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PLANET STORIES Published bi-monthly by Love Romances Pub. Co., Inc., 150 W. 42 St., New York 18, N. Y. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1951, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Reentered as second-class matter August 15, 1950, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. Price 25¢ per copy. Subscription Rate, \$1.50 per year. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 150 W. 42 St., New York 18, N. Y. Printed in U. S. A.



The Conquistadors Come

by M. E. COUNSELMAN

The handsome, fair-haired Conquistadors were welcomed by the S'zetnurs with open arms—the grasping, grotesque arms of a lost race of beauty-worshippers.

THE CONQUISTADORS were tall men, tall and bronzed by many suns, and splendid as they strode down the gangplank in a seemingly endless

procession. They were fair-haired, with flashing black eyes like polished onyx, and their straight profiles might have been copied from the faces of the silver coins that

jingled in their pockets. In the steamy-hot atmosphere of the new-found planet, S'zetnu, they stripped to the waist almost at once, and their muscles rippled in the blue-green sunlight . . .

At the edge of the pallid forest surrounding the clear spot where the great rocket had landed, many eyes were watching their advent. Wondering eyes, wistful and excited eyes . . . but eyes that peered and squinted, rheumy with disease and almost blind.

The Conquistadors, after the manner of their ancient ancestors, knelt down in a ring, hands folded, heads bowed. One of them—the tallest, the most splendid—stood in the center of the circle and lifted both arms to the sky. His lips moved, and lovely rolling sounds issued from them . . .

The watchers in the forest gasped, looking at one another in silent wonder. Two centuries ago, their kind had lost the power of speech; and for a half century their deformed ears had been able to hear only the loudest of sounds—the screech of a giant beetle stalking them through the swampland, the crash of thunder, the rumble of a waterfall . . . the sound of this great rocket-ship roaring down upon them out of nowhere. Now, holding little seashells to their ears to amplify the voice of the Tall One, they began to jump up and down ecstatically, like children promised a treat. They nodded. They hugged one another with their short deformed arms, bumping their foreheads together in the ancient gesture of happiness and good will.

The Conquistadors stood up. The leader raised his hand—and suddenly, from all their open mouths, came beautiful noises that made the listeners in the forest shiver with pleasure. It was a strange thing, a magic thing! Cocking their hideous little heads this way and that, and holding the shells to their ears, they began to sway in cadence, mesmerized with delight; for not even their Elders could remember *singing*.

The lovely sounds ended. Then the Leader, the tall splendid one with the pleasant expression, held up his hand again and spoke, pointing first at one group of men, then at another, who nodded and drifted away from the ring toward the task he had set for them. The watchers in the forest nudged one another, pointing with their

stumps of hands and conversing (in the only way that was left to them) with the expressions that flitted across their horribly disfigured faces. *Hands!* they commented excitedly. *With fingers! And feet, gracefully arched feet, with five toes on each! Oh, were not the strangers beautiful—were they not perfect?*

However—the watchers frowned—they did not seem to be too intelligent. Now, with evident excitement, one of them came running to the tall leader with a handful of pebbles. Others gathered about the two of them, yelling and pounding one another on the back as they examined the small stones—which, the watchers knew, were completely worthless. No one, not even these strong healthy newcomers, could eat a *stone*.

“ROB! Yah-hoo . . . !” Harris, first astronaut, was yelling at his long-time buddy, the pilot and captain of the space-freighter Eroica. “Look at this stuff! Just *look* at it! Solaranium vein a foot thick . . . damn planet’s loaded with it! *We did it! We finally did it . . .*”

“Well, don’t burn out your jet!” Rob Cantrell chuckled, calm and laconic in the face of this near miracle. He squinted at one mica-bright stone, tossing it up and catching it with a grin of quiet triumph. “Yep . . . journey’s end. If our rations hold out, we can mine and refine enough pure sola to start every factory on Terra booming again inside six months. I . . . *Good Lord!*” He broke off, hand arcing to the blaster on his hip. “What’s *that* thing? *Heads up!*” he shouted a warning to the busy men about him. “*General alert! . . . we’ve got visitors!*”

It was a S’zetnur child who had ventured out of hiding, drawn by curiosity—and by the tantalizing smell that issued from a pot of stew one of the cooks was stirring. Now, as the tiny gargoyle-figure crawled out into the clearing from the shelter of those white-leaved trees, everyone turned to stare—the mechanics, unloading their diggers and refining filters; the freight crew, setting up the tents around the big rocket; the biochemists, busily testing the flora for edibility or possible toxicity; the ethnologists, searching for some clue to the language and customs of the people of this planet.

