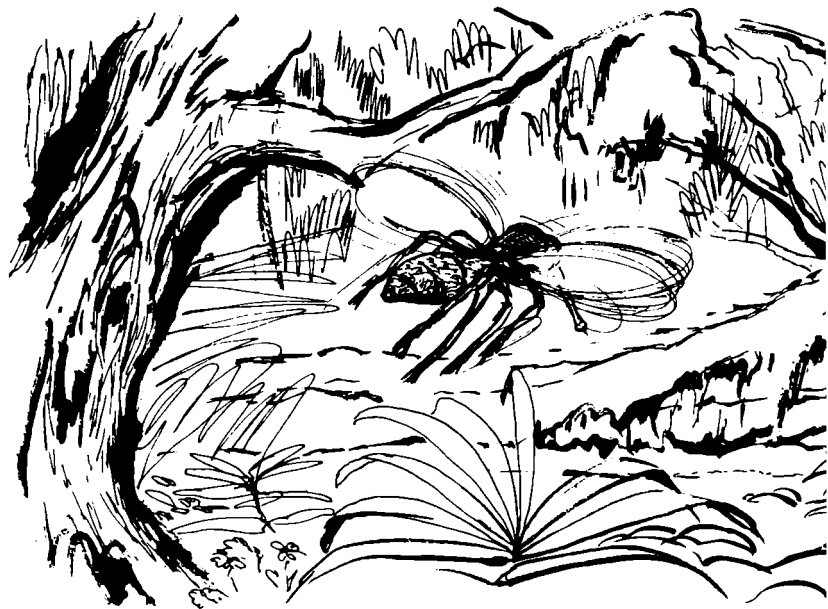
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SURVIVAL TYPE

By J. F. BONE

*Score one or one million was not enough for
the human race. It had to be all or nothing
. . . with one man doing every bit of scoring!*

Illustrated by KIRBERGER



ARTHUR LANCEFORD slapped futilely at the sith buzzing hungrily around his head. The outsized eight-legged parody of a mosquito did a neat half roll and zoomed out of range, hanging motionless on vibrating wings a few feet away.

A raindrop staggered it momentarily, and for a fleeting second, Lanceford had the insane hope that the arthropod would fall out of control into the mud. If it did, that would be the end

of it, for Niobian mud was as sticky as flypaper. But the sith righted itself inches short of disaster, buzzed angrily and retreated to the shelter of a nearby broad-leaf, where it executed another half roll and hung upside down, watching its intended meal with avid anticipation.

Lanceford eyed the insect distastefully as he explored his jacket for repellent and applied the smelly stuff liberally to his face and neck. It wouldn't do much good. In an hour, his sweat



would remove whatever the rain missed—but for that time, it should discourage the sith. As far as permanent discouraging went, the repellent was useless. Once one of those eight-legged horrors checked you off, there were only two possible endings to the affair — either you were bitten or you killed the critter.

It was as simple as that.

He had hoped that he would be fast enough to get the sith before it got him. He had been bitten once already and the memory of those paralyzed three minutes while the bloodsucker fed was enough to last him for a lifetime. He readjusted his helmet, tucking its fringe of netting beneath his collar. The netting, he reflected gloomily, was like its owner—much the worse for wear. However, this trek would be over in another week and he would be able to spend the next six months at a comfortable desk job at the Base, while some other poor devil did the chores of field work.

HE LOOKED down the rain-swept trail winding through the jungle. Niobe—a perfect name for this wet little world. The Bureau of Extraterrestrial Exploration couldn't have picked a better, but the funny thing about it was that they hadn't picked it in the first place. Niobe was the native word for Earth, or perhaps

“the world” would be a more accurate definition. It was a coincidence, of course, but the planet and its mythological Greek namesake had much in common.

Niobe, like Niobe, was all tears—a world of rain falling endlessly from an impenetrable overcast, fat wet drops that formed a grieving background sound that never ceased, sobbing with soft mournful noises on the rubbery broad-leaves, crying with obese splashes into forest pools, blubbing with loud, dismal persistence on the sounding board of his helmet. And on the ground, the raindrops mixed with the loesslike soil of the trail to form a gluey mud that clung in huge pasty balls to his boots.

Everywhere there was water, running in rivulets of tear-streaks down the round cheeks of the gently sloping land—rivulets that merged and blended into broad shallow rivers that wound their mourners' courses to the sea. Trekking on Niobe was an amphibious operation unless one stayed in the highlands—a perpetual series of fords and river crossings.

And it was hot, a seasonless, unchanging, humid heat that made a protection suit an instrument of torture that slowly boiled its wearer in his own sweat. But the suit was necessary, for exposed human flesh was irresistible temptation to Niobe's bloodsuck-

ing insects. Many of these were no worse than those of Earth, but a half dozen species were deadly. The first bite sensitized. The second killed — anaphylactic shock, the medics called it. And the sixth was one of the deadly species.

Lanceford shrugged fatalistically. Uncomfortable as a protection suit was, it was better to boil in it than die without it.

He looked at Kron squatting beside the trail and envied him. It was too bad that Earthmen weren't as naturally repellent to insects as the dominant native life. Like all Niobians, the native guide wore no clothing — ideal garb for a climate like this. His white, hairless hide, with its faint sheen of oil, was beautifully water-repellent.

