

# SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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W. W. Scott — Editor

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# THE HUNTERS OF CUTWOLD

by CALVIN M. KNOX

NOVELETTE

*illustrated by* BOWMAN

The hunters wanted the supreme thrill of shooting the intricate machine creatures without suffering the harsh punishment for murder. — This manhunt was legal

IT was morning on Cutwold, fifth planet of the Caveer system. And there would be betrayal by nightfall, Brannon knew. He knew it the way he knew the golden-green sun would rise, or the twin blank-faced moons. He knew it ahead of time, half-sensing it with the shadowy precognitive sense that made him so terribly valuable as a guide in the deadly forests of Cutwold.

He crouched in the sandy loam outside his cabin, staring down the yet-unpaven street, a

lean tanned figure with thin sharp-curving lips and deepset sepia eyes that had seen too much of the galaxy and of men. He was waiting for the betrayal to begin.

He did not have to wait long.

The morning had started like all the others: at dawn Caveer broke through the haze, showering its eight worlds with golden-green brightness, and moments later on Cutwold the dawnbirds set up their keening icy shriek as



if in antiphonal response. Brannon always rose when the dawnbirds' cry was heard; his day began and ended early.

It was eleven years since he had drifted to Cutwold when the money ran out. For eleven years he had led hunting parties through the vine-tangled Cutwold forests, keeping them from death by his strange foresight. He had made some friends in his eleven years on Cutwold, few of them human.

It was eleven days since he had last had any money. This was the off season for hunting. The tourists stayed away, amusing themselves on the pleasure-worlds of Winter V or losing themselves in dream-fantasy on the cloud-veiled planets in Procyon's system. And on Cutwold the guides grew thin, and lived off jungle vines and small animals if they had not saved any money.

Brannon had not saved. But when the dawnbirds woke him that morning, something in their shrill sound told him that before noon he would be offered work, if he wanted it. . . and if his conscience could let him accept.

He waited.

At quarter past ten, when hunger started to grab Brannon's vitals in a cold grasp, Murdoch came down the road. He paused for a moment where Brannon crouched, looking down at him, shading his eyes from the brightness of the sun.

"You're Kly Brannon, aren't you?"

"I am. Hello, Murdoch."

The other started. He was tall, taller even than Brannon, with shadows shading his craggy face. Strange suns had turned Murdoch's face a leathery brown, and his eyebrows were a solid thick worm above his dark eyes, meeting. He said, "How did you know my name?"

"I guessed," Brannon said. He came slowly to his feet and met Murdoch's eyes, an inch or two above his own. He moistened his lips. "I don't want the job, Murdoch."

Somewhere in the thick jungle a scornful giant toad wheezed mockingly. Murdoch said, "I haven't said anything about any jobs yet."

"You will. I'm not interested."

Calmly, Murdoch drew a cigarette-pack from his waist-pouch. He tapped the side of the pack; the magnetic field sent a cigarette popping three-quarters of the way out of the little jeweled-metal box. "Have one?"

Brannon shook his head. "Thanks. No."

Murdoch took the extended cigarette himself, flicked the igniting capsule on its tip, and made an elaborate ceremony out of placing it in his mouth. He puffed. After a long moment he said, "There's ten thousand units cold cash in it for you, Brannon. That's the standard guide fee multiplied by ten. Let's go inside your shack and talk about it, shall we?"

Brannon led the way. The shack was dark and musty; it hadn't been cleaned in more than a week. Brannon's few possessions lay scattered about carelessly. He had left Dezjon VI in a hurry, eleven years before, leaving behind everything he owned save the clothes on his back. He hadn't bothered to accumulate any property since then; it was nothing

but a weight around a man's neck.

He nudged the switch and the dangling solitary illuminator glowed luminously. Brannon sprawled down on an overstuffed pneumochair that had long since lost its buoyancy, and gestured for his visitor to take a chair.

"Okay," Brannon said finally. "What's the deal?"

**M**MURDOCH waited a long moment before speaking. A gray cloud of cigarette smoke crept about his face, softening the angularity of his features. At length he said, "I have been told that a race calling themselves the Nurillins live on this planet. You know anything about them?"

Brannon flinched, even though his extra sense had warned him this was coming. His eyes slitted. "The Nurillins are out of my line. I only hunt animals."

Sighing, Murdoch said, "The Extraterrestrial Life Treaty of 2977 specifically designates one hundred eighty-six life forms as intelligent species and therefore not to be hunted, on pain of punishment. The

Treaty Supplement of 3011 lists sixty-one additional life forms which are prohibited to game hunters. I have both those lists with me. You won't find the Nurillins of Cutwold named anywhere on either."

Brannon shoved away the two brown paper-covered documents Murdoch held out to him. "I don't want to see the list. I know the Nurillins aren't on them. But that doesn't mean they aren't people. They ran away into the interior of the forest when humans settled on Cutwold. When the survey team made up the lists, they didn't have any Nurillins to judge by. Naturally they weren't included."

Murdoch nodded. "And thus they are free game to any hunters. I've brought a party of nine to Cutwold, Brannon. They're interested in hunting Nurillins. They say you're the only man on Cutwold who knows where the Nurillins are." Murdoch drew a thick bankroll from his pouch and held it by the tips of finger and thumb. "Ever see this much money before, Brannon?"

"Ten thousand? Not all in

one lump. But it's too much. All you need to offer is thirty pieces of silver."

Murdoch whitened. "If that's the way you feel about this job, you—"

"The Nurillins are human beings," Brannon said tiredly. Sweat streamed down his body. "I happened to stumble over their hiding-place one day. I've gone back there a few times. They're my friends. Am I supposed to sell them for ten thousand units—or ten million?"

"Yes," Murdoch said. He extended the bankroll. "Until the Galactic Government declares them otherwise, they're fit and legitimate quarry for hunting parties, without fear of legal trouble. Well, my clients want to hunt them. And I happen to know both that you're the only man who can find them for us, and that you don't have a cent. What do you say?"

"No."

"Don't be stubborn, Brannon. I've brought nine people to Cutwold at my own expense. I don't get a cent back unless I deliver the goods. I could make it hard for you if you keep on refusing."

"I keep on refusing."

Murdoch shook his head and ran lean strong fingers through the blue-died matting of close-cropped hair that covered it. He looked peeved, more than angry. He jammed the bankroll into Brannon's uneager hand. "I want nine Nurillin heads—no more, no less. You're the man who can lead us to them. But let me warn you, Brannon: if we have to go out into that jungle ourselves, without you, and if we happen to come across your precious Nurillins ourselves, we're not just going to settle for nine heads. We'll wipe out the whole damned tribe of them. You know what a thermoton bomb can do to animals in a jungle?"

