

A DIG ALLEN SPACE EXPLORER ADVENTURE

Trappers of Venus

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Dig Allen— Trappers of Venus

By Joseph Greene

Book 4 In The Dig Allen
Space Explorer Series

With Illustrations By Charles Beck

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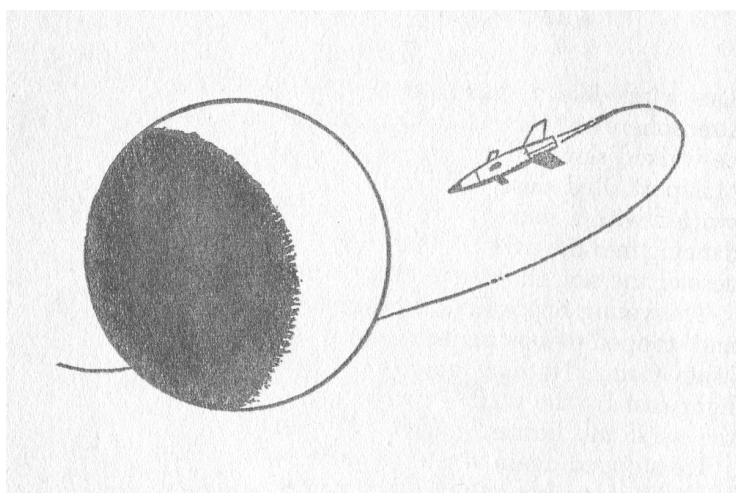
*Dedicated to the first men who crossed the
frontiers of space, and to Science, which made
their journeys possible.*

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1 The Secret Meeting

THE wind, like a sharp knife, cut through the thin night atmosphere of Mars. Dig Allen felt the cold and shivered as he walked slowly down an empty street on the outskirts of Marsport. Red dust raced in little gusts along the gutters, swirled with a sucking sound around his feet, and vanished dancing into the darkness. It was an eerie night. In the blackness of the sky, thousands of stars glittered.

The young Space Explorer came to the end of the street and stopped to look across the open space that bordered the Main Canal. Nothing moved in the dim circles of yellow light cast by the widely spaced arc-lamps. Dig leaned into the wind and hurried toward the canal.

He stopped again when he reached the bridge. Glancing back, Dig saw that no one had followed him out of the street. He waited, listening for the sound of footsteps. Only the soft, steady hiss of the wind came out of the night.

For a few seconds he remained standing, then he turned and crossed the bridge over the canal, moving quickly in the strange, shuffling walk of a spaceman. From the darkness under the bridge came the murmur, the swish and splash of cold water flowing swiftly.

On the other side, Dig peered into the darkness that lay thick at the foot of the bridge.

Softly Dig called out, "Chips?" He waited a moment, then repeated in a slightly louder voice, "Chips? Where are you?"

There was no answer. In the dark sky above him floated Deimos, one of the two moons of Mars. Its weird yellow light reflected faintly on the canal water. On the horizon the second moon, Phobos, was rising swiftly. Soon both moons would be racing across the sky and the darkness would not be so intense.

Dig moved down from the bridge slowly. His heavy

spaceboots clicked sharply on the plastic concrete. Again he called out in a low, anxious voice.

“Chips? It’s me, Dig Allen.”

For a long moment there was silence. Dig felt a touch of fear in the pit of his stomach. Had he been a plain fool to come? He was thinking of turning back when a low whisper came out of the dark.

“Were you followed, boy?”

“No.”

“Be you sure?”

“Aye.”

“Walk ahead,” the whispering voice directed.

Ahead, across the open space, was a tumbled mass of old buildings, covered now by deep, black shadows. It was the slum section of the city, known as Spaceman’s Roost. Within the crowded houses lived the outcasts and criminals of the spaceways. They were a dangerous collection of space smugglers, thieves, reckless adventurers, and shadowy derelicts without hope or ambition. For them Spaceman’s Roost was a hiding place and a home.

It was a dangerous place to visit. Usually, anyone wearing the uniform of the Space Explorer Corps was left alone there. But in the darkness of the queer streets, narrow and twisting, a uniform was not easy to recognize. Dig knew that the treacherous thrust of a knife or the quick blow from a stunray gun would come first. Then, afterward, there might be some regret that the victim of the attack turned out to be a Space Explorer. But it would be too late then.

“Go on, boy, go on!” Chips whispered impatiently. “I be at your side.”

A small figure, like a thicker, heavier shadow, emerged from the deep darkness at the foot of the bridge.

“It be a short way to my jeep.”

Dig hurried, stumbling in the dark. A stab of light

guided him to a jet-jeep parked close to the line of buildings.

“Get in, boy. We’ve got to hurry!”

Dig felt his way, climbing into the jeep. Chips scurried around and took the driver’s seat. He started the motor, turned the vehicle and drove without lights along the side of the canal.

They rode in silence for several minutes. Then Chips stopped the jeep and switched on the light over the dashboard controls. It was on a swivel. He turned it until it shone into Dig’s face.

Silently the man studied the boy’s freckled face, the short, snub nose, the cool gray eyes and the bright red hair. Then he gave a low chuckle.

“Ye haven’t changed much since last I saw ye,” Chips said. He turned the light on his own face. “Ye remember me, boy?”

“Aye, I remember you, Chips.” He stared at the thin, wrinkled face, the skin tanned leathery hard by the sun. “Where are you taking me?”

“To a shack about ten minutes down the road from here.”

“Is Captain Dorkas waiting for me there?”

Chips shook his head, then switched off the light. “The Old Man is back there in Spaceman’s Roost.”

“I had a message from Dorkas to meet you at the bridge,” Dig said.

“Aye, he needs help from ye.” Chips was quiet for a few seconds, then asked, “Will ye help?”

“Of course,” Dig replied quickly. “If I can.”

“Ye can,” Chips said. “Ye and your two spacemates, Jim and Ken Barry. Why didn’t they come with ye?”

“Jim and Ken are away, visiting their folks on Asteroid Eros. I stayed here to have our ship repaired.”

“And will it be all right with Jim and Ken if ye agree to help Dorkas.”

“I think so,” Dig said.

Old Captain Dorkas was a blind spaceman who had been long retired from active service. He lived in Spaceman’s Roost, refUSing to return to Earth and a home for elderly spacemen. He had helped Dig and his spacemates, Jim and Ken, many times. Dig could not think of any favor that would be refused. He told Chips that.

“Aye,” Chips laughed softly. “Old Dorkas said we could depend on ye.”

He started the jetmotor again, turned on the lights and eased the jeep forward. For several minutes Chips kept his eyes fixed ahead, steadily increasing the jeep’s speed. As they traveled, the Canal embankment along the side of the road gradually rose higher until it towered above them.

“Can you tell me what Old Dorkas expects me to do?” Dig asked after a while.

“I can’t,” Chips answered. “That be because I don’t know. There’s a friend hiding in the shack He’ll be telling ye all about it himself.”

“Hiding? Why?”

“There be some people who want to kill him. That be a very good reason for him to hide.”

Startled, Dig turned to look at the man sitting beside him.

“Kill him! Who is this man?”

“A trapper from Venus. His name be Tim Buckle.”

“Wouldn’t he be a lot safer hiding in Spaceman’s Roost?”

“That was the first place they began to look for him. Old Captain Dorkas, he made me take Tim to the shack and stay with him while a message was sent to ye.”

“Who’s with him now?”

“Tim Buckle be alone now. But I’ve been gone only a little time. Just to meet ye and bring ye back”

They drove on in silence. Presently Chips switched off the headlights and slowed the jeep down. He steered off the hard road, bringing the jeep closer to the embankment. Presently he stopped and shut off the motor.

“We climb up from here.”

Dig followed the man out of the jeep. A sudden, strange silence was all about them. Phobos was fast catching up to Deimos. The combined light of the two moons made visible a faint path winding up the side of the embankment.

“Follow me, boy,” said Chips, and started up the path.

Dig followed silently until they had gone about halfway to the top. Chips stopped then and pointed to a dim, boxlike structure outlined against the sky.

“That’s the shack,” he said. Then, softly, he called, “Ahoy, there, Tim! It’s me, Chips. I be back”

No answer came. The night was still. Even the wind had suddenly died down. Uneasily, Chips glanced at the boy.

“That be queer. Tim should be answering me.” He was puzzled and a worried frown creased the skin on his forehead. “I’ll—”

A sudden scream tore through the night. It was a man who screamed, a man alone in the dark with terror in his voice. He screamed again and again until the sound cut off abruptly. There was stillness again.

“It be Tim!” Chips cried.

“They got him!” His voice was hoarse with fear and anger. “Come on, boy!” They started scrambling quickly up the embankment, slipping, sliding, falling in the loose earth. As they reached the top, there was the loud roar of a jetmotor exploding into action. Bright beams of light shot into their eyes, blinding them.

Dig moved swiftly, his actions guided by instinct. He slammed his arm against Chips’ shoulder and sent the little man flying to one side. Dig dived headlong in the

opposite direction.

At almost the same instant a jet-jeep shot past, missing the boy by inches. It hurtled wildly down the steep embankment to the road. Dazed, Dig lay on the ground and watched the jeep roar away toward Marsport.

From the darkness came Chips' voice "Dig lad be you all right?"

"Aye!" Dig jumped to his feet.

"Go to Tim! See what they did to him!"

Dig charged up the embankment and reached the top in seconds.

"Tim Buckle?" the boy called out. "Tim? Tim?"

A weak, strangled cry came from below them. There was a faint splash, then silence.

"He's in the Canal!" Dig called, then plunged down the slope to the water's edge.

From above, Chips cried, "There he be, boy. Just a little ways farther up."

Dig caught sight of a man's hand, white in the moonlight, rising out of the dark water. He ran along the bank, then waded in. The water bit through his clothes with a sharp icy sting. He dived toward the figure dimly seen struggling and splashing in the water, fighting against the swift, powerful current.

A few quick strokes brought Dig close enough to grasp the man by his shirt. Dig pulled and began to swim backward toward the shallows. When he felt his feet touch bottom, the boy turned and staggered up the slope, dragging the body of the Venusian trapper behind bluff.

Chips met him and helped carry the unconscious man to the top of the embankment. Gently they laid the trapper on the ground. Chips ran into the shack and returned a moment later with a heavy blanket. He dropped to his knees and began to wrap it around the still figure."

“We’ve got to take him to the hospital quick, Chips said. “He be dead if we don’t!”

Dig shivered. “I don’t think he swallowed much water. And I don’t see any wounds...”

“Wounds?” Chips snorted. “Cold water alone is deadly enough to kill a Venusian, boy.” Chips rose to his feet and glanced at the silently flowing waters in the Canal. That water be coming straight from the melting ice of the North Pole. Drinking even a little of it or getting his body soaked...” Chips shook his head. “That be enough to kill a man from Venus.”

“It would?” Dig was surprised. “I’ve been on Venus...”

“Ye have not lived in the hot, damp jungles of Venus for years like these trappers do,” Chips said. “Their bodies get used to that. Ice water is like poison to them.

“Then we’d better get started,” Dig said. “The sooner we get him to the hospital—”

“No! Old Tim Buckle’s good as dead!” The voice, weak and hoarse, came from the figure lying on the ground.

“Ye be quiet!” Chips shouted. He picked up the Venusian and slung him easily over his shoulder. “Come, lad, ye drive!”

They slithered down the embankment, stumbled, ran. Dig jumped into the jeep and started the motor. Chips laid the Venusian across the back seat and wrapped the blanket around him.

“Fast, boy. Fast!” Chips cried. “To the hospital!”

Dig returned to the road and gunned the jeep ahead.

“No... no... no! Tim Buckle rolled his head frantically and shouted “Not to the hospital! Not there! Old Tim is dying anyway... don’t take him to the hospital...”

Chips put his hand gently on the trapper’s forehead.

“Rest easy, mate. We’ll take care of ye.”

“There be no hope for Tim,” the sick man continued. “No hope... but help my friends. Don’t let them hunt

and kill my friends...”

“Who be your friends, Tim?” Chips asked, bending low over the trapper.

“The Kohoolies... the Kohoolies...”

“What be the Kohoolies?” Chips asked.

Tim Buckle did not reply.

Over his shoulder Dig said, “I’ve read about them. Some kind of animals found in the jungles of Venus.”

“Not animals... no... no... They be friends,” Tim cried out, raising his head. “Save them! Help them!” Then he fell back and lay still.

“He does not know what he be talking about,” Chips said. “He be burning with fever. I be afraid Tim Buckle is dying.”

Dig kept his eyes on the road and pressed down harder on the accelerator. The jet-jeep leaped ahead. In the distance, the lights of Marsport raced forward to meet them.

2 Fever Madness

THOSE same lights were close, on the other side of the Main Canal, when Dig stepped on the brakes. The jeep screeched to a stop close to the foot of the bridge. Dig twisted around in his seat to face Chips.

“How is he?”

“Out cold,” the old spaceman answered. “Not good. He is shivering with cold one minute, then burning up with fever the next. I’m afraid Tim Buckle is done for. I’ve seen what cold water can do to a Venusian. Drives them crazy before they die.”

“Maybe Tim will have a chance if I take him on board the *Starover*. I can change the atmosphere in the ship. Make it just like the atmosphere on Venus.”

“It might help,” Chips agreed slowly. “But they’d do the same at the hospital.”

“He’d be afraid there. On the ship, Tim will be able to rest.”

“That be so. Aye, then you better get jetting on to the ship, Dig. We be wasting time sitting here.”

“I thought you’d want to get off here.”

“What for?”

“The Space Guards...” Dig hesitated for a moment. “They may be looking for you.”

“Aye, them. They might be,” Chips said, shrugging his shoulders. “I’ve had me troubles with them, same as most folks living in Spaceman’s Roost. I’ll take the risk, boy, rather than be leaving a spacemate in trouble.”

“All right.”

Dig eased the jeep forward across the bridge. On the other side, he turned sharply to the right. He drove along the dark road beside the Canal, avoiding the streets of Marsport.

A few minutes later they reached one of the small side gates leading into the spaceport. Dig allowed the jeep to slow down slightly as it rolled through the gate,

giving the guard a friendly wave of his hand. Then he cut across the great landing field toward the far side where the Explorer Ship *Starover* stood on her huge tail fins, her silvery nose pointing up at the night sky.

He swung the jeep under the stem of the spaceship and stopped.

"I'll take him," Dig said, jumping out.

"No, boy. That be my job."

Chips raised the Venusian and slung him across his shoulder. Then, nimble as a monkey, he went up the wire ladder to the open airlock. Dig followed him inside and closed the outer hatch.

While Dig set the dials for a Venusian atmosphere, Chips made the sick man comfortable on the deck of the little metal room. They waited, sitting on the deck with their backs against the bulkheads while the pumps worked and the temperature inside the ship rose.

"What be the Kohoolies?" Chips asked after a while. The air in the little room was becoming heavy with moisture. The old spaceman wiped the drops of perspiration that gathered on his forehead.

"I read about the Kohoolies," Dig said. "They're animals that live in the jungles of Venus."

"What be they like?"

"Some say they're something like beavers or seals," Dig replied. "And others say they're like large teddy bears."

"Not like people, eh?" Chips frowned thoughtfully. "Tim was talking about them like they were real people. Friends of his..."

The air was now thick, hot and heavy with a fine spray of water. Dig breathed in deeply.

"Tim will explain when he recovers."

"If he recovers," Chips said, shaking his head gloomily.

The pumps stopped working and a green light flashed over the hatchway. Dig rose and opened the door.

“Where shall we put him?” Chips asked. He picked up the Venusian’s body and balanced it across his shoulder.

“In the pilot’s rest cabin. That’s right next to the control room. I’ll be able to watch over Tim and handle the ship, too.”

“Aye.”

Chips stepped out of the airlock and began to climb the metal cleats that formed a ladder upward through the central shaft of the spaceship.

A spaceship is a clumsy thing on land. It is built for space where there is no pull of gravity to hamper movements.

Breathing hard, Chips made his way up to the pilot’s cabin and laid Tim Buckle on the bunk. He wrapped a blanket snugly around the unconscious man.

“Now, boy, you best get out of your wet clothes,” Chips said, turning to Dig. “Ye be breathing Venus air now.”

“Aye.”

Dig went below to his cabin and put on a fresh uniform. Tim was sleeping when the boy returned to the control room. The trapper’s face was flushed and his mouth was open as he gulped in the air.

“Tell Dorkas I’ll do everything to help Tim.”

“Aye, I’ll tell him.”

Chips glanced at the still figure, then with a nod to Dig, left the cabin and climbed down to the airlock. Signals on the instrument panel marked the old spaceman’s progress out of the ship.

Left alone, Dig pulled a metal stool out from under the bunk and sat down to watch over the still figure of Tim Buckle.

o o o o

FAR beyond Mars, the Asteroid Belt formed a dusty ring through space. It was made up of spacejunk—fine particles of dirt, smaller than grains of sand, pebbles, rocks, boulders as huge as mountains and even small

planets measuring hundreds of miles across.

Asteroid Eros drifted at the inner edge of the great Belt. Even from the outside Eros looked different from the other asteroids. Shaped like a plump cigar, it measured about twenty miles in length and five miles across. Its shape made it stand out from the jagged chunks of rock that surrounded it.

Inside, the asteroid was hollow, lined with countless miles of passageways, vast caverns, rows of rooms, elevators and masses of scientific equipment. Soon after its discovery, Eros became the headquarters of the Space Research Bureau.

Guided by Keith Barry, chief of Space Research, a large group of scientists worked on Eros. They lived with their families in apartments carved out of the solid rock inside the asteroid.

For Jim and Ken Barry, Eros was home as long as their parents lived there.

It was at Dig's suggestion that the two brothers hitched a ride to the asteroid for a short visit with their parents. Dig had volunteered to remain on Mars while their spaceship was being repaired.

So it happened that at the moment Dig sat watching over the sleeping form of Tim Buckle, Jim and Ken were walking slowly along one of the corridors inside Eros. They were deep in a discussion of their return to Mars.

"Why doesn't Dig call us?" the younger boy was asking. "The *Starover* should have been repaired by now."

His brother Jim grinned and shrugged his shoulder. "I think Dig is letting us have a few extra days here."

"We ought to go back," Ken said. "We're not being fair to Dig."

"But it's the way he wants it." Jim laughed softly. "And I don't mind being a little lazy now and then."

He was a tall, slim boy, quick in his movements. His long black hair usually tumbled over his eyes and he had a habit of running his fingers through the hair to brush it back.

Ken shook his head stubbornly. "It's not fair for us to take too long a holiday," he said. "We ought to return to duty on board ship."

Jim looked at his brother. Ken, short and stocky, had blond hair cut so close to his head that it stood up like the bristles on a stiff brush.

Jim and Ken were so absorbed in their conversation that they failed to notice a figure step out of a nearby room. Not until they found their way blocked did the two boys look up.

A boy about their own age was standing in the middle of the corridor, his hands resting on his hips. His face was plump, his brows knitted in a frown as he stared at the two Space Explorers.

"Hello," Jim said, smiling. "You're a stranger here, aren't you?"

The boy did not reply. He wore a red shirt made of natural silk and blue trousers embroidered with gold designs. His spaceboots were decorated with gems and fancy stitching.

"I'm Ken and this is my brother..."

"I'm not interested in who you are," the boy interrupted. "You're Space Explorers."

"Sure" Jim said puzzled at the newcomer's manner.

"I'm the son of Linton Wells. Take me to Keith Barry's office."

"It's not far from here. Just go down this corridor." Ken started to give directions, but the boy stopped him.

"I said take me there!" His voice and his manner were arrogant.

For a moment an angry look came into Jim's eyes. Then he turned to his brother.

"He is the son of Linton Wells, Ken. You realize that, don't you?"

Ken caught the mischievous wink his brother gave him. He looked intently at the plump-faced boy.

"The son of Linton Wells! Well, well!"

“Are you going to do as I say?” the boy demanded.

“Aye, aye, sir!” Jim replied quickly. “But what if Dr. Barry won’t see us? He’s a busy man.”

“Not too busy for me,” young Wells announced, very sure of himself. “Lead the way.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Jim seemed to chuckle over the words. He bent his head toward his brother and asked in a loud whisper, “Who is Linton Wells, Ken?”

Ken caught his brother’s mood and his answer came in a whisper just as loud.

“You never heard of Linton Wells? Well, Jim, don’t let anyone know. But I never heard of Linton Wells, either.”

Behind them the two boys heard an angry gurgle but they did not turn to look at young Wells. Jim opened the door to his father’s office and stepped back to let the boy in ahead of him.

“Here we are.”

“I think we’d better see if Dr. Barry is busy...” Ken began.”

“I’m not interested in what you think, the boy said, striding through the small reception room into the main office.

Jim and Ken followed, covering the smiles that kept creeping over their faces.

“Dr. Barry,” the fat boy announced, “I’ve found two Space Explorers here on Eros.”

Keith Barry looked up from his desk, an amused twinkle in his eyes.

“So I see.”

“Now there’s no excuse for postponing an expedition to Venus.”

A short, heavy-set man sitting near the desk chuckled. He flicked his eyes over Jim and Ken, then nodded to young Wells.

“Good for you, Chuck!” he said. He turned to the scientist. “Dr. Barry, you can order these Space

Explorers” to go to Venus. They’ll prove that my reports are correct.”

“I’m afraid I can’t *order* Space Explorers to do anything, Keith Barry said in his gentle manner. “No one has the authority to give orders to a member of the Space Explorers Corps.”

“Now, see here, Barry!” The fat man slapped his hand on the desk angrily. He rose to his feet, whirled on Jim and Ken and snapped at them, “Will you refuse to go to Venus?”

Jim ignored the man. “What’s this all about, Dad?”

At the words, a flush swept over Chuck Wells’ face. His eyes narrowed as he stared at the Space Explorers, angrily.

“This is Mr. Linton Wells, Jim, Keith Barry said, indicating the stout man with a wave of his hand. “You’ve met Chuck Wells, his son?”

“We’ve had that pleasure,” Jim replied sarcastically. “If you can call it pleasure.”

“My sons, Mr. Wells.” The scientist turned smiling to the stout man. “Jim and Ken.”

“Glad to meet you, boys.” Linton Wells’ manner changed abruptly. He smiled and shook the boys’ hands.

“Mr. Wells asked for an official Space Explorer expedition to go to Venus,” Keith Barry said. “Are you boys free to go?”

“We’d have to talk to Dig Allen first, Dad,” Jim replied.

“If Dig’s willing...”

“What’s the matter? Can’t you make up your own minds? Do you have to ask permission?”

“Never mind, Chuck,” Linton Wells said to his son. He looked at Jim. “Would you be good enough to find out if you can go to Venus?”

“Well, we can call Dig, on board the *Starover*. It would take a few minutes,” Jim explained.

“I won’t press you,” Linton Wells said. “Ask your

friend... what's his name?"

"Space Explorer Digby Allen," Jim said.

"Digby Allen," Linton Wells said. "Ah, yes. I recall something... He is the son of Captain Boyd Allen, isn't he?"

Jim nodded, eyeing the stout man suspiciously. He could not understand the change in the man's manner.

"Find out if he agrees, and then," Linton Wells continued, "then I'll explain to you how very important it is for an expedition to go to Venus."

Jim glanced at his brother. "What do you say?"

"Let's call Dig." Ken nodded to his father. "We'll be back soon."

o o o o

THE signal buzzer called Dig away from the side of the sick Tim Buckle. He stepped through the hatchway to the control room and switched on the radarscope communicator.

The screen lighted up, the wavy lines rolled across it and then settled slowly into what might have been a human face-or two faces.

"Jim and Ken Barry calling Explorer Ship *Starover*. Calling Explorer Ship *Starover*." Jim's voice came through, distorted and wavering.

"Jim! I'm hardly receiving you at all!" Dig called back, attempting to adjust the controls of the communicator screen.