Kron, Lanceford reflected, was a good example of the manner in which Nature adapts the humanoid form for survival on different worlds. Like the dominant species on every intelligent planet in the explored galaxy, he was an erect, bipedal, mammalian being with hands that possessed an opposable thumb. Insofar as that general description went, Kron resembled humanity — but there were differences.

SQUATTING, the peculiar shape of Kron's torso and the odd flexibility of his limbs were not apparent. One had the ten-

dency to overlook the narrow-shouldered, cylindrical body and the elongated tarsal and carpal bones that gave his limbs four major articulations rather than the human three, and to concentrate upon the utterly alien head.

It jutted forward from his short, thick neck, a long-snouted, vaguely doglike head with tiny ears lying close against the hairless, dome-shaped cranium. Slitlike nostrils, equipped with sphincter muscles like those of a terrestrial seal, argued an originally aquatic environment, and the large intelligent eyes set forward in the skull to give binocular vision, together with the sharp white carnassial teeth and pointed canines, indicated a carnivorous ancestry. But the modern Niobians, although excellent swimmers, were land dwellers and ate anything.

Lanceford couldn't repress an involuntary shudder at some of the things they apparently enjoyed. Tastes differed — enormously so between Earthmen and Niobians.

There was no doubt that the native was intelligent, yet he, like the rest of his race, was a technological moron. It was strange that a race which had a well-developed philosophy and an amazing comprehension of semantics could be so backward in mechanics. Even the simpler of the BEE's mechanisms left the natives con-

fused. It was possible that they could learn about machinery, but Lanceford was certain that it would take a good many years before the first native mechanic would set up a machine shop on this planet.

Lanceford finished tucking the last fold of face net under his collar, and as he did so, Kron stood up, rising to his five-foot height with a curious flexible grace. Standing, he looked something like a double-jointed alabaster Anubis — wearing swim fins. His broad, webbed feet rested easily on the surface of the mud, their large area giving him flotation that Lanceford envied. As a result, his head was nearly level with that of the human, although there was better than a foot difference in their heights.

Lanceford looked at Kron inquiringly. "You have a place in mind where we can sleep to-night?"

"Sure, Boss. We'll be coming to hunthouse soon. We go now?"

"Lead on," Lanceford said, groaning silently to himself — another hunthouse with its darkness and its smells. He shrugged. He could hardly expect anything else up here in the highlands. Oh, well, he'd managed to last through the others and this one could be no worse. At that, even an airless room full of natives was preferable to spending a night outside.

And the sith wouldn't follow them. It didn't like airless rooms filled with natives.

He sighed wearily as he followed Kron along the dim path through the broadleaf jungle. Night was coming, and with darkness, someone upstairs turned on every faucet and the sheets of rain that fell during the day changed abruptly into a deluge. Even the semi-aquatic natives didn't like to get caught away from shelter during the night.

The three moved onward, immersed in a drumming wilderness of rain — the Niobian sliding easily over the surface of the mud, the Earthman plowing painfully through it, and the sith flitting from the shelter of one broadleaf to the next, waiting for a chance to feed.

THE trail widened abruptly, opening upon one of the small clearings that dotted the rain-forest jungle. In the center of the clearing, dimly visible through the rain and thickening darkness, loomed the squat thatch-roofed bulk of a hunthouse, a place of shelter for the members of the hunters' guild who provided fresh meat for the Niobian villages. Lanceford sighed a mingled breath of relief and unpleasant anticipation.

As he stepped out into the clearing, the sith darted from

cover, heading like a winged bullet for Lanceford's neck. But the man was not taken by surprise. Pivoting quickly, he caught the iridescent blur of the bloodsucker's wings. He swung his arm in a mighty slap. The high-pitched buzz and Lanceford's gloved hand met simultaneously at his right ear. The buzz stopped abruptly. Lanceford shook his head and the sith fell to the ground, satisfactorily swatted. Lanceford grinned—score one for the human race.

He was still grinning as he pushed aside the fiber screen closing the low doorway of the hunt-house and crawled inside. It took a moment for his eyes to become accustomed to the gloom within, but his nose told him even before his eyes that the house was occupied. The natives, he thought wryly, must be born with no sense of smell, otherwise they'd perish from sheer propinquity. One could never honestly say that familiarity with the odor of a Niobian bred contempt—nausea was the right word.

The interior was typical, a dark rectangle of windowless limestone walls enclosing a packed-dirt floor and lined with a single deck of wooden sleeping platforms. Steeply angled rafters of peeled logs intersected at a knife-sharp ridge pierced with a circular smokehole above the firepit in the center of the room. Transverse

rows of smaller poles lashed to the rafters supported the thick broadleaf thatch that furnished protection from the rain and sanctuary for uncounted thousands of insects.

A fire flickered ruddily in the pit, hissing as occasional drops of rain fell into its heart from the smokehole, giving forth a dim light together with clouds of smoke and steam that rose upward through the tangled mass of greasy cobwebs filling the upper reaches of the rafters. Some of the smoke found its way through the smokehole, but most of it hung in an acrid undulating layer some six feet above the floor.