Brannon's mind had already pictured the fierce white brightness of the all-consuming flash. "I know," he said hoarsely. His eyes met Murdoch's: *metal against metal.* After a long silence Brannon said, "Okay. You win. Get your party together and I'll lead them."

**N**EWs travelled fast on Cutwold. It was noon by the time Brannon reached the main settlement, noon by the time he had rid his mind of the jangling

discord of Murdoch's stony presence.

He came down the lonely road into the Terran settlement alone, and blankfaced men turned to look at him and looked away again, knowing he carried a hundred hundred-unit bills tucked carelessly in his hip pocket, and hating him for it. The road at noon was sun-baked and hot: squat diamond-backed reptiles with swollen heads hopped across the path, inches from Brannon's feet.

There were perhaps fifty thousand Terrans on Cutwold, located in six settlements scattered over the face of the planet. It was a warm and fertile planet, good mostly for farming and hunting, weak on minerals. Once there had been a few thousand Nurillins living where the Terrans now lived; remnants of a dying race, they had fled silently into the darkly warm depths of the forest when the first brawling Earthman arrived.

Kly Brannon had discovered the Nurillins. Everyone knew that. Whether it had been through some trick of his extra sense or by sheer blind luck, no one knew. But now everyone

also knew that Brannon had sold the Nurillins out to a hard-faced man named Murdoch for a roll of bills. They could see it in Brannon's eyes, as he came down out of the lonely glade where he had built his shack.

He was supposed to meet Murdoch and his nine nimrods at two-thirty. That left Brannon a couple of hours and a half yet to soak the bitterness out of himself. He stopped in VUORNIK'S BAR.

Vuornik himself was tending bar, a sour-eyed Terran with the pasty puffy flesh of a man who spent his time indoors. Seven or eight settlers were in the bar. They turned as Brannon kicked open the door, and swivelled their heads away again as they saw who it was.

"Morning, Vuornik. Long time no see."

The barkeep swabbed a clean place at the bar for Brannon and rumbled, "Nothing on the cuff today, Brannon. You know the rules here. I can't stretch your credit any."

"I didn't say a word about credit. Here, Vuornik. Suppose you give me a double khalla,

straight, and honest change for this bill."

With elegant precision Brannon peeled a hundred off the roll Murdoch had given him, and laid it in the outstretched, grasping fleshy palm of the barkeep. Vuornik stared at the bill strangely, rubbing it between the folds of flesh at the base of his thumb. After a moment he poured Brannon a drink. Then he went to the till, drew forth a fifty, two twenties, a five, and four singles, shuffled them into a neat stack, and handed them to Brannon.

"You ain't got anything smaller than hundreds?" Vuornik asked.

"All I have is hundreds," said Brannon. "Ninety-nine of them plus change."

"So you took the job, then," Vuornik said.

Brannon shrugged. "You told me no more drinks on the cuff. A man gets thirsty without money, Vuornik."

He raised the mug and sipped some of the thin greenish liquor. It had a hard cutting edge to it that stung his throat and slammed into his stomach solidly. He winced, then drank again. The raw drink eased



some of the *other* pain—the pain of betrayal.

He thought of the gentle golden-skinned people of the forest, and wondered which nine of them would die beneath the blazing fury of hunters' guns.

A hand touched his shoulder. Brannon had anticipated it, but he hadn't moved. He turned, quite calmly, not at all surprised to find a knife six inches from his throat.

**B**ARNEY Karris stood there, eyes bleared, face covered by two days' stubble. He looked wobbly, all of him but the hand that held the knife. That was straight, without a tremor.

"Hello, Barney," Brannon said evenly, staring at the knife. "How's the hunting been doing?"

"It's been doing lousy, and you know it. I know where you got all that cash from."

From behind the bar, Vuornik said, "Put that sticker away, Barney."

Karris ignored that. He said, "You sold out the Nurillins, didn't you? Murdoch was around; he talked to me. He

got your address from me. But I didn't think you'd—"

Vuornik said, "Barney, I don't want any trouble in my bar. You want to fight with Brannon, you get the hell outside to do it. Put that knife out of sight or so help me I'll blast you down where you stand."

"Take it easy," Brannon murmured quietly. "There won't be any trouble." To Karris he said, "You want my money, Barney? That why you pulled the knife?"

"I wouldn't touch that filthy money! Judas! Judas!" Karris' red-rimmed eyes glared wildly. "You'd sell us all out! Aren't you human, Brannon?"

"Yes," Brannon said. "I am. That's why I took the money. If you were in my place you'd have taken it too, Barney."

Karris scowled and fainted with the knife, but Brannon's extra sense gave him ample warning. He ducked beneath the feint, pinwheeled, and shot his right arm up, nailing Karris in the armpit just where the fleshy part of the arm joined the body. Knuckles smashed into nerves; a current of numbness coursed down Karris' arm and the knife dropped clatter-

ingly to the floor.

Karris brought his left arm around in a wild desperate swipe. Brannon met the attack, edged off to the side, caught the arm, twisted it. Karris screamed. Brannon let go of him, spun him around, hit him along the cheekbone with the side of his hand. Karris started to sag. Brannon cracked another edgewise blow into the side of Karris' throat and he toppled. He landed heavily, like a vegetable sack.

Stooping, Brannon picked up the knife and jammed it three inches into the wood of the bar. He finished his drink in two big searing gulps.

The bar was very quiet. Vuornik was staring at him in terror, his pasty face dead white. The other eight men sat frozen where they were. Karris lay on the floor, not getting up, breathing harshly, stertorously, half-sobbing.

"Get this and get it straight," Brannon said, breaking the frigid silence. "I took Murdoch's job because I *had* to. You don't have to love me for it. But just keep your mouths shut when I'm around."

No one spoke. Brannon set his mug down with exaggerated care on the bar, stepped over the prostrate Karris, and headed for the door. As he started to push it open, Karris half-rose.

"You bastard," he said bitterly. "You Judas."

Brannon shrugged. "You heard what I said, Barney. Keep your mouth shut, and keep out of my way."

He shoved the door open and stepped outside. It was only twelve-thirty. He had two hours to kill yet before his appointment with Murdoch.

HE spent the two hours sitting on a windswept rock overlooking the wild valley of the Chalba River, letting the east wind rip warmly over his face, blowing with it the fertile smell of rotting vegetation and dead reptiles lying belly-up-most in tidal pools of the distant sea.

Finally he rose and made his way back toward civilization, back toward the built-up end of the settlement near the spaceport, where Murdoch was waiting for him.