Cantrell, his hand dropping slowly from

his gun-butt, walked slowly forward toward the crawling child. It squinted up at him with milky blue eyes that could scarcely make out the outline of his tall figure. But, at his approach, it cowered back; started to scuttle for cover. Cantrell reached down gently and picked it up, shuddering at the little face so close to his own. Moonstone eyes. Gargoyle mouth with crumbling teeth. Round scabrous head that was almost hairless. Stumps of feet and hands that had no fingers, no toes. The child squirmed frantically in his embrace, uttering a small shrill whistle that seemed to be the only sound it could make.

"God, it's *human*, isn't it?" Harris, standing beside him, muttered in pity and revulsion. "Put it down, Rob! It's . . . diseased!"

More of the men from Terra crowded closer, peering at the struggling child. Then one of the chemists shouted, pointing. Cantrell whirled, hand moving again toward his gun.

Another of the creatures was creeping out of the forest. A woman—probably the child's mother. She limped forward, whistling soothingly to the child, but utterly terrified herself from the look on her bloated, twisted features. A few feet away from Cantrell, she threw her hands over her face and flung herself prone before him; head in the grass, she crawled toward him, reached his feet, and lay tense as though expecting a blow . . .

"Poor slob! God, I've seen beggars on Terra who weren't as . . ." Captain Rob Cantrell knelt slowly and set the child on its deformed feet. It toppled over at once, unable to stand, and the mother snatched it to her flat breast. She began to crawl again, dragging the child and backing away with her face still thrust into the spongy ground.

"Poor ugly *slob* . . . thinks we're going to hurt her, doesn't she?"

On impulse, Cantrell strode forward, took her arm gently, and lifted her to her feet. She swayed, clinging to the child. Casting about for some gesture of friendship, he suddenly unstrapped the space-watch from his left wrist and, smiling, buckled it about the woman's scrawny handless arm. She stared at it dumbly, milk-blue eyes darting

from the jeweled band to Cantrell's face for a moment. Then, with a little bleating sound, she threw herself at his feet again, trembling with terror. She lay there, clutching her baby and sobbing uncontrollably.

"Well, I'll be a—!" Cantrell glanced helplessly at Harris, "What d'you make of *that*?"

"Doesn't understand about presents," the astrologer guessed. "Must mean something special on this planet . . . *Hey! Here come some more!*"

HE POINTED toward the pale forest, from which a wary group of perhaps fourteen S'zetnurs, men and women, had emerged fearfully. Their hands—if they could be called hands—were flung up, like the woman's to cover their faces—if they could be called faces. And when they reached a distance of five yards from the silent group of Earthmen, all threw themselves down flat, their heads burrowing into the spiky grass.

"Don't get it," Rob Cantrell drawled, hands on hips, legs spread apart as he stood regarding this strange welcome. "Look; all of them are deformed. Inbreeding, do you suppose? Or some kind of plague . . .?"

"Sir, I believe it's a matter of vitamin deficiency," one of the bio-chemists spoke up from the group of Earthmen behind Harris. "I've been testing a few specimens under the micro. These white leaves—and look at that grass! It's the sunlight, I think. Not a bit of nutriment in the soil. Another thing," he pointed out shrewdly; "has anybody seen any animal-life yet? Ask me, I don't think there *is* any! These poor critters are just *starving* to death! Malnutrition. Years and years of it . . ."

Cantrell scowled, his lips pursed; he said slowly, "You know, Jim, I believe you're right . . . Well, *hell!*" He gestured impatiently to one of the cooks who had wandered over to join the curious group. "Break out some solid chow for these . . . people. On the double!"

"Yes *sir!*"

Grinning with the sheer pleasure of filling a need, several of the crew followed the cook. They came back with folding plates and collapsible cups, filled to the brim with succulent stew made of dehydrated vegeta-

bles and pressed beef. These, a bit squeamishly, they put into the clumsy grasp of the little dwarfed S'zetnurs; laughing, they watched how they snatched it, turning their backs to their benefactors as they wolfed down the warm food . . .

