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REVIEWS

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TOP PICKS

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COVER

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ONE OF THE GREATEST SPACE-
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THE ROCKETEERS HAVE SHAGGY EARS

A NOVEL By KEITH BENNETT

Some day there will be a legend like this. Some day, from steamy Vesna on arid Mars, the shaking, awe-struck words will come whispering back to us, building the picture of a glory so great that our throats will choke with pride—pride in the Men of Terra!

THE COMMANDER'S VOICE was echoing on, but Hager's fatigued brain registered it as mere sound with no words or meaning. He'd been shamed since the crash. Like a cracked photograph, his brain kept playing back the tipping seat of his chamber blasting out with a scintillating heat that had thrown every man in the control room to the floor. The lights had flickered out, and a scintillating elevator glide began as Patrol Rocket One smashed down through the Venusian atmosphere roof, and crashed in a clearing blasted by its own burning passage.

Hager blinked hard and tried to focus his brain on what hard-faced Commander Devlin was saying, something about the Blue and Goldsons, the weather ship.

"We've five hundred miles before we'll be in their vicinity, and every yard of it we walk. Hunting parties will shoot food animals. All water is to be bottled and treated with ultra-violet by my section. The photographers will march with the science section, which will continue classifying and writing reports. No actual specimens will be taken. We can't afford the weight."

To Hager, the other five men seated around the little dining table appeared cool, confidently ready to march through

five hundred, or a thousand miles of dark, unexplored, steaming Hell that is Venusian mountains. Their faces tightest, jolly calm, they smiled as turn to the Commander looked at each one of them; but Hager wondered if his own face wasn't betraying the fear lurking within him. Suddenly Commander Devlin grinned, and pulled a brandy bottle from his pocket, something it as he spoke: "Well, Rocketeers, a short life and a merry one. I never did give a damn for riding in these tin cans." The tension broke, they were all smiling, and saying they'd walk into the base camp with some kind of a Venusian female under each arm for the celebration of Gilmore's Mars.

Leaves clinked off his own smoking detritus and came lay up in Hager's nostrils, and he felt alive once again. The others streamed from the brightly lighted hatch a moment later. The Commander made a short speech to the entire party. Then Navigator Clark, a smiling, wiry little man, marched out of the dining with his advance guard. Their voices muffled suddenly as they vanished down a furrow corridor that lay gloomy between giant, long holes.

Commander Devlin slapped Hager cheerfully on the shoulder as he moved past, and the second section, sparse and trim in blue



black uniforms, with silver piping, followed him. Crewmen Dideriksen and Davis followed with rifles and rapping hammers of explosive bullets craning their stems; and then Ansd, the lean craggy geologist, his arm in a sling, and marching beside him was roanet, haggarded Gault, the botanist. The lads whipped back dithered by next with Technician Whittaker grinning down at Hague from the turret.

"It pains me somewhat' awful to see you waltz' when I'm ridin'," Whittaker piped over the whipper's chalking grovel.

Hague grinned back, then ploshed his nose between two degrees in the apertures dash above of dugout, pointed at the tank, and shook his head sadly. The one came the whipper tared swayed by, and the rest of the column followed; Beckmann, the doctor and Sewell, his beefy cutaway assistant. The two photographers snaggared past under high-piled equipment packs, and

Hague wondered how long they would keep all of it. Larksson, Johnson, Haxter, Karshok, Hanna, Eliu—rank carried a pack full of equipment. The rest filed by until finally Severson, the big Swede technician, passed and the clearing was empty.

Hague turned to look over his own party. In his mind's eye beheld the neatly typed "Equipment, march order, light field artillery" list he'd memorized along with what seemed a thousand other neatly typed lists at Gunnery School.

The line halted, and Hague watched his five-man gun section lounge against their rifles, leaning slightly horizontal to ease the heavy welding that supported their mounting packs and the sectioned pneumatic gun.

"All right," Hague said hoarsely. He dredged his brain desperately then for an encouraging speech, something that would show the crew he liked them, something the Comanchero might say, but he couldn't

back of anything that sounded witty or sang with morning words. He finally muttered a dejected curse at his own blank-headedness, and said harshly, "All right, let's go."

The six men filed slowly out of the dining quarters in the fore by Patrol Rocket One, and into deep gloom into an apparatus made that was assembly out of pipe and fixtures. Rubbed them a little while, animal scented into the deserted air of heated tubes, its heady black eye peering curiously the silver ship that lay washed and half-buried in the forest floor.

BASE COMMANDER CHAPMAN shuffled hopefully through the thick coil of carbon-disk papers, and took back flying, communication reports, supply reports, medical reports, strength reports, reconnaissance reports, radio logs, tide logs, some logs, bulging dossiers of reports, files full of them, were there, and elsewhere in the ship efficient clerks were tapping out fresh, crisp bulletins of new reports, neatly typed in duplicate on coloniaside paper.

He moved across his crowded desk at the quiet executive office.

"Yes, Blake, it's a good picture of local conditions, but it isn't explanation. Until the Patrol Rocket gets in, we can send only one local mail, and it just isn't enough."

Blake shrugged.

"It's all we've got. We can send parties out on foot from the base here, even if we do lose men, but the hope they'd get would still be on a localized area."

The Commander left his desk, and staved through a viewport at the platform, and beyond that at the jungled hill bringing an endless expanse of rainforest lying suddenly open under the roof of racing grey clouds.

The point is we've got to have more excavated material than this when we fire our robot-courier back to earth. This was awful mountain of papers—what do they do, what do they tell? They describe beautifully the physical conditions of this Base and its complement. They describe very well a two mile area around the Base—but beyond that area they tell nothing. It's wonderful as far as it goes, but it only goes ten miles, and that isn't enough."

Blake sped the mow pile of papers absently. Then he jumped up nervously

as another bundle shot into a receiving tray from the pneumatic message tube. He began going the floor.

"Well, what can we do? Suppose we send the stuff we have here, get it microfilmed and get it off—what then?"

The Commander swore bitterly, and turned to face his executive.

"What then?" he demanded savagely. "Are we going into that again? Why, the minute every other branch of the service realizes that we haven't got any kind of thorough preliminary report on this action of Venus, they'll start pounding the war drums. The bureaucracy already and the laymen generals will get so work and stir up enough public opinion to have the United States Rocket Service absorbed by other branches—the old, old game of military politics."

Blake nodded grimly. "Yes, I know. We'd get the leftovers after the battleships had been built, or new industry engineers recruited, or something else. Anyway we wouldn't get enough money to carry on rocket research for space exploration."

"Exactly," the Commander cut in harshly. "These rockets would be grounded on earth. The generals or admirals would swear that the international situation demanded that they be kept there as weapons of defense, and that would be the end of our work."

"We've got to send back a good, strong report, something to prove that the Rocket Service can do the job, and that it is worth the doing. And, until the patrol rocket gets back, we can't do it."

"Okay, Commander," Blake called as he went through the steel passage opening onto the mother ship's upper corridor. "I'll be holding the Courier Rocket until we get word."

SIX hours later it lightened a little, and day had come. Hager and the Sergeants had pulled the early morning guard shift, and began milking the silver bear from their day individual tests.

Foreman staggered erect, yawned heavily, and swore that this was woeier than spring massacres in Carolina.

"Slake it," Brian snarled savagely. "That whisky will show in a minute."

When it did sound, they backed each

other into pack harness and going off smoothly, but groaning and muttering as the mud dragged at their heavy boots.

At midday, four hours later, there was no halt, and they marched steadily forward through steaming veils of oppressive heat, using compressed air as they walked. They splashed through a deep creek that was wildly dried, and hurried ahead when crawling things wiggled in the green mass. Perspiration ran in streams from each face filling part on the trail, soaked through pack harness and packs; and wily Hurd began to complain that his pack straps had cut through his shoulders as far as his navel. They stopped for a five minute break at 1:00, when Hurd stopped fussing with his back straps and squabbled for attention, though the other five had been too wrapped in their own discomfort to be talking.

"Listen! Do you hear it, Lieutenant! Like a buzz!" Hurd's wisened ear face beamed in concentration. "Way off, like, I can just barely get it."

Huger listened blankly a moment, attempted an expression he faintly hoped was at once intelligent and meaning, then said, "I don't hear anything. You may have taken too much fever dope, and it's causing a ringing in your ears."

"Now," with heavy disgust. "Listen! There it goes again!"

"I heard it." That was Sergeant Brian's voice, hard and incisive, and Huger wished he sounded like that, or that he would have heard the sound before his wound in command. All of the six were hunched forward, listening raptly, when the Lieutenant stood up.

"Yes, Hurd. Now I hear it."

The whistle blew then, and they moved forward. Huger noticed the Sergeant had taken a post at the rear of the little file, and watched their back trail waver as they marched.

"What do you think it was, sir?"ucci inquired in the piping voice that sounded strange coming from his deep chest.

"The Lord knows," Huger answered, and wondered how many times he'd be using that phrase in the days to come. "Might have been some animal. They hadn't found any traces of intelligent life when we left the Base Camp."

BUT in the days that followed there was a new air of expectancy in the marches, as if their suspicions had solidified into a waiting for attack. They'd been moving forward for several days.