When Brannon entered the hotel room, it was Murdoch's face he saw first. Then he saw the other nine. They were grouped in a loose semicircle staring toward the door, staring at Brannon as if he were some sort of wild alien form of life that had just burst into the room.

Murdoch said, "I want you all to meet Kly Brannon. He's going to be our guide. He's spent eleven years hunting on Cutwold—really knows the place. Brannon, let me introduce you to the clients."

Brannon was introduced. He eyed each of them in turn.

There were four couples, one single man. All were Terrans. All looked wealthy, all looked bored. Typical tourist-type hunters, Brannon thought in weary contempt.

At the far left was Leopold Damon and his wife. Damon was fat and bald and looked to be on his second or third rejuvenation; his wife was about his age, puffy-eyed, ugly. They were probably tougher than they looked.

Next to them sat the Sauli Marshalls. Marshall was a thin dried-out man with glittering

eyes and a hooked ascetic nose. His wife was warmer-looking, a smiling brunette of thirty or so.

At their right was Clyde Llewellyn and his wife. Llewellyn was mild, diffident-looking, a slim red-haired man who seemed about as fierce as a bank clerk. His wife—Brannon blinked—his wife was a long, luxurious, cat-like creature with wide bare shoulders, long black hair, and magnificent breasts concealed only by sprayon patches the size of a one-unit coin.

The fourth couple consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Fredrik Rhawn, two sleek socialites, flawless of face and form, who seemed to have been turned out on a machine lathe. Next to them sat the loner, Rod Napoli, a burly, immensely broad man with thick features and gigantic hands.

"Mr. Napoli lost his wife on our previous tour," Murdoch said discreetly. "It—ah—explains the uneven number we have."

"I see," Brannon said. Napoli didn't seem particularly bereaved. He sat inhaling huge gulps of air at each breath, looking like a highly efficient

killing machine and nothing else.

"Well, now you've met everyone," said Murdoch. "I want you to know that this group is experienced in the ways of hunting, and that you're not just guiding a group of silly amateurs." His eyes narrowed. "Our goal, as you know, is the Nurillin."

"I know," Brannon returned acidly. "That's already been made clear."

"When would you like to start?" Murdoch asked.

"Now," said Brannon.

"Now?"

"Now?" said Fredrik Rhawn, half-rising. "So soon? But we just had lunch. I mean, couldn't we hold this thing over till tomorrow?"

"I'd like to get started," Brannon said stubbornly. He added silently, *the quicker the better. I want to get this thing over with.*

Rhawn's wife murmured something to him, and he said, "All right. It's foolish of me to hold everyone back, isn't it? We're ready to go any time."

"Good," Murdoch said. He glanced at Brannon. "Our

equipment is packed and ready. We're at your disposal."

"Let's go, then," Brannon said.

**B**RANNON estimated privately that the trip would take two days of solid march. He had found the Nurillins after only little more than a day's journey out of the settlement, but that was when he had been alone and moving at a good pace.

They left the settlement single file at three-thirty that afternoon, Brannon in the lead, followed by Napoli, who lugged along the handtruck carrying their supplies and provisions, and then, in order, the Rhawns, the Damons, the Marshalls, and the Llewellyns, with Murdoch last of all, just back of radiant Marya Llewellyn.

Two days. As Brannon pushed on slowly through the thick forest, slashing down the clinging vines as he went, the thought of spending two days with these people was intolerable, the thought of the quest they were on impossible to carry in his mind. When he thought of the soft-voiced Nurillins and the few happy days

he had spent with them, and now realized that he was bringing nine trophy-happy tourists through the woods to their secret hiding place—

He shook his head. Behind him, Napoli said, "Something wrong?"

"Damned fly buzzing in my ears. They'll eat you alive if you let them."

Napoli chuckled. They moved on.

Brannon was sure the tourists knew what the Nurillins were. That just added an extra twist to it. Murder was punishable by life imprisonment, which in these days of hundred-fifty-year lifespans was ten times as dreadful as capital punishment. Since detection was almost unavoidable, people rarely murdered.

But *legal* murder—ah, that was another thing. All the thrill of destroying a thinking, breathing intelligent creature, with none of the drawbacks. In the early days of stellar expansion, the natives of a thousand worlds had been hewn down mercilessly by wealthy Terrans who regarded the strange life forms as "just animals."

To stop that, the Extrater-

restrial Life Treaty of 2977 had been promulgated, and its supplement. From then on, none of the creatures listed could be shot for game. But there still were other worlds, newer worlds, worlds which had been missed in the survey. And races such as the Nurillins, with but a handful of members. The Nurillins had retreated when the Terrans came, and so they had been missed by the Treaty-makers.

And so they were still free game for the guns of Rod Napoli and Leopold Damon and anyone else willing to pay for their pleasure. Brannon scowled.

A vine tumbled down out of nowhere and slashed itself stickily across his face. He slashed it out of the way with his machete and pushed on.

He knew the forest well. His plan was to take the most circuitous route possible, in hopes that Murdoch would never be able to find his way to the Nurillins again. Accordingly, he struck out between two vast cholla-trees, signalling for the others to follow him.

Suddenly Murdoch called

out, "Hold it up there, Brannon! Mrs. Damon wants to rest."

"But—"

"*Hold it,*" Murdoch snapped. There was urgency in the hunt director's voice. Brannon stopped.

**H**E turned and saw Mrs. Damon sitting on a coarse-grained gray rock at the side of the footpath, massaging her feet. Brannon smiled and revised his estimate upward. It was going to take *three* days to get there, if this kept on happening with any regularity.

Murdoch said, "Brannon, could I see you for a minute as long as we've stopped?"

"Sure," Brannon said. "What is it?"

Murdoch had drawn away from the others somewhat and stood at a distance, with Marya Llewellyn. Her husband was paying no attention; he had joined the group that stood around Mrs. Damon. Brannon sauntered over to Murdoch.

"Are you taking us in the right direction?" Murdoch asked abruptly.

Surprised—for his foresight did not work all the time—

Brannon glanced at Marya Llewellyn. The girl was staring at him out of dark pools of eyes, darker even than her jet hair. She wore only shorts and the sprayon patches over her breasts; she looked at him accusingly and said, "I don't think we're heading the right way."

"How would *you* know?" Brannon snapped.

Murdoch smiled coldly. "You're not the only one with heightened sensory powers, Brannon. Mrs. Llewellyn has a peculiar and very useful gift of knowing when she's going toward a goal and when she isn't. She says the route you just took doesn't feel right. She says it doesn't lead straight to the Nurillins."

"She's right," Brannon admitted. "What of it? I promised I'd get you there, and I will. Does it make any difference if I take a slightly roundabout route? *I'm* the guide. don't forget."