"We're not receiving you very well, either. Voice weak and picture bad," Jim replied.

"Well, we *are* three quarters of the way across the solar system," Ken's voice said, as one of the wriggling shapes on Dig's screen shifted its position slightly.

"Marsport Communication Center predicted a rise in sunspot activity this morning," Dig said. "I suppose that could be causing a lot of the trouble. What's up on Asteroid Eros? Have you two spaceworms had enough vacation?"

“Yes, and we’re ready to go back to work,” Jim replied. “How would you like to get started on an expedition?”

“I’d like it fine, and as soon as you two get back to the ship, we’ll be ready to blast off. Repairs were completed today. Something’s come up here on Mars that may involve us in a trip...”

“You too?” Ken interrupted. Dig heard his voice beginning to fade out entirely, and quickly he began turning knobs on the communicator. “We ran into the funniest... walking down the passageway... pudgy little guy...” Ken’s voice disappeared in a howl of interference. A minute passed. Suddenly the voice returned. “...wants us to blast off right away.”

“Look, you two,” Dig almost shouted into the communicator, “your signal is getting worse by the minute. I couldn’t make any sense at all out of what Ken was saying. Let’s just get together and talk things over here on Mars. Jim? Ken? Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” Jim’s voice came faintly through the roaring static. “We’ll get back to the ship as soon as we can. In the meantime, we’ll accept no expeditions, no matter what. You’ll do the same?”

“Right,” Dig called. “I promise I’ll accept no expeditions, no matter what.”

The signal from Asteroid Eros had been lost entirely. Dig switched off the communicator and the flickering screen went blank. He sighed and started to turn away from the instrument panel, then stopped short. Tim Buckle stood swaying in the open doorway of the pilot cabin.

“So ye joined them!” the Venusian trapper blazed at the hoy. “Ye have betrayed me and my friends! Now ye be one of the killers!”

“What are you talking about, Tim?”

“I heard ye! I heard ye say ye’ll not go on my expedition!”

The Venusian raised his arm. Dig suddenly noticed a stunray pistol in the sick man’s hand.



“Tim, you should be in bed—” Dig began.

The Venusian shook his head, swayed and blinked at the boy. Suddenly he pressed the trigger. The stunray blast struck Dig in the chest. He fell over the pilot’s chair, then slid to the deck, unconscious.

3 Heading for Danger

MR. LINTON Wells was annoyed. The flush on his face showed it clearly. One of the richest men in the solar system, he was not accustomed to having his requests refused. He controlled his anger and when he spoke, it was in a calm, cold tone.

“I see no reason why you can’t decide for yourselves.”

Patiently, Ken explained. “Dig Allen, my brother and I work as a team. Whatever we decide to do, we all have to agree first. That means a talk, and with communication so bad, *that* means we’ll have to go to Mars.”

Wells bit his lip. “There’s no one who can command the Space Explorers to come to Venus with me?”

Keith Barry shook his head. “No, Mr. Wells. But they have not refused to go. Jim and Ken want to talk it over with Dig Allen before agreeing.”

“But this Allen boy,” Chuck broke in, “is on Mars!”

“We’re going there as soon as we can arrange for the trip,” Jim said.

Linton Wells softened his manner a little. “I’ll be glad to take you boys there. We can leave for Mars in an hour.”

Ken scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Well,” he looked across the desk at his father. “Mom wasn’t expecting us to leave so soon.”

The scientist nodded. “She’ll understand, Ken. She won’t be happy about it, but she knows how it is with Space Explorers.”

“They come and go as they please, eh?” Linton Wells said, trying to be sympathetic.

“If you feel you want to go on this expedition to Venus,” Dr. Barry continued, “well, you’ll have to decide that.”

Ken glanced at his brother. Jim gave him a quick

nod. "All right, Mr. Wells. We'll be aboard your ship in an hour."

"Fine! Fine!" The space merchant rubbed his pudgy hands together, smiling. "Then it's all settled." He turned to the scientist, highly pleased. "I'll leave all those reports with you. I'll have copies for my own use."

"I'll study them carefully," Keith Barry said, laying his hand on a pile of folders on the desk.

"Come along, Chuck."

Linton Wells and his son left the office. Outside, in the reception room, father and son argued for a moment in voices loud enough to be heard by Dr. Barry and the two Space Explorers."

"I don't see why you have to be so nice to them, Dad, Chuck Wells said. "You pay more taxes in a year than all of them earn during their whole lives. You are paying their salaries... and your money buys them their fancy uniforms..."

"My boy," Linton Wells replied, "sugar and salt look very much alike. But there's a big difference between them..."

"What do you mean?"

"You can trap more flies with sugar than with salt!"

They were gone the next moment. Jim turned to his father.

"I don't like them, Dad. Mr. Wells seems like a very tricky person. I wouldn't trust him."

"And Chuck seems to be a spoiled brat," Ken said.

Keith Barry leaned back in his chair and laughed softly.

"You may be right about both of them," he said. Then his face became serious. He leaned forward and tapped the pile of folders on his desk. "But that won't make the expedition to Venus less important."

"Important to Wells," Jim asked, "or to us?"

"Both. Sit down, boys. I'll tell you what I know."

Jim and Ken settled in chairs and turned their eyes on the scientist.

“How much do you know about the settlements on Venus?”

Jim shrugged. “Not much, Dad. I’ve read a few study tapes on it.”

“The atmosphere is thicker than that on Earth but it has less oxygen in it,” Ken said. “Also a lot of moisture.”

His father nodded. “We’d call it thick and humid.”

“The World Council actually never established any colonies there. Not officially. But it’s been colonized. Mostly by independent pioneers, traders and trappers...”

“And outlaws and every kind of dishonest gambler for wealth,” Jim added, turning to his brother.

“Well, we know very little about the geography of Venus or about life there. Native life that is.”

“Trappers ship out lizard skins and natural furs of animals,” Ken said. “Several kinds of herbs, too, very valuable in making medicines.”

“We know there’s no intelligent life there—” Jim started to say, but his father glanced at him quickly.

“Do we?” he said sharply.

“Of course. No signs of any civilization have ever been found,” Jim insisted.

“We found no signs of the kind of civilization we’re used to,” Keith Barry said. “The kind we understand easily...”

“We can understand even a strange civilization Dad,” Jim said.

“Well, I had a Venus trapper here about a month ago,” the scientist said. “His name was Tim Buckle. He insisted that a kind of highly civilized creature does live on Venus!”

Both boys stared at the scientist wide-eyed.

“Why, that would be wonderful!” Ken exclaimed.

"We never heard of it. What kind of... of creature is it?" Jim asked.

"Tim Buckle called it a Kohoolie."

"Kohoolie?" Ken's face fell in sudden disappointment. "I've heard about those animals. They're supposed to be a little more intelligent than dogs or chimpanzees."

"Not according to Tim Buckle," Dr. Barry said. "He came as a representative of the Venus trappers and wanted me to protect the Kohoolies as an intelligent, civilized race."

"That would make them owners of the planet," Jim said. "Did you do as he asked?"

"I can't. Not without an official report from a Space Research expedition. That means a Space Explorer must go to Venus, study the Kohoolies and make his report."

"That means us," Jim said.

His father rose and walked around the desk. He picked up one of the folders and held it up.

"Now Linton Wells comes and wants me to do the exact opposite. His reports show that the Kohoolies are nothing more than clever animals. Of course, I can't declare Venus an open planet without a report I can trust."

"And that means us, again," Jim murmured, smiling.

"Why is Wells so anxious to have Venus an open planet?"

"He's planning to build trading and hunting posts all over Venus. The fur of the Kohoolies is very rare, very beautiful and impossible to copy with plastics..." Keith Barry shook his head. "If you remember your history, the fur trade of North America once made some men enormously rich."

"But Wells is already one of the richest men in the solar system?" Jim asked, frankly unable to understand.

"He wants more," said Ken.

"It probably isn't the wealth itself Wells wants," his

father said thoughtfully. "Wells enjoys the game of getting riches."

"And if the Kohoolies turn out to be intelligent creatures..." Ken began.

His father finished the thought for him. "They will be under the protection of the World Council. No one will be allowed to harm them."

"As simple as that," Jim said, standing up. "I'm in favor of the Venus expedition."

"Well, so am I," Ken said. "I think Dig will agree when he finds out what this is about."

"If you boys want to be aboard Mr. Wells' spaceyacht, you don't have much time."

"Come on. We'll pack and say good-bye to Mother and be off," Ken said.

"I wish we were on board the *Starover* right now."

o o o o

DIG Allen, returning to consciousness, found himself strapped into the pilot seat of the *Starover*. His hands were tightly bound to the arm rests with thin strips of leather. Waves of pain shot through his body and his throat was parched.

When he first looked about him, the control room spun crazily. Then his head cleared a little. He turned and twisted his whole body until the seat swiveled around.

Tim Buckle was sitting at the astronavigation chart, fumbling with rolls of tapes. His whole body sagged wearily and now and then the Venusian shook with chills.

"Tim," Dig called softly, "give me something to drink..."

The trapper looked up, stared for a long time in confusion. After a while his eyes focused on the boy.

"I'm hurting all over, Tim. From the stunray blast... I'm thirsty."

Tim looked about the control room in confusion.

“Emergency rations in locker... under the control board,” Dig said.

Weakly the trapper pulled himself up to his feet and shuffled to the control board. He bent slowly and opened the locker and after some fumbling about, brought out a plastube of chocomilk.

He opened the cap and let the thick, sweet liquid squirt into Dig’s open mouth.

“Thanks Tim,” Dig said. “Have some yourself.”

The trapper nodded and raised the plastube to his lips.

For the first time, Dig had a good chance to study the man from Venus. He was old. His face was gaunt, browned and leathery. A short beard edged his jaw. The trousers he wore tucked into his heavy boots were of leather, fine and soft. The shirt, hanging loose over his belt, was also made of the same thin leather.

Dig watched and waited quietly as the trapper finished his drink.

“How about loosening the knots on my hands, Tim?” Dig asked.

The trapper looked at the boy for several minutes. A shrewd, suspicious expression came into his eyes. He shook his head slowly.

“I’ll be doing that when we’re on our way.”

“Where are we going?”

Tim shuffled to the astrochart and with a shaking finger pointed.

“That be Venus, “ he said. “We’re going there.”

“Venus? But I can’t go without my spacemates.”

“You can,” Tim said, nodding and smiling in a strange way. “And you be going.”

He turned his back on Dig, seeming to forget him, and began to search through the pile of loosely scattered tapes. After a while, he found what he was looking for.

He held it up to the light and, blinking rapidly to clear his bleary eyes, read the label. .

“What’s that?” asked Dig.

“Course for Venus,” Tim answered without looking at the boy. The man stumbled to the control board and opened the gyrobot slot. He slipped the reel of tape inside.

“Tim, you have to check the positions of Mars and Venus first,” Dig said. “Make corrections on the tape.”

Tim paid no attention to him. He pressed the button and the tape began to reel into position over the sensitive electronic direction readers.

“Tim, if you blast off with that tape, you’ll smash up the ship. Or run us clear out of the solar system”

Tim did not seem to hear him.

“Free me and I’ll make the corrections for the course,” Dig pleaded. “You can tie me up again afterwards. I promise...”

The trapper turned suddenly. A crazy light flashed in his feverish eyes.

“You won’t get away, boy!” Tim shouted hoarsely. “They’ve tricked me and they fooled me and they tried to kill me! But no more. You come to Venus with me and you’ll prove that the Kohoolies be as smart as you and I. And maybe a lot smarter!”

“I didn’t trick or fool you, Tim...”

The man glared at the boy. “The trappers sent me to get help. Help before that man Wells and his killers start butchering our friends.”

“We are going to help you...”

“Aye, you’ll help me. But because I’m going to make you!” Tim shouted. He shook his thin fist under Dig’s nose. “I went to Space Research. They wouldn’t help! Get the Space Explorers, the man said. But there be no Space Explorers anywhere! I looked and looked...”

“I’m a Space Explorer...”

“Aye,” the trapper grinned shrewdly. “I “caught me a Space Explorer. Caught him nice and. easy...”

The man was crazy with fever. Dig bit his lip, trying to keep calm. How could he talk to this man? Convince him that he was a friend?

“Look, Tim, I work with two other Space Explorers. Jim and Ken Barry. We’re a team...”

“Aye, a team... like we have going trapping into the jungles...” Tim appeared to understand.

“If this ship blasts off without them, they’ll be marooned on Mars.”

The Venusian shrugged. “That be all right.”

“No, it won’t. This is their ship, too,” Dig explained slowly. “Everyone in space will soon know that Jim and Ken were deserted by their best friend and spacemate. Do you know what this will mean?”

Tim looked at the young Space Explorer, his eyes blank, confused.

“Jim and Ken will be called space-Jonahs!”

“What be that?”

“A space-Jonah is someone who is believed to bring hard luck to a ship,” Dig said. “Every spaceman will keep away from them. No one will let them aboard his ship.”

“I’m sorry,” Tim said slowly. “But that would be better, aye, much better than a war between planets....”

“A war between planets? Dig was startled. This man was completely out of his mind!

“Aye! A war between planets,” the Venusian repeated... Venus and Earth and all the rest...” Tim’s voice trailed off fuzzily. “So you come with me...”

Tim leaned over the control panel and stared at the rows of instruments. With a shaky hand he turned the blast-off time dial until it pointed to thirty seconds.

Dig groaned. “That’s too much time for blast-off!”

Tim did not look up. He set the power control for

twelve gravities. Again Dig called to him, pleading to reduce the setting. Tim paid no attention.

“You’ve set for too much power and for too long!”

“Then we get to Venus quicker!” Tim laughed harshly.

He grabbed the power lever and pulled it down. For a moment nothing happened. Then a slow rumble started deep down in the spaceship. Rapidly the sound rose until it shook the *Starover* from stem to nosecone.

Outside, a mighty stream of raging flames splashed furiously over the plasticconcrete launching pad. The spaceship began to rise, slowly at first, then faster and faster.

The force of the blast-off had smashed Tim Buckle down against the metal deck. He lay still, pressed hard by the gathering acceleration.

Dig sank into the foampad of the pilot seat, stiff and unable to move against the acceleration forces pressing down on him. He could see the dials on the instrument panel swinging wildly.

“Tim... Tim...” Dig tried to mouth the words. “Tim...,untie me...”

But Tim was lying on the deck unconscious.

Rockettubes thundering with released power, the *Starover* was hurtling outward from Mars with no one at her controls.

4 The Outcasts

FROM the viewport of the Spaceyacht *Trader Wells*, Jim and Ken watched Asteroid Eros shrink in size. The sleek spaceship increased its speed steadily. After a while, the Asteroid Belt began to look like a loose string of beads, glittering with reflected sunlight.

The two boys felt a little sad. Every time they parted from their parents, a touch of homesickness came over them. Jane and Keith Barry lived on one of the specks of light they could see in the distance. The boys felt their loneliness more because Dig was not with them.

But Chuck Wells was, and his voice broke into the Space Explorers' thoughts."

"What are you looking so sad for?" he asked with contempt in his voice. "You ought to be glad to get away from there."

Ken glanced over his shoulder. "It's our home."

"It's a chunk of rock!"

"That chunk of rock happens to be one of the great mysteries of space," Jim said without taking his eyes off the viewport. "There are more wonders of science in Eros than on all the planets of the solar system."

Chuck snorted. "Really?" he sneered. "What's wonderful about it?"

"It's a spaceship," Jim answered. "One that once traveled between the stars in deep space."

"What do you think I am? A spacefool?"

"Then you haven't read the report on the Forgotten Star?"

"Oh, I read some of it," Chuck replied indifferently. "I know all about you and Dig Allen and the great Space Explorer, Captain Boyd Allen. And about the science secrets of the ancient Asterian civilization."

"That's what makes Eros a mystery," Ken said. "Who were the people who built it? And sent it on the great

space voyage between the stars?"

"They were fools," Chuck laughed. "Who cares about them? We'll have all their secrets someday and without working too hard to get them."

"Sure," Jim retorted. "That's why Space Research is there now. Learning about the Asterians' science and the world will benefit—"

"They get paid for doing it," Chuck snapped.

Before Jim could reply, the boy turned and pushed himself out of the cabin. When he had floated off down the main passageway, Jim glanced at his brother.

"I didn't think I'd like him at first. Now I'm sure of it."

"Well, just don't lose your temper, Jim. After all, we're guests on board this spaceyacht."

"And I'm not enjoying every minute of it!"

o o o o

THE continuous blasting of the rockets had built up terrific pressure. Dig, crushed into the foampad seat, could not move, even within the bonds that held him in his seat.

When the engines suddenly cut out and a deep silence filled the spaceship, Tim Buckle lay pressed into a comer. His mouth was open and he breathed with difficulty. With the power off, acceleration ceased and the trapper's inert form drifted, weightless, from the deck.

"Tim? Are you all right?"

There was no answer. Bound and helpless, Dig could do nothing to help the trapper. The dials on the instruments had stopped their wild swinging. Blackness and distant stars showed through the viewport.

Hour after hour passed. Dig, in pain from the stunray blast and the leather thongs cutting into his hands, could only wait. He had no way of knowing where the ship was or in what direction it was going.

Tim had fallen into a sleep of complete exhaustion.

For a long time he floated slowly about the cabin, propelled by the gentle force of his own breath. Dig soon lost count of the hours. Finally the Venusian trapper stirred, weakly at first, groaning.

"Tim," Dig called. "Tim, are you awake?"

The Venusian muttered some words under his breath and twisted about. He looked around the cabin in confusion, puzzled and a little frightened.

"Where... where am I?"

"You're on board the Space Explorer Ship *Starover*," Dig told him. "You blasted off with too much power and for too many seconds. Try to remember."

The Venusian frowned, shook his head as if to clear it and pushed himself away from a nearby wall. Clinging to the edge of the instrument panel he stared through the viewport. Slowly he seemed to recall what had happened.

"We be going to Venus," he said.

"I don't think so."

"I put in the tape with the course for Venus."

"But you didn't check it or make corrections."

"How long ago did we blast off?"

"Hours and hours," Dig said. "I fell asleep a couple of times..."

"Can ye fix it so we be going to Venus?"

"Yes. But you've got to release me first,"

The Venusian stared at the boy, deep in thought. "No tricks?" he asked. "Ye won't betray Tim Buckle?"

"You can tie me up again afterwards."

"All right."

Tim fumbled with the leather knots and finally loosened them enough for Dig to pull his hands free. The Venusian then pushed back, retrieving the stunray gun which Boated near him. He watched suspiciously as Dig began to flip on a series of switches on the

instrument panel.

There was complete silence in the control room as the Space Explorer began to take readings. He punched them on tape and, after several minutes, fed the tape into the ship's computer.

Within seconds a plastic tab slid out of the computer slot. Dig took it to the astrochart and compared the figures with the map.

"We're way off course, Tim," the boy said. "The way we're going, we'll come close to splashing the ship all over the rings of Saturn."

"Fix it." Chills were sweeping over the Venusian again. He lost his handhold for a moment.

"Aye, aye." Dig made the course corrections on a reel of clean tape, then slipped it into the gyro bot. Reducing the power setting, he began to fire the nose rockets at short intervals.

The distant stars began to swing past the viewport. Slowly the great spaceship turned. After a few seconds, Dig checked the course. The *Starover* was now speeding toward Venus on a long radial vector. He switched on the automatic controls and turned to Tim.

"Steady as she goes. We'll get to Venus."

The trapper fixed his sharp, black eyes on the boy.

"I don't want to be tying ye up, Dig."

"I don't want to be tied up."

"Promise ye won't change the course, or try to trick me. I'll not tie ye up."

"I promise."

The trapper put the stunray gun in his belt. Wearily he pushed himself into the co-pilot's seat.

"You'll come with me into the jungles and prove the Kohoolies be intelligent..."

"No," Dig interrupted. "I won't explore the jungles."

The trapper looked at him in surprise. "Ye'll be on Venus..."

“By force,” Dig said. “And Space Explorers refuse to be forced or ordered to do anything they don’t want to do.”

The trapper sat back, silent and tired. The chills and fever flushed his body.

“I had to do it, boy,” he said in a low tone. “There are the hunters, ready to go killing my friends.”

Dig thought over the man’s words. The trapper was ill and desperate. He had barely escaped an attack by mysterious killers. Dig glanced at the Venusian, Tim was leaning back in the seat, his eyes closed, his face gaunt with pain.

“Let me call my spacemates,” Dig suggested. “I’ll tell them about this expedition to Venus, I’m sure they’ll agree and join us there.”

Tim opened his eyes and looked at the Space Explorer hopefully,

“You mean it, boy? You’re not fooling old Tim?”

“I mean it.”

“And you’ll come? You’ll help us save the Kohoolies?”

“I’ll come, and I’ll make an honest report to the Space Research Bureau.”

“Where be your spacemates?”

“On Asteroid Eros.”

“Call them.”

Dig leaned over the control board and switched on the radarscope. He opened the microphone and called the station on Eros.

“Space Explorer Ship *Starover* calling Eros control. *Starover* to Eros control.”

He waited while the signal Hashed through space at the speed of light. The seconds seemed like hours. Finally the screen focused and the face of a Space Guard appeared. Either the sunspots had died down or the *Starover*’s new position in space escaped the Hoods of interfering radiation.

“Eros to *Starover*... receiving.”

“Connect me with Jim and Ken Barry, Space Explorer Corps. Now visiting Dr. Keith Barry at...”

The Space Guard cut in. “Sorry. Jim and Ken Barry blasted off for Mars fourteen hours ago.”

Dig turned to the Venusian. “You see? They were coming to join me on Mars.” He turned to the screen. “I’ll contact them in space,” he said. “What ship are they on?” he asked the Space Guard.

“Jim and Ken Barry left on board the Spaceyacht *Trader Wells*, bound for Marsport.”

“Thank you. Out.” Dig flicked the switch and turned to the Venusian trapper. “I’ll call them—” He stopped suddenly.

Tim had his stunray gun out once more. His face was white as a sheet.

“What’s the matter?”

“They be with Linton Wells,” Tim whispered, his voice harsh with anger. “They be working for the man who wants to kill the Kohoolies! The one who tried to kill me in the canal on Mars!”

“Wells? The rich space merchant?”

“Aye, him!” Tim said. “Ye’ll not call his ship.” He motioned with the gun. “Get away from the controls.”

“But, Tim...” Dig moved back a step. “Jim and Ken won’t know what happened to me...”

“Would ye have Linton Wells find out I’m bringing a Space Explorer to Venus? His cutthroats would be waiting for us!”

It was clearly useless to argue with the Venusian. Dig thought quickly.

“Suppose I don’t tell them where I’m going?” he suggested. “Just that I’m all right? At least they won’t be worried about my disappearance.”

“Ye won’t say I’m with ye? Or what ye re going to do on Venus? Not even tell them that you be going to

Venus?”

“Just that I’ve gone on an expedition.”

Tim jerked his head toward the control board. “All right. And then ye’ll come to Venus with me?”

“Aye.”

Holding his stunray gun in his hand, Tim stepped back out of range of the communicator. “

“I know what it means to have friends worry about ye, he said. “Talk to them, but I’ll be listening.”

Dig activated the communications equipment again and called the spaceyacht. It took several minutes to make the contact. Then the face of a young space officer appeared on the screen.

“Spaceyacht *Trader Wells*, receiving,” the m!n said.

“I’d like to speak to Jim and Ken Barry, please.

“One moment. I’ll switch you to the lounge.”

Another few moments passed. The screen criss-crossed with lines that glided swiftly, then sharpened into a view of a richly decorated room. Jim and Ken were sitting in comfortable foampad chairs.

At sight of the screen, both boys leaped to their feet, sailing across the room.

“Dig!”

“Hi, mates,” Dig replied.