The laughter died. For almost instantly three, then a dozen of the dwarfish creatures were doubled up with nausea and stomach-cramp. Others, gagging at the first bite, dropped their platters of food. Then all threw themselves down before the men from Terra, groveling in the grass at their feet as though begging for mercy . . .

"Lord, we're *stupid!*" Cantrell sighed. "Of *course* they can't take our rich food! Probably been living on herbs and stuff for Lord knows how long . . ." He moved pityingly toward one groaning dwarf, writhing on the sward and hugging his stomach. "Hey, you medics! Give me hand—"

He knelt, trying to roll the sufferer over on his back and slip a gastrotab between the writhing lips. But, with a look of terrified pleading, the little S'zetnur covered his face and flopped over again, hiding his warped features in a clump of pale weeds. With his fingerless hands he groped along the ground, found Cantrell's foot, and drew himself up to it, wriggling in worm-like obeisance—

Then, before the Earth pilot could move, a swollen tongue crept out and caressed his bare toes under the plastic sandal-strap.

Cantrell's reaction was instinctive. His foot came up, in sheer disgust that any man should lick another's foot like a mongrel-dog. Cursing, he kicked the little S'zetnur square in the mouth.

And, the next instant, hated himself.

BLOOD, a thin watery trickle, ran from a corner of the gargoyle mouth; but the S'zetnur made no move to escape. He merely lay where he was, dumbly, holding up one arm. Opaque eyes peered warily up through the weeds.

"Ah . . . to hell with it!" the pilot burst out, furious with himself. He started to kneel and apologize; saw the futility of it, and turned away abruptly, striding toward the long silver ship. "Get these screwballs out of the way!" he snapped, irritable in his shame. "We've got work to do! We'll have to refine this sola on a night-and-day

shift! No rest for anybody . . . and twenty shocks to any of you jet-monkeys I catch trying to go over the hill! You got that?"

"Yes *sir!*"

"Yes-sir, Cap'n!"

"Yousa! I hears you talkin'!" This from Harris, who had strolled after him, checking over his charts carefully for the return flight.

Cantrell glared at him. "And that goes for you, too—Romeo!" he growled. "No fraternizing with the natives!"

"*Fraternize!* With *those* women?" Harris shuddered, thumbs in the studded belt of his spacesuit. "Listen, I'd have to be drunker'n I've ever been on Mars or Venus!" He broke off, looking at his friend with faint reproach. "You shouldn't have kicked that poor slob, though. Section 382-XV: *No overt act of violence unless to repel attack . . . you read your Handbook lately, chum?*"

Cantrell grunted, struck one fist into his other palm sheepishly. "I know it. I didn't mean to. But—licking my foot! But I'll make it up to him. Some way . . ."

"Sure!" Harris's eyes softened. Throwing an arm around Cantrell's shoulders, he locked step with him as they walked up the gangplank. "Easy enough. If it's a vitamin deficiency, like Jim says, why—it'll be a cinch for us to help these poor joes! We can ship chemicals from Terra, every return-trip. Teach 'em to grow food by hydro-vat methods. We could make a new world for them!"

The pilot nodded eagerly, his pleasant, alert face full of plans for those pitifully stunted creatures, now melting back into the pale jungle in obedience to the crewmen shoeing them from the vicinity of dangerous—and valuable—machinery.

Cantrell grinned. "We can try vitamin therapy right away," he said happily. "Take, say, ten of the kids and feed them a test-diet for the forty days we're here, loading up sola. May take years of treatment to get them looking like *people* again, but—we can sure try!"

They glanced back over their shoulders in unison, two splendid young giants from another solar system, their eyes warm and bright with a thing called "brotherly love"—which it had taken their own small planet

many centuries to learn. Together they disappeared into the rocket ship.

Watching them from the white-leaved forest, the little people of S'zetnur turned away sadly, in shame and patient resignation. In a small clearing beyond sight of the bustling rocket-camp, they held council, communicating with sharp whistles and facial expressions.

Then—according to the ancient law which the Elders still recalled—they dragged forth the woman who wore The Mark on her wrist, the gleaming Band of Rejection which the Tall Leader of the beautiful ones had placed there with his own hand. The woman did not cry out when they bound her, and buried her, still breathing, beside a huge flowering tree—tossing the baby in with her, according to custom.