I haven't forgotten it. And I'll let you continue on this path another hour or so, provided we don't get any further off the course. But I thought I'd warn you that Marya here

will be able to detect it any time you try to fool us. Any time you deliberately try to get us lost, she'll tell me about it."

Brannon looked stonily at her. He said nothing.

"Losing your charges in the jungle is attempted murder," Murdoch went on. "I'd feel entirely justified in shooting you down if necessary."

Brannon's jaws tightened. "For the benefit of you and your little bloodhound here, I'm doing my best. I'll get you to the Nurillins. And if it's okay with Mrs. Damon, I'd like to get moving again right now."

**A**N hour later, they were still moving. Dark shadows were scudding across the sky now, and the forest was thickening into jungle—jungle where death might wait behind any tree or under any pebble. But still Brannon kept moving.

Knowing that Marya Llewellyn had some strange way of sensing direction didn't alter his plans any. He had intended from the first, whatever Murdoch's suspicions were, to lead the party sooner or later

to the Nurillins. Brannon had been around; he never deluded himself with false hopes. Murdoch had hired him to lead them there, and Murdoch would not settle for less.

The nine tourists said little as they proceeded. They were lost in the strangeness of Cutwold.

Cutwold—or Caveer V, as the starcharts called it—was a warm, almost tropical world, heavily forested, heavily inhabited by life of all sorts. Once in its history it had spawned an intelligent species, the Nurillins. But they had been too gentle for Cutwold, and when Brannon had discovered them they were in the final throes before race extinction, with perhaps ten generations remaining to them if they kept out of man's way.

The forest was speaking, now. Crying abuse at the man who led ten others on a mission of murder.

The giant toads, those cynical toothy amphibians half the size of a man, were honking scornfully from either side of the path. Further back originated the deep moaning bellow

of the groundsnakes, and Brannon heard also the endless yipping of the little blue dogs that raged through the forest in murderous packs. He sensed nervousness spreading over his charges as night approached.

Above, Caveer, the golden-green sun that Brannon, in a forgotten past, had said was the loveliest he had ever seen, was dropping toward the horizon. Jonquil, first of the identical featureless moons of Cutwold, glimmered palely in the still-blue sky; Daffodil yet lay hidden in the nestling clouds of day, but soon would break forth and with its sister spiral across the night sky.

Then was the time of fear, in the forest—when the moons were bright.

Brannon plodded methodically forward through the darkening forest, dragging his ten charges along as if they were tied to his back. Somewhere ahead lay the refuge of the unsuspecting Nurillins; somewhere ahead lay a soft-eyed alien girl who had spoken kindly to him once long ago, and who now would receive her reward.

Karris' accusing words

burned his soul.

*Judas. Judas.*

It wasn't so, Brannon protested silently. It wasn't so. If they only could see *why* he was doing this—

They couldn't. To them he was a Judas, and Judas he would remain.

He stopped, suddenly. His jungle-sensitive ears, aided by the vague blur of a foresight in his mind, picked up the *sound* of feet drumming against forest soil. Hundreds of feet.

"What's the trouble?" Murdoch asked.

"Pack of wild dogs coming this way," said Brannon. "Let's pull into a tight circle and wait them out."

"No!" Mrs. Marshall gasped suddenly. "No!"

Her ascetic-faced husband turned to her, skin drawn so tight over his face he looked mummified. He slapped her, once; a white blotch appeared on her face, rapidly turning red. "Keep quiet," he said.

"That goes for all of you," Brannon. "They won't bother us if they have some other quarry. Stay still, try not to move—and if any of you lose your heads and fire into the



pack, you won't live to fire a second time."

He listened, tensely. First came the thump-*thump* of some large beast, then the pat-*pat*-pat of dogs, hundreds of them, in fierce pursuit.

"Here they come," Brannon said.

**T**HE quarry came first, bursting out of the thick wall of vegetation that hemmed in the pathway on both sides. It was a Cutwold bull, eleven feet through the withers, a monster of atuarine with yellow curved horns two feet long jutting from its skull.

Now the bubbly slaver of fear covered its fierce jaws, and the thick black hide was slashed in a dozen places, blood oozing out steadily. The vanguard of the attacking force rode with the bull: two small blue dogs who clung to the animal's hind legs, snapping furiously, hoping to slice through the hamstring tendon and bring the bull crashing to the ground.

*The pack is hungry tonight,* Brannon thought.

He had only a moment's glimpse of the bull; then it was gone, blasting its way through

the yielding underbrush, and only the sound of its snorting bleats of terror remained. But then came the pursuers.

Brannon had learned to fear the blue dogs of Cutwold more than the poison-trees or the velvet snakes or any of the other deadly jungle creatures he knew. The dogs were built low to the ground; they were whip-pet-like creatures whose claws could rend even the armor-thick leather of the giant bull, whose teeth bit the toughest meat, whose appetites never reached satiety. They burst into the clearing and streamed across the road so fast one dog appeared to melt into its successor, forming an unending lake of blue, a blur broken only by the glinting of their red eyes and snapping teeth.

Brannon remained quite still, standing with his group. The women were frozen, fearstruck; Napoli was staring at the dog horde with keen interest, but the other men appeared uneasy. Brannon counted minutes: *one, two, three...*

The numbers of dogs thinned until it was possible to see daylight between them. Off in the distance a cry of *skilling* 4-

tensity resounded: the bull had been brought to earth. Good, Brannon thought. The dogs would feed tonight, and for a while at least would keep away.

One last dog burst through the trampled brush. And paused.

And turned inquisitively, guided by who knew what mad impulse, to sniff at the clustered huddle of human beings standing silently in the jungle path.

It bared its teeth. It drew near. The rest of the pack was out of sight, almost inaudible. Suddenly Clyde Llewellyn lowered his heavy-cycle gun and sent three bullets smashing through the dog's body and skull, even as Brannon reached out to prevent it.

The dog fell. Savagely Brannon smashed Llewellyn to the ground with one backhanded swipe. "You idiot! Want to kill us all?"

The mildness vanished from the little man's face as he picked himself up. He started to go for his gun; Brannon tensed, but this time it was Murdoch who caught hold of Llewellyn. He shook him twice, slapped him.

"We've got to get moving now," Brannon said. "The dogs are blood-crazy tonight. They'll be back here any minute, as soon as the wind drifts the scent to them." He pointed up the road. "Go on! Start running, and don't stop!"

"What about you?" Murdoch asked.

"I'll back you up. Get going."

HE watched as they ran ahead. As they passed out of sight, Brannon lifted the dead dog and heaved it as far in the opposite direction as he could. The yipping grew louder; the pack was returning.