Huger saw the pack before any of his men did, and thanked his guiding star first for once he had been a little more alert than his gun-otiose members.

The canvas carrier had been set nearby against one of the buttressing roots of a giant tree hole and, from the collecting bottles strapped in efficient rows outside, Huger deduced that it belonged to Bernstein, the entomologist. The quantity offered looked and proved lack into the gloom off the trail, called Bernstein's name; and when there was no reply moved cautiously into the bushy shadows with his carbine ready. He sensed that Sergeant Brian was crouching behind him.

Then he saw the ghostly white beetle suspended six feet above the forest floor, and moved closer, calling Bernstein's name softly. The dim handle vibrated gently, and Huger saw that it hung from a giant white lattice radiating wheel-like from the green gloom above. He raised his hand to touch the cocoon thing, noted it was shaped like a man well-wrapped in some woody material, and on a sudden branch pulled his left hand and cut the fibers from what would be the head.

It was Bernstein suspended there, his long, white thread bobbing gently in the distance. His dark face was pallid in the gloom, motion and flicked of features, as though the joints had been sucked from his corpse, leaving it a limp mass.

The beetle's stick white strands vibrated—something moved across it overhead, and Huger flinched his lightbulb up into the darkness. Crouched twenty feet above him, two giant legs delicately testing the strands of an antler-like web, Huger saw the spider, its bulbous furrowed body fully four feet across, the creature's mental eyes glimmering fire-like in the glow of Huger's lightbulb, as it gathered the great legs slightly in the manner of a tarantula ready to leap.

Brian's sharp yell broke Huger from his frozen trance. He dove himself down as Brian's rifle cracked, and the giant arachnid was hatched in a blue-white flash of ex-

plaster light, its body tumbling down across the web onto Hagar where he lay in the mud. The officer's heavy rifle rang heavily while he pulled himself clear of the dead spider-beast, but he forced himself to quit at the sound of the Sergeant's cool voice.

"All clear, Lieutenant. It's dead."

"Okay, Brian, I'll be all right now," Hagar's voice droned, and he started the weakness of his feet, lancing himself to walk calmly without a glance over his shoulder until they were back on the trail. He led the other four gnomes back to the spider and Bernama's body, as a grim object lesson, warned them to leave the trail only in pairs. They returned their weary foot-slapping pace down the muddy creek marked by Clark's crew. When water had started to at the same steady pace, Hagar could still feel in the men's stiff clothes their horror of the thing Brian had killed.

HOURS, and then days, rolled past, dragging nightmare through which they plowed in mud and stony loam, with periodically once every eleven hours a breath-taking, pounding torrent of rain. Giant drops turned the air into an opaque misture that was almost unbreathable, and smacked against their faces until the skin was numb. When the rain stopped abruptly the heat came back and water vapor rose steaming from the mud they walked through; but always they walked, shoving one slogging foot ahead of the other through sucking black glop. Sometimes Bernama's burrower would whiffle ready air, and they would stop and talk for a time, but mostly they went forward in silence, faces drawn with fatigue and pain in the forest half light. Hagar looked down at his hands, swollen, bloody with insect bites, and painfully stiff; and wondered if he'd be able to bend them round his ration pan at the evening tub.

Hagar was pre-occupying at the rear of his little column, listening to an urgent account from Bernama of what his girl might expect when he saw her again. But, shoving occasionally to ease the pneumatic gun's barrel assembly across his shoulder, dined in with an exotic description of his little Wilson. The two had been married just before the Expedition blasted Yemond out of an Arizona desert. Casser was at the

front end, and his voice came back usually.

"Hey, Lieutenant, there's somebody sitting beside the trail."

"Okay, Hah." The Lieutenant moved quickly and trotted up to Casser's side. "What?"

"There. Against the big root."

Hagar moved forward, rifle at ready, and knew without looking that Sergeant Brian was at his shoulder, cool and self-sufficient as always.

"Who's there?" the officer croaked.

"It's me, Bernama."

Hagar motioned his party forward, and they gathered in a small circle about the Doctor, seated calmly beside the trail, with his back against a root flange.

"What's the matter, Doc? Did you want to see us?"

"No, Sewell seems to think you're all healthy. You had the main party sent as well off. Quite a lot of trouble with liver. And Bernama gone of course."

Hagar nodded, and remembered he'd reported Bernama's death to the Commander three nights before.

"How's the Commander?" he inquired.

The Doctor's crumpled face darkened.

"Not good. He's not a young man, and his feet and walking are wrecking his legs. And he won't take the task."

"Well, let's go, Doc." It was Brian's voice, cutting like a knife into Hagar's consciousness. The Doctor looked sad, and droop.

"Go ahead, huh, I'm just going to sit here for a while." He looked up and smiled weakly at the astonished faces, but his eyes were heavily determined.

"This is as far as I go, Sutter bin. We've no anti-moon that wants to work. All they can do is to amputate, and we can't afford another sick man." He pulled a nylon wrapper from one leg that sprawled at an awkward angle beneath him. The hard flesh was black, swollen, and had a gurgling sound. Young Casser turned away, and Hagar heard his retching.

"What did the Commander say?"

"He agreed this was best. I am going to die anyway."

"Well—will you be all right here? Does't you want us to wait with you?"

The Doctor's smile was weaker, and he

slipped at the rivets of perspiration streaking his mud-spattered face.

"No, I have an X-tended dosage and a hypodermic. I'll be here here, I will know what to do." His round face contorted. "Now, for God's sake, get on, and let me take that tablet. The pain is driving me crazy."

Hagar gave a curt order, and they got under way. A little further on the trail, he turned to survey at Barker Backstrom, but the little man was already invisible in forest shadows.

IT WILL be ten days after the crash of Patrol Barker Oso, unobtrusively known as the Baton Can, glimpses of daylight opened over the trail Clark's crew wore markings; and Hagar and his men found themselves suddenly in an opening where low, thick vines, and luminous, thick-leaved shrubs struggled viciously for life. Backstrom, the ecologist, slight whisp of a dark man always and almost a shadow more, stood wearily beside the trail waiting as they drew up. Their dark-framed eyes picked out details in the open ground dimly. Hagar greeted inwardly when he saw that this was a more old in the forest, and the great trees loomed again a hunched yard ahead. Backstrom seized Hagar by the shoulder and pointed into the thick mass of green, smiling.

"Watch, all of you."

He blew a shrill blast on his whistle and waited, while Hagar's gunners wondered and watched. There was a wild, silver call, a fluttering of wings, and two huge birds rose into the gold-lit air. They flapped up, lashed their wings, and glided, coasted, and whirled over the earth-stained forest of moss—two great white birds, with crests of the gold, plumage snowy gray where it was dotted with rose perfume. Their call was bell-like as they floated across the clearing in a golden haze of sunlight filtered through shrubs.

"They're—they're like angels." It was Backstrom, the high young instrumentalist.

"You've named them, soldier." Backstrom grinned. "You been trying for a name; and that's the best I've heard. Backstrom's angels they'll be. In Latin, of course."

Unfolding vistas of eternal ecological glory left Backstrom speechless and un-

happy. Sergeant Brian looks in.

"I guess they would have made those bats angels, Right, Lieutenant?" His voice, dry and a little patronizing, suggested that this was a poor waste of valuable marching time.

"I wouldn't know, Sergeant," Hagar answered, trying to keep his face out of his voice, but the momentary dull was broken out, with Backstrom beside him, Company Officer Hagar struck out on the trail that had been blazed and hacked through the clearing's wastes entanglement of greasy plant life.

As they crossed the clearing, Brian tripped and sprawled full length in the mud. When he tried to get up, the vine over which he'd stumbled clung with a sticky tenacity that would smother him right about his ankle, and, while heed, the rest of the men chopped him free of the oppressive thing with belt knives, hauled him the short wayward in his leg, and went on.

The clearing had one more secret to divulge, however. A movement in the forest edge caught Brian's eye and he motioned to Hagar, who followed him questioning as the Sergeant led him off trail. Brian pointed silently and Hagar saw Dickrickson, Sergeant in charge of Supplies, seated in the immemorial sunlight at the forest edge, an open food pack between his knees, trim which he snatched things and swallowed them voraciously, feeding like a wild dog.

"Dickrickson! Sergeant Dickrickson!" the Lieutenant yelled. "What are you doing?"

The supply man stared back, and Hagar knew from the man's face what had happened. He crouched warily, eyes wild with panic and jaw hanging foolishly slack. This was Dickrickson, the steady, efficient man who'd sat at the dining table the night they began this march. He had been the only man Duvlin thought competent and nerveless enough to handle the food. This was the same Dickrickson, and suddenly now from a March base, Hagar concluded grimly. The efficient man watched the food pack, staring at them in wild fear, and began to run back down the trail, back the way they'd come.

"Come back, Dickrickson. We've got to buy that food, you fool!"

The madman laughed crazily at the sound

of the officer's voice, glanced back for a moment, then spun and ran.

Sergeant Brian, as always, was ready. His rifle cracked, and the explosive rounds blew the running man nearly in half. Sergeant Brian calmly retrieved the food pack and swapped it back to Hagen.