“Where are you?” Jim asked.

“In... space,” Dig said hesitantly.

Ken looked worried. “What’s the matter? You haven’t broken your promise...”

Dig did not know how to answer the question. While he hesitated, Jim had made up his mind.

“You have!” he said, frowning.

“I... I...”

“Why, Dig?”

“Something important came up...”

“All right,” Ken said. “We’ll understand. What’s the explanation?”

“I can’t explain...”

“Where are you going? We’ll follow and...”

“I... I’m sorry... I can’t tell you that. And don’t follow.” Dig avoided looking at his friends. “I... I’m sorry... Jim... Ken...”

“You’re sorry!” Jim cried hotly. ‘What about us? Deserted on Mars! Our spacemate takes away our ship...”

“Dig,” Ken said gently. “You know what every spaceman is going to say. That Jim and I are a couple of space-Jonahs and our best friend wouldn’t have us aboard his ship...”

“I’ll explain when I see you again... I... I...” Dig became silent, turning his eyes away from the screen. He was now sorry he had called his friends. Without an explanation, it only made matters worse. “You’re not space-Jonahs... I’ll be glad to have you for my...”

“Spacegas!” Jim snapped. “Turn it *off*!” Angrily he flipped off the switch and the screen went black.

“I don’t understand it.” Ken shook his head sadly. “It’s not like Dig.”

“Let’s get out of here. I want to lock myself away in my cabin and not have to look at anyone.”

He left the cabin and Ken followed him silently, still unable to believe that Dig Allen had left them high and dry and marooned without a spaceship.

The conversation was followed keenly on another screen in the cabin below by Mr. Wells and his son Chuck.

“What do you think of that, Dad?” Chuck grinned his pleasure. “Kicked out by their best friend!”

“I’m sorry for them,” Mr. Wells said. “Chuck,” he said, turning, “they have enough trouble on their hands. I don’t want you to add to it by telling anyone what we

just overheard.”

“Sure, Dad, sure. I won’t say a thing.”

Frowning, Mr. Wells left the cabin. His son remained standing beside the radarscope screen, laughing silently.

“Oh no no! I won’t say a word! I’m going to miss this chance of fixing those two stuck-up Space Explorers?”

Chuck Wells slipped out of the cabin and moved toward the mess room, close to the stem of the ship. Some of the crew members would be there, spending their off-duty hours.

That would be a good place to begin, the boy thought.

5 Treachery on Mars

WITHIN an hour every member of the crew of the Spaceyacht *Trader Wells* knew the story. Jim and Ken Barry members of the Space Explorer Corps, had been left grounded by their best friend!

“Just our luck,” one member of the crew said, shaking his head. “Stuck with a space-Jonah!”

“One be not enough,” groaned another crew man. “We get two of them.”

“We’re in trouble, mates,” an elderly space sailor complained. “Something will be happening soon. Maybe the atomic pile will blow up. Maybe a meteor will hit us. I know. I’ve sailed with a space-Jonah before.”

Chuck Wells knew just how to spread nasty news. In the finest schools of Earth, he had practiced such tricks until the rest of the students would have nothing to do with him.

He had been sent to one school after another, and always Chuck managed to become the most unpopular boy. He tried to buy friends with the money he always had to spend. But friendship can never be bought. Chuck never had a true friend and he never learned to be one himself.

Jim and Ken were not aware of the crew’s feelings until they came into the mess room after a day of sulking in their cabin. It took them only a few seconds to feel the coldness in the room.

Spacemen who had been friendly before now turned away from the two boys. Others pretended to be busy eating.

“It’s started,” Jim said loudly to his brother. He looked about the room.

No one returned his look. No one said anything.

“It isn’t our fault,” Ken started to speak. “We’re not —”

Jim grabbed his brother’s arm. “What’s the use of

trying to explain? They're a bunch of stupid spacedogs! Ignorant... cowards!"

"Jim..." Ken turned to his brother. "You know that's not so."

"Come on," Jim cried, dragging his brother away. "You'd be wasting your time talking to them. I'd rather stay in our cabin."

"Don't blame the men," Ken said to his brother when they were alone in their room. "Some one overheard us talking to Dig and spread the report."

"Aye," Jim growled, furious. "I can guess who the sneak was! Chuck Wells!"

"We can't prove it. It could have been the communications officer."

"A spaceman wouldn't do a thing like that," Jim insisted. "No, I'm sure it's Chuck!"

For the rest of the trip, the two boys kept to themselves. They avoided the men of the ship, and Mr. Wells, who seemed really sorry for them. Chuck approached them several times, a smirk on his lips, but Jim and Ken slammed the door of their cabin in his face.

When the spaceyacht began to drop for the landing on Mars, the Space Explorers had their duffle bags packed and ready. They stood at the small viewport in their cabin and watched the landing field rush upward.

Their eyes hopefully sought for the *Starover* among the neat rows of spaceships lined up on their launching pads. It wasn't there.

The moment the great fins of the spaceyacht touched the ground and the motors were cut, the two boys picked up their bags and climbed down to Linton Wells' cabin.

"Come in," the man said as they knocked on the door.

"Mr. Wells," Jim began.

"Ah!" the man said, rising from his chair. "Come in boys. Come in. Sit down."

“No, Mr. Wells. We’re leaving.”

“I had hoped you’d come to Venus with me...” He hesitated, glancing away uneasily. Then he snapped his head up. I don’t believe that space-Jonah nonsense, you know. I still need you and want you to come on my Venus expedition.”

That’s good of you, sir,” Ken said. “We may do it. But first we want to spend some time on the ground.”

Look, boys. I can wait for you. You...” He cleared his throat, looking down at his desk. “you can decide for yourselves now that... that... you’re not with this Dig Allen anymore. “

“We want to find out what happened here, sir,” Jim said. It may take a long time. There’s something behind Dig’s leaving us...”

“I understand... I understand.” Mr. Wells was sympathetic. After all, you are Space Explorers—”

“Without a spaceship, Jim broke in angrily.

“Come to work for me and I’ll give you the finest spaceship that ever blasted off into space!”

The Corps and Space Research will give us another ship,” Ken said.

“How long will it take? At least six months? Maybe a year. What will you do in the meantime?”

Jim shrugged. “We don’t know yet. Right now, we want to get the whole story about... about Dig Allen and why he left us.”

“I see.” The space merchant frowned. “I can begin to build my outposts on Venus at once, of course. But my business is going to be stopped until Space Research declares Venus an open planet. I hope you make up your minds—or find out what you want to know—very soon. Perhaps in time to come with me on this trip.”

“If we do, sir,” Ken promised, “we’ll get in touch with you.”

“Fine, fine!” The man walked with them to the hatch and watched the boys climb down to the airlock.

A few minutes after the two Space Explorers had left the airlock, a jeep drew up and a tall, thin man stepped out. He stared with small, narrow-set eyes as the two boys climbed down the wire ladder and climbed in beside the driver of the transport jeep. When the jeep headed back toward the administration building, he turned and hurried up the ladder to the airlock.

"I've some good news to report," Hanker said as he entered Wells' cabin. "That Venus trapper, Tim Buckle? The one who's been giving us a lot of trouble?"

"Yes?"

"I had some of my men convince him to forget the whole thing."

"That's good. How much did it cost to bribe him?"

"Not very much, sir. Tim Buckle has agreed to disappear and stop demanding that those animals on Venus be declared intelligent creatures."

"Good. But we'll still need an official Space Explorer report before the World Council will give us a free hand on Venus."

"We'll get it." Jud Hanker rubbed a thin hand over his chin thoughtfully. "Those two Space Explorers I saw leaving with their duffle bags just now... are they the ones who worked with that fellow Dig Allen?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I've heard rumors that they've been left behind by the shipmate." Hanker glanced at the viewport for a moment. "We could use them."

"Very much," Mr. Wells agreed. "But how can we get them to come? You don't just order a Space Explorer around. And I just tried to bribe them with a fine spaceship."

"I'd make up their minds for them mighty quick," the man growled.

"Mr. Hanker, we're partners in this Venus business," the merchant said sharply. "I'm putting up my money and my influence. You're going to do the work on

Venus. But we're not going to use your jungle tactics. I want that understood right here and now."

"Of course," the man said, his eyes observing Linton Wells slyly. "We're doing everything according to the law."

"And don't forget it."

"I think I can convince them to come," Hanker said, after a pause.

"All right. But just be careful about how you do it," Wells warned.

"Leave it to me, sir." Hanker turned to the hatch and paused, looking back over his shoulder. "Our supplies will be loaded in a short while. We'll blast off tonight, if you want to.

"With the Space Explorers, I hope."

"With the Space Explorers, Mr. Wells. You can count on me. I know just the argument to use on them."

Hanker went below to the airlock. A few minutes after he emerged from the spaceyacht, he was in a jeep heading toward Spaceman's Roost.

He drove quickly through the narrow streets, perfectly familiar with the place. Presently he stopped before a small, boarded-up house. He glanced about, then slipped inside.

When he came out again some time later, a wizened little man accompanied him to the jeep.

"Be ye careful, Jud," the little man said. "I wouldn't want to be caught again forging spacegrams. And about Space Explorers."

Jud Hanker laughed.

"I've paid you well for this work. So keep your mouth shut and nothing will happen."

"Aye. It's as good a bit of falsifying as I've ever done. There be none better than me... not on all the planets Of the solar system. And the information my spies report-you can depend on it."

Jud Hanker said nothing. He climbed into the jeep and drove away, turning and twisting through the streets of Spaceman's Roost. Presently he arrived at the spaceport, parked his jeep in front of the Administration building and hurried inside.

At the door, Hanker stopped a customs inspector.

"See a couple of Space Explorers?" he asked.

"The two space-Jonahs?" the customs man asked. "Sure, they're choking on a meal in the restaurant."

"Thanks."

Hanker went to the door and glanced inside. Most of the tables and booths were empty. His keen eyes searched the place carefully. In a far corner booth, he spotted the two boys.

A grin on his face, he strode across the room toward Jim and Ken. But as he neared their table, his face took on a friendly expression.

"You boys Jim and Ken Barry?" he asked, slipping into a seat facing the two boys.

"Yes."

"My name is Jud Hanker. I'm a Venusian merchant, sort of..." He hesitated, "I'm Linton Wells' partner."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Hanker," Ken said politely. "But if you don't mind, we'd rather be alone. Don't mean to be—"

"Oh!, I know how you boys feel," Hanker said in a friendly voice. "I came because Mr. Wells asked me to see if I could help you—and I can."

"How can you help *us*?" Jim asked.

"I can tell you why Dig Allen left you behind."

Jim and Ken tensed. Their eyes flashed at the man as they leaned toward him across the table.

"Tell us," Ken said.

"I don't know how to say it... It's not a nice story."

"Give it to us straight," Ken snapped. "You can't hurt

our feelings any more than they've already been hurt."

"It's cost me a bit of money," Hanker said, keeping his voice very low. "And if ye tell anyone about this, my friend who works for the Spacegram Company will get into *trouble*..."

He did not wait for the Space Explorers to reply, knowing that the two boys would never agree to anything dishonest. And what he had suggested certainly was. Instead, he fished out of his pocket two crumpled spacegrams and laid the pieces of paper on the table. Then *slowly*, he pushed them toward the two boys.

"Copies of messages sent out by Dig Allen and received by him. Read them, boys. The whole story is right there in black and white."

"It wouldn't be right to read Dig's spacegrams" Ken said looking away. "

"They're about you," Hanker argued. "You can read them."

For a long time, the Space Explorers remained silent. Gradually their eyes moved until they became fixed on the two spacegrams. Finally Jim reached out and picked up the first one.

He read it silently, then passed it to his brother.

To: Captain Boyd Allen	Urgent/Confidential
Explorer Ship Viking	Spacegram
In Spacetransit	8 October 2161 E.C.

BIGGEST OPPORTUNITY EVER. JIM AND KEN NOT HERE. MIGHT MISS CHANCE. ADVISE.

Digby Allen, Space Explorer Ship *Starover*
Marsport Base

"At least Dig wanted us here, eh, Jim?" Ken said, looking up. "What does Captain Allen say?"

For answer, Jim handed the second spacegram to his brother.

Urgent/Confidential
Spacegram
9 October 2161 E. C.

WORRY ABOUT YOURSELF AND YOUR FUTURE. YOU CANNOT WIN FAME AND PROMOTION SHARING HONORS WITH OTHERS. LET JIM AND KEN LOOK OUT FOR THEMSELVES. YOU GO AHEAD AND GRAB THIS CHANCE.

Captain Boyd Allen
Space Explorer Ship *Viking*
Saturn Vector

Ken stared at the words on the slip of paper. He was too stunned to say anything. The letters seemed to jump and dance before his eyes. He turned a pleading look on his brother. Jim's face was bleak.

Jud Hanker was watching the two boys closely. He saw the shock in their faces, and waited shrewdly until the meaning of the words could do its full damage. He picked up the space grams casually and tore them into shreds.

“I only wanted to do you boys a favor,” he said in a kindly tone. “I hope it didn’t upset you too much.”

The Space Explorers did not reply and the man continued in his smooth, friendly voice.

“It doesn’t surprise me a bit. Space Explorers are no different from others. Deep down, they be greedy and ambitious... same as we.”

“What will Dad say?” Jim asked his brother. “Dig doing this! And Captain Allen telling him to drop us!”

“I’d quit such an outfit,” Hanker’s voice slipped in quietly. “I’d be ashamed to be spacemates with such men...”

“It would break Dad’s heart,” Ken said. “Let’s forget this, Jim. I wouldn’t want Space Research to know... about Dig, I mean.”

Jim looked down at the surface of the table. “I’d like

to get out of this uniform...”

Ken turned to the thin trader. “Would you leave us alone for a few minutes, Mr. Hanker? We’d like to talk this over privately.”

“Sure thing, boys,” Hanker said in a confidential tone. “I’ll just wander outside. When you make up your minds, meet me by the Spacegram counter near the main entrance.” With a casual wave, he sauntered across the room and out into the hall. Jim and Ken were left staring numbly at the place where Hanker had sat.

Fifteen minutes later, the boys found Hanker lounging against the counter of the Spacegram booth in the lobby.

“Well, what have you decided?” he said as they came up.

“We’re finished with the Space Explorers, Mr. Hanker.” Jim said.

“Well, now you can go to work for Mr. Wells, can’t you?” Hanker asked briskly.

Jim and Ken looked at each other. “I guess we can, at that,” Ken said. “What do you say, Jim?”

“It’s all right with me,” Jim replied with a shrug. “I guess we’d better notify Space Research right away, though. We can go through the formal resignation procedure later.”

“That’s just fine, boys,” Hanker grinned. “That is, it’s fine you’ll be shipping on the *Trader Wells*. That reminds me—the ship’s all loaded by now. We’d better be getting aboard. Write out your message and I’ll send it off for you while you’re flagging us a jeep to get to the ship.”

Hanker pushed a message pad across the counter to Jim. He watched, a gleam of triumph in his eyes, as Jim wrote. Jim signed it and passed the pad to his brother. Ken didn’t read it. He signed quickly, then bowed his head.

Hanker seized the message pad and glanced at the words. A little smile played around the corners of his

mouth as he began to read.

“For important reasons, we hereby announce our intention to resign from the Space Explorer Corps. We hereby place ourselves on suspended-duty status pending...”

Jim stopped him angrily. “You don’t have to read it to us. We know what the message is.”

All sympathy, Hanker stopped. “I’m sorry, boys. I know this is a bad thing for you.”

The two boys hardly paid attention to the man. They were still dazed by their best friend’s treachery.

“All right, boys,” Hanker said brightly, “get your gear outside and hold a jeep. I’ll be with you quicker than you can say, *‘Trader Wells!’*”

6 Jud Hanker's Scheme

"I DON'T know how you did it," Linton Wells said, beaming at Jud Hanker. But you did get the Space Explorers here and we're on our way to Venus."

The wealthy merchant of the spaceways was in a happy mood. He rubbed his pudgy hands together with a great deal of pleasure as he talked to his partner.

Hanker drank in the praise, a sly smile on his lean face. His eyes, cold and steady, watched the merchant.

"I have ways of getting things done, Wells. Wait until we get started on Venus. Kohoolie skins, herbs for medicine, everything we can lay our hands on will come pouring to earth in your spacefreighters."

"I like a man who gets things done." Mr. Wells turned to his son sitting sullenly beside the viewport. "Perhaps if you had been a little more friendly..."

"I don't like them," Chuck interrupted his father. "They're like the kids in school. Stuck up and goody-goody..."

"Mr. Wells sighed and turned away from the boy. "I hope this trip to Venus teaches Chuck a few things, Jud," he said. Now tell me what you did to make them agree to come with us."

"How and what I did isn't important," Hanker said, pretending to be modest, but clearly pleased with himself. "I convinced Jim and Ken to quit the Space Explorer Corps..."

"You did what!" Linton Wells roared. His face turned a bright red and his eyes almost popped out of his head.

Hanker waved a piece of paper in his hand. "Here is their resignation from the Corps. Signed. Witnessed by me."

"What good are they to me now?" Linton Wells shouted. "You spacefool! I want a report from the Space Explorers! An official report that the World Council will accept without question! If they're no longer Space

Explorers, I don't need them."

"Ha!" Chuck Wells snorted. "So they're just members of our crew now! I'll show them who's boss!"

"Quiet, Chuck!" his father commanded. Mr. Wells then turned his attention to Jud Hanker. "You're not that stupid, Jud. You've got some scheme in mind."

Hanker was smiling. "I have. This resignation is staying right here with me. As far as Space Research and the World Council know, Jim and Ken Barry are still Space Explorers."

"Jim and Ken believe they're out..." Linton Wells scratched his fat chin, smiling, "...and only we know they're still in."

"And you can practically tell them-order them to write the kind of report you want," Hanker finished.

"Hmmm..." Wells became thoughtful. "Of course, I won't *order* them to write what we want in the report. I might make a suggestion here and there."

"Then we send it off to the Space Research Bureau as an official report of the Space Explorers," Hanker finished proudly. "How do you like it?"

Mr. Wells chuckled, his fat body beginning to shake and quiver.

"I like it, Jud," he said, heartily. "The best part of it is that we're doing the boys a favor. In a few days Jim and Ken will be sorry they quit the Space Explorers."

"That's true," Hanker said. "I talked fast."

"They'll be grateful we didn't send in their resignation."

But we won't tell them until after they prove the Kohoolies are just animals," Hanker put in quickly. .

After the report, of course." Linton Wells laughed. "This is even better than I had hoped for."

o o o o

THE Explorer Ship *Starover* approached Venus in a wide circling orbit that had carried it sweeping past

Earth. The clouds that covered Venus glowed in the bright sunlight. From a distance of a thousand miles, the haze appeared thick and milky. But as the spaceship drew nearer, the clouds seemed to grow thinner, with wispy streaks that showed the surface briefly.

The voyage had been longer than usual because of the error in blast-off. The extra time gave Tim Buckle the rest he needed to recover from the fever that had tortured his body.

He was still weak. Yet the approach to his beloved planet brought new color to his cheeks and a vigorous spring to his walk. “

“There be no world as sweet as Venus,” the trapper said. Not Earth, not Mars, not the new colony they be building on Ganymede.”

Dig Allen thought, looking at the man, “How like the hunters and trappers of the Old West of America this man is! Like Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, Daniel Boone...” A deep admiration for the strange Venusian was growing in the boy.

“What do you expect me to do when we reach Venus?”

“Tim Buckle scratched the back of his head thoughtfully. Don’t really know. Just so long as you tell that Space Research outfit that the Kohoolies be as smart as any earthling. Smart as you and me.”

“That’s all, eh?”

“Aye, that will save them from being shot up by Linton Wells’ gang.”

“Well, Tim, it won’t be easy. I have to be convinced first.”

The trapper chuckled quietly. “That be easy. You’ll come and live with us in the swamps. Get real friendly with the Kohoolies. They be nice folks. Maybe ye’ll even learn to speak Kohoolie. They’ll be glad to teach it to you. If ye be wanting to learn.”

“That’s nice,” Dig said, joking. “So I’m to live in the swamps.”

"You'll be all right," Tim assured him. "My partners be waiting for us in Venus town right now."

"Trappers or Kohoolies?"

"My partners?" Tim asked seriously, seeing nothing funny in the boy's remark. "Trappers they be. Pierre Hammer and Peter Axe."

"Strange names," Dig said. "Are they real names?"

Again the trapper scratched his head, smiling. "Kohoolies gave us the names, so I guess they're real. You see, boy, to the Kohoolies all people look alike. That is, until they get to know us. So they give us names to help them tell us apart."

"I see," Dig said. "How did you get the name of Tim Buckle?"

"Tim's really my name," the trapper said. "And when I met the first Kohoolie, my belt buckle was broken. So the Kohoolies remembered that and always called me Tim Buckle."

"And Pierre Hammer?"

"He was nailing up a shelter when he met his first Kohoolie."

"And Peter Axe?"

"Cutting wood for the shelter. It be very simple," the trapper assured him.

"And will they give me a name, too?"

Tim shook his head. "Only if ye decide to live in the swamp, same as us trappers."

"Then I'm safe. I won't leave the free spaceways," Dig laughed.

"That be your way," Tim Buckle said. "The swamps be for me."

There is a strange beauty about Venus, seen from space. The clouds seem to spread out, scatter and thin into a faint mist as a spaceship enters the atmosphere. Below, the green jungle stretches in every direction, as far as the eye can see.



Dig had slowed down the swift approach of the *Starover* with nose rockets, then swung the great ship about. It came down tail-fins first. With Tim beside him, Dig watched the rear scanner.

Venustown was a large, sprawling place with makeshift houses almost all lined up along one main street. The buildings were made of heavy Venusian timber supplied by the thick forests that loomed all around the town. A few of the larger houses were made

of plasteel sections, bolted together.

The spaceport was a great Hat field of mud, without a control tower to guide the ships in. The jungle crowded in on it from all sides.

Dig handled the controls carefully as he brought the *Starover* down. For a few minutes, he held the ship hanging in the air. The stream of flames from the rocketubes baked the wet mud hard. Then Dig set the ship down.

"That be neat," Tim acknowledged with admiration. "Now we go to meet my partners, eh, Dig?"

"All right. But could I send a message to Jim and Ken? I must explain—"

"They be with Linton Wells," Tim said, his face hardening briefly. "That be the one man in all space who shouldn't know where you be."

"We're here now," Dig argued. "He can't stop us."

"There be many cutthroats here who work for him. You know what they tried to do to me on Mars."

"Aye, but as soon as this is over," Dig said, "I'll have to make up for deserting my friends. I just hope they don't do anything foolish before I can talk to them. Jim's awfully quick tempered."

They climbed down to the airlock. Since the atmosphere inside the ship already matched that on Venus, they went through quickly.

The field looked deserted. A few spacefreighters stood at the edges of the clearing. There were no jet-jeps in sight and the two walked across the muddy field toward the town, half a mile away.

"Where are you meeting Pierre and Peter?"

"They be staying at the Trappers Cafe."

"Far?"

"Right plunk in the middle of town."

Nothing further was said until they reached the first buildings. It was growing dark, but no lights showed

through the windows.

“Where are the people?” Dig asked after they had passed several more houses. All were dark and deserted.

Tim shook his head. “Town people. There be no way of understanding how they live,” he said, as if the problem was beyond him.

But as they advanced farther into the town, the silence of the houses began to puzzle the trapper. After a while he stepped up to the window of a house and looked inside. He came back scratching his head.

“Never saw the town like this before,” he said.

They turned into Main Street and immediately noticed a great crowd gathered some distance ahead. Tim stopped the boy with a quick motion of his hand. He peered ahead. It was too dark to see more than the dim figures of people. There were shouts that carried through the warm, moist air.

Tim frowned. “I don’t like this,” he said in a soft, careful voice. “There be something wrong.”