The glow outlined the squatting figures of a dozen or so natives clustered around the pit, watching the slowly rotating carcass of a small deerlike rodent called a sorat, which was broiling on a spit above the flames. Kron was already in the ring, talking earnestly to one of the hunters—a fellow-tribesman, judging from the tattoo on his chest.

To a Niobian, the scene was ordinary, but to Lanceford it could have been lifted bodily from the inferno. He had seen it before, but the effect lost nothing by repetition. There was a distinctly hellish quality to it—to the reds and blacks of the flickering fire and the shadows. He wouldn't have been particularly surprised if Sa-

tan himself appeared in the center of the firepit complete with horns, hoofs and tail. A hunt-house, despite its innocuousness, looked like the southeast corner of Hades.

CLUSTERED around the fire, the hunters turned to look at him curiously and, after a single eye-filling stare, turned back again. Niobians were almost painfully polite. Although Earthmen were still enough of a curiosity to draw attention, one searching look was all their customs allowed. Thereafter, they minded their own business. In some ways, Lanceford reflected, native customs had undeniable merit.

Presently Kron rose from his place beside the fire and pointed out two empty sleeping platforms where they would spend the night. Lanceford chose one and sank wearily to its resilient surface. Despite its crude construction, a Niobian sleeping platform was comfortable. He removed his pack, pulled off his mud-encrusted boots and lay back with a grunt of relaxation. After a day like this, it was good to get off his feet. Weariness flowed over him.

He awoke to the gentle pressure of Kron's hand squeezing his own. "The food is cooked," the Niobian said, "and you are welcomed to share it."

Lanceford nodded, his stomach

crawling with unpleasant anticipation. A native meal was something he would prefer to avoid. His digestive system could handle the unsavory mess, but his taste buds shrank from the forthcoming assault. What the natives classed as a delicate and elusive flavor was sheer torture to an Earthman.

Possibly there was some connection between their inefficient olfactory apparatus and their odd ideas of flavor, but whatever the physical explanation might be, it didn't affect the fact that eating native food was an ordeal. Yet he couldn't refuse. That would be discourteous and offensive, and one simply didn't offend the natives. The BEE was explicit about that. Courtesy was a watchword on Niobe.

He took a place by the fire, watching with concealed distaste as one of the hunters reached into the boiling vat beside the firepit with a pair of wooden tongs and drew forth the native conception of a hors d'oeuvre. They called it vorkum—a boiled sorat paunch stuffed with a number of odorous ingredients. It looked almost as bad as it smelled.

The hunter laid the paunch on a wooden trencher, scraped the greenish scum from its surface and sliced it open. The odor poured out, a gagging essence of decaying vegetables, rotten eggs and overripe cheese.

Lanceford's eyes watered, his stomach tautened convulsively, but the Niobians eyed the reeking semi-solid eagerly. No meal on Niobe was considered worthy of the name unless a generous helping of vorkum started it off.

AN ENTREE like that could ruin the most rugged human appetite, but when it was the forerunner of a main dish of highly spiced barbecue, vorkum assumed the general properties of an emetic. Lanceford grimly controlled the nausea and tactfully declined the greasy handful which Kron offered. The Niobian never seemed to learn. At every meal they had eaten during their past month of travel on Niobe, Kron had persistently offered him samples of the mess. With equal persistence, he had refused. After all, there were limits.

But polite convention required that he eat something, so he took a small portion of the barbecued meat and dutifully finished it. The hunters eyed him curiously, apparently wondering how an entity who could assimilate relatively untasty sorat should refuse the far greater delicacy of vorkum. But it was a known fact that the ways of Earthmen were strange and unaccountable.

The hunters didn't protest when he retired to his sleeping platform and the more acceptable concen-

trates from his pack. His hunger satisfied, he lay back on the resilient vines and fell into a sleep of exhaustion. It had been a hard day.

Lanceford's dreams were unpleasant. Nightmare was the usual penalty of sitting in on a Niobian meal and this one was worse than usual. Huge siths, reeking of vorkum, pursued him as he ran naked and defenseless across a swampy landscape that stretched interminably ahead. The clinging mud reduced his speed to a painful crawl as he frantically beat off the attacks of the blood-suckers.

The climax was horror. One of the siths slipped through his frantically beating hands and bit him on the face. The shocking pain of the bite wakened him, a cry of terror and anguish still on his lips.

He looked around wildly. He was still in the hunthouse. It was just a dream.

He chuckled shakily. These nightmares sometimes were too real for comfort. He was drenched with sweat, which was not unusual, but there was a dull ache in his head and the hot tense pain that encompassed the right side of his face had not been there when he had fallen asleep.

He touched his face with a tentative finger, exploring the hot puffiness and the enormously swollen ear with a gentle touch. It

was where he had struck the sith, but surely he couldn't have hit that hard.

He gasped, a soft breath of dismay, as realization dawned. He had smashed the sith hard enough to squeeze some of the insect's corrosive body juices through his face net—and they had touched his skin! That wouldn't normally have been bad, but the sith bite he had suffered a week ago had sensitized him. He was developing an anaphylactic reaction—a severe one, judging from the swelling.

That was the trouble with ex-

ploration; one occasionally forgot that a world was alien. Occasionally danger tended to recede into a background of familiarity—he had smashed the sith before it had bitten him, so therefore it couldn't hurt him. He grimaced painfully, the movement bringing another twinge to his swollen face. He should have known better.