"Do you want it here, Lieutenant, or shall I take it up to the main party?"

"We'll keep it here, Sergeant. I would not take it back tonight after our medical check," Hagen's voice droned, and he walked wearily that he could have had the nerve to pass that man's death sentence. Ditch-dug crime was dangerous to every member of the party, and the Sergeant had been right to shoot. But when the time came—when perhaps the Sergeant wasn't with him—would he, Hagen, react swiftly and surely as an officer should, he wondered despairingly?

"All right, look, let's pull," he said, and the night lipped gun came flung again into the locked, numbered door corridors.

II

COMMUNICATIONS TECHNICIAN HARKER took a deep pull at his mug of morning coffee, checked his eyes hard at the revolving disk before him, and lit a cigarette. Distance warning center was never quiet, even now in the graveyard watch when all other lights were turned low through the great ship's hull. Here in the neat grey room, murmuring, whirring-sliding signal equipment was hauled against every wall in a gleaming array of dials and meters, heavy power leads, black panels, and intricate skeins of colored wire. The meter kept up a sleepy drone, and radar scopes glowed faintly with interference patterns, and the warning horn beeped softly as the radar echoed back to its receiver the rumble of strange planetary forces that make hulk's hull built to filter through. What made the interference, base technicians couldn't tell, but it practically paralyzed radio communication on all bands, and blundered out even radar warnings.

The cigarette burned his finger tips, and Harker jerked awake and tried to concentrate on the letter he was writing home. It would be cancelled, and go on the next

morning mail. A movement at the Warning Panel drew Harker's head up, and he saw Commander Chapman, lean and grey, standing there.

"Good evening, sir. Come on in. I've got coffee on." The Communications Technician made a pot from the glow heater at his elbow, and set out another cup.

The Commander walked slowly, pulled out a sturdy metal stool, and sat across the low table from Harker, sipping the scalding coffee cautiously. He looked up after a moment.

"What's the good word, Harker? Filled up anything?"

Harker ran his fingers through his mop of black hair, and grimaced.

"Not a speck, sir. No radio, no radar. Of course, the interference may be blanketing those. Causes a lot of false signals, too, on the radar screens. But we can't even pick 'em up with long-range scopes. That should get through. We're pretty sure they crashed, all right."

"How about our signals, Harker? Do you think we're getting through to them?"

Harker leaned back expansively, happy to respond to a query.

"Well, we've been sending radio signals every hour on the hour, and radar voice messages every hour on the half hour. We're sending a continuous meter beam for three direction-finders. That's about all we can do. As for their picking it up, assuming the meter has crashed and been totally knocked out, they still have a radio in the whipper tail. It's a transmitter. And they have a portable solar set, one of those little emergency-ported armored detection units. They'll see it as a direction finder."

Chapman twisted the coffee around in the bottom of his cup and stared thoughtfully into it.

"If they can get消息, why can't we send them messages down the power beam? You know, flick it on and off in Morse code?"

"It won't work with a small detector like they have, sir. With our big old beam, we could send them a message, but then once they have sight beam set, it has a limited needed meter supply that must break down an initial current resistance on the grid before the receiver can convert it to audible

wood. With the set operating continuously, power drainage is small, but begins changing your signal beam and the power has to break down the grid resistance several hundred times for every short signal sent. It would burn out their set in a matter of hours.

"It works like a slide trombone, sort of. Run your slide way out, and you get a slowly vibrating column of air, and that is heard as a low note, only on some it would be a short note. Run your slide way up, and the vibrations are progressively faster and higher in pitch. The same set, at peak, is vibrating so rapidly that it's almost static, and the power flow is actually continuous. But, starting and stopping the set continuously, the vibrator motor has a chance to reach a normal peak, and the power flow is broken at each vibration in the receiver—and a few hours later your solar receptor is a tank of junk."

"All right, Harker. Your discussion is vague, but I get the general idea that my suggestion won't see far. Well, have whoever is on duty call me if any signals come through." The Commander set down his cup, laid good night, and moved off down the locked corridor. Harker returned to his letter and a checked stack of pencil, while he scoured in a favored square of composition. It was a letter to his girl, and it had to be good.

NIGHT had begun to fall over the forest roof, and mist thickening down the muddy collateral sides of great trees, and Hagar looked hopefully for the halt signal from the whippet tank, which should come soon. He was worried about Hagar who was laughing and talking vaguely, and the officer decided he must have a touch of fever. The dark, monotonous games kept talking about his young wife as what was almost a habit. Once he staggered and nearly fell, and Hagar took the pneumatic gun barrel assembly and carried it on his own shoulders. They were all listening expectantly for the tank's blower, when a heavy stream rapped the evening to rolling clouds and a flurry of stars broke out ahead.

The stream came again, metallic and dull as a locomotive gives away; pale, explosive-bullet reports, and the sound of

hammering blows drifted back.

"Take over, Brian," Hagar stopped. "Cross, Hard—let's go!"

The three men ran at a stagger through the dragging mud around a tree in the trail, and dropped the pneumatic gun swiftly into place. Hard at firing position, Cross on the charger, and Hagar joined in the firing stopping an ammunition belt into the loader.

Two emergency flares some cost had thrown in the trail ahead in a garish photographic fantasy of bright, white light and ink-black shadow, a scene out of Inferno. A cart lay on its side, men were running clear, the whippet tank lay spinning on its side, and above it tumbled the waiting thing. A lizard, or dinosaur, rising up thirty feet, scaly grey, a man charred as its two hand-like claws, while its rounded tail swished and cracked at the tank with pole-driver blows. Explosive bullets cracked around the thing's chest in blue white flares of light, but it continued to rip at the man twisting pygmy-like in its claws—white teeth glancing like salmon as its blindly multi-colored screams went on.

"On target," Hard's voice came strained and low.

"Change us," from Cross.

"Let her go!" Hagar yelled, and let APF cartridges as the gun coughed a burst of armor-piercing, explosive shells into the rearing beast. Hagar saw the tank have swung up as Whitaker tried to get his gun in action, but a slapping slap of the monster's tail spun it back brokenly. The cluster of pneumatic shells hit them and burst within that body, and the great grey-skinned tank was hurled off the road, the head clapping against a tree trunk on the other side as the reptile was halved.

"Good shooting, Cross," Hagar granted. "Get back with Brian. Keep the gun ready. That thing might have a man." He ran toward the main party, and into the glare of the two flares.

"Where's Devlin?"

Clark, the navigation officer, was standing with a small handful of men near the stranded supply cart.

"Here, Hagar," he called. His eyes were empty, his face colder in the days since Hagar had last seen him. Devlin's dead,

smashed between the tent and a tree trunk. "We've lost two men, Commander Devlin and Ellis, the suit man. He's the one it was eating." He grinned.

"That leaves twenty-three of us!" Hagar inquired, and tried to sound casual.

"That's right. You'll continue to cover the tent. Those four wounds you repaired had Devlin worried about an attack from your direction. I'll be with the tank."

Sergeant Brian was actually leading action now over the cook unit when Hagar returned, while the crew sat in a close circle, absently eyeing curiously the forest at their backs, and the anxiety strain that rose from Brian's mischiefs. There wasn't much for each of them, but it was hot and highly nutritious, and after a cigarette and coffee they would feel comfort for a while.

Cross, seated on the grey metal charger tube he'd carried all day, lit up the latter in his lap, and looked inquiringly at the Lieutenant.

"Well, sir, anybody hurt? Was the tank smothered?"

Hagar squatted in the circle, sniffed the air with local enthusiasm, and looked about the circle.

"Commander Devlin's dead, and Ellis. One supply can smashed, but the tank'll be all right. The lizard charged the tank. Balziczer thinks it was the lizard's stinging stings, and he figured the tank was almost smothered and he tried to fight it. Then he stopped — in — touch and we got him. Lieutenant Clark is in command now."

The orange glow of Brian's cook unit painted queer shadows on the smothered form around him, and Hagar tried to brighten them up.

"Will you favor us with one of your inimitable barmanian arrangements, Master Barman?"

"I can't right now. I'm bandaging Helen's wing." He held out something in the palm of his hand, and the lizard's glow glinted on liquid black eyes. "She's like a little bird, but without her brothers, isn't?" He placed the warm lump in Hagar's hand. "Her wings, she's just got skin, like a bat, except she's built like a bird."

"You ought to show this to Balziczer, and maybe he'll name this for you too."

Barman's heavily face creased into a

grim. "I did, sir. At the same hole when I found it. It's named after my girl. 'Barman's Helen', only in Latin. Helen's got a broken wing."

AS THEY ATE, they heard the boom now again. Brian's black eyes were feverishly bright, his skin hot and dry, and the vice scratches on his leg badly inflamed, and when the tent began to ring he was quiet. The steady song of Barman's barmanian piped down the quiet forest passages, and returned back from the great trees, and somewhere, as Hagar stared off in his little tent, he heard the boom once again, undivided into mouth organ melody.