The man Rob Cantrell had kicked in the mouth, likewise, was made ready for the honor bestowed on him . . . and allowed to touch the *Icon*, as was his right . . .

THE BLUE-GREEN SUN sank slowly, and the night-shift of the Earthmen's work-camp took over, mining and refining solaranium ore, working swiftly and efficiently against time.

Cantrell and Harris slept on identical cots in a central tent, waking now and then to listen to the night-noises of this strange new planet, S'zetnu? . . . It was only a designation, not a name; a term in interstellar Esperanto, meaning "Seventh-from-the-Sun." Tomorrow, Cantrell thought sleepily, they would find out what the dwarfish inhabitants called their little world. It must have a name for they must once have had some sort of language. There were signs, the ethnologists reported, that they had once been a civilized people.

The pilot blew a smoke-ring at the damp ceiling of the tent, thinking and making plans.

"Harris?" he called softly. "You awake?"

"Uh-huh. Too damned hot to sleep! Worse than Venus. It isn't the—"

"—heat; it's the humidity!" Cantrell grinned in the darkness. "Yeah, yeah. Well, you can stand it for forty days. Say!" He sat up abruptly, snapping his fingers on sudden thought. "If we could hire a couple of those little S'zetnurs to locate sola veins

for us, we could cut down the time . . . put the Geiger crew on one of the spare refiners! Hire me one tomorrow, will you? A couple, I mean—two of the *older* ones, with rudimentary fingers and toes. They should know their way around better . . . Cripes! You can see how their race has deteriorated, each generation a little bit worse than the one before . . . the poor devils!"

"Yeah." Harris plucked Cantrell's cigarette-glow from the darkness to take a drag. "But we're going to fix all that for them! Vital food, in return for vital solaranium . . . Why, it's a natural for trade-relations between S'zetnu and Terra!" He blew out smoke, returned the cigarette. "El Presidente's sure to give each of us a citation—with bonus! I can just see my old lady spending it now. On a Martian *urna-fur* coat! She's been whining for one ever since . . ."

Cantrell chuckled drowsily, then sighed. "I wish I hadn't kicked that little guy. Feel like a heel. Wish I hadn't given that woman my spacewatch, too, in a loose moment! What time is it?"

"88-zero, shiptime," the astrogator murmured. "Go to sleep, will ya? . . . I wish I was back on Tee with my baby tonight . . ."

Silence fell. Outside, the refiners chugged rhythmically, melting away the solaranium from the crude ore wheeled in by the miners. At a little distance from the camp, the Geiger experts were moving their counters over the ground, seeking the highly-fissionable ore. The sola shortage had shut down the industries of Terra for five years now, and sent many a rocket-ship out into space, searching, searching . . . until now, at last, the search was ended on a tiny planet Z-north of the System. Close! Near enough to organize a freight-lane!

But in the forest, the pallid forest beyond the camp, a gargoyle-woman lay buried, clinging to her deformed half-idiot baby who had died with her. Cantrell's spacewatch glinted on her stumpy wrist; mute testimony that she must be *eliminated*, according to the ancient law that the Elders remembered. It was strangely unfair—for there were others, many others in the tribe, who were far more hideous than she! Mitka, who had only a hole for a nose, and Jura, whose ears were unformed knobs on either side of her head . . . but that, of course, was for the

Beautiful Ones to judge. Their word had always been the Law . . .

AROUND NOON the next day, Harris reported glumly to the central tent. Cantrell, hard at work on a sheaf of forms, glanced up, his eyes preoccupied.

"Harris? Did you get those guides?"

Harris spread his hands. "No can find! I've had men out combing the forest all day. Can't find a sign of those little pixies! They've just vanished!"

Cantrell grinned. "Well, they're back again . . . look; what do you think *that* is? A mirage?" He jerked a nod at a dwarfish figure coming across the clearing, trailing a long train of lush tropical flowers that had been woven into a sort of cape. A garland of the same flowers perched askew atop the scabrous gargoyle-head. The man limped proudly, presenting himself before Cantrell with a little bow.

"Well!" The pilot's eyebrows went up. "Who's he, the chief?" Then he saw the man's swollen lips. "Say . . . this is the poor jerk I *kicked!*" His face softened, and he pointed to a folding chair beside his cluttered desk. "Sit down, buster. You're hired—if I can only explain your job to you!"