They came a moment later, muzzles coated with red, smelling new blood. Brannon crouched beside the thick trunk of a quaa-tree, waiting. The dogs paused in the clearing, sniffed the air, and, ignoring Brannon, set off toward their dead companion.

Brannon turned and ran up ahead, rejoining the others.

They were waiting for him. "The dogs are off our trail," he said. He looked at the sullen-faced Llewellyn. A bruise was starting to swell on the side

of his face. "You're lucky I didn't shoot you down as you deserved," Brannon told him.

"Don't talk like that to my clients," said Murdoch.

"Your client nearly got us all killed. I specifically told you all to hold fire."

"I didn't like the looks of that dog," said Llewellyn. "He looked dangerous."

"One dog isn't half as dangerous as a pack. And one live dog won't draw a pack; a dead one will, when the blood gets into the air."

"Is the whole trip going to be like this?" Mrs. Rhawn asked suddenly. "Dangerous?"

Brannon took a deep breath before replying. "Mrs. Rhawn, you're on Cutwold to commit murder, whether you know it or not. The animals you're hunting are people, just like you and me. Murder is never easy. There's always danger. It's the price you pay for your sport."

Around the circle, faces whitened. Murdoch was taut with anger. Brannon looked inquisitively at him, but no reply was forthcoming.

Then he glanced upward. Both moons were high above,

now, and the sun was barely visible, a lime-colored flicker hovering above the horizon, half intersected by the vaulting trees. It was getting late. It was almost time to make camp for the night.

"Let's move along," Brannon said. "It's getting late."

**F**OR half an hour more they hacked their way deeper into the jungle, until it was obviously too dark to travel further that day. Brannon marched at the head of the file, eyes keen for danger, ears listening, mind shrouded in black thoughts.

Behind him came the others. *Nine thrill-killers*, he thought. Nine allegedly civilized human beings who were spending fabulous sums for the privilege of gunning down other human beings coolly and consciencelessly.

It would be so easy, Brannon told himself, to lose these nine and their coordinator in the jungle—*d e s p i t e* Marya Llewellyn. There were so many pitfalls to right and left of the main path: the carnivorous trees that waited, leaves quivering, for something meaty to trip their tropisms and plunge

into a network of catch-claws. The giant toads whose tongues could flick out and snarl themselves around a man's throat or waist in an unbreakable lariat's grip. All Brannon needed to do was lead them a short distance from the beaten path—

But that was the coward's solution. No, he told himself. He would bring them to their destination, for only that would fully serve his purpose.

Above, a nightbird squawked in the sky, calling, "*Keek! Keek! Keek!*"

On Cutwold day was heralded by the dawnbirds, night by the nightbirds. It was a system more efficient than clocks. Brannon said, "Okay. We stop here. Drop your packs and let's set up the shelter."

Under Murdoch's direction the plastic tent-bubble went up within minutes, puffing out of the extrusion panel carried for the purpose. Brannon patrolled the area, burning a wide swath around the camp with his flamer, as a signal to wildlife to stay away during the night. Unless they were ravenous, they would respect the singed circle of vegetation.

He left a fire outside the tent

hatch that would last all night. Then he crawled inside. The others were already within their sleeping packs, though none were asleep. Brannon ventured a private guess that few of them would sleep soundly this night. The jungle was noisy—noisier, perhaps, for those with this sort of hunt in mind.

The Rhawns were talking in low whispers. Brannon caught Mrs. Rhawn saying, "...I don't think I trust that guide too much. He looks so strange, and *tense*."

Her husband glanced at Brannon, who was staring at the ground. "Hush! I think he can hear us."

Smiling, Brannon looked away. The others were gathering in for the night, trying to sleep. Brannon stepped outside, peered at the now almost entirely dark sky. The two moons hung overhead like two lanterns, casting shadows through the trees.

An animal was prowling outside the singed circle, sniffing the ground, staring strangely at the intruders who had broken the jungle peace.

He turned away and returned to the tent, found an un-

occupied corner, and slouched to the ground. He was thinking.

Thinking of a stubbtefaced man in a bar who had cried *Judas* at him, and of ten thousand Galactic Currency Units that was his fee for this trip, and of a time three years before when he had gone off into the jungle on a solitary quest, and found—

The Nurillins.

**I**T had been a warm day in the twelfth month of Brannon's eighth year on Cutwold. He had been without work for three weeks, without money for two, and had gone on a foraging mission into the jungle.

At least foraging had been the ostensible reason. Actually he was searching—searching for something deeper than he could understand, out there. He needed to get away from the men of the settlement; that much he knew. So he struck out on his own, deep into the jungle.

The first day had been routine. He covered his usual quota of hiking miles, shot three small succulent birds and roasted them for his meal, dined on the sweet stems of

kyril-shoots and the slightly bitter wine of the domran plant. At nightfall he camped and slept, and when the keening shriek of the dawnbirds woke him he rose and continued on, travelling unknowingly and uncaringly the same route that three years later he would cover with a party of wealthy killers.

Then he had had no idea where he was going. He put one foot before the other and forged on, pausing now and then to stare at some strange plant or to avoid some deadly little reptile or insect.

Somewhere on that second day, he ran into trouble.

It began with the *thrum-thrum* of a giant toad in a thicket of blueleaved shrubs. Brannon turned, reaching for his gun—and as he turned, a sudden thrumming came from the other side of the path, as well. He whirled—and found he was caught between two of the great squat amphibians!

He took two half-running steps before a sticky tongue lashed out and caught him round the middle. The thicket parted, and he saw his captor, vast mouth yawning, bulging

yellow eyes alight with anticipation. Brannon clawed desperately at the gummy pink ribbon that held him fast, but there was no escaping it. He dug his feet deep in the rich soil, braced himself—

The other toad appeared. And snared him as well.

He stood immobile, tugged in two directions at once, with two gaping toad-mouths waiting to receive him the moment the other yielded. The pressure round his middle was unbearable; he started to wish that one or the other would release him, so death would come.

But before death would come devouring. The victorious toad would digest him alive.

Then suddenly he heard a bright chirping sound, unlike any animal call he had ever known. There was a whistling in the underbrush and then a lithe golden form was at his side. Brannon's dark eyes were choked with tears of pain; he could barely see.

But the strange figure smiled at him and tapped each of the straining toads gently between the protruding eyes, and spoke three liquid alien words. And

one toad, then the other, released him.

The tongues ripped away, taking with them clothing, skin, flesh. Brannon stood tottering for a moment, looking down at the red rawness of his waist, sucking in air to fill the lungs from which all air had been squeezed by the constricting tongues.