Two days of slugging through the slimy green mud, and at a noon hole Sewall brought back word to be careful, that a man had failed to report it well, and that morning. The gun crew divided Brian's equipment between them, and he leaped in the middle of the life on crutches fastened from ration can wreckage. Cross, who'd been glancing off curiously, like a witness, sat, hung up his tent in a silent signal to halt, and Hagar moved in to investigate, the ever present Brian moving carefully and with jungle bear's silent pain just behind him. Crumpled like a sack of damp laundry, in the mark of two men buttworn, lay Barman, one of the two photographers. His Hasselblad camera lay beneath his body creating a small place he must have been photographing.

From the back of Barman's neck protruded a gleaming nine-inch arrow shaft, a lovely thing of gleaming bone-like metal, delicately thin of shaft and with fragile hammered bronze vane. Brian moved up behind Hagar, bent over the body and cut the arrow free.

They examined the thing, and when Brian spoke Hagar was surprised that this time even the rock-steady Sergeant spoke in a hoarse voice, the kind boys use when they walk by a graveyard at night and don't wish to attract unwholesome attention.

"Looks like it came from a blowgun, Lieutenant. Not the plug at the back. It must be poisoned. It's not big enough to kill him otherwise."

Hagar grunted assent, and the two moved back toward,

"Brian, take over. Cross, come on. We'll repeat this to Clark. Remember, from now on wear your body armor and go in pairs when you leave the wall. Get Brian's place on to him."

Bourman and Hood sat down their loads, and went bucking the weakly protesting Hood into his chair and back plates, as Hagar left them.

COMMANDER CHAPMAN stood at the circle of faces. His serious countenance beamed about his top square chin.

"Well, then, what are their chances?"

Bourman, executive for the technical section, stood at Chapman levelly.

"I can vouch for Devlin. He's not precisely a rule-book officer, but that's why I recommended him for this expedition. He's at his best in an unusual situation, one where he has to depend on his own wits. He'll bring them through."

Anti-freeman Branch spoke in turn. "I don't know about Hagar. He's young, untried. Seemed a little nervous. He might grow panicky and be useless. I got him because there was no one else, unless I went myself."

The Commander cleared his throat hesitantly. "I know you wanted to go, Branch, but we can't send out our executive officers. Not yet, anyway. What about Clark? Could he take over Devlin's job?"

"Clark can handle it," Captain Binkell of the Science Section, was saying. "He likes to follow the rule book, but he's steady stuff. He'll bring them through if something happens to Devlin."

Bourman—that leaves Hagar as the one questionable link in their chain of command. Young man, untried. Of course, he's only the junior officer. There's no one growing over this, but I'll tell you frankly, that if those men can't get their records through to us before we send the next courier rocket to earth, I think the U.S. Rocket Service is finished. This attempt will be chaffed up as a failure. The project will be abandoned entirely, and we'll be ordered back to earth to serve as a fighter arm team."

Bourman peered from the space-port window and looked out over the clutter-packed parade a hundred feet below. "What makes

you so sure the Rocket Service is in immediate danger of being scrapped?"

The last courier rocket contained a confidential message from Secretary Dougherty. There is considerable war talk, and the other Service Arms are planning for large armaments. They want their appropriations of money and stock pile materials expended at once, except, "We've got to show that we are doing a good job, show the Government a creditable return in the form of adequate reports on the surface of Venus, and its soils and raw materials."

"What about the 'copter' Binkell inquired. "They brought in some good stuff for the reports."

"Yes, but with a crew of only four men, they can't do enough."

Branch cut in dryly. "About all I can see is to look hopeful. The Rocket would have exhausted its fuel long ago. It's been over ten weeks since they left base."

"Assuming they're marching overhead, God forbid, they'll have only solar and radio, right?" Bourman was saying. "Why not keep our klaxon going? It's a pretty faint hope, but we'll have to try everything. My section is keeping the klaxons manned continually, we've got a gear from our radio messages every thirty minutes, and with the klaxon we're doing all we can. I doubt if anything living could approach within a twenty-five mile range without hearing that klaxon, or without us hearing them with the listeners."

"All right," Commander Chapman stated hopefully at a fresh batch of reports burrowing his desk. "Send out ground parties within the ten mile limit, but remember we can't afford to lose men. When the 'copter' are back in, send them both West." What meant steady in a direction west from Meridian 0, as the mother rocket's landing place had been designated. "They can't do much searching over that rainforest, but it's a try. They might pick up a radio message."

Chapman returned grumpily to his reports, and the others filed out.

III

AT NIGHT, on guard, Hagar saw a thousand horrid peeping the Slogian faces at work, but when he flashed his lightbulb

into darkness there was nothing. He wondered how long he could stand the waiting, when he would catch up Supply Sergeant Deibachman's hat, and his comrades would blast him down with explosive bullets. He should be like Brian, hard and sure, and always doing the right thing, he decided. He'd come out of OCS Gentry School, trained briefly in the newly-formed U.S. Rocket Service. Then the expedition to Venus—it was it was a fifty-fifty chance they said, and out of all the volunteers he'd been picked. And when the first expedition was ready to blast off from the Base Camp on Venus, he'd been picked again. Why, he cursed despairingly? Sure, he wanted to come, but how could his commanders have had faith in him, when he didn't know himself if he could continue to hold out.

Search on the trail sent his machine automatically to ready, and he called a strained, "Huh."

"Okay, Hager. It's Clark and Amsh."

The very little navigation officer, and lean, straggly Sergeant Amsh, the latter's arm still in a sling, came into the glow of Hager's flashlight.

"Any more horns or arrows?" Clark's voice sounded tight, and apologetic. Hager collected that perhaps the strain was getting him too.

"Yes, but Becci is getting worse. Can't you carry him on the cart?"

"Hager, I've told you twenty times. That cart is full and breaking down now. Get it through your head that it's no longer individual men we can think of now, but the entire party. If they can't march, they must be left, or all of us may die!" His voice was straggly, and when he tried to light a cigarette his hand shook. "All right, it's your call, and I don't like it any better than you do."

"How are we doing? What's the over-all picture?" Both of the officers tried to smile a little at the memory of that pompous little phrase, favorite of a winding they'd arrived under.

"Not good. Twenty-two of us now."

"Mirsky thinks we may be within radio range of Base now," he continued more hopefully. "With this interference, we can't tell, though."

They walked a little longer, Amsh gave

the gunnery officer a food and medical supply packet, and Hager's vision became two blinding gloves of light that vanished down the trail.

A real crushing weight of days passed while they staided forward through mud and green gloom, like men walking on a frozen sea bottom. Then it was a real dawn, and a rapping at his back woke the Lieutenant. Hurd, his face a strained mask, was peering into the officer's small shelter tent and jerking at his leg.

"Get awake, Lieutenant, I think they're here."

Hager struggled hard to blink off the off-handed sleep he'd been in.

"Listen, Lieutenant, one of them horns has been blowing. It's right here. Between us and the main party."

"Okay," Hager rolled swiftly from the tent as Hurd made the men. Hager moved swiftly to work.

"Brian, you handle the gun. Becci, leader. Cross, charger. Bornman, cover our right. Blast the hell. I'll watch the trail ahead."

Brian and Cross worked swiftly and quietly with the lethal efficiency that had made them crack gunners at Fort Fisher, North Carolina. Becci lay motionless at the ammunition box, but his eyes were bright, and he didn't seem to mind his forehead, swollen leg. The Sergeant and Cross dove the pneumatic gun to cover their back trail, and fell into position beside the gleaming gas tube. Hager, Bornman and Hurd moved quickly in staking tents and rolling packs, their rifles ready at hand.

Hager had forgotten his fears and the self-doubt, the feeling that he had no business ordering men like Sergeant Brian, and Hurd and Bornman. They were swallowed in intense expectancy as he lay watching the dawn fog that obscured the thick under the trail that led to Clark's party and the whopper tent.

He peered back over his shoulder for a moment. Brian, Becci, and Cross, well-stained backs toward him, were checking the gun and murmuring soft comments. Bornman looked at the officer, grinned tightly, and pointed at Hurd perched on his shoulder. His lips carefully framed the words. "Er a pasterov, Helen brings back."

The little bird peered up into Bornman's

old-fashioned face, and Hagen, trying to grin back, hoped he looked confident. Blood lay on the other side of the trail, his back to Bornans, peering over his rifle barrel, bearded jaw, rhythmically working a coil of tobacco he'd salvaged somewhere, and Hagen suddenly thought he must have been saving it for the birds.

Hagen looked back into the green light beginning to penetrate the trail fog, changing it into a glowing mass—then thought he saw a movement. Up the trail, the whipper-snapper's mouse crouched with a roar, and he heard Whitaker traversing the battered tank's turret. The turret gun boomed flatly, and a shell burst somewhere in the dense darkness to Hagen's right.

Then there was a gibbling yell and gray man-like figures poured out onto the trail. Hagen set his sights on them, the black sight-hole silhouetting sharply in the glowing fog. He set them on a running figure, and squeezed his trigger, then again, and again, so new targets came. Sharp reports ran crackling among the great trees. Sharp screams came, and a whistling sound overlaid that he knew were blown-up arrows. The pneumatic gun spat once behind him, and Bornans's and Hurd's rifles clicked in the growing roar.