He swore mildly as he opened his Aid Kit and extracted a sterile hypo. The super-antihistamine developed by the Bureau was an unpredictable sort of thing. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. He removed the screw cap



that sealed the needle and injected the contents of the syringe into his arm. He hoped that this was one of the times the drug worked. If it wasn't, he reflected grimly, he wouldn't be long for this world.

He sighed and lay back. There wasn't anything more to do now. All he could do was wait and see if the anti-allergin worked.

THE Bureau of Extraterrestrial Exploration had discovered Niobe barely three years ago, yet already the planet was famous not only for its peculiar climate,



but also for the number of men who had died upon its watery surface. Knowledge of this planet was bought with life, grim payment to decrease the lag between discovery and the day men could live and work on Niobe without having to hide beneath domes or behind protection suits. Lanceford never questioned the necessity or the inevitable price that must be paid. Like every other BEE agent, he knew that Niobe was crash priority — a world that *had* to be understood in minimum time.

For Niobe was a made to order herbarium for a swampland plant called viscaya. The plant was originally native to Algon IV, but had been spread to practically every suitable growth center in the Galaxy. It was the source of a complex of alkaloids known as gerontin, and gerontin had the property of tripling or quadrupling the normal life span of mammals.

It was obvious that viscayaculture should have a tremendous distribution throughout the Confederation worlds. But unfortunately the right conditions existed in very few places in the explored galaxy. Despite the fact that most life is based on carbon, oxygen and water, there is still very little free water in the Galaxy. Most planets of the Confederation are semi-arid, with the outstanding exceptions of Terra and Lyrane.

But these two worlds were the seats of human and humanoid power for so long that all of their swampland had been drained and reclaimed centuries ago.

And it was doubly unfortunate that gerontin so far defied synthesis. According to some eminent chemists, the alkaloid would probably continue to do so until some facet of the Confederation reached a Class VIII culture level. Considering that Terra and Lyrane, the two highest cultures, were only Class VII, and that Class level steps took several thousands of years to make, a policy of waiting for synthesis was not worth considering.

The result was that nobody was happy until Niobe was discovered. The price of illicit gerontin was astronomical and most of the Confederation's supply of the drug was strictly rationed to those whom the government thought most valuable to the Confederation as a whole. Of course, the Confederation officialdom was included, which caused considerable grumbling. In the nick of time, Niobe appeared upon the scene, and Niobe had environment in abundance!

The wheels of the Confederation began to turn. The BEE was given a blank check and spurred on by a government which, in turn, was being spurred on by the people who composed it. The ex-

ploration of Niobe proceeded at all possible speed. With so many considerations weighed against them, what did a few lives matter? For the sake of the billions of humanoids in the Confederation, their sacrifice was worthwhile even if only a few days or hours were saved between discovery and exploitation.

LANCEFORD groaned as a violent pain shot through his head. The anti-allergin apparently wasn't going to work, for it should have had some effect by now. He shrugged mentally—it was the chance one took in this business. But he couldn't say that he hadn't been warned. Even old Sims had told him, called him a unit in the BEE's shortcut trial and error scheme—an error, it looked like now.

Seemed rather silly—a Class VII civilization using techniques that were old during the Dark Ages before the Atomic Revolution, sending foot parties to explore a world in the chance that they might discover something that the search mechs missed—anything that would shorten the lag time. It was incomprehensible, but neither Sims nor the BEE would do a thing like this without reason. And whatever it was, he wasn't going to worry about it. In fact, there wasn't much time left to worry. The reaction was ob-

servably and painfully worse.

It was important that the news of his death and the specimens he had collected get back to Base Alpha. They might have value in this complex game Alvord Sims was playing with men, machines and Niobe. But Base Alpha was a good hundred miles away and, in his present condition, he couldn't walk a hundred feet.

For a moment, he considered setting up the powerful little transmitter he carried in his pack, but his first abortive motion convinced him it was useless. The blinding agony that swept through him at the slightest movement left no doubt that he would never finish the business of setting up the antenna, let alone send a message.

It was a crime that handie-talkies couldn't be used here on Niobe, but their range, limited at best, was practically nonexistent on a planet that literally seemed to be one entire "dead spot." A fixed-frequency job broadcasting on a directional beam was about the only thing that could cover distance, and that required a little technical know-how to set up the antenna and focus it on Base Alpha. There would be no help from Kron. Despite his intelligence, the native could no more assemble a directional antenna than spread pink wings and fly.

There was only one thing to do

—get a note off to Sims, if he could still write, and ask Kron to deliver the note and his pack to the Base.

He fumbled with his jacket, and with some pain produced a stylus and a pad. But it was difficult to write. Painful, too. Better get Kron over here while he could still talk and tell him what he wanted.

The stylus slipped from numb fingers as Lanceford called hoarsely, "Kron! Come here! I need you!"

KRON looked down compassionately at the swollen features of the Earthman. He had seen the kef effect before, among the young of his people who were incautious or inexperienced, but he had never seen it among the aliens. Surprisingly, the effects were the same—the livid swellings, the gasping breath, the pain. Strange how these foreigners reacted like his own people.