The alien girl—Brannon saw her as that now—gave one further command. The toads uttered thrums of disgust, turned, flopped heavily away into the darkness of the deeper jungle.

Brannon looked at the alien. "Thanks," he said. "Whoever—*whatever* you are."

And plunged forward, dropping heavily on his face in the warm jungle soil.

**H**E woke, later. When he could speak the language, he learned that it was four days later.

He was in a hut, somewhere. Golden alien figures moved about him. They were slim, humanoid in appearance, but hairless. Their skulls were bald shining domes of yellow; their eyes, dark green, were somehow sad.

Brannon looked down at himself. He was swathed in bandages where the tongues of the giant toads had ripped away the flesh. Someone bent above him, holding a cup to his lips.

He drank. It was broth, warm, nourishing. The girl who held it was the one who had rescued him in the forest. She smiled at him.

"Lethii," she said, pointing to herself.

Uncertainly Brannon touched his chest. "Brannon."

She repeated it. "Brannon." She grinned at him.

He grinned back.

That was the beginning.

He stayed there six weeks, among the Nurillins. He discovered that there were perhaps three thousand of them, no more; once, they had had great cities throughout Cutwold, but that had been many thousands of years before, and the jungle had long since reclaimed them.

The girl named Lethii was his guide. She nursed him to health, kept constant company with him when he was strong enough to walk, taught him the language. It was a smooth and

flowing language, not difficult to learn.

"The toads are our steeds," she told him one day. "My people trained them long ago to respond to our commands. When I heard you screaming for help I was bewildered for I knew the toads never attacked any of us."

"I didn't know I was screaming," Brannon said.

"You were. The touch of a toad's tongue is agony. I heard your voice and saw you, and knew that the toads had attacked you because you were—not of us."

Brannon nodded. "And I never will be."

But at times during the weeks that passed he thought he *had* become one of them. He learned the Nurillin history—how they had been great once, and now were dying away, and how when the Terran scout ships had come the Nurillins had realized the planet was no longer theirs, and had moved off into the jungle to hide and wait for the end.

He felt himself growing a strange sort of love for the girl Lethii—not a sexual sort of love, for that was impossible

and even inconceivable between their species and his, but something else just as real. Brannon had never felt that sort of emotion before.

He met others, and came to know them—Darhuing, master of the curious Nurillin musical instruments; Vroyain, whose subtle and complex poetry bewildered and troubled Brannon. Mirchod, the hunter, who showed Brannon many ways of the jungle he had not known before.

But Brannon sensed strain in the village, finally, when he knew the people well enough to understand them. And so when six weeks had passed he said to Lethii, "I'm well now. I'll have to rejoin my people."

"Will you come back?"

"Yes," he said. "I'll come back."

**H**E came back twice more—once half a year later, once a year after that. They had welcomed him gladly, and grieved at his leave-taking.

Now a year and a half had slipped by since the last visit, and Brannon was returning once again. But this time he was bringing death.

Above the tent a bird shrieked, the long low wail of a dawnbird, and Brannon realized night had gone. He had dreamed of the NuriHins. He had remembered the three visits past, the visits now to be blotted out by bloodshed.

He got to his feet and stood looking down at the ten sleepers.

It was possible to kill them all, one by one, as they slept. No one would find them. Brannon would return alone, and no one would question him. The Nurillins would remain untroubled where they dwelt.

He shook his head.

His decision had been made; he would abide by it. He nudged Murdoch. The dark-faced man blinked and was awake in an instant, staring up at Brannon.

"Time to get up," Brannon said. "It's dawn. You can't sleep all day."

Murdoch got to his feet, nodding. "Time to get up," he repeated loudly. "Everybody up!"

The hunters awoke, grumbling and complaining.

"Will we reach the Nurillins today, Mr. Brannon?" asked



Saul Marshall's wife. "I'm stiff all over from sleeping on the ground."

"Did you sleep?" said Mrs. Damon. "I couldn't. I was up every moment of the night. Those birds, and the animals I kept hearing—!"

"Yes," said Rhawn's wife. "I hope we'll get there today. Another night sleeping out would really be too much."

Brannon very carefully erased the scowl of contempt before it had fully formed on his face. He said, "There's a very good chance we may get there before nightfall tonight. If all of you hurry up, that is. We're not getting any closer while we sit around in camp."

It was a telling point. Breakfast was perfunctory, just a handful of food-tabs and a once-over with a molecular rinse. Within an hour the camp had been broken up, the plastic tent dissolved, the equipment repacked and re-shouldered.

While Brannon waited for the Damons and the Rhawns to ready themselves for the day's march, he walked over to Murdoch, who was talking with Marya Llewellyn.

She looked incredibly fresh and lovely, as if she had slept in a germicidal incubator all night rather than in a jungle tent. Her skimpy clothes were barely creased.

"Well?" Brannon asked. "Am I taking you the right way?"

Murdoch glared at him. "We trust you, Brannon. You don't have to act this way about it."

"You trust me? You didn't yesterday."

"Marya says you're leading us toward the Nurillins. Well, you ought to be. We're paying you enough."

Brannon glanced at Marya Llewellyn. "Are you from Earth, Mrs. Llewellyn?"

"Originally. I live on Vega VII now."

That explained the deep tan, the air of health. "Have you done much hunting before?" Brannon asked.

"Mrs. Llewellyn has been on four hunting tours of mine," Murdoch said. "In fact, she met her husband on a tour. We were hunting in the Djibnar system then." He grinned at her, and she returned the grin. Brannon wondered whether any sort of relationship existed

between these two besides that of hunter and hunt director. Probably, he thought. Not that it mattered any to him.

"We're ready," Mrs. Damon called cheerily.

Brannon turned. She was plump, good-natured looking. A grandmotherly type. Out here, hunting intelligent beings? He shrugged. Strange kill-lusts lay beneath placid exteriors; he had found that out long before. He wondered how much these people were paying Murdoch for the privilege of committing legal murder. Thousands, probably.

Brannon surveyed the group of them. Only big Napoli was a familiar type: he was a legitimate sportsman, as could be seen by the way he handled his gear and himself in the jungle. As for the rest of them; these hunters, they were a cross-section—but they all shared one characteristic. All had a curious intent glint in their eyes. The glint of killers. The glint of people who had come halfway across the galaxy to cleanse their minds and souls by emptying the chambers of their guns into the innocent golden bodies of the Nurillins.

He moistened his lips. "Let's go," he said crisply. "There's a lot of hiking yet ahead."

**T**HERE wasn't much doubt in Brannon's mind that he would reach the Nurillins' village safely with his ten charges. The half-comprehended sense that had been with him so long guided him through the thick jungle.