Blue flashes and explosive bullets made fantastic flares back in the forest shadows, and suddenly a host of man-shapes were running toward him through the fog. Hagen picked out one in the glowing mist, fired, another, fired. Gibbling yells were around him, and he shot toward them through the fog, at point-black range. A thing rose up beside him, and Hagen yelled with murderous fury, and drove his left-knife up into your leader's chin. Something bounded his shoulder as he rolled aside and fired at the dark form standing over him with a point, backed apart. The blue-white flash was blinding, and he crouched and frayed up.

There was nothing more. Scattered dots, and the forest lay quiet again. After that they at point-black range, Hagen's vision had blurred out.

"Any one else need first aid?" he called, and tried to keep his voice firm. When there was silence, he said, "Hurd, lead me to the tank."

He heard the rat-faced man choke. "He

God, he's blind."

"Just flash blindness, Hurd. Only temporary." Hagen kept his face still, and hoped frantically that he was right, that it was just temporary blindness, temporary optical shock.

Sergeant Brian's icy voice cut in. "Clark's all right, Lieutenant. Nobody hurt. We had twenty-eight rounds of R.E. No A.F.X. Got going with him, Hurd."

He hit Hurd's leg at his elbow, and they made their way up the trail.

"What do they look like, Hurd?"

"These mousies? They're gray, about my size, skin looks like leather, and their heads are flatish. Eyes on the side of their heads, like a lizard. Men a stack of clothes. Just a hole with a knife and arrow holder. And they got webbed claws for feet. They're ugly looking things, sir, Herr's the best."

Clark's voice came, hard and clear. "That you, Hagen?" Silence for a moment.

"What's wrong? You're not blinded?"

Swell had stopped his machine, and his voice was steady and kindly.

"Just flash blindness, isn't it, sir? This mousie will fix you up. You've got a cut on your shoulder, I'll take care of that too."

"How are your men, Hagen?" Clark sounded as though he were standing beside Hagen.

"Not a scratch. We're ready to march."

"Five hurt here, three with the advance party, and two at the tank. We got 'em good, though. They hit the trail between our units and got 'em from both sides. Must be twenty of them dead."

Hagen grimaced at the sting of something Swell had spat into his eye.

"Who was hurt?"

"Archie, the geologist, his buddy, Galat, the botanist, his technician Harker, Crossman Dwyer, and Satchel, the moonlighting man. How's your pneumatic ammunition?"

"We fired twenty-eight rounds of R.E."

Cartographer Maudsley's voice burst in suddenly.

"That gun crew of yours! Your gun crew got twenty-one of them—these blind men. A bunch came up near back trail, and the pneumatic cut them to pieces."

"Good going, Hagen. We'll leave you extended back there. I'm pulling in the advance party, and there'll be just two groups

"We'll be at post, and you continue at fiftyyard." Clark was silent for a moment, then his voice came hoarsely. "We're down to seventeen men, you know."

He cursed, and Hagar tossed the tiny little navigator dead away through the mud and began shouting orders. He and Bacci started back with Whitaker and Sergeant Sample yelling wild instructions from the tank as to what the rear guard might do with the next batch of hired men who came marching up.

Hagar's vision was clearing, and he saw Balicoveri and the photographer Whitcomb through a milky haze, measuring, photographing, and even dissecting several of the live-tanks. The tank trail, deep by progressive gouging was a wreck of wood splinters and crushed trees, crushed bodies, and crushed work.

They broke down the gas, hauled the equipment, and swung off as the sound of Clark's whistle. Bacci had to be supported between two of the others, and they took themselves at the job, shoving through the water and mud, with Bacci's one swallow leg dragging uselessly between them. It was pushing work as the line waltz discovered and thickened, but no one seemed to consider leaving him behind. Hagar noticed, and he determined to say nothing about Clark's orders that the tank must be abandoned.

Days and nights flashed by in a dreary succession of mud, heat, insects and thinning rations. Then one morning the giant tank began to thin, and they passed from raincoat into jungle.

The change was too late for Bacci. They curved a new marker beside the trail, and set the dead post's better stop it. Lieutenant Hagar carried about a strapped letter in his shirt, with instructions to forward it to Wilma, the general's young wife.

Hagar and his four gunners followed the rattling whipper tank's trail higher, the jungle fell behind, and their protruding legs carried them over the rim of a high, dead-sweep plateau, that swept on to the limit of waste on both sides and ahead.

THE city's black walls sported secretive-ly; foursquare, black, glassy walls with a blocky tower set steadily at each of the

four corners, enclosing what appeared to be a square mile of low buildings. Gray fog whipped wildly across the flat blackness and melted through dark grass.

Balicoveri, plodding beside Hagar at the rear, stared at it warily, muttering, "And Charlie Roland to the dark tower come."

Sample's tank ground along the base of the twelve-foot wall, turned at a sharp right angle, and the party filed through a square air opening that once had been a gate. The black city looked seamless. There was dark-leaved grass growing in the misted streets and squares, and across the fronts of cube-shaped, neatly aligned dwellings, fattened of black, black blocks. Hagar could hear nothing but whipping wind, the tank's clatter, and the quiet clink of equipment as men shuffled ahead through the knee-high grass, peering warily into dark doorways.

Clark's whistle whirled, the tank motor died, and they waited.

"Hagar, come ahead."

The gunnery officer nodded at Sergeant Brian, and walked swiftly to Clark, who was leaning against the tank's mottled side.

"Sample says we've got to make repairs on the tank. We'll stoker here, let your gun on a roof top commanding the street—we, better yet, set it on the wall. I'll wait two of your gunners to go hunting first minute."

"What do you think this place is, Bob?"

"Here me," and the navigator's wind-burned face twisted in a perplexed expression. "Latterno knows more about metals, but he thinks this case is volcanic, like situation. Those hired men couldn't have built it."

"We passed some kind of barrier or mounds inside the gate."

"Whitcomb is going to photograph them. Bacci, Larkman, Johnson, and Nichols are going to explore the place. Your two gunners, and Carawan, Saccaron and Balicoveri will form the rear hunting party."

For five days, Hagar and Connor walked over the white plates beneath smoldering, broken clouds, hunting little lizards that resembled dinosaurs and tin in covers like grey chickens. The moon was good, and

Sewell dropped his role of medical technician to achieve glowing accolades as an expert cook. Balatzeri was in a biologist's position, and he hunted over the windy plain with Swenson, the big white-tailed hawk, for ten and twelve hours at a stretch. Balatzeri would sit in the cook's unit glow at night, his thin face autistic as he described the weird life forms he and Swenson had tracked down during the day; or alternately he'd become the necessity of eating what was to him profane zoological specimens.

Whitaker and Hapner hunched in the maintenance tank's bowels and shouted aloud remarks to anyone nearby, until they occupied the dead day, gray-rained and perplexing, to announce that "She's ready to roll her p— d— drive off."

Whitaker had been rousing the tank's radio transceiver beside the forward hatch this gray afternoon, when his wild yell brought Hapner eyes. The officer carefully handed Swenson's skin bird back to the gunner, swung down from the city wall's edge, and sat to Whitaker's side. Clark was already there when Hapner reached the tank.

"Listen I've got 'em!" Whitaker yelped and extended the crackling explosion to Clark.

A busy noise penetrated the interference.
 "Base . . . Peter One . . . Do you hear . . . in George Easy Peter One . . . base me . . . out."

Whitaker snapped on his throat microphone.

"George Easy Peter One To Base, George Easy Peter One To Base. We hear you. We hear you. Radio contact. Radio contact. Returning overhead. Returning overhead. Please, strength status men. Can you drop us supplies? Can you drop us supplies?"

The responses scattered, but no more voices came through. Clark's excited face fell into tired lines.

"We're lost here. Keep trying, Whitaker. Hapner, we'll search-order someone at dawn. You'll take the rear again."

GRAY, windy dawnlight brought them out to the sound of Clark's call. Strapping on equipment and plates, they assemb-

led around the tank. They were sootied, and full fed.

"Walk, you poor devils," Whitaker was yelling from his tank turret. "And, if you get tired, run outside," he sneered, grinning heartily, as he leaned back in pattered luxury against the gunner's seat, a thinly pulled metal strip.

Balatzeri and the blond Swenson considered their rifles and shuffled out. They would move well in advance as scouts.

"I wouldn't ride in that armored aluminum shell if it had a button home," Head was screaming at Whitaker, and heeled a well-placed mudball at the tankman's head as the tank motor caught, and the metal vehicle lumbered ahead toward the gate, with Whitaker sneering, but with most of his head safely below the turret rim. Headly he marched Clark, his ragged uniform carefully scraped clean of mud, and with him Lindstrom, the metal man. Both carried rifles and wore half-empty bandoliers of blast cartridges.

The supply cart jolted behind the tank, and behind it sled Whitcomb with his camera; Sewell, the big, laconic medical technician; Johnson, cartographer Hondo, perusing absently the clip-board that held his map; Hahn, the trim and sported bacteriologist, brought up the rear. Hapner waited until they had disappeared through the gate cut sharply in the city's black wall, then he turned to his gun crew.