He scratched his head and pulled thoughtfully at one of his short ears. It was his duty to help Lanceford, but how could he? The Earthman had denied his help for weeks, and Niobians simply didn't disregard another's wishes. Kron scowled, the action lending a ferocious cast to his doglike face. Tolerance was a custom hallowed by ages of practice. It went to extremes—even with

life at stake, a person's wishes and beliefs must be respected.

Kron buried his long-snouted head in his hands, a gesture that held in it all the frustration which filled him.

The human was apparently resolved to die. He had told Kron his last wishes, which didn't include a request for help, but merely to get his pack back to the others in their glass dome. It was astonishing that such an obviously intelligent species should have so little flexibility. They didn't understand the first principles of adaptation. Always and forever, they held to their own ways, trying with insensate stubbornness to mold nature to their will—and when nature overcome their artificial defenses, they died, stubborn, unregenerate, inflexible to the end. They were odd, these humans—odd and a little frightening.

Lanceford breathed wheezily. The swelling had invaded the inner tissues of his throat and was beginning to compress his windpipe. It was uncomfortable, like inhaling liquid fire, and then there was the constant desire to cough and the physical inability to do so.

"Dirty luck," he whispered. "Only a week more and I'd have had it made—the longest trek a man's made on this benighted planet."

Kron nodded, but then belatedly realized that the human was muttering to himself. He listened. There might be something important in these dying murmurings, something that might explain their reasons for being here and their strange driving haste that cared nothing for life.

"It's hard to die so far from one's people, but I guess that can't be helped. Old Sims gave me the score. Like he said, a man doesn't have much choice of where he dies in the BEE."

"You don't want to die!" Kron exploded.

"Of course not," Lanceford said with weak surprise. He hadn't dreamed that Kron was nearby. This might well destroy the Imperturbable Earthman myth that the BEE had fostered.

"Not even if it is in accord with your customs and rituals?"

"What customs?"

"Your clothing, your eating habits, your ointments—are these not part of your living plan?"

Despite the pain that tore at his throat, Lanceford managed a chuckle. This was ridiculous. "Hell, no! Our only design for living is to stay alive, particularly on jobs like this one. We don't wear these suits and repellent because we *like* to. We do it to stay alive. If we could, we'd go around nearly as naked as you do."

"Do you mind if I help you?"

Kron asked diffidently. "I think I can cure you." He leaned forward anxiously to get the man's reply.

"I'd take a helping hand from the devil himself, if it would do any good."

Kron's eyes were brilliant. He hummed softly under his breath, the Niobian equivalent of laughter. "And all the time we thought—" he began, and then broke off abruptly. Already too much time was wasted without losing any more in meditating upon the ironies of life.

He turned toward the firepit, searched for a moment among the stones, nodded with satisfaction and returned to where Lanceford lay. The hunthouse was deserted save for himself and the Earthman. With characteristic Niobian delicacy, the hunters had left, preferring to endure the night rain than be present when the alien died. Kron was thankful that they were gone, for what he was about to do would shock their conservative souls.

LANCEFORD was dimly conscious of Kron prying his swollen jaws apart and forcing something wet and slippery down his throat. He swallowed, the act a tearing pain to the edematous membranes of his gullet, but the stuff slid down, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. The act triggered

another wave of pain that left him weak and gasping. He couldn't take much more of this. It wouldn't be long now before the swelling invaded his lungs to such a degree that he would strangle. It wasn't a pleasant way to die.

And then, quite suddenly, the pain eased. A creeping numbness spread like a warm black blanket over his outraged nervous system. The stuff Kron had given him apparently had some anesthetic properties. He felt dimly grateful, even though the primitive native nostrum would probably do no good other than to ease the pain.

The blackness went just far enough to paralyze the superficial areas of his nervous system. It stopped the pain and left him unable to move, but the deeper pathways of thought and reason remained untouched. He was conscious, although no external sensation intruded on his thoughts. He couldn't see Kron—the muscles that moved his eyes were as paralyzed as the other muscles of his body and the native was outside his field of vision—but somehow he knew exactly what the Niobian was doing. He was washing mucus from his hands in a bowl of water standing beside the fire pit and *he was wondering wryly whether forced feeding was on the list of human tabus!*

Lanceford's mind froze, locked in a peculiar contact that was

more than awareness. The sensation was indescribable. It was like looking through an open door into the living room of a stranger's house.

He was aware of the incredible complexity and richness of Kron's thoughts, of oddly sardonic laughter, of pity and regret that such a little thing as understanding should cause death and suffering through its lack, of bewildered admiration for the grim persistence of the alien Earthmen, mixed with a wondering curiosity about what kept them here — what the true reasons were for their death-defying persistence and stubbornness — of an ironic native paraphrase for the Terran saying, "Every man to his own taste," and a profound speculation upon what fruits might occur from true understanding between his own race and the aliens.

It was a strangely jumbled kaleidoscopic flash that burned across the explorer's isolated mind, a flash that passed almost as soon as it had come, as though an invisible door had closed upon it.

But one thing in that briefly shocking contact stood out with great clarity. The Niobians were as eager as the BEE to establish a true contact, a true understanding, for the message was there, plain in Kron's mind that he was thinking not only for himself but

for a consensus of his people, a decision arrived at as a result of discussion and thought — a decision of which every Niobian was aware and with which most Niobians agreed.