Sometimes s t r a y thoughts popped into his mind: *a man named Murdoch will come to you this morning and offer you a job.*

Other times, it would be more subtle: a shadowy wordless feeling that to take a given path would be unwise, that danger lurked somewhere

Still other times he felt nothing at all. Fortunately this happened infrequently.

Brannon knew without knowing that the party would reach the Nurillin village on time. It was only a matter of picking one foot up and slogging it back down a yard further ahead, of mechanically marching on and on and on through the endless jungle that made up so much of the planet Cutwold.

Overhead Caveer climbed

toward noon height, sending down cascades of golden-green radiance. Rhawn's wife asked once, "How soon will we be out of this dreadful jungle?"

Rhawn said, "Darling, be patient. This is one of the last places in the universe where we can do something like this. What an experience it'll be to tell about! When we're vacationing again next season, won't we be envied so!"

"I suppose you're right, dear."

Brannon's lips firmed grimly. *I suppose you're right, dear.*

He could picture them gossiping now—of the time they came across the secret village of aliens on Cutwold, and killed them for trophies because the Galactic Government had not said it was illegal. As these rich socialites roved from pleasure-spot to pleasure-spot, they would repeat the story, boasting of the time they had killed on Cutwold.

"You look angry," a soft voice said. "I wish I knew why you always look so angry."

Brannon had known a moment in advance: Marya Llewellyn had left her place in line and had come to his side. He

glanced down at her. "Angry? Me?"

"Don't try to hide it, Brannon. Your face is dark and bitter. You're strange, Brannon."

He shrugged. "It comes from long years in the outworlds, Mrs. Llewellyn. Men get strange out here."

"Call me Marya, won't you?" Her voice was low. "Do you think we'll reach the Nurilins' village today?"

"Hard to tell. We're making a good pace, but if Mrs. Damon gets tired and has to rest, or if a herd of thunder-beasts decides to cut across our path, there'll be delays. We may have to camp out again tonight. I can't help it if we do."

Her warm body brushed against his. "I won't mind. If we *do* camp out—tonight, when everyone's asleep—let's stay awake, Brannon. Just the two of us."

For a moment he failed to see what she meant. Then he did, and he scowled and quickened his pace. One betrayal was bad enough... but not two. He thought of golden Lethii, and the harsh angles of his face deepened.

He looked back. Llewellyn

was marching on, not knowing or not caring about his wife's behavior. The others showed some sign of strain, all but stony-faced Murdoch bringing up the rear and the tireless Napoli.

"I'm exhausted," Mrs. Damon said. "Can we rest a while, Mr. Brannon?"

"No," he said, surprising her. "This is dangerous country we're passing through. These shining-leaved bushes here—they're nesting places for the giant scorpions. We have to keep moving. I want to reach the village before nightfall if possible."

At his side Marya Llewellyn emitted a little gasp. "You said that deliberately!"

"Maybe. Maybe I'm turning you down because I'm afraid of getting mixed up in a quarrel."

"My husband's a silly fool. He won't cause us any trouble."

"I wasn't talking about your husband. I was talking about Murdoch."

For a second he thought she would spring at him and rake his eyes with her enamelled fingernails. But color returned

to her suddenly pale face after a moment. She glared at him in open hatred and dropped back into formation, leaving him alone at the head of the line.

Brannon shook his head. He felt sudden fatigue, but forced himself to accelerate the pace.

NOON passed. A flock of scaly air-lizards passed by and showered them with nauseous droppings at twelve-thirty; Brannon brought one down with a quick shot of his handgun and showed the grisly beast to the group. Marshall photographed it. He had been taking photographs steadily.

After a brief rest at one, they moved on. Brannon set a sturdy pace, determined not to spend another night in the jungle before reaching the village. At two, they paused by a waterhole to splash cooling water on their parched faces.

"How about a swim?" Marya asked. She began to strip.

"I wouldn't advise it," said Brannon. "These waterholes are populated. Tadpoles the size of your thumb that'll eat your toes off while you swim and work their way up your

body in two minutes."

"Oh," she said faintly. There was no swimming.

They moved on. And at three-thirty Brannon paused, signalling for quiet, and listened to the jungle noises.

To the steady *thrum*... *thrum*... of the giant toads. To the sound that meant they had reached the Nurillins' village.

Brannon narrowed his eyes. He turned to Murdoch and said, "All right, we're here. The Nurillins live just up ahead. From now on it's your show, Murdoch."

The hunt leader nodded. "Right. Listen to me, all of you. You're to fire one shot at a time, at only one of the beasts."

*The beasts*, Brannon thought broodingly, thinking of Vroyain the poet. *The beasts*.

"When you've brought down your mark," Murdoch went on, "get to one side and wait. As soon as each of you has dropped one, we're finished. We'll collect the trophies and return to the settlement. Aim for the heart, or else you may spoil the head and ruin the trophy. Brannon, are these crea-

tures dangerous in any way?"

"No," Brannon said quietly. *Thrum...thrum...* "They're not dangerous. But keep an eye out for the giant toads. They can kill."

"That's your job," Murdoch said. "You and I will cover the group while the kill is going on." He looked around. "Is everything understood? Good. Let's go."

THEY headed forward, moving cautiously now, guns drawn and ready. The thrumming of the toads grew more intense. Brannon saw landmarks he had not seen before. The village was not far. They were virtually at the point now where he had been attacked by the toads, before Lethii had rescued him.

*Thrum...thrum...*

The sudden croaking sounds were loud—and a toad burst from the underbrush, a Nurillin mounted astride the ugly creature. Brannon stared at the Nurillin but did not recognize him.

"That one's mine," Napoli said before anyone else of the group was aware of what was happening. The burly hunts-

man lowered his rifle and pumped one shot through the Nurillin's heart.

Brannon winced. That was the first one.

The Nurillin dropped from his mount, a look of astonishment frozen on his face. The toad uttered three defiant bellows and waddled forward, mouth opening, deadly tongue coiling in readiness, as Napoli neared to claim his kill.

"Watch out for the frog," Brannon warned.

Napoli laughed. And then the tongue flicked out and wrapped itself around the big man's bull-like neck and throat. Napoli gagged and clawed at his throat, trying to say the word "Help" and failing.

Brannon's first shot severed the outstretched pink tongue, breaking the link between the toad and Napoli. His second shot ripped a gaping hole in the toad's pouting throat. Napoli reeled away, gasping for air, and ripped the tongue away from his skin. It came away bloody; a line of red circled his neck like the mark of a noose.

"I thought I could outma-

neuver him," Napoli said. "But that tongue moved like lightning."

"I warned you," Brannon said. Napoli knelt by the dead Nuriillin.