Instead, quivering, the stunted S'zetnur covered his face and threw himself down on his face.

Harris sighed. "Here we go again!" He knelt and pulled the malformed dwarf to his feet and shoved him into a chair.

"Now," Cantrell groaned, "comes the tough part. How can I say in sign-lingo that we want him to locate sola veins for us? Well—here goes!"

He held up a piece of ore, pointing and gesturing. The dwarf eyed it, bewildered, milky-blue eyes darting from Harris to Cantrell and back again. Cantrell pointed to the earth—

Instantly the little S'zetnur threw himself flat on the ground again, quivering. He began to sob, holding up one stumpy arm.

"Oh, *bell!*" The spaceship's captain gave up, looking helplessly at his astrogator. "Harris? Can you—"

Harris pulled the S'zetnur to his feet again; shoved him into the chair; explained with patient gestures about *digging*, about *the ore*, about *the ship*. The man's eyes, like

glowing moonstones, followed his every motion eagerly, as a stupid child's might. He took the pebble in his hand obediently, went out to the ship, dug a small hole in the shadow of the great rocket, and buried the piece of ore. Then he looked up at Cantrell, towering over him in exasperation. Harris mopped his forehead.

"I give up!" he laughed. It's . . . it's as though there was a *glass wall* between us! We can see each other, and hear each other. But I can't make him *understand*. Damned if I understand him, either!"

Rob Cantrell rubbed his jaw, caressing his stubble of blond beard.

"If we only knew what's going on in that funny little head," he muttered. "What do they *want*? Everybody wants something. If we could just figure out what these S'zetnurs are after—besides centuries of decent diet, which they obviously need—we could—"

He glared at the twisted little S'zetnur, decked with flowers that made his hideous deformity even more noticeable. The man cringed at his expression, covering his face and peeping through his short arms. Then, emboldened, catching one of the pilot's hands between his own stumps, he examined it admiringly, tracing each finger with his gaze. Cantrell scowled and jerked his hand away impatiently.

The S'zetnur covered his face and threw himself flat on the ground. Cantrell cursed and mopped his streaming forehead and neck.

"I don't get it," Harris said, scratching his head. "I just don't get it . . . hey! Maybe if we take him out to that valley a mile from camp, we can put over the idea of his locating more sola for us. When he sees our men mining the stuff—"

"Sound idea," Cantrell grunted. "Come on!"

SUPPORTING the stumbling dwarf between them, the two Earthmen strode across the camp and down the long hill toward the distant sound of the pick-and-shovel crew. Two small a. g. barges sailed past them on their way down, loaded with ore and manned by a single sweat-streaked miner, headed for the nearest refinery.

As they neared the valley, where last night the Geiger crew had located a rich streak of

solaranium, the pilot and the astrôgator noticed that their small captive was growing very nervous. Stumbling along between them as fast as his stumpy feet could walk, he glanced first at Harris, then at Cantrell, his expressive features working with agitation.

When they reached a small ravine, its cliff-like walls pitted with many small caves, the little dwarf began to bleat and squirm in their grasp like a hysterical child being dragged to the dentist. Over his flower-decked head, the two Earthmen looked at each other, and shrugged.

"Now what?" Cantrell drawled. "This valley taboo or something, you suppose?"

"Beats me!"

Harris stopped, pulling the little S'zetnur around and pointing to a broad streak of sola inside the mouth of one cave. He made digging motions. He pointed to himself and Cantrell, beaming and nodding.

"Rock," he labored. "Nicee rockee! Find for us? . . . Oh hell!" He laughed at his own absurd pidgin-English, then resorted to gestures again. He pointed to the cave, to the little dwarf, to Cantrell—

The S'zetnur shook his head violently, clapping both stunted hands over his face. An agonized bleat issued from his twisted larynx, and he threw himself flat before Cantrell, groveling and holding up one arm—then, as the captain took an idle step toward the cave, he flung his tiny malformed body before the entrance, shaking his head and beating himself in the face with his fingerless hands.

Cantrell looked at Harris, who scratched his head, grinning.