The trapper pointed to the nearest house. Its door was wide open. He pointed to the next house, then to several across the street. All the doors were open.

“What’s wrong with leaving doors open?” Dig asked.

“There be too many thieves in Venustown, Tim said. “The place be full of them. Ye just don’t leave a house open, not if ye want to keep your things.”

“We can find out easily by asking someone up there.” Dig pointed to the crowd.

Tim laid a hand on the boy’s shoulder. All the quick senses of a man used to danger came alive in the trapper. His eyes darted swiftly in every direction. He breathed in deeply, his chest heaving, as though he could smell the warnings in the air.

“Stay close behind me,” he said to Dig. “We’ll go around the back way.”

The trapper turned off the street into a dark, narrow alley between two rough log houses. Behind the houses

the ground was soft from the constant moisture. in the air. Clumps of heavy, thick-leaved bushes grew in scattered spots. Farther back, the thick jungle growth began and streamers of mist crept out from beneath the trees.

Tim ran swiftly on silent feet, crouching a little and glancing back over his shoulder to make sure Dig followed. The noise of the crowd became louder as they approached. Finally, Tim stopped.

"We'll join the crowd quietly," he said, with a nod toward the nearby alley. "Stay with me."

"Aye." Dig glanced toward the crowd. "Seems like there are more people here than I thought lived on Venus."

"Whole town's out there," Tim said.

The trapper turned and sauntered ahead. The edge of the crowd flowed around the houses, lapping like a muddy stream into the alley. The street was jammed with men. All of them had their eyes fixed on a plasteel building across the way.

A lean, hard man, his face twisted with anger, was saying, "We ought to shoot the both of them!"

Another beside him growled, "That be too good for them kind. Feed 'em to their own blasted scorpion lizards! That be what I say."

"There be no sense in keeping them locked up in the storehouse," a burly man said. He had massive shoulders and thick arms, heavy with powerful muscles. "Give 'em to me! I'll tear them apart."

"Aye, and you could do it, too, Gorgon," the lean man said, laughing.

"I'd rather have my house back," a man said. "If they can get rid of the scorpion lizards..."

"Scorpion lizards!" Tim said excitedly to Dig. "That must be why the houses are open. The town's full of scorpion lizards!"

The burly man called Gorgon must have overheard

Tim's remark, because he turned his head in the direction of the alley. "Aye," he said, "the trappers let them loose. Say! Where have ye been that ye didn't know..." Gorgon stopped and stared.

"Another trapper!" he shouted, pointing at Tim's leather clothes. He leaped forward and his huge fist shot out, smashing into Tim's face.

"Gorgon's got another one!" the lean man cried.

Tim staggered back under the blow. In an instant Gorgon was upon him. His fist smashed out again, and Tim fell to the ground.

A man tried to kick the trapper. Dig leaped in and blocked him. A fist hit the boy in back of the head. He stumbled, tripped over Tim and fell.

The crowd surged forward, forming a tight, furious circle around Tim and Dig.

7 The Scorpion Lizards

EVEN as he fell, Dig realized that the crowd was crazed by fear and hatred. The danger was real. In the tense moment as he looked up at the faces peering down at him, the boy knew that the first wrong move could lead to a violent explosion.

To wait would only increase the danger. With each second, the men were working themselves into a deadly, mind less mob.

Dig scrambled to his feet, shouting at the top of his voice "Wait! Wait! You're making a mistake!"

Hands grabbed at him and he fought them off with desperate fury. A heavy fist struck him in the shoulder and the boy almost went down again.

At that moment a man recognized Dig's uniform. "Hey This be a Space Explorer. He's no trapper."

The crowd drew back for an instant. Dig took advantage of the moment.

"I'm Digby Allen, Space Explorer Corps," he said in loud, commanding voice. "Stand back."

The crowd retreated a step, widening the circle around Tim and the boy.

"I've just landed here on Venus," Dig went on quickly, "with my friend, Tim Buckle."

"Aye, that be Tim Buckle." A man leaned forward peer into the trapper's face. "I know him."

"We saw the crowd and came to find out what was going on," Dig said quietly, hoping his manner would help calm the mob. "Tim and I have been in space. Just arrived from Mars."

"That makes no difference! Tim Buckle's guilty, same as the others." It was the big man called Gorgon who stepped forward to shake his fist at Tim.

"Now, wait, Gorgon," a man said, pushing through the crowd. "That does make a difference. There may be

no law here on Venus, and no Space Guards. But we be decent folks...”

“The trappers brought in the scorpion lizards and let them loose in town. They knew the lizards would make for the houses. They’re out to drive you out of your homes,” Gorgon began to shout to the crowd. “Are you men going to let them do it?”

“No!” a number of voices cried.

“Then let’s teach the trappers a lesson! Right now!” Gorgon cried.

Dig glared at the big man towering over him. “Looks to me like you’re just trying to start trouble,” he said.

“Me? Start trouble?” Gorgon shouted. “It was the trappers let the scorpion lizards loose in town...”

“If that’s what the trouble be, Tim Buckle said, sitting tip, “I can help ye clear the town of them.”

“Another trick,” Gorgon shouted.

A small man pushed past Gorgon and stood leaning over Tim.

“Can ye get rid of them for us?” he asked.

“Aye.” Tim stood up, shakily. “That I can do.”

“Then do it, and do it quick,” the man said.

“His kind can’t be trusted,” Gorgon insisted. “Hanging is what he deserves.”

“That wouldn’t save your town from the scorpion lizards,” Dig reminded the men. “Give Tim Buckle a chance. He’ll help you.”

“Only way to get rid of them lizards is to burn the town down,” one bearded old fellow said. “There be no other way to do it.”

“I’ll do it, and I won’t burn the town, either,” Tim promised. “Who are the two trappers you’ve locked up?”

“Fellows named Pierre Hammer and Peter Axe,” someone in the crowd called out. “If ye want to save them, get rid of the lizards.”

Tim started when he heard the names of the prisoners. Dig noticed it and he turned to his friend quickly. Before Tim could say anything, the boy took his arm.

“Better start, Tim,” he said sharply. “There’s no time to waste in arguing.”

“Aye,” Tim said.

The trapper pushed his way through the crowd and walked briskly into the alley between two houses. He continued his steady pace across the empty field toward the jungle. Not once did he look back as Dig followed.

At the edge of the heavy growth, Dig called to him.

“Where are we going?”

Tim did not reply. He bent down and studied the ground as he walked beneath the first big trees. Suddenly he stopped and pointed.

“This way.” He pushed his way through the undergrowth. “There should be a path here.”

Dig plunged in after the trapper. After a few minutes, he noticed a faint trail through the jungle. A glow outlined the sides of the path. The trapper’s keen eyes found it.

“Pay attention to this,” Tim said, pointing out the glowing blades of grass along the path. “You’ll never get lost in the jungle if ye follow them.”

“What is it?”

Dig bent down and examined the grass closely. Tiny, hairlike strands of spider web were looped from one blade of grass to the next. The strands were luminous.

“Spider webs,” Tim said.

“Tim, how did you know there would be a path here?”

“Kohoolie sign told me.” Tim chuckled softly. “This be a Kohoolie trail.”

“They come this close to Venustown?”

“Aye, and closer. Sometimes they slip into the town.”

“Aren’t they afraid?” Dig asked. “After all, some of

the people would shoot and kill them for their furs.”

“Aye, the Kohoolies be afraid. Same as you and me. But they’ve got to keep an eye on what’s going on.”

The trapper said nothing more, but turned and set a fast pace along the path. They traveled for several minutes in complete silence.

Presently a clearing appeared in the jungle ahead. Tim stopped and look about, sniffing the air. Then he dropped to his knees and began to slap the ground with his hands.

Amazed, Dig watched the strange performance. There was a definite rhythm to the sound of Tim’s hands hitting the ground. Two slaps, three, one, two, then a pause. Two, three, one, two, another pause.

After several minutes, the trapper stopped and went over to the side of the clearing.

“Now we wait,” Tim said. He sat down on the ground and leaned his back against the trunk of a thick tree.

Dig joined him. Tim closed his eyes, sitting perfectly still. He seemed to be listening. After a while he opened his eyes.

“That fellow Gorgon,” the trapper said, “he and two other men trapped a lot of scorpion lizards two days ago.”

“Then they’re the ones who let the lizards loose in town!”

“Must be.” Tim closed his eyes again and sat quietly.

“It couldn’t be anyone else—” Dig began, then stopped and flashed a startled look at his companion. “How do you know? You’ve been with me in the *Starover!*”

“The Kohoolies told me,” Tim said. In the faint light, Dig could just make out the smile on the trapper’s face.

“The Kohoolies told you!” Dig repeated, astonished.

“Aye, they be telling me right now.”

Dig listened carefully but heard only the sounds of the jungle. The distant cry of a bird or some beast, the

murmur of millions of insects. Nothing more came on the night air.

"I don't hear a thing..."

"Your back," Tim said. "Listen with your back."

"My back?" Dig was bewildered. Suddenly a chill of fear swept over him.

Faintly, through the tree, he felt a vibration. A sound from some distance carried along the ground... he felt it with his back. A tiny thud, then two, then four, then one. There was a clear rhythm to the faint vibrations he felt through the trunk of the tree.

"The Kohoolies will take care of the lizards," Tim said. "They'll go into the houses and catch them."

The sounds coming through the ground stopped abruptly. An eerie silence was all around them.

"What about the town people?" Dig asked. "They're watching the streets."

Tim laughed. "The Kohoolies can slip right under their noses and not be caught. They'll let me know when the job's done."

They waited quietly for over an hour. Then the slap-slap signals came again through the ground. Dig felt the faint vibrations with his back against the trunk of the tree. Tim tensed, listening. Finally he rose to his feet, yawned, stretched his arms wide.

"Time we be going back," he said.

He set off down the path. Keeping his eyes on the strangely glowing spider webs along the way, Dig had no trouble following the trail.

When they reached the edge of the jungle, Tim motioned for Dig to stop. He began to search about in the tall grass.

"Here they be," he announced, stooping.

There were two baskets, woven of some thick fiber, with grass rope handles at each side. Tim picked up one and asked Dig to take the other.

"Be careful, boy," the trapper said. "These baskets be

full of lizards, scorpion lizards. Don't be putting your hand in, and don't trip and spill what's inside. Those lizards be deadly poisonous."

"I'll be careful."

The trapper stepped out of the jungle into the clearing behind the rows of houses. From the shadows several armed men emerged. Quietly they followed Tim and Dig. The trapper walked on until he reached the crowd in the street.

"Your homes are safe now," he said, putting down his basket. "Now free Pierre and Peter."

Dig placed the basket he carried beside Tim's. As he set it down, he heard a scrambling, rustling sound from inside that made his flesh creep. Some of the men went to look into the nearby houses.

One man called out, "There be no lizards here." He poked his head out of the nearest house. "All clear."

"The lizards are all in these baskets," Tim said, poking one of them with his toe.

The crowd began to break up, with most of the men hurrying off to look over their own homes. Tim signaled to Dig and strode across the street to the large plasteel building.

Two men, holding stunray rifles, stood guard before the door. One of them stopped the trapper.

"Those two stay inside until the town folks decide ho to punish them for bringing in the lizards" the man said quietly.

"Are they going to have a fair trial?" asked Dig. "You have to call the Space Guards..."

"We don't need Space Guards on Venus," a harsh voice broke m. It was the man called Gorgon. "And no trial. They're guilty and we'll take care of them!"

"You have no right to keep them locked up," Dig insisted.

"We're going to do it just the same," Gorgon sneered. "We hold them until they rot of swamp fungus—or get hanged!"

8 Pierre and Peter

TIM BUCKLE heard the sneering words of Gorgon and said nothing for a long, breathless moment. His sharp eyes watched the big man coldly. When the trapper finally did speak, it was in a calm, friendly tone.

"I've heard of ye," Tim said. "Ye be Gorgon, the hunter."

"Aye," the big man laughed. "The best hunter on Venus. I can shoot a Kohoolie a mile away. And skin him faster than any man on this planet."

Tim frowned, then nodded. "Ye be a man of many and great skills. Now I wonder if it's all right with you if I go in and see my friends?"

Gorgon laughed. "So that's why you're praising me!"

"Aye."

"I don't know." Gorgon scratched his head, thinking. Before he could go on, one of the guards spoke up.

"Sure. You can go in Tim. But no tricks."

"No, no tricks," Tim said.

The trapper walked quickly through the door and Dig followed him. The guard came with them, watching warily.

"The room at the back of the house," the man said, pointing. "Down the hall. There's a bar across the door. You can take it down."

Tim nodded to the guard, murmured his thanks in a low voice, and hurried toward the far end of the hallway. When he reached the last room, he lifted off the metal bar and put it carefully on the floor. Then he pulled open the door and stepped inside. Dig followed him slowly.

The room was small, lighted by an ancient lantern hanging from the ceiling. Two men, dressed in leather clothes similar to those worn by Tim, sat on a wooden bench, their eyes watching the doorway suspiciously. As

Tim came in one of the men leaped to his feet.

“Tim,” he cried. “You’ve come back!”

He was a short and skinny man. He had a long, thin nose and a gaunt, bony face that ended in a sharply pointed chin. His eyes darted swiftly over the boy, noticed the uniform, the red hair, the snub nose, the freckled face. A quick smile came over his face.

“A Space Explorer,” he said, holding his hand out to Dig. “I’m Peter Axe. Glad you came here to Venus.”

My friends, they do not have the good manners” the other. man said, rising slowly to his feet. “They always forget Pierre Hammer. They do not introduce him.” He raised himself to his full height, proudly. “But I, Pierre Hammer, I also am very glad to see you, my young friend.”

Dig hardly heard the man’s words. He was staring in amazement at the size of Pierre Hammer. Almost seven feet tall, weighing close to four hundred pounds this was a mountain of a man!

“You say nothing?” Pierre asked, bending his massive head toward the boy. “For me, it is a very happy moment. Tim has brought you here to help us, no?”

Dig looked about the tiny prison. “I... I could think of nicer places in which to meet...”

Pierre laughed heartily, his huge hands holding his shaking sides.

“It is a sad thing for you to see Pierre and Peter locked in this jail, eh? Do not worry. Pierre, he is a very strong man. Pierre can break this jail with one little hand.”

The fist the trapper held up before Dig’s eyes was not little. Pierre grinned, pleased to see Dig draw back his head in surprise.

“I will show you, my little friend.”

On legs as thick and solid as tree trunks, the trapper slumped to the door and glanced out quickly. He came back smiling.

"The guard, he is waiting down the hall."

With surprising ease, the big man sprang onto the bench and reached up to the window, high in the wall. He grasped one of the plasteel bars with his hand and, with a twist of his wrist, wrenched the metal bar out.

"Old Pierre," the trapper said, stepping lightly down to the floor, "he is the strongest man in all the worlds."

"Well, then, if it be so easy to get out," Tim asked, a little annoyed, "why did ye stay inside?"

Pierre tapped his forehead with a thick finger, chuckling.

"Pierre, he also has the brains."

"Gorgon and his killers are hiding outside, waiting to shoot us down the moment we get out of here," Peter Axe I explained. "We were going to make a break for the jungle tonight."

Tim scratched his chin, thinking. "I'll make sure they're busy when you go."

"That is good," Pierre laughed. "What we do now, Tim, eh?"

"Dig Allen, here," Tim said, "has to send word back to Space Research that the Kohoolies be intelligent. That will stop Linton Wells."

"The troubles, they are over, no?" Pierre looked at the Space Explorer. "You help quick, yes?"

"I can't, Pierre," Dig explained. "I have to test their intelligence... study their way of living..." The red-headed boy looked at the men watching him quietly. "I must really believe the Kohoolies aren't just clever animals."

"How long will it take, Dig?" Peter Axe asked.

"I don't know. A few weeks—"

"We can't wait that long. Wells' and Hanker's hunter have been in the swamps for more than a week already, killing our friends. They're hiding the furs to bring out later."

“And you’ve sat safe in this jail all this time?” Tim cried angrily. “Doing nothing to protect them?”

“What can we do against hundreds of armed men?” Peter Axe cried.

“If they’re intelligent,” Dig broke in, “why can’t the Kohoolies defend themselves?”

“They be gentle creatures,” Tim said. “They will not hurt a living thing unless they be forced to do it. But they will fight to save a mend. And they can do terrible things when they decide the time has come to strike back at an enemy.”

The trapper turned to his two jungle companions.

“We’re going out there to fight Wells’ hunters,” Tim announced. “I will signal you when to break out.”

Pierre and Peter nodded, silently.

“Let’s get out of here, Dig,” Tim said. He strode out of the room.

The guard in the hall watched them pass.

“I’ll bar the door,” he said. “And Tim, be careful. That Gorgon is a mean one.”

“Thank ye,” Tim glanced at the man. He was one of the town people, not a hired hunter. “May the luck of the swamps be with ye.”

Outside, the thick, black darkness of a Venusian night covered the town. In doorways and alleys, Dig saw the vague shadows of men with rifles lurking.

“Pierre and Peter were right about Gorgon waiting to shoot them,” Dig said in a low whisper.

“Aye,” Tim said. “But be not worried about them. We go back to the ship, Dig.”

They walked along the muddy street to the outskirts of the town then across the landing field. All the way to the spaceship, Tim walked with bowed head, deep in thought. He said nothing until they were in the control cabin of the *Starover*.

“Now, Dig, I be wanting a promise from ye.”

“What is it?”

“Do not use the radarscope to call your spacemates. Not until morning. Then ye be free of all promises to me. Ye can blast off, or ye can go into the jungle to make your report.

“All right, Tim. You’ve got my promise. What are you going to do?”

The Venusian shook his head. It be better if I don’t tell ye. That way, ye won’t be blamed for what will happen.”

“All right,” he said. “Get some sleep.

“Aye” Tim agreed. He went into the pilot room and threw himself on the bunk. Almost instantly he was asleep.

Dig paced restlessly about the control room: Then, after a while, he felt the tiredness in his body and climbed below to his own cabin.

Lying on his bunk, he closed his eyes and tried not to think of anything. But the events of the past week stumbled through his mind.

“It’s been more than a week,” he muttered to himself. Everything happened so rapidly after his meeting with Chips at the bridge on the Main Canal. He had no time to think and now he was too tired to do so.

“Wish Jim and Ken were here. We’d find some way to stop Wells and his men...”

He realized, as he fell asleep, that his body still ached from the blast of Tim Buckle’s stunray gun.

He awoke with a start. He must have been sleeping for a long time. Through the viewport he saw a faint glow lighting up the cloudy sky.

“Dawn?” Dig was surprised. The nights on Venus were almost three times as long as those on Earth.

He sat up and looked out of the viewport. Suddenly he tensed. It was not dawn but a fire in the town that cast the glow on the clouds.

Leaping out of his bunk, he ran to the shaftway and

called up to Tim.

“Tim! Tim! The town’s on fire!”

There was no answer. Dig clambered up the cleat ladder quickly. The pilot cabin was empty. Tim was gone.

“So that’s it! Tim set fire to the town!” The thought flashed through his mind.

Dig whirled and slid down the shaft to the airlock. The hatches were open. He leaped through, grabbed the wire ladder hanging outside the spaceship and climbed down to the ground. Then he sprinted across the muddy landing field toward the town.

As he reached Main Street, he heard the confused shouts of the crowd.

“It’s that trapper Tim Buckle! He did it!”

“Aye,” someone else cried. “We should have thrown him in jail, with the other two!”

Dig stopped to read the large sign hanging over the burning storage shed.

WELLS TRADING COMPANY HEADQUARTERS

He had no doubts now. Tim had taken a desperate revenge on Wells. And the town people were justly angry that their houses happened to have been in the way. What would they do now to Tim? To Pierre and Peter?

He started to move away when a man stopped him.

“Here, take some of these carbon dioxide cartridges!” the man shouted, thrusting a box of the small fire extinguishers into the boy’s hands. “Get busy!”

“Aye,” Dig said.

“Hold on!” the man cried, grabbing Dig. “You be the Space Explorer!”

“Aye,” Dig said. “Let go, so I can help fight the fire...”

“No ye don’t!” the man snarled. “You be with Tim Buckle! Ye helped start this fire!”



“Don’t be a fool,” Dig retorted. “I was on board my ship...”

“Gorgon! This way, Gorgon!” the man shouted at the top of his voice.

Two men suddenly came out of the darkness.

“What is it, Jamie?” Dig recognized Gorgon’s voice.

“The Space Explorer,” Jamie replied. “I caught him.”

“Good!” Gorgon snarled. “We’ll use him to get the town people mad enough to hang every trapper on Venus!” He turned on the boy. “Pretty smart, aren’t you! Starting the fire so the trappers could break out of jail!”

“Is that what happened?” Jamie asked in surprise. “Did they get away?”

“They did. But now we’ve got this one!” Gorgon shook his fist at Dig. He turned and began to shout for the crowd.

The fire in the shed was already dying, smothered by clouds of carbon-dioxide gas. From every side, men came running toward Gorgon.

“What’s the matter?”

“We’ve got him!” Gorgon cried. “The one who tried to burn down our town!”

A circle of angry faces formed around Dig. He knew he’d never be able to talk to them as he had before. He slipped his hand slowly into the box of fire extinguishers he was holding and pulled one of them out. Cautiously he pushed in the starter, then counted off five seconds. He dropped it on the ground just as it exploded into a cloud of choking gas.

For a moment the crowd was stunned. Dig leaped, crashing out of the circle of angry men.

“Don’t let him get away!”

The boy sprinted down Main Street, the crowd fast at his heels. Ahead, men were running out to head him off. There was no time to look around. Dig turned into the first alley and ran blindly through the darkness.

The hot blasts of stunray guns churned up the ground at his feet. Something hit his heel. He stumbled and fell, then picked himself up again and staggered forward.

He reached the end of the alley ahead of the crowd and turned to run around the house. Suddenly something grabbed his ankle and he tripped. He did not have the strength to get up. Dazed, he lay with his face against the soft, warm earth.

Gentle hands touched him, found his spacebelt around his waist, gripped it. He felt himself sliding along the ground. Someone was dragging him. Dig tried to look up, but leaves and branches whipped at his face.

He had been pulled into one of the clumps of heavy bushes that grew in the fields behind the houses.

Cool fingers felt his face, then covered his mouth lightly. Hardly daring to breathe, Dig lay still as the feet of the crowd rushed past his hiding place.

9 Into the Jungle

WITH a roar, the mob swept off into another alley and flowed back into the main street. Dig lay quietly, rapidly regaining his strength. The fingers moved away from lips. Some one was beside him, hidden in the bush, Dig knew. He could see nothing in the darkness.

Unexpectedly, something touched his hand. The cool gentle fingers again tugging at him. The bushes parted and something crawled out, pulling his hand.

Dig followed on his hands and knees. From beyond the houses came the angry sounds of the mob. A small, dark shape rose to its feet beside him, and taking him by the hand, led the way to the edge of the jungle.

Dig went along quietly, his eyes fixed on the vague figure guiding him. He sensed that it was a Kohoolie but it was too dark for him to see clearly.

At the edge of the heavy growth, the animal opened a path hidden behind bushes and pulled Dig in. A short distance beyond they found a path. Dig recognized the faintly glowing spider webs along the sides.

Still holding him by the hand, the Kohoolie led the way deeper into the Jungle. Dig followed silently. At the clearing where he had sat with Tim Buckle, Dig stopped to rest. Patiently, the Kohoolie waited.

Overhead, Dig could see through the thinned-out foliage the dark of the sky, empty and starless. He stared for a long time and then, just as he was about to look away, his eyes caught a flash of light.

Tiny at first, it grew larger as he watched. Braking rockets, he guessed. The light continued to increase in size as a spaceship descended and the flames from the rockettubes increased in power.