THE magnitude of that thought and its implications staggered Lanceford's imagination.

After two years of exploration and contact with the dominant race of this planet, the BEE still knew literally nothing about the sort of people with whom they were dealing. This instantaneous, neural contact proved that. Equated against the information dished out in Basic Training, it merely emphasized the fact that the BEE was grossly ignorant.

Anthropological Intelligence had a lot to account for — the job they'd done so far could have been performed by low-grade morons. In wishing to avoid the possibility of giving offense, in hiding behind a wall of courtesy and convention, there had been no contact worthy of the name. Yet here was the possibility of a rapport that could be closer than any which existed between any races in the Galaxy.

Lanceford groaned with silent frustration. To learn this when he was dying was the bitterest of ironies. In any other circumstances, the flash of insight could be parlayed into a key which

might unlock the entire problem of Niobian relationships.

Bitterly he fought against the curtain of unconsciousness that closed down on him, trying by sheer will to stay awake, to make some move that could be interpreted, to leave some clue to what he had learned.

It was useless. The darkness closed in, inexorable and irresistible.

A RTHUR LANCEFORD opened his eyes, surprised that he was still alive. The pain was gone from his face and the swelling had subsided. He grinned with relief — his luck had held out.

And then the relief vanished in a wave of elation. He held the key. He knew the basics for mutual understanding. And he would be alive to deliver them to the specialists who could make them operate.

He chuckled. Whatever the cure was — the BEE drug, Kron's treatment, whatever it was, it didn't matter. The important thing was that he was going to live.

He wondered whether that flash of insight just before unconsciousness had been real or a figment of delirium. It could have been either, but Lanceford clung to the belief that the contact was genuine. There was far too much re-

vealed in that sudden flash that was entirely alien to his normal patterns of thought.

He wondered what had triggered that burst of awareness. The BEE drug, the stuff Kron had given him, the poison of the sith and the histamines floating around in his system — it could have been any one of a number of things, or maybe a complex of various factors that had interacted to make him super-receptive for an instant of time.

It was something that would have to be reported and studied with the meticulous care which the BEE gave to any facet of experience that was out of the ordinary. A solution might possibly be found, or the whole thing might wind up as one of those dead ends that were so numerous in Exploration work. But that was out of his field and, in consequence, out of his hands. His specialty wasn't parapsychological research.

Kron was standing beside his bed, long doglike face impassive, looking at him with pleased satisfaction. Behind him, a group of natives were clustered around the cooking fire. It was as if no time had passed since the allergy struck — but Lanceford knew differently. Still, the lost time didn't matter. The bright joy that he was going to live transcended such unimportant things.

"Looks like you won't have to

bury me after all," Lanceford said happily.

He stretched his arms over his head. He felt wonderful. His body was cool and comfortably free of the hot confinement of the protection suit. He did a slow horrified doubletake as he realized that he was lying on the sleeping platform practically naked—a tempting hors d'oeuvre for the thousand and one species of Niobe's biting insects.

"Where's my suit?" he half shouted.

KRON smiled. "You don't need it, friend Lanceford. If you will notice, you are not bitten. Nor will you be."

"Why not?"

Kron didn't answer. It wasn't the proper time, and the euphoria that he and the Earthman were enjoying was too pleasant to shatter.

Lanceford didn't press the matter. Apparently Kron knew what he was talking about. Lanceford had been watching one particularly vicious species of biting fly hover above his body. The insect would approach, ready to enjoy a mandible full of human epidermis, but, about six inches from his body, would slow down and come to a stop, hanging frustrated in midair. Finally the fly gave up and flew off into the darkness of the rafters. Lanceford hoped that

one of the spiders would get it—but he was convinced. Whatever happened to him while he was unconscious had made him as insect-repellent as the Niobians.

The smell of cooking came from the firepit and, incredibly, it smelled good.

Lanceford looked startledly at Kron. "I'm hungry."

"An excellent sign," Kron replied. "You are nearly cured. Soon you will be able to finish this trek."

"Incidentally," Lanceford said, "for the first time since I have been out on this showerbath world of yours, you're cooking something that smells fit to eat. I think I'd like to try it."

Kron's eyebrows rose and he hummed softly under his breath. This was something entirely unexpected—an added delight, like the flavor of komal in a sorat stew. He savored it slowly, enjoying its implications.

"What is it?" Lanceford persisted.

"A dish called akef," Kron said. The name was as good as any and certainly described the effect well enough.

THE last hundred miles had been a breeze. Lanceford stood at the edge of the clearing, looking across the planed-off landscape to the shimmering hemispherical bulk of Base Alpha, glis-

tening like a giant cabochon jewel under Niobe's dark sky. Without the protection suit to slow him down and hamper his movements, what would have been a week's trip had been shortened to four days.

In a few minutes, he would be back among his own kind — and he wasn't sure whether he was glad or sorry. Of course, there was a certain satisfaction in bringing back a first-class discovery — perhaps the greatest in the short history of Niobian exploration — but there was a stigma attached to the way it had been found. It wouldn't be easy to confess that it had practically been forced upon him, but it would have to be done. It would have been much nicer to have found the answer by using his head. There would have been some really deserved prestige in that.