"This one's mine," he repeated. "I got mine."

They moved on, rounding a bend in the path, coming now to the outskirts of the village itself. Four male Nurillins were coming toward them, their green eyes sharp with accusation. Again, Brannon did not know any of them. He was thankful for that much.

"What were those shots?" asked one of them in the Nurillian tongue. Brannon was the only one who could understand, and he could make no reply.

It was Marshall's wife who spoke first. "Why...they're just like *people!*" she said in wonderment.

"Of course," her husband snapped dourly. "That's why we're here." He lowered his gun to firing level and sent the rightmost Nurillin sprawling with a quick shot. The other three turned to flee, but were dropped rapidly with bullets from the guns of Rhawn, his

wife, and—of all people—grandmotherly Mrs. Damon.

*That makes five*, Brannon thought. *Five corpses.*

Four more and it would all be over.

Trickles of alien blood stained the forest sand now. The four dead Nurillins lay with limbs grotesquely tangled, and the four successful huntsmen were beaming with pride.

And more, Nurillins were coming. Many of them. Brannon shuddered.

"Here comes a batch of them," Murdoch shouted. "Be ready to move fast."

"They won't hurt you," said Brannon. "They don't understand violence. That's why they ran away."

**T**HEY came, though, to see what the disturbance was. Brannon turned and saw Llewellyn levelling for a distance shot, his mild face bright with killing fever, his eyes fixed. He fired, and brought down Darhuing the musician. The Nurillin toppled out of the front row of the advancing aliens.

"I'd like another one," Nap-

oli said. "Let me get another one."

"No!" Brannon said.

"He's right," said Murdoch. "Just one each. Just one."

Marshall's wife picked off her trophy before the aliens reached the glade. The second to die was a stranger to Brannon. The others scattered, ducking into the under-brush on both sides of the road—but not before Leopold Damon had fired. His shot caught a Nurillin slightly above the heart and sent the alien spinning backward ten feet.

Eight were dead, now. And only one Nurillin had not saught hiding.

Lethii.

She came forward slowly, staring without comprehension at the little knot of gunbearing Earthmen.

"Brannon," she said. "Brannon. What are you doing?" The liquid syllables of the alien tongue seemed harsh and accusing.

"I—I—"

She stood slim and unafraid near two fallen Nurillins and stared bitterly at Brannon. "You have come back...but your friends kill!"

"I had to do it," Brannon said. "It was... for your sake. For your tribe's sake. For my sake."

"How can that be? You brought these people here to kill us—and you say it's good?"

*She doesn't understand,* Brannon thought drearily. "I can't explain," he said.

"Listen! He's speaking her language!" Mrs. Damon exclaimed.

"Watch out Brannon," said Marya Llewellyn suddenly. She laughed in derision.

"No," Brannon said. But for once his foresight failed him. Before he could turn, before he could deflect Marya's aim, she had fired, still laughing.

Lethii stared at him gravely, reproachfully, for a fragment of a second. Then she put her hand to her chest and fell, headlong into the dust.

**THE** journey back to the settlement seemed to take forever. Brannon led the way, eyes fixed ahead of him, never looking back, never speaking. Behind came the nine, each with a trophy, each with the deep

satisfaction of knowing he had murdered an intelligent being and would go scot-free.

Brannon was remembering. Remembering the look on nine Nurillin faces as they fell to the ground, remembering especially that of the ninth victim. Lethii. It had *had* to be her, of course. Her, out of the three thousand. That was necessarily part of the betrayal.

It took a day and a half to reach the main settlement again; Brannon did not sleep in the tent with the others, but remained outside, sitting near the fire with his hands locked across his knees, thinking. Just thinking.

It was late in the afternoon when the group stumbled out of the edge of the jungle and found themselves back in civilization. They stood together, in a nervous little group.

Murdoch said, "I want to thank you, Brannon. You got us there, and you got us back, and that's more than I sometimes thought you were going to do."

"Don't thank me, Murdoch. Just get going. Get off Cutwold as fast as you can, and



take your nine killers with you."

Murdoch flinched. "They weren't *people*, those aliens. You still can't understand that. The Treaty doesn't say anything about them, and so they're just animals."

"Go on," Brannon said hoarsely. "Go. Fast."

He looked at them—puffed up with pride they were, at having gone into the jungle and come out alive. It would have been so easy to kill them in the jungle, Brannon thought wearily. Marya Llewellyn was looking blackly at him, her body held high, as if inviting him. She had known about Lethii. That was why she had waited, and fired last, killing her.

"We want to say goodbye, Mr. Brannon," gushed Mrs. Damon. "You were just wonderful."

"Don't bother," Brannon said. He spat at their feet. Then he turned and slowly ambled away, not looking back.

He came into Vuornik's Bar. They were all there, Vuornik, and Barney Karris, and the eight or nine other regular barflies. They were all staring at

him. They knew, all of them. They knew.

"Hello, Judas," Karris said acidly. A knife glinted in his belt. He was ready to defend himself.

But Brannon didn't feel like fighting. He slouched down next to the bar and said, "Give me the usual, Vuornik. Double khalla, straight."

"I don't know as I want to serve you in my place, Brannon. I don't know."

Brannon took one of Murdoch's bills from his back pocket and dropped it on the bar. "There's my money. My money's good. *Give me that drink, Vuornik!*"

His tone left little doubts. Vuornik said nervously, "Okay, Brannon. Don't fly up in an uproar." He poured the drink.

Brannon sipped it numbly, hoping it would wipe away the pain and the guilt. It didn't. *Judas*, he thought. *Judas*.

He wasn't any Judas. He had done what was right.

If he hadn't led Murdoch to the Nurillins, Murdoch would have gone himself. Sooner or later he would have found them. He would have destroyed them all. . . not just these nine.

But now there had been a hunt. Nine trophies had been brought back. Murdoch's nine hunters would boast, and the Nurillins would no longer be secret. Soon, someone high in government circles would learn that there was a species in the galaxy still unprotected from hunters. Survey ships would come and the Nurillins would be declared untouchable.

It had had to happen. But there would be no more hunting parties to the interior of Cutwold now that the galaxy knew the Nurillins existed. They would be safe from now on, Brannon hoped. Safe at the

cost of nine lives...and one man's soul.

No one would ever forgive him on Cutwold. He would forgive himself. *But he had done the right thing. He hadn't any choice.*

He finished his drink and scooped up his change and walked slowly across the bar-room, out into the open. The sun was setting. It was a lovely sight—but Brannon couldn't appreciate it now.

"So long, Judas," came Karis' voice drifting after him out of the bar. "So long, Judas."

THE END