Sergeant Bolan, stunner as always, swung past, carrying the pneumatic hand assembly. Cross with the charger a post behind. Next, Swenson, whispering to Hahn who rode his shoulder piping throat calls. Last came Head, swagging past with jaws grinding steadily at that mysterious cut. Hapner sat a plateau over his shoulder at the diverted curve of black cubes, woodshed at the dark horizon of the plain, and followed Head.

The hours wore on as they swung across dark grass, through damp tangles of cloud, and faced into whipping, cold wind, eye narrowed against its sting. Hahn, squawking unsympathetically, crawled inside Swenson's shirt and rode with just his beaver bird-head protruding.

"Look at the big hole, Lindstrom," Head called above the wind.

Hard had dropped behind, and Hague called a halt to investigate Hard's feat, but as he tilted rapidly back, the tiny little man yuffed and pitched out of sight. Brian came running, and he and Hague peered over the edge of a funnel-shaped pit, from which Hard was trying to crawl. Each time he'd get a third of the way up the eight-foot slope, greasy soil would slide and he'd again be carried to the bottom.

"There are a few."

Brian pulled a bank of nylon line from his belt, shook out the snuff, and reeled an end into Hard's clawing hands. Hague and the Sergeant anchored themselves to the upper end and were preparing to haul, when Hague saw something more in the gravel beneath Hard's feet, at the funnel bottom, and saw a giant power emerging from beneath black gravel.

"Hard, look out!" he warned.

The little man, white-faced, threw himself aside as a giant beetle head erupted through the funnel bottom. The great pincers jaws fastened around Hard's waist as he struggled frantically up the pit's side. He began screaming when the beetle monster dragged him recklessly down, his distorted face flung up at them appealingly. Hague snatched at his rifle and brought it up. When the gun cracked, the pincers tightened on Hard's middle, and the little man was snipped in half. The blue-white flash and report of the explosive bullet flung back with Hard's distorted yells, the beetle rolled over on its back and the men below lay entangled at the pit bottom. Brian and Hague looked at each other in silent, blanked horror, then turned from the pit's edge and looked back to the above.

Burmann and Casper peered frantically across the white-tipped grass, and inspired in shouts when Hard was doing.

"He's dead, gone," Hague yelled angrily over the wind's whine. "Keep moving. We can't do anything. Keep going."

IV

AT 1415 HOURS Commander Tuckerton Harker slipped on the wet, blew over a transmitting switch, and disconnected the turbine aerial message.

"Base to George Easy Peter One . . .

Base to George Easy Peter One . . . Do you hear me, George Easy Peter One . . . Do you hear me, George Easy Peter One . . . reply please . . . reply please." Nothing came from his microphone, but bursts of crackling interference, until he tried the system again, and "George Easy Peter Two" said "George Easy Peter Three" repeated in. They were operating near the base.

He read "One" again, just in case.

"Base to George Easy Peter One . . .

Base to George Easy Peter One . . . Do you hear me . . . Do you hear me . . . mt."

A scratching whisper scolded over the microphone: Harker's face wore a strained look, but he quickly flung over a second switch and the scratching voice blazed over the station ship's entire address system. Men dropped their work throughout the great hall, and clustered around the speaker.

"George One . . . Base . . . hear you . . . water cracked . . . overhead . . . percent strength . . . supplies . . . drop supplies."

Interference sagged back and drowned the whispering voice, while through Odysseus' hull a tugged closer grew and gathered volume. Harker shut off the address system and strained over his crackling microphone, but nothing more came in response to his radio calls.

He glanced up and found the Warning Room jammed with technicians, armor section members, officers, men in laboratory smocks, or group overall, or spudon Rocket Service uniforms, watching intently his own strained face as he tried to get through. Commander Chapman looked laggard, and Harker remembered that someone had once said that Chapman's young sister was the wife of the medical lieutenant who'd gone out with Patrol Rocket One.

Harker finally pulled off the microphone reluctantly and set them on the table before him. "That's all. You heard everything they said over the P.A. system. Nothing more is coming through."

Night came, another day, night again, and they came finally to the planet's end and stood staring from a windy emplacement across an endless sea of misty forest far below, gray green under the continuous veil of lead-colored clouds. Hague, stand-

ing back a little, watched them. A thin line of ragged moon along the rim porting resoundingly out across that endless expanse for a gleam that might be the distant hull of Olympus, the mother ship. A damp wind flattered their eyes and plastered them against great bodies.

Clark and Sampson were conferring in silence.

"Will the tank make it down this grade?" Clark wanted to know.

"For once, Sergeant Sampson's mobile, merry face was grim.

"I don't know, but we'll sure try. Be ready to cut that cat loose if the tank starts to slip."

Drag ropes were fastened to the tank, a man stationed at the tank hitch, and Sampson went his tank lurching forward over the edge, and it started down at a steep angle. Hagar, holding a drag rope, set his heels and allowed the tank's weight to pull him forward near the rim; and the tank, ran, and steadily figures hanging to drag ropes began descending the steep gradient. Foreman, just ahead of the lieutenant, strained back at the rope and turned a light face over his shoulder.

"See's slipping faster!"

The tank was picking up speed, and Hagar heard the clack of gears as Sampson tried to fight the downward pull of gravity. Gears ground, and Sampson forced the whippet straight again, but the downward slide was increasing. Hagar was harnessed under Foreman, heels digging, and behind him he could hear Sergeant Brian cussing, struggling to keep his against the downward pull.

The tank covered sideways again, slipped, and Whitaker's white face popped from his harness.

"She's going," he screamed.

A drag rope parted. Clark sprang like a madman between tank and cart, and cut the hitch. The tank, with no longer sufficient restraining weight, pipped and slaw respectably forward, then rolled out and down, bounding, swaying as if in a slow motion film, clanking parts at each coming contact. It looked like a top below tank, still rolling and gathering speed, when Hagar saw Whitaker's body fly free, a tiny figure

fall at that distance, and the tank was lost to view when it bounced off a ledge and went floating down through space.

Clark signalled them forward, and they inched the supply cart downward on the drag ropes, legs trembling with strain, and their nerves clanking at the memory of Whitaker's shabby face peering from the falling tank. It was eight hours before they reached the bottom, cooling with exhaustion, set a guard, and tumbled into their shelter tents. Outside, Hagar could hear Clark pacing restlessly, trying to count himself that he'd been right to cut the tank free, that there'd been no chance to save Whitaker and Sampson when the tank began to slide.

Hagar lay in his little tent listening to the footsteps splash past in muddy Venusian soil, and was thankful that he hadn't had to make the decision. He'd been seeing three cigarettes in an officer's pocket, and he drew one carefully from the wrapping room, lit it, and inhaled deeply. Could he have done what Clark did—break that tank? He still didn't know when he took a last long-filling pull at the top shaft of cigarette and crushed it out carefully.

As dawn filtered through the cloud layers, they were setting shelter tents and building an equipment. Clark's face was a worn mask when he talked with Hagar, and his fingers shook over his pack bundles.

"There are sixteen of us. Six men will pull the supply cart, and six guard, in four hour shifts. You and I will alternate command of guard."

He was silent for a moment, then watched Hagar's face intently as he spoke again.

"It'll be a first grade mistake if any of us get through. Hagar, you—you know I had to cut that tank free." His voice rose nervously. "You know that? You're an officer."

"Yeah, I guess you did." Hagar couldn't say it any better, and he turned away and faced hardy with the bars, holding the portable Solar direction unit to the supply cart.

They moved off with Hagar leading into harness pulling the supply cart busily ahead. Clark stumbled joyfully at the head, with Blake, a lion, about great beauty

line, rife in hand. The cart came next with Hagar, Slocum, Sergeant Ross, Crane, Lockman and Sewall leaning in single file against its weight. At the rear marched photographer Whitcomb, Hirooka with his traps, and Belintari, each carrying a rifle. The big Swede Slocum was last in line, poking warily back into the rainforest shadows. The thirteen men wound Indian file from sight of the feathered reptilian thing, clutching a shaft of bronze arrow, that watched them.

HAGAR had lost count of days again when he looked up into the shadowy haze that, his feet finding their way unconsciously through the thin mud, his ears registering automatically the murmurs of talk behind him, the supply cart's rattled creaking, and the continuous Sona's drone. The air felt different, warmer than its usual moist lush heat, drier and charged with expectancy, and the forest seemed to crouch in waiting with the repressed silence of a hunting cat.

Crane yelled thinly from the rear of the file, and they all halted in lines, the leading crew dropping their burdens thankfully. Hagar turned back and saw Crane's thin arm waving a rifle overhead, then pointing down the trail. The lieutenant looked carefully until he caught the sound, a thin coil, the sound of a lion muffled by distance.

The men unthinkingly moved in close and threw wary looks into the forest ways around them.

"Move further ahead, Hagar. Must be some lizard man." Clark swore, with tired despair. "All right, let's get moving and make it fast."

The cart creaked ahead again, moving faster this time, and the cackling of rifle bolts came to Hagar. He moved warily about on the trail and glanced up again, saw tracks in the forest wall, and realized that the huge trees were pitching wildly for above.