“A spaceship coming in for a landing,” the boy said, glancing toward the dark shape of the Kohoolie.

The animal shifted uneasily but made no sound. It reached out for Dig’s hand and gave it a gentle tug.

“Want me to come with you, is that it?” Dig asked.

Again the Kohoolie pulled at his hand.

"All right." The boy rose to his feet, then turned for another look at the sky. "I can't go back to the *Starover*. Gorgon and his men are probably watching for me there. I might as well go with you. Maybe we can find Tim, Pierre and Peter somewhere in this jungle."

He turned again and looked enviously at the spaceship high above him.

"Wish I was up there."

The Kohoolie trotted off. Dig followed the steady pat-patter of its feet. The clearing was left behind. The jungle grew thicker around them with every step. The ground, too, changed. There were soft spots in the path and Dig slipped and stumbled as he matched the quick pace of the Kohoolie.

They went on for hours until they reached another clearing. The Kohoolie stopped, rising high on its hind legs. It sniffed the air cautiously. Then it took Dig by the hand and led him to a grassy mound. The Kohoolie plopped himself down on the ground and looked at the boy, waiting. In the dark, Dig could only make out the head turning toward him. He remained standing, puzzled by the animal's actions.

The Kohoolie reached up and took his hand, then pull him gently toward the ground.

"So you want me to sit down," Dig said, smiling. The animal behaved like a clever dog, trying to make him understand. "I get it. This is where we rest."

As if he understood the words, the Kohoolie curled up on the ground and seemed to go to sleep. He looked like a dark, furry ball.

"I can take a hint," Dig said.

He stretched out on the soft, sweet-smelling grass. The jungle was filled with faint insect sounds. It was quiet and restful. Before he realized it, Dig was sound asleep.

o o o o

ON wide-open rockets, the Spaceyacht *Trader Wells*

made the trip from Mars to Venus in record time. As it slowly came down for its landing, Jim and Ken Barry sat in the foampad chairs at the viewport in their cabin. The Hare of the braking rockets showed them the column of smoke still drifting from burned buildings in the town.

The two boys were silent, staring down into the misty darkness. The yellow glare of the rockets struck gleams from spaceships standing here and there on the landing field. There were several spacefreighters, most of them old and patched. Nearer the center stood two modern cargo and passenger carriers.

Then Jim leaned forward tensely, his every nerve suddenly alert.

“Ken! Look down there!” he cried, his voice breaking unexpectedly in the excitement that swept over him. “That ship...”

“Where?” The younger boy followed his brother’s pointing finger. A hushed moment, then Ken gasped, “*It’s the Starover!*”

The next second the *Trader Wells* came down on its flaming tail and settled on the ground. The engine cut out. In the silence that filled the ship, the two boys stared at each other.

“What’s it doing here?” Jim asked, stunned for the moment.

“Dig’s on Venus!”

“We’ve got to see him!” Jim scrambled out of his seat and headed for the hatchway to the center shaft. “Come on.”

A crew member stopped them at the airlock. A red warning light flashed overhead.

“Atmosphere changing to match Venus,” the space sailor informed them. “You can’t leave ship yet.” Jim smiled sheepishly. “I forgot.” He turned and began to climb back to the cabin. “We’ll wait in our place, Ken.”

On the way up, Linton Wells poked his head out of his cabin.

"Come in here, boys. I want to go over our plans with you," the space merchant said, "then you can go."

"Sure, Mr. Wells." Jim: went through the hatchway into the cabin. Ken climbed in after him.

Jud Hanker and Chuck were there, sprawled in foampad chairs. On the table a rough map was spread and Wells motioned to the boys to join him.

"This is where we are now," the merchant said, putting his finger on a cross marked on the map. "Venustown."

Jim glanced down. It was a photomap, made by a spaceship from a height of about a hundred miles. Red crosses formed a great circle around the spot marked "Venustown."

"My hunting and trading stations will be placed around the town here, here, here..." Wells tapped his finger on the red crosses. "We supply them with helicopters. Your job will be to explore the jungle between my stations and this town..."

"Mr. Wells, our job is to learn something about the animals called Kohoolies," Ken reminded the man.

"Naturally," Wells agreed. "But there are other animals here. Perhaps, from what I have heard, very strange and dangerous ones. The Kohoolie report, well, that isn't too difficult."

"You thought it was very important when you were on Eros..."

"That's true, of course," Wells said, smiling. "It is important. But it's not going to be a difficult job." He swung around to Jud Hanker. "Jud, can our boys get a Kohoolie for them? A live one, I mean. I want Jim and Ken to have a chance to study it and write out their report."

"Sure thing, Wells," Hanker replied. "Gorgon will be aboard as soon as the atmosphere check is made." He looked up at the two brothers. "Gorgon is my foreman here. A good man and the best hunter on Venus."

"You'll have a chance to make a pet of the Kohoolie,"

Wells laughed. "That suit you?"

"Fine," Jim said. "But we'll have to try to see how they live."

"They live like the animals they are," Chuck came into the conversation, his tone barely concealing a sneer. "You talk as if you already made up your minds that they live like civilized beings."

"We haven't made up our minds yet," Ken said. "Not one way, not the other."

"Well, remember, you're working for us now," Chuck grumbled, his round, soft face pinched into a frown. "You're not Space Explorers now. You'll have to learn to take orders."

Ken turned his back on the boy. "Mr. Wells, we're going out now."

"Sure, go ahead. But there's nothing to see here on Venus—just jungle and mud."

"There's something very important to see," Jim said. "Our ship is here..."

"You're just a couple of space-Jonahs," Chuck laughed. "You haven't got a ship. And you'll never get one—unless we give it to you."

Linton Wells threw a furious look at his son.

"Quiet!" he roared. "I've told you before..." With an effort he controlled his temper. Then, his face changing swiftly, he looked at Jim. "You mean the *Starover* is here? On Venus?"

"Yes, sir," said Ken. "We spotted it as we came down for the landing."

The merchant frowned. "By all means, of course. You must find out what it's doing here."

Hanker interrupted. "Gorgon should be coming aboard soon. He knows just about everything that's going on in Venus town. My advice is for you to wait for him."

Ken hesitated. Before he could say anything, Linton Wells stopped him.

“That’s the best advice you could get. Stay on board for a few minutes more.”

“We’ll wait.”

The two boys crossed the cabin to the viewport and gazed out into the dark night. Chuck Wells yawned, then looked at them, grinning.

“Why do you want to see that spaceworm?”

“What spaceworm?” Jim’s eyes narrowed angrily.

“Easy, Jim,” Ken cautioned, seeing his brother’s quick temper about to explode.”

“You know who I mean—Dig Allen, Chuck sneered. ‘Your dear spacemate... your pal.’”

“Keep out of our business,” Jim snapped, controlling his temper with difficulty. Then he added, “Better remember that, chubby!”

“Don’t you call me that!” Chuck leaped to his feet, face twisted with fury. “

Stop it!” Linton Wells shouted. “I’ll have no fighting on my ship!”

“Sorry, sir.” Jim turned back to the viewport, furious with himself now for letting his temper get the best of him.

“He’s been asking for it,” Ken whispered to his brother. “But you shouldn’t have called him chubby.”

“I know,” Jim whispered back, now ashamed of himself. He turned to Chuck and said, “I’m sorry, Chuck. I didn’t mean...”

“I’m going to make you a lot sorrier before I’m through with you,” Chuck snarled, keeping his voice low. From the shaft came the sound of heavy boots on the metal cleats.

“Gorgon’s here,” Jud Hanker announced.

A burly man came up through the hatchway. Jim and Ken turned and both noticed a stealthy signal pass from Hanker to the man.

“Before we have your report on our expedition,” Jud

Hanker began smoothly, "I have two friends here." He motioned with his hand to Jim and Ken. "They're interested in a spaceship on the field. The *Starover*."

Gorgon's eyes flicked swiftly to the two boys. He noted the Space Explorer uniforms they were still wearing and his face became hard.

"You mean the red-headed boy? The Space Explorer?" Gorgon glanced uneasily at the brothers.

"What do you know about him? What's he doing here on Venus?"

"He came with Tim Buckle—"

Two voices exploded at the same time.

"What's that?" Linton Wells cried.

Jud Hanker leaped to his feet. "Impossible!"

"Well, he's here!" Gorgon insisted stubbornly. "Tried to destroy the town by setting it on fire."

"Which one? Tim Buckle or Dig Allen?" Ken asked.

"The both of them! Town folks have set a reward for catching them. Criminals they be!"

"Criminals? Dig Allen? You're spacegoofy!" Jim cried, instinctively coming to the defense of his friend. "Dig Allen could never do a—" then he stopped as suddenly as he began.

"Where is he now?" Ken asked.

"Escaped into the jungle," Gorgon replied. "All of them. The Space Explorer and Tim Buckle and the other two, Pierre Hammer and Peter Axe. And they can rot there!"

Linton Wells nodded to the man and turned his attention to Jim and Ken.

"That answers your questions, I believe. We have a lot of work tonight. Get a good rest. We leave by helicopter in the morning."

"No, Mr. Wells," Jim said, without looking to his brother for approval. "We're going into the jungle to find Dig. He's in trouble."

The merchant frowned, clearly annoyed. He remained silent for a minute, thinking.

“Of course it’s only natural. He was your friend. Tell you what we’ll do,” and Wells paused for an instant: “We’ll help you look for him. While you work on the Kohoolie report, I’ll send my helicopters to look for your friend. How’s that?”

Jim and Ken were silent for a moment. Then they nodded. “All right,” Jim said.

“Now you boys go to your cabin and get plenty of rest.”

Linton Wells put his arms around the shoulders of the two boys and guided them to the hatch. He waited until they had gone, then turned with fury on Jud Hanker.

“So Tim Buckle took a bribe to vanish, did he! You blundering fool!”

10 The Kohoolie

THE song of an unseen bird awoke Dig and he opened his eyes to see a strangely bright world around him. Above him the branches of a tree swayed gently in a light breeze. Millions of blossoms-in brilliant red colors, in yellows, in soft pinks-covered the branches. The grass on the mound where he had slept through the night was as soft as the finest foam mattress.

Rested and somehow cheerful, Dig turned over and then slowly sat up. He was alone. The Kohoolie which had been curled up beside him was gone. Alarm touched him for an instant. He jumped to his feet.

The scene was peaceful, but over the songs of birds Dig heard water splashing and a sound like that of a duck quacking. There was a rhythm and joy to this quacking that he had never heard before.

It seemed to come from a short distance beyond the clearing. Curious, the boy walked cautiously toward the sound. There was a path, covered over by a heavy growth and he pushed his way through. The sound of splashing was closer now and he could see the banks of a stream a short distance beyond.

He moved silently until he found himself *looking* down into a small pool formed by a sharp curve in the stream. The quacks had stopped. The water in the pool was clear and smooth.

“What a great swimming hole this makes,” Dig said to himself.

He was about to turn away when a movement beneath the surface of the water caught his eye. A dark shape was swimming around there and the boy remained, watching. Suddenly the figure swept upward and shot through the surface. Up into the air it went like a playful dolphin. Jumping out of the water, then down with a great crashing splash.

It was the Kohoolie.

It swam around in perfect circles for a few minutes,

rolled over and over, dived and came up again with swift grace that made Dig catch his breath. And at the time it seemed to sing in that strange quack-quack. It was a sound as carefree as laughter.

Dig watched with awe and admiration until it came out of the stream. Standing on its hind legs, the Kohoolie shook the water from its glistening coat of fur.

For the first time, Dig saw the animal clearly. It was about four feet in height. The fur, thick and soft, had a blue-black glow. The body seemed perfectly balanced for walking or running on two hind legs, which were long and sturdy. And for swimming, too, Dig thought remembering the natural ease of the Kohoolie in water.

The belly had a light-colored fur, a delicate pink which ran upward to the chin. The head was small and round, with features surprisingly human-like. There was a bright, black button of a nose and two sharp, black little eyes shining like jewels.

The animal seemed aware of him, although the boy made no sound. It turned its head and, it seemed to Dig, smiled. Then the Kohoolie clambered up the bank and joined the boy.

It took Dig's hand and led the way along the path back to the clearing. When they were seated on the grass, the Kohoolie pointed to Dig's space belt, to the pouch in which he kept his emergency food rations.

"Hungry?" Dig asked, reaching into the pouch to take out a chocobar.

The Kohoolie stared at him with its bright little eyes.

"All right, Dig said, breaking the bar in two. "We'll share my emergency rations."

He gave half to the Kohoolie, which immediately began to peel off the plasticover. Dig watched, fascinated as it ate the chocobar concentrate.

When they had finished eating, the Kohoolie rose to its feet and motioned for Dig to follow.

"All right, go on," Dig said aloud. "But where are you taking me?"

He followed the Kohoolie. Behind them the clearing merged into the thick, endless jungle. The going became tougher as they went on, hour after hour. Without the glowing spider webs, invisible in daylight, Dig blundered off the path several times. The ground was soft and swampy. He sank into muddy pools again and again. Each time the Kohoolie watched him crawl back to the path a grin on its face.

"I must be a hundred different kinds of spacefool!" Dig muttered to himself, "following an animal into the most dangerous jungle in the solar system."

But he went on.

o o o o

IN Venustown, morning found the Wells expedition ready to take off. Supplies and some dozen men were already in the great helicopter when Jim and Ken climbed down the wire ladder to the ground.

Across the field, in the distance, the two boys saw the slim, graceful lines of the *Starover* pointing silently to the sky. For a moment they were tempted to run to the ship. But the great blades of the helicopter were turning. Sadly, the two boys tore their eyes away from their spaceship, and walked over to the helicopter ladder.

From a seat in the plastic cockpit beside the pilot, Chuck Wells was looking down at them, his round, puffy face showing his dislike of the two boys. Wells and Jud Hanker had their heads bent over a map.

Wells looked up as Jim and Ken approached.

"Morning, boys," he said cheerfully. "Climb aboard. We'll take off in a few minutes." He turned back to the map.

"This will be our main camp," Jud was saying, his finger tracing the place on the map. "It's an old campsite of the Venus trappers. I figure we'll just take it over."

"Is it a good spot?"

"The best within a hundred miles of here."

"All right," Wells agreed. "Let's get started."

“Supplies are on board,” Hanker said. “And all the men who’re coming with us.”

Jim and Ken went up the ladder, Wells puffing heavily behind them. Hanker waved a hand to the pilot, then climbed into the ship. By the time Jim and Ken had settled into their seats, the huge helicopter was rising above the trees.

The helicopter circled the town slowly as it picked up speed, then it climbed sharply and swept away over the jungle. Below, the trees merged into a solid green carpet. Mile after mile, in all directions, the jungle spread out endlessly.

Jim and Ken, watching through the window, saw openings in the green from time to time and noticed water or small clearings. Mostly the jungle remained unbroken.

Wells, looking out of the window once, frowned and turned to Hanker who sat beside him.

“We’re flying much too high to see anything,” he said.

He unhooked a small microphone hanging from the side of his chair and called the pilot.

“Bring the ship lower. Tell all hands to keep an eye on the ground below us. If they see anything that looks like a human being, or a camp, have them report it to me at once.”

Without waiting for an answer, Wells clicked shut the microphone and placed it back on the hook. He turned to Jim and Ken, encouraging them with a smile.

“Might as well start looking for your friend,” he said.

o o o o

DIG was not used to so much walking. With every step, he discovered new muscles in his body by the aches and pains he was beginning to feel.

The Kohoolie, though, was tireless. It frisked and ran and jumped, seemingly enjoying the trek through the jungle. Every time they passed a clear pool of water, the little animal dived in headlong, swam around a bit, then

emerged, grinning at Dig.

“Next time,” Dig muttered, “I’m going in, too. Clothes and all.” He glanced down at his mud-spattered uniform. “Come to think of it, the swim will clean off my clothes.”

He did just that when they reached another pool. The boy waded in after the Kohoolie and, finding the water deep, dived and swam around.

He felt better when he came out. The ache and pain in his body seemed to have gone away.

“I should have taken off my clothes,” he said. The Kohoolie grinned at him and settled down on the grass. “Gosh! You seem to understand everything I say,” Dig remarked. “I’m going to let my clothes dry and take another swim.”

He stripped and laid the clothes on the grass, then dived into the water. An instant behind him came the Kohoolie. For a long time, the two swam about, splashing each other, diving under, racing. Dig was a good swimmer, but he was no match for the Kohoolie.

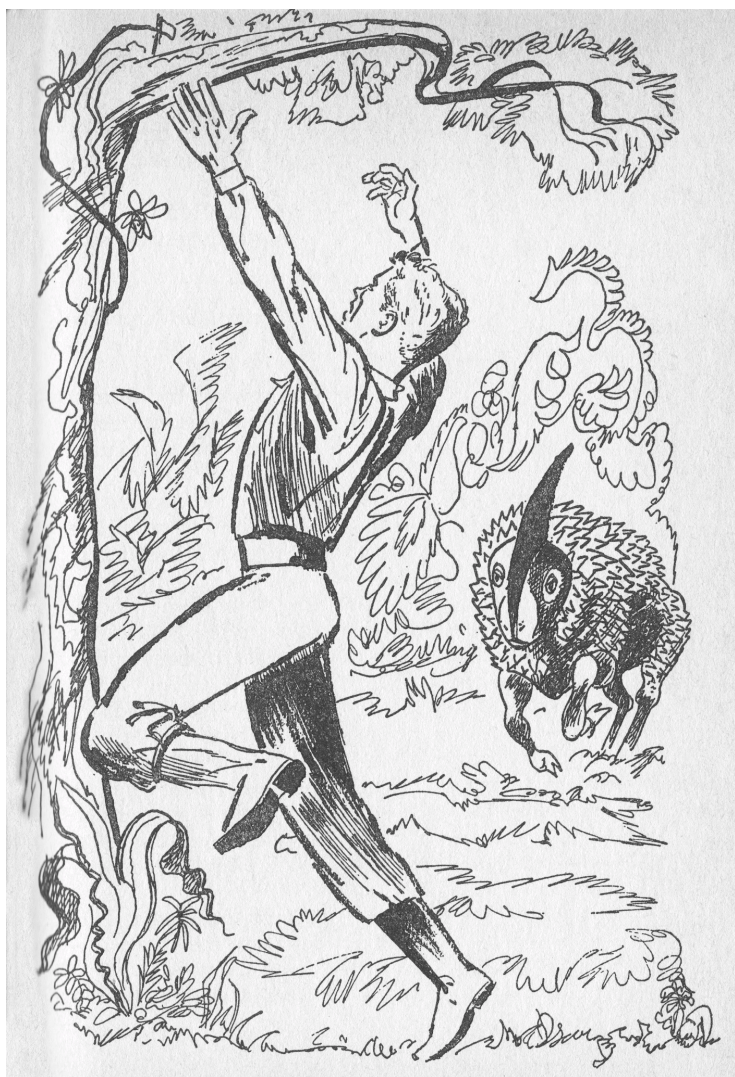
“What a wonderful friend you’d make!” he exclaimed once. Then he caught himself thinking of the Kohoolie as a real human being. “I must be going spacegoofy, he said to himself. “No wonder Tim and the Venusian trappers believe these animals are intelligent. They re fun to be with...”

They came out and lay on the grass, relaxed and warm. Dig closed his eyes, drowsing from time to time. A faint humming sound annoyed him as it grew louder rapidly. There was something familiar about it and he sat out, looking about him.

And then he recognized the sound. It was the copter’s turbojet engine!

With a happy cry, Dig leaped to his feet. A helicopter

He stopped suddenly, his joy turning to cold fear. Who was in that helicopter? The people from Venustown? Gorgon? The cruel hunters searching for him with vengeance in their hearts?”



He sprinted across the clearing, scooped up his clothes in one swift motion and plunged into the shadows of the trees.

Almost at the same instant a huge helicopter came into sight. It passed over the clearing and continued on its way.

Dig remained still until the sound of the engine fled

away in the distance. Then he dressed quickly, asking himself at the same time, "What am I doing in this jungle?"

"Kohoolie, Kohoolie," he whispered as the animal came close to watch him dress. "I wish you really were intelligent. I wish you could lead me to Tim Buckle or Peter Axe or Pierre Hammer."

The Kohoolie listened, its head cocked and the bright black eyes shining. When Dig finished dressing, the animal again tugged at his hand. Then it turned and quietly trotted away.

"Well, maybe you do understand," Dig smiled. "You seem to know where we're going..."

He followed quickly and, as he stepped out on the path, almost ran into the Kohoolie. It was standing very still listening.

"What's the matter?"

The Kohoolie did not move. A sound came faintly from the distance. As they listened it grew louder. Suddenly the Kohoolie whirled around and grabbed Dig's hand.

Frantically, the animal pulled him toward the nearest tree. The distant sound in the jungle was speedily racing toward them, turning into a hard crackling and then into a thunder of hooves.

The Kohoolie began to climb into the tree, making its strange quacking sounds, and turning its head to see if Dig was following. The boy hesitated for a moment. He stared in the direction of the noise.

Suddenly something came crashing out of the undergrowth, something that looked like a large pig. But it was covered with a hard shell, from which sharp, bony spikes stuck up in all directions.

The pig-like beast saw the boy instantly. It swerved, increased its speed, and charged straight at him.

Dig leaped up and grabbed a branch. In less than a second, he was up and safe. The animal swept under him. As it passed the tree, it turned its head slightly. A

sharp ridge of from which came down its forehead and over the snout slammed into the trunk of the tree, gouging out a large piece of the wood.

A second animal came crashing out of the jungle. This one, too, charged the tree and slammed into the trunk. Another chip of the wood was neatly cut away.

Dig held on and watched as one after another of the animals came out and hit the tree. Each cut away a piece of the trunk.

Suddenly he noticed that the animals had formed a circle, running around the tree. As each one passed, it lowered its head and tore a piece out of the trunk.

And then fear came over the boy. They were not doing this by accident, he realized. They kept hitting the same spot, cutting deeper and deeper and already they had cut through almost half of the trunk.

Within a few minutes, the tree would be cut down. He and the Kohoolie would be on the ground, at the mercy of these savage animals.

11 Prisoners!

AROUND and around charged the pig-like beasts. Their sharp, hard hooves beat a steady drumming on the ground. Helplessly, Dig watched as more and more of the tree trunk was ripped away.

“Not much time left us, my little Kohoolie friend,” Dig said. “This tree won’t stand up for another minute.”

The Kohoolie did not seem to hear him. It was moving slowly along the branch of the tree. Inch by inch it crept farther out until it was over the heads of the charging animals. Then it moved beyond them.

Wondering what the Kohoolie was doing, Dig watched. Then he understood, as the little creature suddenly let go and dropped to the ground.

No sooner did its feet touch the earth than it leaped away and ran, loping like a dog, to the path along which they had come.

A sudden shock swept over the boy. It was deserting him! Somehow he had grown to expect friendship and loyalty from the Kohoolie.

Then his anger turned to shame. The Kohoolie stopped running and began to wave its arms and make loud, quacking sounds. The pig-beasts stopped, turned and stared at it.

Dig could see their mean little eyes, red and evil, looking first at him, then at the Kohoolie. Suddenly, as if at a signal, the beasts charged at the Kohoolie.

The speed and agility of the pig-beasts surprised the boy. But the Kohoolie seemed to have expected the attack. I turned and ran, weaving in and out through the heavy under growth.

In an instant, they were out of sight. Dig climbed down from the tree. Looking about him, he found another tree with a thicker trunk, and quickly scrambled up to the first branch.

The sounds of the chase grew fainter in the distance. Dig balanced himself on the branch and waited.

The Kohoolie, he was thinking, showed that it understood the other animals of the jungle. When trapped, it had figured out a plan to lure the pig-beasts away.

“That’s smart,” he said to himself.

But then, most jungle animals have a good knowledge of their enemies. They couldn’t last long if they didn’t.