"Beats me!" he repeated helplessly. "Guess they don't want us to have the sola—!" his eyes hardened slowly. "Yeah—maybe that's it! Maybe they're—" He stiffened, glancing nervously toward the white jungle that pressed closely about them on all sides. "Maybe they're arming right now—planning an attack—"

Rob Cantrell's pleasant face changed. Eyes narrowed, mouth tight, he let his gaze flicker over the working men who were under his command, dependent on his judgment for their safety. His gaze returned to the small S'zetnur, feebly trying to block the entrance to that natural hole in the cliff's side. Or . . . was it a natural hole? Cantrell's

keen eyes became observant, noting worn places in the rock—

"There's something in this cave," Harris grunted. "Something this little monkey doesn't want us to see . . . a secret weapon, maybe? Sa-ay!" His pleasant face hardened, like Cantrell's. "Maybe these cookies aren't as dumb and helpless as they look! Maybe they've got something that could wipe out our whole expedition!"

Cantrell nodded and strode forward, jerking the bleating dwarf aside with one sweep of his muscular arm. The cave was not deep; and, Cantrell noted with tensed nerves, there were fresh flower-petals on the floor of the small opening. Petals like those on the flower-wreath of this fantastically decorated little S'zetnur.

The captain groped inside. Harris stepped forward, shoving the dwarf away as he flung himself at Cantrell again like a furious kitten. There was, the Earthmen both saw at once, something inside. A kind of box, crudely made of white wood, as though a clumsy child had put it together. There was no lock. Cantrell raised the lid—

Inside, dry and crumbling, was a small doll made of brown clay. Harris and Cantrell stared at it, amazed at its perfection of modeling. It was, or seemed to be, a very good image of an Earthman. Certainly, it was not intended to portray one of the stunted little S'zetnurs, for the legs and feet were perfect, the hands beautifully formed, the facial details fine and delicate—though there was about the thing, Cantrell noted, an odd expression of cruelty and arrogance—

"Well! What d'ya know?" he snapped. "A graven image! The aborigines on Terra used to make these images of an enemy—just before slipping him a poison-dart in the back! Juju . . . and they made sure it worked!"

He whirled on the little S'zetnur, who was whistling shrilly now, jumping up and down in agitated protest.

At that moment, one of the diggers shouted a warning. Cantrell turned, to see beyond the handful of workers in the valley a small army of S'zetnurs advancing on them from the jungle-edge. Backs to the cliff wall, Harris and Cantrell snatched out their blasters. The captain yelled, warning

the unarmed workers to make a dash for the camp:

"General alert! Prepare for attack!"

THEN the dwarfs were upon them, armed rather pathetically with clubs strapped to their fingerless hands. Advancing in a rough semi-circle upon Cantrell and Harris, and completely ignoring the half-dozen workers who dashed past them, the little S'zetnurs closed in. Lips tight, eyes narrowed, the Earthmen waited until they were within ten feet—

Then, methodically, they let go with their blasters, searing the attackers from left to right.

Screaming, they went down, half-charred bodies and burning hair. One little creature, luckier or bolder than the rest, struck a blow that numbed Harris's left arm. Cantrell blazed away at him. He fell, an unrecognizable mass of ashes.

The men from Terra pressed against the cliff wall, panting, their eyes raking the pale jungle for the next wave of attackers.

"How d'you like these babies?" Cantrell snarled. "Planning to jump us all the time—And we were feeling sorry for them!"

They waited, tensed for the next attack. In the distance they could hear the siren on the spaceship, calling a general alert. Calling in the Geiger crews, and the diggers, and the ethnologists. *Natives hostile, natives hostile!* the signal was screaming—

Cantrell turned his head briefly—and stiffened as he saw the small S'zetnur decked in flowers. He was still alive, crouched just inside the cave, clutching the mud doll and whimpering softly. The captain glared at him, hard-eyed.

"Ambassador, huh?" He smiled without mirth. "To keep us from being suspicious of this juju-attack, until it was too late!" He jerked his head at Harris. "Blast him! He's a spy, isn't he? Been all over the camp. Knows just where everything's located—"

The astrogator peered at the huddled creature nursing the doll. He raised his gun, then swallowed hard. "Rob—I can't do it! Cold like this, I mean . . . can't we take him prisoner? A hostage?"

Cantrell glanced at him, then at the pitiful figure in the cave.

"Don't be a damned fool!" he snapped.

"If he gets away and brings reinforcements, none of us'll get off this apple alive! You lost your guts or something?"