"Look up," he yelled, "wind coming!"

The wind came suddenly, striking with stone wall solidity. Hagar sprang to the cart, and the struggling body of man washed it off the trail, and laid a hasty trail of two great tree roots, leading it

there with nylon ropes. The wind velocity increased, snapping tree branches overhead, and ripping at the men who lay with their heads well down in the mud. Tiny animals were blown huffing past, and once a great spider came falling in cartwheel fashion, then smashed brokenly against a tree.

The wind drove east in volume, the air darkened, and Hagar lost sight of the other men from behind his knitted shiver against a wall-like mass. The great trees twisted with grinding protest, and three-drum strokes came downwind through the forest, with sometimes the faint squeak of a dying or frightened animal. The wind halted for a breathless, hushed moment of utter stillness, broken only by the dropping of limbs and the scurry of small life forms—then came the screaming fury from the opposite direction.

For a moment, the gunnery officer thought he'd be torn from the cart to which his clawing fingers clung. He braced faster, smothered breath into Hagar's lungs, and held him pinned in his corner until he struggled choking for air as a drowning man does. It seemed that he couldn't draw breath, that the air was a solid mass from which he could no longer get life. Then the wind stopped so suddenly as it had come, leaving dazed quiet. As he stumbled back to the cart, Hagar saw crouched beneath a thigh-sized limb a huddling moving reptilian head, and the dying eyes of the lizard-man were still able to stare at him in cold indifference.

The supply cart was still intact, roped between buttressing roots to hold limbs driven into the tough wood. Hagar and Clark freed it, rolled a heavy coil, and the march was resumed at a fast pace through moist, clammy air. They could no longer hear lion sounds, but the grim knowledge that lizard-men were near them lent strength, and Hagar led as rapidly as he dared, listening carefully to the Sona's drone behind him, altering his course when the sound faded, and straightening out when it grew in volume.

A day slipped by and another, and the cart rolled ahead through thin green mist on the forest floor, with the Sona's drone mingled with murmuring men's voices talk-

ing of food. It was the universal topic, and they carefully worked out geological notes each would engage when they reached home. They talked about, insect bites, the mopping humidity, and talked of food—steaming meats, flanked by crystal goblets of red wine, oily roasted nuts, and fresh, crisp green salads.

V

HAGUE, again marching ahead with Balistoni, broke into the comparatively bright clearing, and was blinded for a moment by the sudden, dust-stained light after days of forest darkness. As their eyes accommodated to the lemon-colored glare, he and Balistoni sighted the animals squatting beneath low bushes that grew thickly in the clearing. They were monkey-like primates with golden monkey coats, a rickshaw crest of white flaring above dog ears. The monkeys stared a moment, the great white crests ciling doubtfully, every canine tooth fully three inches long bared.

They'd been feeding on fruit that dotted the shrub-filled clearing, but now one screamed a warning, and they sprang into vines that made a matted wall on every side. The two sides cracked together again, and they hastily colored bodies lay quiet, while the rest of the troop fled screaming into the tops and disappeared. At the blast of sound, a flaming kaleidoscope of color swept up above the matted crevasses, and they stood blinded, while mad wheels of color whirled around them in a miniature storm.

"Giant butterflies," Balistoni was screaming in ecstasy. "Look at them! Big as a deer!"

Hague watched the bright insects color like into one agitated mass of vermilion, azure, metallic green, and sulphur yellow twenty feet overhead. The pulsating mass of host resolved itself into single insects, with wings large as dinnerplates, and they started out of sight over the forest roof.

"What were they?" he queried of Balistoni. "Going to name them after Beermann?"

The slight zoologist still watched the spot where they'd vanished.

"Does it matter much what I call them?"

"Do you really believe anyone will ever be able to read this logbook I'm making?" He eyed the gummy silver blades, then. "Well, come on. We'd better skin these monkeys. They're food anyway."

Hague followed Balistoni, and they stood looking down at the golden furred primates. The zoologist took, slipped a long-legged white coat, and remarked, "These blue cartridges don't leave much room, do they? Hardly enough for the whole party." He pulled a tin metal block, with a lens and dial, from his pocket, looped the block through a tendon in the monkey's leg and lifted the dead animal.

"Hinson, four-seven pounds, the best." He weighed each in turn, made accurate notes, and stored them in his pocket near his.

The circle around Swell, who pointed over the creek unit, was merry that night. The men's eyes were bright in the lantern glow as they studied their straggling specimens with monkey ears and the fruits the monkeys had been eating when Hague and Balistoni surprised them. Beermann and Crane and Whitcomb, the photographer, overate and were violently sick; but the others sat poking their sticks constantly in a close circle. Beermann pulled his harmonica from his shirt pocket, and the band, silvery scores of music set them to singing merrily. Hague and Fisher, the bacteriologist, stood guard among the trees.

At dawn, they were marching again, stepping more briskly over dry creeks, through green-tinted mud, and the wet forest. At noon, they heard the howl again, and Clark colored silence and a faster pace. They swung merrily, eating iron rations as they marched. Hague leaned into his cart harness and watched preparation staining through Beermann's striped back just ahead of him. Behind, Sergeant Brown tugged manfully, and gawped under his brows at boxing insects, clapping occasionally with a low level of mused anger. Fisher, the skin bird, made on Beermann's shoulder, staring back into Hague's face with open-mouthed chirp; and Hague was whistling softly between his teeth at her, when Beermann stopped suddenly and Hague slumped into him. Fisher took flight with a scurried squawk, and Clark came loyally

back in demand quiet. Bornmann stared at the two officers, his young-old face blank with surprise.

"Yes, I'm shot," he stammered, and stared wondrously at the thing thrusting from the side opening in his chest armor. It was one of the fragile bronze arrows, glowing eerily in the forest gloom.

Hague roared, and jerked free of the car harness.

"Here, I'll get it free." He tugged at the shaft, and Bornmann's face twisted. Hague stopped back. "Where's Sewell? This thing must be barbed."

"Back off the trail! Form a wide circle around the car, but stay under cover! Fight 'em on their own ground!" Clark was yelling, and the men clustered about the car faked into forest corridors.

Hague and Sewell, left alone, dragged Bornmann's limp length beneath the metal car. Hague leaped erect again, man-handled the pneumatic gun off the car and went the trail, upon the charge cranks, and lay down in firing position. Behind him, Sewell groaned. "He's gone. Arrow points must have paralyzed his diaphragm and chest muscles."

"Okay. Get up here and handle the ammunition." Hague's face was as gray as the medical technician crawled into position beside him and opened an ammunition canister.

"Watch the trail behind me," Hague cautioned, jamming up the top cover plate and jacking a belt through the pneumatic breach. "When I yell charge, spin the charge cranks, and when I yell off a number, set the timer arrow at that number." He swapped the cover plate shut and locked it.

"The other way! They're coming the other way!" Sewell hurled to his knees, and the two heaved the gun around. A blizzard arrow whirled off the car body above them, and gubbling yells issued among the trees with an increasing crash of explosive cartridges. A screaming hail of gray figures came sprinting down on the car. Hague sprayed the pneumatic's trigger, the gun coughed, and blue-fire-lit round fired men crumpled in the trail mud.

"Okay, give 'em a few the other way."

The two men heaved the gun around and sent a burning flock of explosive leads down the forest corridor opening ahead of the car. They began firing carefully down other corridors opening off the trail, aiming deliberately low; their machine exploded too close and the concussion killed their own men; but they worked a blasting circle of destruction that smacked the great trees back in the forest and made openings in the forest roof. Blue fire flared in the shadows and from weird tabernacles of screaming lizard-men and hunting moat, leeches, and great splinters of wood.

An echoing yell burst behind them. Hague saw Sewell stare over his shoulder, face contorted, then the big medical technician sprang to his feet. Hague rolled hard, pulling his belt knife, and saw Sewell and a gray man-shaped leech in combat above him, saw leafy gray claws drive a barbed knife into the medic's unarmored throat, and then the gunnery officer was on his feet, knife clacking, and the lizard-man fell across the prone Sewell. An almost audible silence fell over the forest, and Hague saw Barkstover filtering back onto the car trail, rifle cautiously extended in study.

"Where's Clark?" he asked Ledwren. The gray-haired metals man gazed back dully.

"I haven't seen him since we left the trail. I was with Swenson."

The others moved in, and Hague listed the casualties, Sewell, Bornmann, and Lieutenant Clark. Gunnery Officer Clarence Hague was now in command. That the Junior Lieutenant now commanded Ground Expeditionary Patrol Number One bridled into his still numb brain, and he wondered for a moment what the Base Commander would think of their chance if he knew. Then he took stock of his little command.

There was young Cross, his face twitching nervously. There was Blight, the tall, spare bacteriologist; Ledwren, the morose, shaggy Haroba; the Nivet, Balistorev; Wilkcock, the photographer, with a battered Hasselblad still dangling by its neck next against his unarmored chest; Swenson was still there, the big Struck crewman, and impeccable Sergeant Brian, who was now

calmly checking the pneumatic gun's loading mechanism. And, Hain, Bornann's skin bird, fluttering near the ration cart, beneath which Bornann and Sewall lay in the trail.