“Still,” Dig argued with himself, the Kohoolie had risked his own life to save me.”

Was Tim Buckle right, after all? Were these strange, furry little animals really intelligent beings?

There were dogs, back on Earth, which had given their lives to save a well-loved master. The Kohoolie, Dig was sure, was much more intelligent than the best dog. But how much more?

Since his escape from Venustown, he had learned to love the little animal. Now, after this encounter with the pig-beasts, he was also beginning to respect it. But this was not enough to report it as a human-like being. He would have to wait and learn much more before he could write a report for Space Research.

The thought made him aware of the silence around him. He couldn’t sit and wait.

Making up his mind to follow, Dig swung out on the branch and dropped lightly to the ground. The trail smashed through the jungle by the charging beasts was easy to see.

He set off at a quick, steady trot. Before long, he began to hear distant sounds. It was not the thunder of pounding hooves. It seemed more like... like what? Dig asked himself.

He increased his pace, bending forward at the same time to peer ahead for any sign of danger. As he came closer, he recognized the sounds. The shrieks of animals in pain and terror.

What was happening out there?

And then he saw, as he came around a bend in the road. He stopped and stared in growing horror.

The trail of trampled grass and torn earth led straight to a tree in a small clearing. It was a low tree, thick and solid and with long, drooping branches that almost reached the ground.

The pig-beasts formed a circle around this tree. But they were not charging. They were fighting for their lives as whip-like limbs lashed at them, curling around their bodies, finding crevices in their shells and ripping them with sharp thorns.

The Kohoolie was standing on one of the low branches of the strange tree, unharmed. It watched the struggle of the shrieking pig-beasts, patiently waiting.

For Dig, it was not hard to figure out what happened. The Kohoolie had led the beasts to this tree, climbed it and watched the charging beasts blunder into the trap.

Even as Dig stood there, the sounds of the animals weakened. Most of them lay still on the ground. A few still struggled to break clear of the terrible limbs holding them.

It was over quickly. The Kohoolie came down and walked past the weaving limbs of the tree fearlessly. It saw Dig watching and, with a quick look of recognition, trotted up to him.

For a moment it studied his face with its bright little eyes. It seemed to understand the horror the boy felt. It took Dig's hand and led him away from the terrible scene.

As they traveled through the jungle, hour after hour, Dig began to feel that Tim Buckle had been right. The Kohoolies were intelligent beings. But there was something missing... something more he had to learn before he could make his report to Dr. Keith Barry and the Space Research Bureau.

o o o o

IN a little meadow beside a swift-flowing stream, two crude wooden huts appeared as the helicopter circled and began to descend for a landing.

Their noses close to the window, Jim and Ken watched the ground rise up toward them.

"We're setting up our camp here," Jud Hanker said, tapping the boys on the shoulder.

"Whose huts are those?" asked Ken. "Is anyone here?"

"No," Jud replied. "Some of the Venusian trappers use these huts when they come by this way."

The helicopter touched the ground. A ladder was lowered and men began to come out of the ship. They lost no time in getting to work. By the time Jim and Ken came down the ladder, hatches in the underbelly of the helicopter were open and men were unloading crates of supplies.

As Wells and Hanker came from the ship, Gorgon called to them. With a wave of his hand, he pointed to the huts.

"What d'ye want done with them?"

"Burn them down, Gorgon," Linton Wells ordered. "We've got plastic pre-fab sections for a new warehouse. Set it up."

"Aye, sir." Gorgon turned to his men. "Burn them."

"What about Kohoolies?" Wells asked Jud.

"Used to be plenty around here," the man answered, looking around the meadow. "Came to meet the Venus trappers. I'll have some traps set right away."

"The sooner we get one of those animals for the boys, the sooner we'll have their report."

"That's right."

"And we can't get started until the report is in," Linton Wells said.

"I'll do it now," Jud said, a little annoyed at being rushed. "We've just landed."

He called several men to him and gave orders to unpack traps. Then he and the men left the camp, circling the meadow along the edge of the jungle.

Jim and Ken went back to the ship and brought out their dufflebags. Three small plastic tents had been set up near the center of the clearing.

"You two will use the tent in the middle," Chuck Wells said, seeing the two brothers carrying their bags. "Until the camp is settled, stay out of my way."

The pudgy boy strutted about, giving orders right and left. Jim and Ken watched him for a few minutes, then smiled at each other.

"Come on, let's get settled. Then I want to take a walk out into the jungle and see the traps they're setting for the Kohoolies."

They went into the tent and unpacked their belongings. Ken inflated the two air-foam sleeping bags and spread them on the ground. The edge of the plastic tent walls had been set deep into the ground so that no creeping animal could get inside. The plastic was extremely tough and laminated with layers of fibers. Ventilation slits were open in the top. It was cool inside, restful. Ken sprawled out on his sleeping bag.

"Where's Dig?" he asked wistfully. "What's he doing right this minute?"

Jim flashed a troubled look at his brother. "What are you thinking about?"

"The Space Explorer Corps," Ken answered slowly. "And us not being part of it any more."

"I thought so. I've been thinking about it all the way in the helicopter."

"Sorry?" Ken asked in a very low voice, as if afraid to voice the question.

"Yes," Jim admitted quickly. "You?"

"Me, too."

"I was a spacegoof," Jim said. "I lost my temper... and I shouldn't have listened to that Jud Hanker."

"I listened to him, too," Ken said. "But it was my fault."

"No, we were both wrong. We should have followed Dig wherever he'd gone and talked to him first."

Jim was silent for a long time. Then he said, half angrily, "We're fine spacemates. We read the spacegrams and believed the worst about our best

friend.”

“The spacegrams were pretty strong,” Ken said. “But you’re right. We should have waited instead of resigning.”

“Aw... come on. Let’s go outside.”

Jim pushed aside the tent flap and walked out. The two wooden huts were still burning, sending a thin column of black smoke high into the misty sky.

Silently the boys crossed the meadow to the line of trees. For some minutes they strolled along the border until they came to an opening in the undergrowth. Beyond it they found a path leading into the jungle.

“Must be one of the trails made by the trappers,” he guessed.

“Let’s see where it leads,” Jim said. “I’d like to get the feel this jungle.”

They entered the path and had walked only a short distance when one of Gorgon’s men stepped out from behind a tree. He held a stunray rifle in his hands.

“Where d’ye think you’re going?” he asked sharply, blocking their way.

“For a walk,” Jim retorted. “It’s none of your business.”

“Get back” the man said, motioning with his rifle. “I got orders that nobody be allowed out of the camp.”

“We’ll see about that!” Jim snapped. “I’m going to tell Linton Wells he can’t treat Space Explorers this way!”

“You’re not Space Explorers any more!” It was Chuck Wells, coming up behind them, sneering. He had a stunray pistol strapped to his thigh and his hand rested lightly on the butt. “You’re working for us now. And you better learn to take orders! Especially when I give them.”

“Why, you fat spaceslug!” Jim took a step forward.

Instantly Chuck had his gun out. “Try it,” he taunted. “Boy, I’d love to have an excuse to slap you down with a blast!”

Ken took his brother's arm and pushed him back to the camp.

Chuck Wells marched behind them, laughing.

Neither Linton Wells nor Jud Hanker was to be seen.

"Until Dad comes back," Chuck said, "I'm in command here. If you don't like my orders, complain to him later. But right now you'll do what I tell you to."

"Where is Mr. Wells?" Ken asked, holding back his anger.

"I'll let you know when I feel like it," Chuck laughed at the boy. "Now get into your tent and stay there."

"No use arguing with him," Ken said, turning to his brother. He pulled aside the tent flap. "We'll get this cleared up when Mr. Wells comes back."

"Sure, you'll get this cleared up," Chuck sneered. "And you're going to learn a few things you won't like. One thing is that you're both just hired hands around here, with no special privileges. Be thankful you've got jobs with us. Nobody wants space-Jonahs."

Jim and Ken went into the tent and closed the flaps.

They could hear Chuck call one of the men over.

"The two space-Jonahs have orders to stick close to the tent," he said to the man. "I want you to stand guard here and make sure they follow orders."

"Aye, sir."

"What's your name?"

"Jamie."

"All right, Jamie. You've got your orders."

Jim ran his fingers through his long hair, combing it back from his eyes. "What do you think of that?" he asked.

Ken shook his head soberly. It was clear that they were being held as prisoners.

12 The Report

IT WAS the Kohoolie who first noticed the spiral of black smoke rising above the jungle trees. The animal halted abruptly. For several minutes it stood motionless, as still as one of the nearby trees.

“Is it a campfire?” Dig asked, completely forgetting that he was talking to a furry animal. “Are the trappers there?”

The Kohoolie did not move. It seemed to be deeply puzzled by the smoke. Then it bent to the ground and began to slap the earth with its hands.

Tim Buckle had done just that, Dig remembered. At the time, the trapper had said it was a way of calling the Kohoolies. Dig had not really believed him. Now he waited, expecting to feel answering vibrations through the ground.

But after several minutes, no answer came. The Kohoolie looked up at the boy, its little black eyes worried. It raised its paw, so curiously like a human hand, and placed it over its mouth. It was a sign of warning and Dig understood. He nodded quickly.

The Kohoolie returned to the path and ran ahead at a faster pace. Dig followed, staying close to the furry animal.

Soon the path opened a little. Ahead, Dig could see a clearing. He increased his pace, for the smoke seemed to come from that direction.

The Kohoolie stopped and held up its hand. Then it moved off the path into the undergrowth of bushes and creepers. With Dig following, it began to advance slowly and cautiously.

A few paces ahead, Dig saw the reason for the Kohoolie’s caution. A man was standing behind a tree, holding a stunray rifle in his hands.

Two figures appeared, coming down the path. The man stepped out, blocking the way.

“Where d’ye think you’re going?” he asked sharply.

“For a walk,” was the reply. “It’s none of your business!”

Dig’s heart leaped into his mouth as he recognized the voice. It was Jim! And the other figure must be Ken! He was about to run out of his hiding place when he felt the gentle touch of the Kohoolie’s hand on his arm.

“Get back!” the man warned. “I got orders that nobody be allowed out of the camp.”

“We’ll see about that,” Jim snapped. “I’m going to tell Linton Wells he can’t treat Space Explorers this way!” Another voice joined the conversation. A pale, flabby-looking boy had approached, unnoticed.

“You’re not Space Explorers any more,” the boy said with a sneer. “You’re working for us now. And you better learn to take orders! Especially when I give them.”

Dig almost reeled back in shock. What had happened to his spacemates? Why weren’t they Space Explorers any more? Why were they working for Linton Wells?

The question whirled through his mind dizzily. He barely heard the rest of the talk. The Kohoolie, holding his hand, gently guided him back into the jungle.

They stopped to rest on the bank of a stream, some distance away from the trail, hidden within a thick mass of bushes and vines. On the hot, still air came the sound of birds and insects.

Dig lay down on the grass and closed his eyes, thinking of his friends in the camp. The guard watching over them in the nasty manner of the fat boy... and most important, Jim and Ken were not Space Explorers! Why?

He sat up quickly. The Kohoolie crouched beside him, watching his face with its bright button eyes.

“If only you could think like a human being,” Dig said to the animal. “If only you could do what a trained dog could...”

The Kohoolie made no movement, but a watchful attitude came over it. It seemed to listen to every word.

"I'd send you into camp," Dig continued. "Maybe you do understand... maybe..." He stopped and looked hopefully at the animal.

The Kohoolie rose to its feet. It came close and took the boy's hand and held it gently in its paw. Then it gave a low, soft quacking sound.

"I've got to hope," Dig said. "Hope you understand." He waved his hand back in the direction of the camp. "Those two boys are my friends. Like Tim Buckle and Pierre Hammer and Peter Axe. Understand?"

The expression on the Kohoolie's face did not change.

"They're in some kind of trouble," Dig went on. "Can you get into that camp and bring them out? Like you saved me in Venustown?"

The Kohoolie seemed to smile. It touched Dig's lips with its cool hand. Then it turned and made its way back to the trail.

Dig rose and followed, wondering if it did understand. It was a chance... perhaps...

The Kohoolie bent low and left the trail as it came closer to the camp. It circled around the guard and crawled to the edge of the meadow. Dig followed, watching the little animal closely.

For a long time, the Kohoolie peered out from behind protective bushes, studying the movements in the camp. Slowly it moved, following the edge of the jungle, searching the ground and the trees carefully.

It seemed to find something in the ground, glanced up at a tall tree close by, then turned to look back at Dig. Raising its hand, it signaled to the boy, motioning for him to go back.

Dig retreated a few steps and watched. Deliberately, the Kohoolie pushed the bushes aside and stepped out of the Jungle.

The next instant there was a sharp twang in the air. A branch of a tree snapped upward, trailing a long wire. And at the end of the wire, the Kohoolie was dangling by one foot. Dig's first impulse was to rush to its aid. He

crashed through the brush and was almost in the clearing when he noticed the Kohoolie waving its hand. He stopped. The little eyes were fixed on him watchfully as the Kohoolie hung head down. Then it placed its hand over its mouth and again motioned for Dig to go back.

A cry rose in the camp. Two men came running from one of the tents.

"The signal be lighted up!" one of them shouted.

The other pointed to the Kohoolie hanging at the end of the trap wire.

"There it is! Caught quick and slick!"

They ran across the clearing and soon had the Kohoolie down. A collar was slipped over the Kohoolie's neck and it was hauled into the traders' camp at the end of a thin metal chain. Dig slipped back into the jungle. "

"He knew just what he was doing," he said to himself. The best way to get into the camp without being shot..."

Dig realized he was thinking now of the Kohoolie as *he* not *it*, not as some sort of clever animal.

o o o o

THE excited cries brought Jim and Ken out of their tent. Gorgon was striding toward them, a big smile on his face. Behind him he dragged a furry animal, yanking the chain roughly to make it run faster.

"Here ye be!" the man cried triumphantly. "I've got one. This be a Kohoolie." He handed the chain over to Jim, who pulled the gentle animal away from Gorgon.

Linton Wells, who had returned to the camp shortly before, emerged from the next tent.

"What's this?" he asked, then his eyes fell on the Kohoolie. "You've got one, eh? Good work, Gorgon. Good work."

"Mr. Wells," Jim began. "Before we start work, there are some things we have to clear up..."

"You mean the guards around the camp?" Linton Wells turned a smiling face to the boy. "For your own good, Jim. It's dangerous out there. Until my men look

around, I thought it best that no one leave the camp. I'm sorry if it spoiled any plans you might have made ••."

"There's something else..."

"My boy Chuck? Well, he's not a bad boy. Really, when you know him, he's a nice boy. Don't mind his... his enthusiasm. Maybe he was a bit hasty..."

"What about the search for Dig Allen?" Ken asked. "You promised..."

"My men are already looking for him in the jungle," Mr. Wells said, his face taking on a look of deep concern. "As soon as you have your report on this animal, you can go out and look with them."

The merchant glanced at the Kohoolie.

"Cute little beasts, aren't they?" he said. "Let me know if you need anything. A transcriber to make your reports? Tape recorder? Just ask for anything you need."

He turned quickly on his heel, not waiting for an answer and disappeared into his tent. The men drifted away slowly returning to the work they had been doing.

Jim and Ken were left alone with the Kohoolie. For a long time, the two boys and the little animal stared at each other.

"We might as well begin," Ken said. "I've read that these animals are gentle."

Gingerly the boy put out his hand and patted the Kohoolie on the head.

Watching his brother, Jim laughed, "He doesn't bite, that's clear. But how much does he understand?"

"Suppose we begin with standard tricks any clever dog can learn?" Ken suggested.

"Go ahead."

"Come," Ken said and started walking. He gave the chain a little tug. The Kohoolie appeared to understand. It trotted alongside as the boy circled the tent and came back to his brother. "It learns quickly" he said.

"Try something harder."

Ken scratched his head, thinking.

“Sit.”

The Kohoolie did so.

“Lie down.”

Again the command was obeyed.

“Stand.”

The Kohoolie rose to its feet.

Ken looked at his brother. “Any more ideas?”

“Yes,” Jim said. “How is it he understands our language so well? Or maybe he can read your mind...”

“Let’s get inside the tent.” He opened the flap and called to the Kohoolie. “Come.” At the same time, he let the chain drop from his hand.

The Kohoolie followed him into the tent.

“There’s something very strange about this,” Jim muttered when they were inside. He frowned, observing the easy way the Kohoolie settled itself in a corner of the tent.

“What’s strange about it?” asked Ken. “This animal is smarter than any dog we have on earth. But that doesn’t make him a human being. Or as good as a human being.”

“An animal as smart as this shouldn’t have been caught in a simple snare trap.”

“Maybe that kind of trap is new on Venus. Come on, Jim. Admit you’re getting some wild idea again. What’s the theory?”

“Nothing,” the older boy replied slowly, running his fingers through his unruly hair in a quick, nervous gesture. “Just wondering. I can do that, can’t I?”

The flap of the tent opened and Linton Wells entered. Jud Hanker crowded in behind him. “How are you boys doing?” the wealthy merchant asked cheerfully. “Ready to give me a report?”

“Why, we’ve just started, Mr. Wells,” Ken said.

“Cleverest animal I’ve ever seen,” Jim added.

"But still it's only an animal," Linton Wells said, his manner becoming hard and brusk. "You can't waste too much time playing around with it."

"We're also animals, sir," Ken said cautiously.

"With brains, boy, with brains," Jud broke in. "You know, you can keep this one for yourself," he said, pointing a finger at the Kohoolie. "They make nice pets."

"Give me a first report," Linton Wells said. "Later, as you learn more about this animal, you can add to it."

"Sure. We've got to work fast, boys," Jud said.

"Tomorrow, eh?" Linton Wells went to the tent flap but paused to look back and smile at the two boys. "Tomorrow you'll have your first report. Just say it's a very clever animal... but that doesn't make it a human being."

He went out and Hanker followed him outside.

"We can give him a first, quick report," Jim said. "It'll keep Mr. Wells happy and give us time to make friends with the Kohoolie."

The animal had his eyes fixed on the boy as he spoke and Ken, noticing this, said, "I've got the queerest feeling, Jim."

"You have?"

"Aye. I think this animal understands every word we say."

"Bully for him!" The tent flap was open again. Chuck Wells, his round, puffy face flushed with anger, stood in the opening.

"You're not welcome here," Jim snapped.

"I'm not here because I want your company. For some reason, Dad thinks I can learn a few things from you two spaceworms. He insisted I come and watch you work."

"Well, you might learn something, at that," Ken said.

"Bah! Waste my time watching you play with a stupid animal!"

Chuck lowered his stout body to the air-foam

sleeping bag and stretched out.

“Go ahead. Don’t mind me.”

The boys did their best to ignore his presence. But the Kohoolie, it was easy to see, had become tense and suspicious. It obeyed the commands given by Jim and Ken, but slowly and reluctantly.

For over an hour, Chuck watched. Then he jumped to his feet.

“How long is this going to go on?” he asked.

“Until we’re sure about this creature,” Ken said. “You don’t have to stay.”

“Tell that to my Dad!” The boy glared at Jim and Ken. “Anyone can see it’s just an animal and nothing more.”

“How long are you going to pester us?” Jim asked.

“Until Dad gets the report.”

Jim glanced at his brother. “What do you think?”

“Suppose we give a report for every session we have with the Kohoolie?” Ken suggested. “We can honestly say that it is a very smart little animal now. Later, when we have more knowledge...”

“If you have more knowledge,” Chuck corrected him with a sneer.

“... if we have more facts,” Ken continued, “we can add to and correct the first report.”

“That’s good.”

“Can I tell that to my father?”

“Yes.”

A smile appeared on the face of Chuck Wells. His eyes flicked around the small tent, on Jim, on Ken and finally settled on the Kohoolie.

“Perfect,” he said. “Just perfect. Get busy and write the report.”

He turned and quickly left the tent.

13 Foul Play

FOR many hours Dig remained hidden in his retreat beside the stream. But impatience kept chewing away at him. Finally he could stay no longer. He went back to the trail and crept to the edge of the jungle.

He was aware of the traps set all around the camp. Carefully inspecting every inch of ground before him the boy crawled cautiously into a thick bush and peered out across the meadow.

The huge helicopter was on the far side of the field. Nearer, a group of men were busy putting up a long shed made of pre-fab plastic panels. A small tractor had been unloaded and this was being used to haul crates and large bundles from the helicopter. There was no activity around the three tents which stood somewhat alone at one side of the camp.

Dig lay and watched for hours, until his body felt stiff and cramped. He dared not move about too much. Off to his right, where the trail cut over the meadow, he could see the armed guard moving about restlessly.

Suddenly he stiffened. Ken Barry came out of the middle tent followed by the Kohoolie. The little animal frisked at the boy's feet as he crossed to the first tent. The Kohoolie was still wearing the collar around its neck though the chain had been removed. He seemed happy' as a pup to romp with the boy.

For a brief moment, Dig had doubts. "How can he be happy with the collar of a slave... or an animal, around his neck? The Kohoolie can't be compared to a human being..."

And then Dig realized that it was *because* he was intelligent that the Kohoolie appeared to accept his fate so easily. What better way was there to make the guards relax... to become careless?

Admiration replaced doubt. The Kohoolie would wait for his chance and then lead Jim and Ken out of the camp. They would meet once again; once more become a Space Explorer team, working together... or would

they? Dig recalled the words he had heard the strange boy say on the jungle trail: "...you're not Space Explorers any more!" What could that mean? Perhaps it was all a mistake that would be explained when they met.

Where would they meet? Dig asked himself. Where would the Kohoolie expect to find him? He now believed in the little creature's ability to think and plan. Hard as it would be for him to wait and do nothing, Dig knew that the Kohoolie would lead Jim and Ken to the bank of the stream, and that that was where he should be.

He crawled back into the jungle, circled the spot where the guard stood, and hurried to the spot where he had parted from the Kohoolie hours before. He could only wait... and hope.

o o o o

INSIDE Linton Wells' tent, Ken watched as the wealthy merchant read the report. Jim and he had worked on it carefully, saying only that it was a first report and that as far as they had gone in their study, the Kohoolie seemed to be only a clever animal, with an intelligence above that of a dog.

"We shall have more information for you Mr. Wells in another few days," Ken told the man as he fished reading.

"Fine. No hurry now." Wells turned to Jud Hanker who had taken the sheet of plastipaper and was skimming over it quickly. "What do you think, Jud?"

"We won't need any more," the man replied. "A few words have to be changed. I see it's signed..."

"Jim and I both signed it."

"What changes do you want?"

"This. Where it says it's a first report."

"Let me see." Mr. Wells took the sheet and frowned he studied the words for a moment. "You're right, Jud. "We'll make the change. And, of course, their titles after the signatures.

Wondering and becoming uneasy, Ken said, "I don't understand you, Mr. Wells. You do want a complete report on the Kohoolies, don't you?"

"Of course... of course," Linton Wells replied cheerfully. But I can send this one to Space Research and the World Council now."

Ken looked at the man in complete confusion. "Space Research and the World Council won't accept this report as official..."

"Oh, they'll have to," Linton Wells laughed. He opened a briefcase lying on the small table beside him and pulled out a document. "This is my petition to the World Council. Look at it."

Ken read:

"At my request, presented to Dr. Keith Barry, director of Space Research, two members of the Space Explorer Corps undertook to explore the planet Venus and, particularly, study and verify, or reject, the claim that an animal known as the Kohoolie, was an intelligent form of life. After a long and complete study, Space Explorer James Barry and Space Explorer Kenneth Barry have shown that the Kohoolie is only an animal with an intelligence a little higher than that of a dog. Their report is attached, and becomes an official part of this petition..."

"Jim and I aren't Space Explorers any more," Ken said dazedly. "This can't be an official report... it can't..."

Wells took the document out of the boy's hands. He pushed it back into his briefcase and took another paper out of it.