Harris scuffed his toe, looking down. "No-o . . . It's just that . . . Well, hell!" his gruff voice cracked. "He's so . . . helpless!"

"Helpless, my eye!" Rob Cantrell growled. "There may be thousands of these joes, closing in on us right now from that jungle! Millions! All right, I'm in command," he said quietly. "Make a run for the camp. I . . . I'll do it . . ."

His buddy tossed him a grateful look, born of their long-time friendship. With another look at the silent wall of forest, he sprinted in the direction of the camp. Once he paused, wincing, as the blare of a ray-gun sounded behind him. Then Cantrell caught up with him, his eyes pained, his lips white.

"Poor slob!" he muttered through clenched teeth as he ran. "Poor ugly little slob . . . He kept shielding that damn doll with his body!"

They burst into the clearing, where the lieutenants were already rounding up those of the ship's crew who were trained to fight. Others, the workmen and the experts, were piling into the ship for safety. The siren kept up its woman-like screaming: *Hostile natives, hostile!*

Cantrell and Harris stopped in the center of the clearing, to view the ordered shambles with sick eyes. They glanced at each other, and shrugged.

"All right!" the captain's clear voice rang out. "Prepare to take off! Repeating: Prepare to take off! Abandon all equipment not vital to crew. Repeating . . ."

The men from Terra were efficient men, quick, intelligent, and well-organized under the pilot and astrogator who commanded their expedition. In exactly 8-3 kilos, ship-time, men and machinery were loaded aboard the big silver rocket. Fire belched from her twin jets. She took the atmosphere of the planet designated as S'zetnur like a pale streak of flame. In another kilo, she was bulleting into free flight.

Cantrell, the pilot, fixed her automatic on "Sol-Terra," then strolled back to the chart room, where Harris was re-checking their line of flight. He sat down on

he plastine desk, lighting a cigarette. Harris took it from him, inhaled a deep drag, and handed it back. They looked at each other, smiling wryly.

"Well . . ." Rob Cantrell sighed. "There goes that presidential citation you were yapping about—with bonus. We'll be lucky if we keep our rating!"

"Oh, it won't be that bad," Harris predicted cheerfully. "I mean, nobody could expect us to form a trade-alliance with a bunch of hot-heads like that! Graven images! Tricked-up spies!" He spat disgustedly. "And all because we wanted one shipload of lousy sola . . .!"

Cantrell nodded bitterly. "And we could have done so much for them in return. A new world, I think you said . . .!" He emitted a short laugh, edged with cynicism. "Well . . . Terra-Government can't afford to ship from a hostile planet. Too damn expensive. We'll just have to equip another expedition and start looking again . . ."

Harris nodded absently, his eyes thoughtful. "Uh-huh . . . But if we could only have understood those little monkeys! Maybe they didn't mind our taking the sola. Maybe it was something else . . . Rob," he blurted, "one of the junior ethnologists has a theory; did you hear? He . . ."

"Junior ethnologists have always got a theory!" the captain snorted. "Lack of experience!"

"Yeah, but . . ." Harris pursued. "This kid says he thinks those little S'zetnurs were

a cult of beauty-worshippers. You know? Like they used to have on Venus? Eugenic mating—killing off the imperfect ones. He says they just don't understand about nutrition; that's why it's so tragic that they're all deformed and diseased now. None of them are beauties any more, and they don't know why. But when they saw us . . ."

"Nuts!" said Cantrell rudely.

"Yeah, but . . . The doll. Maybe it was an image of the way *they* used to be. A sort of pattern for them to remember . . . And you know how that poor joe kept . . . *looking* at us? The one all tricked up in flowers? This ethno thinks they sent him to be mated with one of our women . . ."

"Good God!" the pilot laughed.

". . . and that poor slob of a woman, who acted so upset when you strapped your spacewatch around her wrist. The kid thinks you marked her for death, and . . ."

"Oh, go soak your head! And that junior ethnologist's, too!" Cantrell chuckled. "I understood those babies, all right! They're just a bunch of greedy, ignorant morons, who were determined not to let a shipful of strangers cart off any of their lousy little planet! You and your . . . glass wall!"

He punched Harris on the shoulder in affectionate scorn. The astrogator grinned feebly; then with more assurance, because Cantrell was his friend and he trusted his judgment.

"Yeah . . ." he said. "Yeah, Rob; I guess you're right . . ."