"Cross, Larkspur, bustle detail. Get going." It was Hagen's first order as Commander. He thought the two leading mount workhorses of the party, and figured digging might loosen their nerves.

Cross stared at him, and then set valdely against a tree hole.

"I'm not going to dig. I'm not going to march. This is camp. We're going to get killed. I'll wait for it right here. Why do we keep walking and walking when we're going to die anyway?" His rising voice cracked, and he burst into hysterical laughter. Sergeant Brian rose quickly from his gun clearing, jerked Cross to his feet, and slapped him into quiet. Then he turned to Hagen.

"Well, I take charge of the bustle detail, sir."

Hagen nodded, and suddenly his long double of the iron-hard Sergeant melted into warm liking and admiration. Brian was the man who'd get them all through.

The Sergeant looked his dark brows tranquilly at Hagen. "And I don't believe Cross meant what he said. He's a very brave man. We all got a little jumpy. But he's a good man, a good Rockeeter."

THREE markers beside the trail, and a pile of dumped equipment marked the hard ground when the cart swung forward again. Hagen had dropped all the remaining instruments, saving only Whitcomb's exposed film, the ration, rifle ammunition, and logbooks that had been kept by different members of the science section. At his command, Sergeant Brian reluctantly unstrapped the pneumatic gun's firing mechanism, and left the gun opening on its tripod beside charger and shell hole. With the lightened load, Hagen figured these men could handle the cart, and he took his place with Brian and Cross in the harness. The science no longer walked in the trail, but slipped between great root-flanges and tree holes on either side, pushing forward on by the horse's horn.

They left no more trail markers, and

Hagen cautioned them against making any unnecessary noise.

"No trail markers behind us. This trail is waxy enough to hold footprints in a few minutes. We're making no noise, and we'll drop no more rifles. All they can hear will be the horse, and that won't carry far."

On the seventy-first day of the march, Hagen squatted, fell almost to the ground, and grunted, "Take tea."

He stared at the steamed, ragged waxy cross-battered horse knee in furry mud.

"Why do we do it?" he asked no one in particular. "Why do we keep going, and going, and going? Why don't we just lie down and die? That would be the easiest thing I could think of right now." He knew that Buckler Service officers didn't talk that way, but he didn't feel like an officer, just a tired, feverish, horse-wary man.

"There we got a great glowing tradition to inspire us!" he shouted. "No, we're just the long rocketers that every other service men plans to absorb. We haven't a Great or a John Paul Jones to provide an example in a tough spot. The U. S. Buckler Service has nothing but the memory of more ships that went out and never came back; and you can't make a legend out of men who just plain vanish."

There was silence, and it looked as if the muddy figures were too exhausted to reply. Then Sergeant Brian spoke.

"The Rocketers have a legend, sir."

"What legend, Brian?" Hagen wanted.

"Here is the legend, sir. George Guy Peter One."

Hagen laughed hollowly, but the Sergeant continued as if he hadn't heard.

"General Expeditionary Patrol One—the south a planet couldn't hit. Yams, staves for grub bag at us, minerals, coals, poison plants, starvation, fever, and we keep right on coming. The feet made us weaker, and tougher, and harder to beat. And we'll blast through these band-men and the jungle, and march into New City the white U. S. Armed Forces on review."

"Let's go," Hagen called, and they sagged up again, now great bundles of wadded, muddy rags, rapped in pairs with steel helmets with slush guards down. The silver slipped off the trail, and Hagen,

Brian, and Coates pulled on the next harness and lurches forward. The car wheel bells jammed against a tree hole, and as they strained heavily about to free it, a boat was drifted from afar.

"Here they come again," Coates groaned.

"They—wasn't he—up—with us—for days," Hagar grunted, while he threw his weight in jerks against the tow line. The car lurches free with a lunge, and all three slide forward and sprang tugging in the muddy trail.

They sat wiping mud from their faces, when Brian stopped suddenly, slipped off his helmet and threw it aside, then sat tensely forward in an attitude of strained listening. Hagar had time to wonder dully if the man's boots had snapped, before he crawled to his feet.

"Start up, and listen," Brian was shouting. "Hear it! Hear it! It's a blasted War all, about every two seconds!"

Hagar tugged off his heavy helmet, and strained every nerve to listen. Over the forest silence it came with pulse-like regularity, a deep whinger of sound.

He and Brian stared bright-eyed at each other, not quite daring to say what they were thinking. Coates got up and leaned like an empty sack against the outboard with an insane questioning look.

"What is it?" When they stared at him without speaking, still listening intently, "It's the Bass. That's it, it's the Bass!"

Something choked Hagar's throat, then he was yelling and firing his rifle. The rest came strutting out of the forest shadows, faces looking into wild grins, and they joined Hagar, the forest making war gunfire. They moved forward, and Hilda took up a thin chant:

"Goooooh, the Robsters
have shaggy men,
They're dirty—"

The rest of their lyrics wouldn't look well in print, but where the Robsters have gone, no every feature of space, the child sang it song. The little life moved down the trail toward the kitchen sound. Behind them, something moved in the gloom, moved half into a reptile-headed, man-like thing, that roared a small, wooden

trumpet to its mouth, a soft hiss note fluted clear, and other shapes became visible, springing forward, sliding through the gloom. . . .

WHEN a red light flashed over Chapman's desk, he flung down a sheet of papers and hurried down steel-walked corridors to the number one shaft. A top elevator swept him to Olympus' upper side, where a shallow pit had been set in the ship's scarred skin, and a pneumatic gun installed. Chapman hurried past the gun and over to stand beside a listening device. The four loops came loomed shaft against the clouds, the operator in this room was a blob of shadow in the daylight, where he looked listening to a chattering murmur that came from his head. Blake came bounding onto the gangdeck; Bjornson, and the staff officers were all there.

"Get it into the Address system," Chapman told the Listener operator excitedly, and the faint sounds were amplified through the whole ship. From listening Address amplifiers, the child words broke in a hoarse melody.

"The robsters have shaggy men,
They're dirty—"

The rest described in vivid detail the process of robbery in general.

"How far are they?" Chapman demanded.

The operator pointed at a dial, fingered a knob that altered his receiving cones in fractions of angle. "They're about twenty-five miles out."

Chapman turned to the officers gathered in an oval room behind him.

"Branch, here's your chance for action. Take thirty men, one whipper tank, and go out to them. Bjornson, get the 'upters alert for air cover."

Twenty minutes later, Chapman watched a column assemble beneath the Olympus' gleaming side, and march into the night, with the 'upters buzzing west a constant lane, like miniature dragon flies.

Breakfast was brought to the men clustered at Warning equipment, and to Chapman at his post on the gangdeck. The day tilted away, the parade ground vanished

in thickening close of night; and a second dawn found the workmen still at their posts, listening to queer sounds that trickled from the speakers. The singing had stopped; but now they heard a roar that a lion might make, and several voices jabbing yells that didn't sound human. George One was fighting, they knew now. The listeners picked up crackling of rifle fire, and when that died there was silence.

The workmen heard a short cheer that died suddenly, as the rolled columns and George One went; and then waited and waited. Branch, who headed the relief column, communicated with the mother ship by the simple expedient of yelling, the sound being picked up by the listeners.

"They're coming in, Chapman. I'm coming behind to guard their rear. They've been attacked by some kind of Band-er-man. I'm not saying a thing—see for yourself when they arrive."

Blows ruffed past, while they speculated in low voices, the bank that held the ship growing taut and strained.

"Surely Branch would have told us if anything was wrong, or if the records were lost," Chapman barked angrily. "Why did he have to be so damned melodramatic?"

"Look, there—through the trees. A helmet glinted!" The heroic Hesperian had thrown dignity to the winds, and roared like a drunken goat, as Kinell described it later.

Chapman stared down at the jungle edging the parallel ground and caught a movement.

A man with a rifle came through the

fringe and stood crouching the ship in silence, and then came walking forward across the long, unbroken expanse. From this height, he looked to Chapman like a child's lead soldier, a ragged, wooden, wooden warrior. Another ran in the trees, and one more man, shuffling like an indolent hanker with rifle at ready, life, too, straightened and came walking quickly forward. A line of three men came next, bearing in—the harness of a little metal cart that bumped drastically as they dragged it forward. An instant of waiting, and two more men stole from the jungle, more like attacking infantry than returning heroes. Chapman waited, and no more came. This was all.

"My God, no wonder Branch wouldn't tell us. There were thirty-two of them." Kinell's voice was choked.

"Yes, only seven," Chapman remembered his field glasses and focused them on the seven approaching men. "Lieutenant Hagar is the only officer. And they're heading us the future of the U. S. Buckle down on that little metal cart."

The quiet destroyed and a yelling band of men poured from Odysseus' hull and engulfed the tattered seven, swooping around them, yelling, cheering, and carrying them toward the mother ship.

Chapman looked a little awed as he moved to the officers behind him. "Well they did it. We forward these records, and we've proven that we can do the job." He broke into a grin. "What are I talking about? Of course we did the job. We'll always do the job. We're the Buckeys, aren't we?"