"My boy, I knew that someday you and your brother would be sorry you quit a fine organization like the Space Explorers Corps..."

Ken nodded, a feeling of shame sweeping over him. "We... we are."

"You see, just as I expected. I thought you were a bit hasty when Jud showed me the notification. So, I stopped him from sending it in. I thought that I'd

reward you for good work by giving this back to you.”

Wells held out the spacegram form on which Jim and Ken had written out their intention to resign from the Space Explorer Corps. The boy took it, hardly aware of what he was doing.

“Then... then our report is official?”

Linton Wells laughed. “That’s *my* reward for keeping you in the Space Explorers.”

Resentment burned inside the boy. “I want the report back, Mr. Wells.”

“Jim and I will send another one saying we made a mistake!”

The merchant shrugged his shoulders. “Not for a long time, Ken. I’ll have this report accepted by the World Council long before you can send in any second report. Then I’ll use my money, my position and my lawyers to keep our fight in the World Courts for years. In the mean time, Jud Hanker and I will have this planet to ourselves!”

Ken realized he had been beaten. His shoulders sagged. He felt sick inside and something was twisting his head sideways. Linton Wells knew what he was doing. The man was experienced in such trickery.

Ken turned to the Kohoolie who had been sitting quietly near the tent flaps, like a good and loyal dog. Something like an electric current shot through the boy!

There was such an air of alert intelligence in the Kohoolie’s face that Ken had the weird feeling the animal understood every word spoken in the tent. For some unexplainable reason, hope came into his heart.

He went out of the tent and Wells and Hanker followed.

“I want to make sure you do nothing foolish,” Wells said. “You’ll have to remain in your tent for a while.”

“Prisoners?” Ken asked, holding back his anger.

“I’m afraid so, but only until my petition and the report pass through Space Research and into the hands

of the Council.”

“We know your father is the director of Space Research, Barry,” Jud Hanker grinned. “He might, if you called him, hold the papers back.”

“No hard feelings, Ken,” Mr. Wells said. “You understand I must do this.” Ken stared at him, still silent with the shock of Wells’ trickery.

The merchant called to one of the men. “Get a stunray gun and guard the boys’ tent,” he ordered. “They are not to set foot outside.”

“Aye, sir.” The man jerked a thumb toward the tent. “Inside, boy. You heard what Mr. Wells said.”

Ken bowed his head silently. With the faithful Kohoolie at his heels, he went into the tent to tell everything to his brother.

For once, Jim neglected to brush back the hair hanging over his eyes. He heard the news in stony silence. And then, as his brother finished, his face turned white as a sheet. He went to the flap of the tent and was about to open it when Ken stopped him.

“What are you going to do?”

“Get our report back! Get it back if I have to fight the whole gang of them!”

Ken grabbed his brother by the arm and pulled him back. “

“There’s a guard outside with a stunray gun.”

“I don’t care!”

“Don’t be a fool! We have to use our heads, not our muscles...”

“Let go of me!” Jim hurled his brother away. But Ken, stronger than Jim, clung desperately to him.”

“You’re space goofy, Jim! Listen to me...”

But Jim refused to listen. The two brothers wrestled and stumbled about the small tent, Jim trying to break his brother’s hold, Ken hanging on with all his strength.

Suddenly they heard a sharp, quack-like sound.

Surprised, the two boys stopped fighting and turned to the Kohoolie.

The animal was standing on its hind legs, looking at them with little black eyes that seemed to smoulder with anger.

Their amazement increased as the Kohoolie stepped up to them. It reached up and took Ken's hands off Jim's shoulder. For a fleeting moment, it seemed to smile at the boy.

The Kohoolie moved back. It reached up and began to finger the collar around its neck. The lock snapped open. The animal took it off and threw it on the ground.

Placing a hand to cover its mouth, the Kohoolie looked at the boys with a pleading expression in its eyes.

"I think it... it wants us to be quiet, Ken said.

The furry face brightened at the words. Jim was watching it closely and noticed the change in the Kohoolie's expression.

"I think it understands, Ken!"

The Kohoolie spun around and pattered to the rear of the tent. It examined the tough, laminated plastic fabric for a moment. Then its eyes quickly surveyed the interior of the tent, finally coming to rest on Jim's many-bladed jackknife lying on his bedroll. In one smooth motion the Kohoolie picked up the knife and flicked open the longest blade.

As the boys watched in amazement at the little creature's deftness, the Kohoolie made a long slit in the tent wall, poked its head through and looked about. Then it motioned for the boys to follow and crawled outside. Behind the tent, the three of them lay flat on their bellies. Voices came from the next tent. They listened. Jud Hanker was saying, "How soon can you get the report to the World Council?"

"It has to go to Asteroid Eros first. They will send it to the Council."

"We can't hold those Space Explorers forever. You have to work fast, Wells."

“I intend to. Chuck will take it himself. By the way, have you seen that boy of mine? I can’t seem to manage him...”

“Last time I saw him, Chuck was getting ready to go out hunting for a Kohoolie skin,” Jud said.

“Let’s find him.”

Wells and Hanker stepped out of the tent. They stopped to talk to the guard for a moment.

The Kohoolie turned its head and threw a warning look at the two boys. Then it crawled silently along the ground to the rear of the tent used by Linton Wells. With a swift movement, it slashed an opening in the plastic wall with Jim’s knife, slipped through the hole and disappeared inside.

A moment later, when it emerged, the Kohoolie held Linton Wells’ briefcase in its hands. It handed Jim his knife and began to crawl toward the jungle.

Jim and Ken followed, keeping as close to the ground as possible.

There was a stir behind them, then a loud cry of alarm. Men dropped whatever they were doing and came running across the clearing. They crowded around the excited figure of Linton Wells.

Meanwhile in a final rush, Jim and Ken reached the jungle unseen. The little Kohoolie was holding aside the thick bushes to help them crawl under cover.

Another cry arose in the camp. Someone had seen the trail they left as they crawled over the ground. Gorgon and several men were running toward their hiding place. Chuck Wells fired blindly into the bushes and the blast ripped the branches a few feet from the two boys.

“That spacerat is shooting wildly,” Jim warned. “Let’s get away from here.”

“But where do we go?” Ken turned to the Kohoolie. The animal was waiting quietly a few feet away, holding the briefcase tightly against its chest. “Lead us away from here,” Ken said to the animal.

The Kohoolie turned and crept through the heavy undergrowth deeper into the jungle. The boys followed and presently reached a barely visible path. The Kohoolie increased his pace here and soon the sound of the search for them was left behind.

They followed the path for a few minutes, then turned off into the jungle. A few minutes later they reached the bank of a stream.

The Kohoolie scrambled down to the edge of the water and ran along the side. Jim and Ken followed. They ran silently, one behind the other, keeping below the level of the bank.

They had covered only a short distance when there was a cry from the ground above them. "Jim! Ken!"

A figure in the uniform of the Space Explorer Corp came tumbling and sliding down the bank of the stream toward them.

Red hair, a grinning freckled face-and Dig Allen was throwing his arms around his two friends.

"He did it! He did it!" Dig cried, dancing around them. "I knew the Kohoolies would get you out of there!"

The warm greeting was unexpected and Jim and Ken held back uneasily.

"What's the matter with you guys?" Dig asked, noticing his friends' uncertainty.

"Don't you know?" Jim asked, avoiding Dig's puzzled eyes. "You put the label of space-Jonahs on Ken and me! You wanted to drop us and..."

Words came pouring out as Jim told Dig about the spacegrams and their decision to quit the Space Explorer Corps. Dig denied the space grams angrily, and then told them how Tim Buckle had actually kidnapped him.

"That's why I couldn't tell you anything when I called you the second time," Dig finished. "Tim was right at my elbow with a stunray gun. You were on Linton Wells' yacht. Tim Buckle wouldn't trust the man..."

"Tim was right," Jim said bitterly.

"Cheer up, Jim," Ken said to his brother. "We have the report back and we're still Space Explorers."

"Let's tear up that report right now," Jim said, "if anything happens to us and it falls into Wells' hands again, he could use it to take over this planet!" He took the case from the Kohoolie and started to open it.

Ken stopped him. "No, Jim, if we get out of this alive that report will be valuable evidence against Wells when he's brought to justice."

"Ken's right," put in Dig. "Seal up that case again, Jim, and let's decide what we're going to do now."

"Wells and Hanker and their friends are still looking for us with rifles," said Ken. "Our chances don't look too good."

"I have a lot of confidence in our Kohoolie friend," Dig said.

The Kohoolie was standing very still, listening. Above the sounds of the jungle, there came a distant crashing and thrashing about in the undergrowth.

"It's them!" Jim whispered tensely.

The Kohoolie beckoned to the three boys, then waded into the stream and crossed to the other side. They followed, climbing up the opposite bank and slipping quietly into the jungle.

They were not a moment too soon. Behind them, Gorgon broke through to the stream. He looked down and shouted to his men.

"Footprints over here."

Others came crashing through the jungle.

"They crossed the stream."

The three Space Explorers did not wait to hear any more. They turned and ran after the Kohoolie who was leading the way deeper into the jungle.

Overhead and drawing nearer rapidly came the roar of the helicopter's turbojets.

“They’re using the copter,” Jim groaned, gasping for breath as he ran.

“They can’t see us through the trees,” Dig assured him.

“But what if they get ahead and land to cut us off?” Jim asked.

“Then we’re in trouble,” Dig answered.

The helicopter passed above, skimming the tops of the trees and swept ahead of them. The sound of its engine faded away in the distance.



14 End of the Chase

THE Kohoolie moved quickly and with easy grace through the underbrush, weaving in and out of the thickets, slipping under the jungle creepers and looping vines.

The three Space Explorers found the going hard. They blundered into the heavy bushes and tripped over the thick, gnarled roots of trees rising out of the swampy earth. Sometimes they floundered in mud up to their knees or splashed through streams.

The noise of the search was far behind them, growing fainter as they increased the distance separating them from their pursuers. Stubbornly they went ahead, though their pace seemed painfully slow.

Two hours later Jim called for a halt.

"I'm tired and winded," he announced. "Can't we rest a bit?"

Dig looked at the Kohoolie. It pointed to a grass-covered mound of earth.

"On that," Dig said, stumbling to the place indicated by the Kohoolie.

The three boys sprawled out and lay silently. Then in the distance they heard the drone of the helicopter's engines again.

"Get out of sight," Dig ordered.

They hid in the bushes but the helicopter did not fly over them. It hovered, circling a mile or so away.

"My guess is they're talking to Gorgon and his men by radicom," Ken said.

"We've left a clear trail behind us," Jim muttered. "I've read where in the old days, American Indians could go through the forests and never leave a single mark behind them."

"And I've read where other Indians and frontiersmen could follow them anyway," Dig laughed.

"If they're smart, they can plot the general direction'

which we're going," Jim said.

"Where are we going?" Dig asked. "My sense of direction says deeper into the jungle, away from Venustown."

"We can't go back, so it doesn't make any difference where we're going. Just so long as we get away from Wells and Hanker and that bunch of spacecrooks."

The Kohoolie signaled them to get up. The rest was over and they slogged back to the faint trail they were following.

Again the helicopter flew overhead. They made no effort to hide since the branches overhead were thick and daylight barely came through.

They continued for perhaps an hour. The jungle growth became very thick around them and they lost time pushing and tearing their way through. They struggled ahead and finally found the trees growing farther apart. Ahead they saw a clearing.

They halted at the edge and looked across. The path wound through the tall grass. The Kohoolie waited, studying the way before them. Then it pointed to the side and began to circle around the open ground, keeping hidden in the shadows of the trees.

From time to time, the Kohoolie stopped to sniff the air uneasily. When it continued on the way, it did so with greater caution.

They reached the other side of the clearing and found the trail. The Kohoolie ran ahead quickly. The path was clear and the ground solid. They went along for a quarter of a mile when they reached a stream larger and swifter than any of the others.

The Kohoolie did not hesitate. It ran and, with a great spring, leaped across the water. Dig followed, then Jim and finally Ken.

They were about to climb up the bank when the Kohoolie suddenly whirled around. Frantically it waved to the boys.

"What's he doing?" Jim asked.

“Jump back!” Dig cried. “There’s someone ahead!”

They turned to the stream and stopped. The man called Jamie was standing on the opposite bank, aiming his stunray rifle at them. Two other men crouched behind bushes. Both raised their rifles, ready to fire.

The Kohoolie turned and began to scramble up the bank. From the bushes above, Chuck Wells stepped out holding a pistol in his hand.

He pointed the muzzle at the little animal and pulled the trigger. The short blast slammed into the Kohoolie’s chest. The force of the blow picked up the body and hurled it backward to the edge of the stream.

The Kohoolie lay still, part of its body in the water.

“Stand still!” Chuck commanded. “I’ll blast the first one who moves!”

“You didn’t have to do that!” Jim raged. “You didn’t have to shoot the little fellow!”

“What did you want me to do? Shoot one of you? You’re human and that thing’s just an animal. I had to show you fellows I mean business.”

“Even animals,” Ken said, seething with contempt for the boy, “you don’t go around killing them! Not if you’ve any decency in you.”

Dig said nothing. He dropped to the ground beside the still body of the Kohoolie. Tenderly he pulled it out of the water. Its hands were still gripping the briefcase. Dig took it away.

Chuck slid down the bank, puffing heavily, and walked up to him.

“I’ll take that briefcase,” he said. Then he looked at the slim, red-headed boy. “So you’re the great Dig Allen, eh?”

Silently, Dig handed over the case, turned his back on the boy and rejoined his spacemates.

Chuck looked down at the Kohoolie for a moment.

“Don’t have time to skin you,” he said. “I’ll keep the next one for a trophy.”

He pushed the body with his foot, rolling it into the water. Then with a final kick, he sent it floating down the stream.

"All right," Chuck Wells called to his men. "Let's take my prisoners back."

They crossed the stream and pushed their way through the bushes until they found the trail. Chuck led the way, the three Space Explorers followed with the man called Jamie holding a stunray rifle to their backs. The others followed behind.

"Where are you taking us?" Jim demanded.

"You'll find out when we get there," Chuck laughed. "But now, better do as you're told. You'll learn that even Space Explorers have to obey orders—when Chuck Wells gives them."

"Well, enjoy yourself now, chubby. But someday I'll have you alone, without your stunray pistol. Just the two of us. I'll see if you're as good as you think you are."

"I'm better," Chuck retorted. "I'll show you I can take care of myself rather well."

"Then I'll look forward to our get-together."

Recklessly Chuck hurried ahead. In the distance, through the trees, they could see a clearing. It was the same one around which the Kohoolie had guided the Space Explorers so carefully, a short while earlier.

Gorgon emerged from the trees on the far side with several men and crossed the clearing to meet the group led by Chuck.

"I see you got them, Chuck."

"Sure. I knew they would follow the path. Only place they could go."

Chuck opened the briefcase and examined its contents while the men surrounded the three boys.

"It's all here." Chuck looked at the Space Explorers with contempt. "You were too stupid to destroy the report," he sneered. "Well, you had the chance. You goofed it."

The Space Explorers were silent.

"What are we going to do with them?" Gorgon asked.

"They're my prisoners," Chuck snapped at him. "You're working for us."

"That be so," Gorgon said, humbly. "I did not mean to question ye, Chuck."

"I'm not your friend, Gorgon," the fat boy said arrogantly. "Don't call me *Chuck*. It's *Mister Wells*, to you."

"Aye, if that's the way ye want it," Gorgon growled.

"And always say 'Sir' to me!"

"Aye... sir," the burly man replied, scowling blackly.

"That's better. Now, where are my father and Jud Hanker?"

"Back on the trail... sir. They should be catching up with us soon."

"I don't want to wait. We'll go meet them." Chuck tossed the briefcase to Gorgon. "Carry that for me like a good fellow, Gorgon."

"Aye... sir," the man said with suppressed rage.

"Follow me!" Chuck Wells marched ahead, motioning for the three Space Explorers to follow. Behind them came Jamie, holding his finger on the trigger of his rifle.

Gorgon hesitated, staring after young Wells and scratching his head in amazement.

"Spacenutty as they come, eh?" he said, shaking his head.

"He be just a spoiled brat," one of the men muttered. "He be wanting to show his father how he caught the Space Explorers. All by himself, he'll be boasting."

"We'd better follow before he hurts himself," Gorgon chuckled. "Or gets lost."

Gorgon and his men trailed after Chuck's group, keeping a short distance behind. Just beyond the clearing, the jungle grew thicker and the ground soft and swampy.

Slowly, as they advanced, the light began to dim. A

faint mist seemed to rise around them, filtering soundlessly through the trees.

"Funny how the mist rises on this planet," Jim said. "I can almost feel it on my face and hands. Like a spider's web."

"I feel it, too," Ken said, lowering his voice. "It seems to get thicker up ahead."

"If it gets thick enough," Dig said, hurrying to get close to Ken, "we might get a chance..."

"To slip away?"

"Right. Pass the word to Jim."

The three boys increased their pace, staying close together. Jamie hurried after them. "What be the hurry?" he asked.

"No hurry," Dig replied, casually. "Just getting a little misty and we didn't want to lose our way..."

"Misty?" Jamie halted abruptly. He looked about him, sudden fear turning his face white as a sheet of paper. "Did ye say it be getting misty?"

"Yes, why..."

Jamie dropped his rifle and whirled madly.

"The Mist Flower!" he screamed. "Get away! Get away!"

"What's the matter with you, Jamie!" Chuck demanded.

But the man paid no attention to him. He was swinging his arms wildly about, seeming to fight with some invisible force holding him.

"Get away! Get away!" he sobbed, half crazed with terror.

"Take it easy, Jamie." Dig took a step toward the man. The instant he moved, he felt something like a tiny wire tighten about him. A thousand tiny wires!

"Jim! Ken! Something's wrong here!"

Dig tried to tear away the thing holding him. Instantly he felt the same hair-like wires clutch his entire body.



"It's some kind of a spider web," Dig cried. "We're trapped in it."

"Are you all crazy?" Chuck shouted. "I order you to —" His voice broke and he began to thrash around. "What is this thing?"

"The Mist Flower! The Mist Flower!" Jamie whined. "We be lost! Lost!" With renewed fury, he fought against

the unseen thing, fighting his way out, little by little.

Gorgon and his men stopped some distance away and watched silently. They made no move to come closer.

“Gorgon! Help me!” Chuck cried. “Something’s holding me... a million things like wires... I can’t see them! I feel them all over me.”

His face dead serious, Gorgon called to him. “There be nothing I can do. Ye be caught by a Mist Flower.”

Jim and Ken seeing the others struggling, remained standing perfectly still. They felt only the gentle touches of a web creeping around them.

Jamie staggered away, beating furiously at his clothes, tearing at his face and hands. Suddenly he seemed to break free. He reached Gorgon and fell at his feet.

“Help me,” the man croaked. “I be loose of it but the Mist Flower poison be in me.”

Gorgon stepped away from the man on the ground.

“What is it, Gorgon?” Jim called. “Am I caught, too? I don’t feel anything holding me. How about you, Ken?” he added, turning to his brother.

“I don’t feel anything. But I think that if we try to move back, the web will tighten around us.”

“That be so,” Gorgon said. “The Mist Flower got ye and there be no way to escape.” He pointed at Jamie lying on the ground, twisting and tossing in pain. “Even if ye break out like Jamie, you’ll die. There be poison in the tentacles of the Mist Flower. Ye’ll die same as Jamie is going to.”

Dig stopped struggling. He seemed to hang exhausted in the air.

“It’s holding me. I can barely move.”

Chuck, too, was hanging limply. His arrogance was gone. He was crying, calling softly for his father.

“Go get him, Gorgon... Oh, please, go get him.”

15 Flower of Death

THE fine strands of the strange web gradually began to tighten around the bodies of the four boys. A thousand invisible needles seemed to pierce their skin and push and probe deeper and deeper into their bodies.

So slowly that they were not aware of it at first, pain began to flow over them. Chuck whimpered. Jim, sweat breaking out on his forehead, called to Gorgon.

"Don't just stand there. Can't you do anything to help us?"

"There be nothing anyone can do," the man answered. Even he seemed to be touched by a feeling of pity. "Never was any man saved once he be caught in the mist of the Flower."

"Burn down the jungle," Dig suggested, gritting his teeth as pain shot through him.

"The webs don't bum," one of the men answered. "I saw that tried once."

"Get my father... get my father," Chuck cried. "Gorgon, I'll give you money... anything you want! Only save me."

Gorgon turned to one of the men. "Get around to the other side. Wells and Hanker be coming that way. They might walk into the web."

"Aye," the man said.

"Be careful."

The man needed no warning. With two others, he made a wide circle around the Mist Flower.

"What is it, Gorgon?" Ken called out. "Tell us about this thing."

"No one knows," the burly man answered. "Be it flower or beast or spider... no one knows."

"I don't see anything but this mist," Jim said.

"That be not mist but very thin tentacles. It has a million arms thinner than a hair."

“But where is it?” Jim asked.

“Look where the mist be heaviest,” Gorgon told him. “Where it looks almost dark.”

Jim turned his head and looked about him. Each movement brought a tightening of the webs that held him. Pain shot through his body so suddenly that he could not keep back a groan.

“Jim!” Ken tried to take a step toward his brother. The webs held him fast as sharp pains stabbed his body.

“Don’t move,” Dig warned. “Don’t move whatever happens. This thing seems to sense when you try to break away and it holds you even tighter.”

“Aye, and shoots poison into your body,” a man said in a choking voice. “That be why Jamie here is dying, even though he broke free.”

“I still don’t see it,” Jim said.

“You’ll see it soon enough,” Gorgon muttered. “Why be they so anxious to see the face of the flower of death?”

“Hanker and Mr. Wells are coming,” a voice called from the other side.

“Father! Father! I’m going to die!” Chuck cried. “Help me, Dad! Help me!”

“What is it? What is it?”

“They be caught by a Mist Flower, Jud!” Gorgon shouted across. “Watch out!”

“Hold it, Wells! Don’t go any farther!” Jud Hanker grabbed the stout little man and held him back.

“But my boy is out there!” Wells turned a frightened face to his partner. “What is it? What is it?” he kept repeating.

“They can’t be saved, Wells. Once the Mist Flower traps anyone, there’s no hope.”

“You’ve got to get my boy out of there!”

“It can’t be done. He’s shot full of poison by now.”

“You don’t understand, Jud. I’ll let you have all of Venus, but get my boy out.” Wells began to cry and plead. “I’ll make you rich! I’ll make any man rich if he saves my boy!”

“You heard him, men? Anyone want to try?” Jud Hanker turned and looked at the hard-fisted hunters standing around him.

“Well? Well? A million to the man who brings out my son! Two million? Three?”

There were no volunteers. The men drew back sullenly. If there was greed in them, there was also fear. And the fear was greater. They remained silent.

“Then I’ll save him!”

Linton Wells pushed Jud’s hand away and made a rush toward his son.

“Chuck! I’m coming!”

“Stop, Dad! Stop!”

It was Chuck, screaming at the top of his voice.

“Hold him back, Hanker! Gorgon! You men! Don’t let him come any closer!”

Linton Wells halted in shocked amazement. The moment’s hesitation was enough for Hanker. He leaped and threw the space merchant to the ground.

“Give me a hand, men!”

Two hunters jumped to Hanker’s side and held the struggling merchant down. A third one quickly cut a vine from a tree. They tied up Linton Wells.

“You fools! You cowards!” Linton Wells raged. “My boy will die! And none of you will help!”

“There’s no use, Dad. They know what they’re doing.” Suddenly, Chuck seemed surprisingly calm. It was the first time in his life that he had given a thought to someone else’s safety. “Leave me, Dad. Go back.”

Gorgon moved around the Mist Flower and joined the group. He showed the briefcase to Jud.