HE sighed and turned to Kron. "Farewell, friend," he said soberly, "and thanks."

"We are even," Kron replied. "You saved my life from a roka and I saved yours from the sith. The scales are balanced."

Lanceford blinked. He had forgotten that incident where he had shot the big catlike animal shortly after the 'copter had dropped them for the start of their journey back to Base. Apparently it was after Kron — or at least the native

had thought so. Lanceford grinned ruefully. Score another point for blind luck.

"But, Kron, it's not that easy. You have given me a secret of your people and I shall have to tell it to mine."

"I expected that you would. Besides, it is no secret. Even our children know its composition and how to make it. We have never held it from you. You simply wouldn't accept it. But it is about time, friend Lanceford, that your race began learning something of Niobe if they wish to remain here — and it is about time that we began learning something about you. I think that there will be some rather marked changes in the future. And in that regard, I leave you with the question of whether a civilization should be judged entirely upon its apparent technological achievements."

"I —" Lanceford began.

"You have learned how we avoid the insects," Kron continued, maneuvering past the abortive interruption, "and perhaps someday you will know the full answer to my question. But in the meantime, you and your kind will be free to move through our world, to learn our ways, and to teach us yours. It should be a fair exchange."

"Thanks to akaf," Lanceford said fervently, "we should be able to do just that."

KRON smiled. "You have used the drug enough to have overcome the mental block that prevented you from naming it before. The word I coined from your own language of science is no longer necessary."

"I suppose not, but it's pleasanter to think of it that way."

"You Earthmen! Sometimes I wonder how you ever managed to achieve a civilization with your strange attitudes toward unpleasant facts." Kron smiled broadly, relishing the memory of his deception and Lanceford's shocked awakening to the truth. "I hope," he continued, "that you have forgiven my little deceit and the destruction of your protective clothing."

"Of course. How could I do otherwise? It's so nice to be rid of that sweatbox that I'd forgive anything." Lanceford frowned. "But there's one thing that puzzles me. How did you disguise the stuff?"

"I didn't," Kron replied cryptically. "You did." He turned away and, with characteristic Niobian abruptness, walked off into the jungle. His job was done and natives were never ones to dally with leavetaking, although their greetings were invariably ceremonious.

Lanceford watched until the native was out of sight and then walked slowly across the clearing

toward the dome. He had learned a lot these past few days, enough to make him realize that his basic training had been so inadequate as to be almost criminal. It was lacking in many of the essentials for survival and, moreover, was slanted entirely wrong from a psychological point of view.

Sure, it was good enough to enable a man to get along, but it seemed to be particularly designed to deny the fact that the natives obviously possessed a first-rate culture of their own. It didn't say so directly, but the implications were there. And that was wrong. The natives possessed a civilization that was probably quite as high as the one Terra possessed. It was simply oriented differently. One thing was certain—the Confederation wasn't going to expropriate or exploit *this* planet without the natives' consent. It would be suicide if they tried.

He grinned. Actually there would be no reason for such action. It was always easier to deal with advanced races than to try to conquer or educate primitive ones. Kron had the right idea—understanding, exchange, appreciation—Confederation culture for Niobian. It would make a good and productive synthesis.

Still grinning, Lanceford opened the airlock and stepped inside, ignoring the pop-eyed guard who



eyed his shorts and sandals with an expression of incredulous disbelief.

ALVORD SIMS, Regional Director, Niobe Division BEE, looked up from his desk and smiled. The smile became a nose-wrinkling grimace as Lanceford swung the pack from his shoul-

ders and set it carefully on the floor.

"Glad to see that you made it, Lanceford," Sims said. "But what's that awful smell? You should have done something about it. You stink like a native."

"All the baths in the world won't help, sir," Lanceford said woodenly.

He was tired of the stares and the sniffs he had encountered since he had entered the base. In his present condition, a fellow-human smelled as bad to him as he did to them, but he didn't complain about it and he saw no reason why they should. Humanity should apply more courtesy and consideration to members of their own species.

"It's inside me," he explained. "My metabolism's changed. And incidentally, sir, you don't smell so sweet yourself."

Sims sputtered for a moment and then shrugged. "Perhaps not," he admitted. "One can't help sweating in this climate even with air-conditioning."

"It's the change inside me," Lanceford said. "I suppose it'll wear off in time, once I've been on a normal diet. But I didn't think that was too important in view of the information I have. I've learned something vital, something that you should know at once. That's why I'm here."

"That's decent of you," Sims replied, "but an interoffice memo would have served just as well as a personal visit. My stomach isn't as good as it once was. Ulcers, you know."

"The executive's disease," Lanceford commented.

Sims nodded. "Well, Arthur, what did you find that was so important?"

"That we've been fools."

Sims sighed. "That's nothing new. We've been fools since the day we left Earth to try and conquer the stars."

"That's not what I mean, sir. I mean that we've been going at this Niobe business the wrong way. What we need is to understand the natives, instead of trying to understand the planet."

"Out of the mouths of babes and probationers—" Sims said with gentle irony.

"It pays off," Lanceford replied doggedly. "Take my case. I've found out why the natives are insect-proof!"

"That's a new wrinkle. Can you prove it?"

"Certainly. I came the last hundred miles in shorts."

"What happened to your suit?"

"Kron destroyed it accidentally."

"Accidentally — hah!" Sims snorted. "Niobians never do things accidentally."

LANCEFORD looked sharply at the director. The observation carried a wealth of implications that his sharpened senses were quick to grasp. "Then you know the natives aren't simple savages, the way we were taught in Basic Training?"

"Of course! They're a non-technical Class V at the very least — maybe higher. Somehow they've

never oriented their civilization along mechanical lines, or maybe they tried it once and found it wanting. But no one in the upper echelons has ever thought they were stupid or uncivilized."

"Then why —"

"Later," Sims said. "You're entitled to an explanation, but right now I'd appreciate it if you'd finish your statement. What makes the natives insect-proof?"

"Vorkum."

"That gunk?"

"That's the repellent."

"In more ways than one," Sims said.

"It's not so bad after you get used to it. It just smells awful at first."

"That's an understatement, if I ever heard one."

PERHAPS the lab can analyze it and find the active principle," Lanceford said hopefully.

"If they do, I'll bet it is distilled quintessence of skunk," Sims replied gloomily. "I'll be willing to bet that our native friends tried that trick ages ago and gave it up for a bad job. They're pretty fair biochemists as well as being philosophers."

"Could be," Lanceford said thoughtfully. "I never thought of that."

"You'd better start thinking all the time. These lads are *smart*."

Why do you think we have this complicated rigmarole about native relations and respect? Man, we're running scared. We don't want to lose this planet, and anything less than the kid-glove treatment would be sheer suicide until we learn how far we can go. These natives have an organization that'd knock your eye out. I didn't believe it myself until I got the proof. As you learn more about it, you'll understand what I mean. We're dealing with an ecological *unit* on this planet!"

"But I thought —"

"That you were here to explore a primitive world?"

"Wasn't that what I was trained for?"

"No. We can do that sort of thing with a couple of geodetic cruisers. We don't need men trekking through the jungles to assay a world's physical resources. That business went out of date during the Dark Ages. There's a better reason than that for these treks."

"Like what?"

"You asked the question. Now answer it," Sims said. "You have enough data."

Lanceford thought for a moment. "I can see one reason," he said slowly.

"Yes?"

"The trek could be a test. It could be used to determine whether or not the probationer was a survival type — a sort of

final examination before he's turned loose in a responsible job here in the BEE."

SIMS smiled. "Bull's-eye! It's part of the speedup—a pretty brutal part, but one that can't be helped if we want to get this planet in line quickly enough to stop the riot that's brewing in the Confederation. It's as much for Niobe's good as ours, because the Confederation wants that gerontin like an alcoholic wants another drink—and they're not going to wait for normal exploration and development. That's why the treks. It's a tough course. Failure can and often does mean death. Usually we can pull a misfit out in time, but not always. If you live through the trek and we don't have to pull you out, though, you've proved yourself a survival type—and you're over the first hurdle.

"Then we check with your guide and anyone you happen to meet en route. The natives are very cooperative about such things. If you pass their evaluation, you're ready to join the club. It's been forming ever since we landed here two years ago, but it's still pretty exclusive. It's the nucleus of the BEE's mission here, the one that'll get things rolling with the gerontin plantations. We'll know about you in a few more minutes after the Cyb Unit

gets through processing your data." Sims grinned at the thunderstruck youngster.

Lanceford nodded glumly. "I'll probably fail. I sure didn't use my head. I never caught the significance of the trek, I failed to deduce the reason for the insect-repellent qualities of the natives, and I missed the implications of their culture until I had almost reached Base. Those things are obvious. Any analytical brain would have figured them out."

"They're only obvious when you know what you're looking for," Sims said gently. "Personally, I think you did an excellent job, considering the handicaps you have faced. And the discovery of the vorkum was masterly."

Lanceford blushed. "I hate to admit it, but Kron literally shoved the stuff down my throat."

"I didn't mean the *method* by which you learned that vorkum was the stuff we've been searching for," Sims said. "I meant the *results* you obtained. Results are what count in this business. Call it luck if you wish, but there is more to it than that. Some people are just naturally lucky and those are the sort we need here. They're survival types. A lot is going to depend on having those so-called lucky people in the right places when we settle Niobe's status in the Confederation."

He paused as the message tube

beside his desk burped a faint hiss of compressed air and a carrier dropped out into the receiving basket.

"Somehow I think that this is your membership card to the club, he said. He read it, smiled, and passed the sheet to Lanceford. "And now, Arthur, before I appoint you as a Niobe Staff member, I'd like to know one thing."

"What is that, sir?"

"Just why in the name of hell did you bring that pack in here with you? I've just realized where that smell is coming from!"

"I didn't dare leave it anywhere," Lanceford said. "Someone might have thrown it down a disposal chute."

"I wouldn't blame them. That's vorkum you have in there, isn't it?"

Lanceford nodded. "Yes, sir. I didn't want to lose it."

"Why not? We can always get more from the natives if we need it."

"I know that, sir. *We* can, but this is all *I'll* get for the next six months, and if I ration myself carefully, it might last that long. You see, sir, it's mildly habit-forming — like cigarettes — and one gets accustomed to it. And besides, you really don't know what flavor is until you've tried vorkum on chocolate."

— J. F. BONE