“The papers are in here,” he said. “And there be

nothing we can do for them,” he added with a jerk of his head in the direction of the Mist Flower. “Best we get out now.”

Hanker agreed and signaled for his men to join him.

“What about Jamie?” one of them asked.

“Leave him,” Gorgon said. “We can’t save him.”

“Take him!” Linton Wells cried. “What kind of men are you? Bring him to the camp! We’ve got medicine...”

“It won’t help, Mr. Wells. I know. I’ve seen this thing before.”

“We’ll try!” Wells shouted.

“All right, Mr. Wells,” Gorgon said. He told two men to carry Jamie back to camp.

“Now untie me,” Wells demanded.

They pulled him up to his feet. Hanker stopped them from cutting the bonds from his hands. “

“You’ll stay tied up until we get back to camp, Wells, he said. “If you try to go to your son’s help, you’ll be caught. I can’t take a chance on you dying.”

“I can’t leave my boy here.” Tears began to flow down the man’s face. “I can’t. Don’t you understand? He’s my boy... my boy... “

“Look, Wells,” Jud Hanker snarled. “I understand only one thing. We’ve got a chance to win a fortune! A dozen fortunes! It’s right here in this briefcase!” He slapped the plastileather bag viciously. “And I need you to put the thing over! I’m taking no chances! That’s what I understand. That’s all I want to understand! Now, march!”

“What do I need a fortune for if I lose my son?” Linton Wells cried.

Suddenly he shook off the hands holding him and started to run toward Chuck. Gorgon put out a foot and tripped him.

As the merchant fell, Gorgon brought the butt of his stunray gun down on his head.

There was a crack and Linton Wells lay on his face. Gorgon bent over him.

“Just knocked him cold, Jud,” he said. “He be all right in a couple of hours.”

“Get some men and carry him back to camp.”

“Aye.”

“I had to do it, Chuck,” Jud called, facing the trader’s son. “And, Space Explorers, we can’t help you anyway.”

“We know,” Dig answered for all of them.

They carried Linton Wells’ unconscious figure down the path, and one by one, the silent men disappeared into the thick green jungle. The four boys were left alone.

A strange silence settled over the place. Birds and insects seemed to have vanished. Even the branches of the trees stirred without sound in the light breeze.

“Chuck?” Dig called.

“What do you want?”

“That was a fine thing you did—for your father.”

“It’s all your fault,” Chuck snarled back. “If you hadn’t given us this trouble, we wouldn’t be trapped and dying here. All because of that stupid Kohoolie! An animal... an animal... and we must die...” He stopped with a gasp. Then in a choking voice he cried, “Look! Look! The Mist Flower! There it is...”

The three Space Explorers turned, fighting pain as they did so, and looked toward the thickest part of the mist.

The mist was slowly parting. Speechlessly they stared at the most beautiful Sight they had ever seen!

It was a flower, a huge flower of many brilliant colors. The colors shimmered softly, changing from one shade into another. Red so bright it hurt their eyes faded gently into delicate pink, then again into sky blue...

It was like a song... music in strange, joyous colors...

ever changing... changing... changing...

The pain that like a thousand cruel knives had cut into their bodies was gone. They felt an ease and lightness come over them. They seemed to float on air, soft, gentle... And all the while, the song of many colors shimmered before their eyes...

o o o o

SWEPT by the current of the stream, the body of the Kohoolie drifted for a long time until a great, twisted tree root snagged it. For a while it pressed against the root. Then an eddy swirled it around and it floated gently to the shore.

The light from the cloudy sky broke through the trees and fell upon the still body. And then, after more time had passed, the body twitched. The fingers of the Kohoolie clawed weakly at the soft mud.

Soon it seemed to have gained some strength for it pulled itself up to drier land and lay there. And then, weakly at first, it began to slap the ground with its open hand.

It continued to do this for a minute, then rested, then began again. After a while, there was a slight vibration that ran through the ground, answering it. The sound seemed to give it strength, for the Kohoolie managed to raise its head and crawl higher up the bank.

There it sat up and began to slap out a message on the ground. Replies came back in rapid succession, seemingly from different directions.

When the signaling stopped, the Kohoolie rose weakly to its feet and staggered into the bushes. It fell and lay still for a few minutes. It rose and walked on. Then it saw a bush different from the others, covered with large, prickly berries. The Kohoolie stumbled to it and began to pull the tiny spikes out of the fruit.

It did not tear the fruit from the bush, but squeezed it and let a stream of juice squirt into its mouth. When one of the plum-like berries seemed to have no more juice, the Kohoolie took another. Finally, the small furred creature stood firmly on its hind legs, stronger and

more alert.

It looked back at the stream, then turned and waded into the water. Pushing away from shore, the Kohoolie began to swim against the current.

It swam upstream until it reached the place where it had been shot and thrown into the water. There it crawled out, studied the ground for a moment, then crept up the bank.

The trail made by Chuck as he led his prisoners to the clearing was plain to see. The Kohoolie ran, sometimes on all fours, sometimes on its hind legs.

It reached the clearing and stopped to survey the place. Seeing no one about, it ran swiftly across to the path on the other side.

Here it picked up the trail again. But now it became cautious for the trail was fairly fresh. From time to time, it stopped to thump the ground. It waited until answering sounds came back, then it picked up the trail again and hurried ahead.

It stopped at last, hesitating. It rose high on its hind legs and began to sniff at the air, puzzled. It looked up at the trees and noticed there were no birds or insects. For several minutes it stood perfectly still. Then it moved forward again, slowly this time, watchfully.

It saw the Mist Flower and the four boys trapped in the web. For a minute the Kohoolie stared. Then it bent down and began to pound out a hurried, frantic message.

Almost at once answering slaps came to it. Closer and closer the answers sounded, coming from all directions.

Hanging in the web, Dig called to his friends, "Listen. Do you hear anything?" He could not look around for the beauty of the Mist Flower's colors held him spellbound. "Do you hear anything?"

"No," Jim answered. "But the colors... they're... they're wonderful! Almost like music... like music..."

"I feel something," Ken said. "Through my shoes..."

like sound carrying through the ground. Horses? Animals running? What is it?”

“The Kohoolies,” Dig cried in a strangling, hopeful voice. “They’re coming to help us.”

“You called me crazy... crazy...”

“No! Listen. What you feel through the ground... vibrations!” Dig tried to explain. “It’s the Kohoolie way of sending messages.”

He shut his eyes and with an effort turned his head so that he would not be looking at the Mist Flower. When he opened his eyes, he found himself staring at a Kohoolie.

“They’re here!” Dig cried joyously. Then raising his voice, he shouted, “Help us, Kohoolie! Help us!”

The others finally broke the hypnotic hold the Mist Flower had on them and looked. They saw the Kohoolie sitting quietly and watching them with its little black eyes.

“There’s your Kohoolie,” Chuck sobbed. “It’s come to see us die! It’s doing nothing to save us! Nothing!”

16 Race for Life

The Kohoolie remained seated on the ground only for a few minutes. To the boys, hopeless and in pain, he appeared to be doing nothing. In reality, the Kohoolie was carefully observing the Mist Flower.

He circled the area slowly and by the time he had returned to his starting point, there were several more Kohoolies crouching just beyond the reach of the deadly strands of the mist-like tentacles.

Every minute more of the animals arrived. They moved apart, surrounding the Mist Flower. And then, little by little, they began to advance, closing in.

Using their sharp little teeth, they attacked the trees and bushes in their way, working furiously like beavers. Soon a wide swath of fallen trees formed a ring around the Mist Flower. Apparently the deadly tentacles had no effect on the Kohoolies.

Still they advanced, silently, drawing a smaller circle around the Mist Flower.

The four boys watched, hope reviving in them.

"They'll save us," Dig called out encouraging his companions. "I told you..."

"The poison's in us, Dig," Jim said.

"Don't mind him, Chuck," Ken cautioned. "And Jim, you keep quiet."

"No need to kid me," Chuck said. "I know what's ahead."

"Chuck, if Dig says the Kohoolies will save us—" Ken insisted, and stopped.

A great, booming voice came out of the jungle to break in on the boy.

"If Dig say that, he is one smart fellow!"

"Pierre! Pierre Hammer!" Dig shouted, twisting about to see the huge Venusian. Pain shot through the boy's body so fiercely that he uttered a groan through

clenched teeth.

“Ah, my friend, it is not good for you to move around,” Pierre called. “You stay quiet and the pain, it will not be too much. Yes?”

“Aye, Pierre. How did you find us?”

“It is the little slap-slap on the ground. They tell me, Pierre Hammer, to come quick. Friends be in trouble, bad trouble.”

“How can they save us, Pierre?” Ken moaned.

“Hah!” Pierre followed behind the Kohoolies which were tearing and chewing down the jungle growth. “I see the uniforms, no? You are one of the two brothers? Dig’s spacemates?”

“Yes. I’m Ken.”

“The other one, he is Jim?”

“Yes,” Jim called.

“And the other one?”

“Chuck Wells,” Dig said.

“Ah...” Pierre took a deep breath. “So, it is the son of the bad one, no?”

“No!” Chuck cried, his face twisted by pain. “My father is not a bad man.”

“Perhaps greedy, no? A little bit?”

“Pierre, Chuck can’t fight back now. Leave him alone,” Dig said sharply.

“It is the bad manners I have,” Pierre said, ashamed of himself. “I am sorry, Dig. It is a boy and he is in bad danger. So, my friends the Kohoolies and I, we must help. No?”

“How can you help?” Ken asked again.

The Mist Flower,” Pierre said. “She is somewhere in the middle, hanging from a tree.”

“We can see it,” Dig said.

“So the Kohoolies, they cut down all the trees. She can move from one tree to another. You understand?”

But she must have a tree to hang from. If not, she is helpless and she die.”

“That’s why the Kohoolies have cut down trees around us?”

“What else for?” Pierre asked, raising his hands. “Soon they will have only one tree left, there in the middle. You see?”

“Aye,” Ken replied. “Then they attack that last tree.”

“Smart fellow, Ken.” Pierre laughed. Somehow the boy sensed that he was talking to keep their attention away from the fierce, silent struggle going on around them.

The Kohoolies had, by this time, cut down all but one of the trees. This stood in the center, and hanging from it was the great flower.

Pierre, advancing through the cleared area, stood close to the boys: He kept up a constant chatter, his cheerful voice booming through the woods. But his face showed the deep concern with which he watched the Kohoolies.

“It is now the Mist Flower, she will die,” the trapper said. “You watch how they do it, no? But first, I will tell you something.” Pierre paused, then went on. “It will hurt very much when the Mist Flower she die.”

“More... more than now?” Chuck asked.

“But yes, very much more,” Pierre repeated. “You will fall to the ground. Maybe you will be knocked out. *Zut!* Like that! Everything, it will be black like the night.”

“All right, Pierre. We’ll pass out,” Jim said. “What else?”

“Do not lose the hope, my friends. The Kohoolies, they be very smart. They try hard for to save you. You understand?”

“Yes.”

“Now you watch?”

The four boys turned their eyes to the great flower. It was turning a bright, angry red, then yellow swept

across the big petals, then brilliant blue. Color after color shifted and shimmered, in rapid succession.

The Kohoolies, forming a tight circle around the last tree, moved closer relentlessly. The first one to reach the base of the tree began to tear at the wood with his sharp, cutting teeth.

The tree was thick, but soon it began to sway and then, with a loud crack, toppled and fell over.

The Kohoolies swarmed over the flower. For a moment, Dig saw the little animals tear at the petals. Then a great wave of pain swamped him. He cried out. The ground turned and flew at his face and hit him. He knew he had fallen.

He knew that his face now lay flat against the hard ground. He knew that the pain was unbearable. And then he knew only blackness, silence and nothingness...

How much time had passed until he opened his eyes again Dig never knew. He found himself lying on the grassy bank of a stream when he opened his eyes. Two faces were leaning over him, staring anxiously. He recognized them at once.

Pierre Hammer and Tim Buckle...

"Where... where am I?" Dig asked. His voice sounded strangely low and distant. His throat seemed to be on fire.

"What happened?"

"You be all right, Dig," Tim answered. "Drink this."

The trapper held a large, prickly berry in his hand. He squeezed it and a stream of juice squirted out. It splashed over the boy's face, spilled on his lips. Dig licked the thick, sweet-tasting liquid.

"Jim... Ken... Chuck?"

"Do not worry, my friend," Pierre murmured. "They are here also."

Dig felt a little better. He raised his head and looked at Jim, lying beside him.

“How do you feel, Jim?”

“Like my body was filled with pieces of broken glass.”

“Me, too.” It was Chuck, lying a little beyond Jim and moaning feverishly. “Big pieces of glass... jagged pieces... ugly pieces...”

“Ken?” Dig asked.

“I’m here, near Chuck. And I feel like the rest of you.”

“Pieces of broken glass inside of you,” Dig thought. “That’s just how I feel, too. Only it’s hot glass...”

He turned his head toward the stream. The Kohoolies were dragging trunks of trees down to the water’s edge.

He asked Tim, “What are they doing?”

“Building rafts, they be.”

“Rafts?”

“Aye, to take ye boys to the land of the Kohoolies.”

“Land of—Where is it?”

“Far, far away beyond the swamps it be, Dig.” The trapper’s face grew somber. “I will not be fooling ye, lad. Ye’ve the poison of the Mist Flower in ye. That be deadly stuff. If ye can be saved, the wise ones in the land of the Kohoolies be the only ones can do it.”

“But, Tim...”

“It be better ye rest instead of asking questions, lad.”

Dig lay back quietly. The sky was growing darker and soon the long Venusian night would be upon them. He turned his head and watched the Kohoolies roll the logs into the water.

Swimming, they pushed the huge tree trunks to midstream. “How do the logs stick together,” Dig asked himself. “The Kohoolies are not using anything to tie them. And still the logs stay together, one against the other.”

The red-haired boy blinked and raised his head in surprise. Some kind of creatures were running nimbly back and forth across the logs, laying behind them thin strings. They moved on long, spindly legs... six or eight or... Spiders! Dig recognized the creatures. Spiders weaving strands of silk to hold the raft together.

He fell back and closed his eyes. "I'm in fever," he muttered weakly. "I'm seeing things... imagination..."

He awoke to feel the gentle heaving of the water under him. Chuck lay beside him and Tim Buckle sat on his heels at the back of the raft. The heads of several Kohoolies were bobbing in the water. They were pushing and pulling the raft swiftly with the current of the stream.

Chuck saw Dig open his eyes. "You were sleeping for a long time," he said.

"How long?" It was daylight and this surprised Dig. "The last thing I remember, it was just growing dark."

"You slept all night."

"All night? But the Venusian night's about three times as long as on Earth!"

"It seemed longer to me," Chuck said. "I slept a bit now and then. He..." Chuck rolled his eyes in Tim's direction, "he's been feeding me that juice."

"Be ye feeling better?" Tim asked.

"Yes. But if only the pain would let up a little... maybe I'd get some sleep."

"Won't be long now," the trapper muttered, leaning forward to peer down the river. "We be on the lake soon."

"And then?" Dig asked.

"Ye'll see." The trapper was silent.

Dig raised himself to look ahead, then back. One raft was in front of them. Jim and Ken were lying there and Peter Axe was with them.

"Where's Pierre?" Dig asked, tired again.

“Too big for these rafts,” Tim answered. “He be going over land.”

Hours passed. A brightness in the cloudy sky overhead showed where the sun was. Noon on Venus, Dig thought. He drowsed off, keenly aware of the unending pain that tortured his whole body.

When he awoke again, the rafts were being pulled across a great lake. They bobbed about on the choppy water. Far in the distance, Dig saw a mass of logs, piled high, rising out of the water. At first he thought it was a beaver dam, then a raft. It stretched away for miles.

“What is *it*?” he asked, looking up at Tim.

“That be an island plunk in the middle of this lake.”

“An island?” Dig looked again.

“That be the place we are going to.”

“Where the Kohoolies live?”

“One of the places. There be many,” Tim said. “They be the cities of the Kohoolies.”

“Cities!” Chuck sneered and tossed in pain. “You mean hives or ant hills...”

“I mean cities!” Tim snapped.

“The Kohoolies are animals,” Chuck said. “Why try to fool us? We’re going to die of the poison in us anyway...”

“They be a lot more than animals,” Tim said, his voice becoming low. “And they be trying to save ye, boy.”

Chuck said nothing. They moved over the water in utter silence. As they drew nearer to the log-covered island, it appeared even more massive.

Presently they were being pulled along the side, bumping from time to time against great tree trunks jutting out into the water.

The Kohoolies swam to the raft, crowding about it. One of the animals gave a series of sharp quacking sounds. Tim nodded, as though he understood the meaning of the queer sounds. He leaned back and

quietly tumbled into the water.

“Tim!” Frightened, Dig tried to stand up.

At that moment the Kohoolies tilted the raft and Dig and Chuck found themselves pitching into the water.

Before Dig realized what had happened, he found his arms seized by the Kohoolies. He was forced down under the water. A gentle hand clamped over his mouth and nose, forcing him to hold his breath.

The Kohoolies swam under surface, pulling him along. For a fleeting moment he saw huge logs, then a black opening. He was dragged into it, moved along a water-filled tunnel, and then, abruptly raised up to the surface.

The hand was removed from his mouth and he sucked in the cool, fresh air.

He was inside a great, circular cave. A roof of logs loomed high above him. A series of steps rose from the water. The Kohoolies gently pulled him toward the steps.

Tim’s head came up through the water. A moment later Chuck was brought in, then Jim and Ken. They were laid on the bottom step by the Kohoolies.

Tim grinned at the boys. “Ye be in the land of the Kohoolies,” he said. “Be welcome here.”

17 Kohoolie World

“REST ye here awhile,” Tim Buckle said. “They be preparing a nice room for you.”

He pulled a handful of the prickly berries from the leather bag he wore tied to his back. Bending over each boy in turn, the trapper squeezed a stream of juice over their fever-parched lips.

They lay resting and regaining some of their strength. But the pain never let up. If anything, it was becoming worse.

“What is this *stuff*?” Jim asked. “It tastes like a mixture of sugar syrup and pepper.”

“Kohoolie medicine. Without it...” Tim hesitated for an instant. “Without it ye’d be long dead.”

He said nothing more, and no one was curious enough to ask questions. Dig was picked up first. Four Kohoolies came and raised him gently and carried him up the steps.

They came to a tunnel and turned into it. The walls were covered with a velvety material, pink in color and glowing faintly. Dig studied the walls as he was carried along.

It looked like natural silk. He wanted to touch it but didn’t have the strength to raise his hand. He moved his head and stared at the ceiling.

Every few feet there were clusters of tiny lights. “Like little bunches of fireflies,” he thought, and suddenly almost sat up in surprise.

He stared hard and then he realized that the lights *were* fireflies!

“Jim? Ken? Chuck?” Dig called out.

Jim replied, just behind him. “I’m here.”

“Look at the ceiling.”

“Fireflies,” Jim said. “I’ve been watching them. This whole place uses fireflies—or some insect like that—for

lighting.”

“And the walls? What do you think they’re covered with?”

“Like the inside of a butterfly cocoon,” Jim said.

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“The Kohoolies turned a corner in the tunnel and arrived at the opening of a small room. They carried Dig inside and laid him on the floor, close to the doorway.

The boy felt the softness on which he was lying. It was the same material as on the wall, soft and velvety. From the ceiling, clusters of fireflies cast a cool bright light around the place. Dig watched as a small army of tiny things crawled over the rocky walls, weaving the velvet material.

“So that’s how they do it,” he said.

“They look like caterpillars, only bigger,” Ken said. “I wonder if the Kohoolies have trained insects.”

“That’s a smart trick,” Jim said, trying to smile through pain-twisted lips. “A lot smarter than anything we do on Earth.”

“A trick, nothing but a trick,” Chuck said. “They’re not intelligent. I can prove it.”

“Go ahead,” said Dig.

“Did you hear anyone giving orders?”

“No,” Dig admitted.

“But every Kohoolie seemed to know exactly what to do.”

“That’s right.”

“You’ve seen the same thing on Earth,” Chuck said. “Instinct, just pure instinct and no brain needed. Ants on earth have it... bees... salmon returning to their streams...” He stopped and moaned in pain. Then he continued. “The Kohoolies have instinct. Jim and Ken compared them to dogs. Remember? They were wrong. Should have been compared to ants...” He fell into silence, turning and moaning.

No one picked up the argument. The three Space Explorers lay and thought over Chuck's words. Perhaps he has a point, Jim said to himself.

But Dig remembered his journey through the jungle with the Kohoolie, and the animal's ability to understand his words. He rejected Chuck's argument.

Tim came into the room and sat down cross-legged on the floor.

"The Wise Elder of the Kohoolies is coming," the trapper said. "Be not afraid. Stay quiet."

"Aye," Jim murmured. "When is he coming?"

"He be here now."

So softly had the old Kohoolie entered that the four boys were not aware of his presence until they found a gray, furry face looking down on them.

The Wise Elder was small and thin. The gloss had gone out of his dark fur and the pink on his chest was reddish. But his little black eyes were sharp and clear.

He moved on silent paws, examining each of the boys, touching their foreheads with his cool, gentle hands. Then he sat down beside Chuck and, turning to Tim, made some quacking sounds.

"He wants ye to stay very still, Chuck," Tim said. "And close your eyes."

Chuck nodded.

The Space Explorers turned their heads to watch the old Kohoolie. He leaned over the boy and swayed from side to side.

Slowly something began to move on the Kohoolie's shoulder. It was a large, brown insect. It crawled down his arm and then jumped to Chuck's chest. Then it crawled over to the boy's hand.

Tim placed a finger over his lips, warning the Space Explorers to remain silent.

A sting came out of the insect's mouth. Dig watched as it felt the boy's skin. Suddenly the sting went in and out, so quickly that Dig had to blink, not sure he had

actually seen the sting pierce the skin.

Immediately the insect scampered back to the old Kohoolie. The Wise Elder rose to his feet and shuffled out of the room.

“What was it?” Jim asked.

“Something like a bee without wings,” Tim answered. “Or maybe a fat mosquito. I can’t figure out which.”

Chuck opened his eyes. “What happened?”

“Took a sample of the Mist Flower poison in ye, boy,” the trapper told him. “Them creatures now will be making a medicine for ye.”

Chuck turned, groaning, and lay with his face to the wall.

They waited for a long time, drowsing in the cool air.

“Are we inside the island, Tim?” Ken asked.

“Aye. Pretty deep inside.”

“Why is the air fresh?”

“Look over there by the doorway.”

The boys turned their heads. Masses of insects, like bees, were ranged along the doorway, beating their wings continuously.

“They be moving the air about,” Tim explained. “Ye’ll find them all the way up to the air holes.”

“Air conditioning,” Jim murmured, trying to smile in spite of the pain.

Chuck raised his head and looked, then faced the wall again and lay silently.

A long time passed in restful quiet. The pain became more intense, things seemed to float around the room in a feverish haze. After a long while, the old Kohoolie returned.

This time he was not alone. Behind him came others and they carried bowls in their hands. They came to the four boys and sat beside them. The Kohoolies stuck their fingers into the bowls. They pulled out a thick,

sticky substance and forced the boys to eat it.

Sleep came and then again the feeding, and sleep again. It was like some half-remembered dream. But when at last Dig opened his eyes, for the first time he felt no pain. He sat up without effort and looked at Jim and Ken sleeping beside him, and farther away, near the wall, Chuck Wells.

He wanted to jump to his feet and dance and cheer. Against the wall, Tim was sleeping with his mouth open. He was snoring.

A pair of bright little eyes were watching from the door. Dig rose to his feet and cautiously stepped over his friends. As he approached the Kohoolie, he saw a stunray burn on the animal's chest.

"It's my Kohoolie," he said. "The one who brought me from Venustown."

The animal smiled and took Dig's hand and pulled him gently into the tunnel passage.

"I wish I knew what your name was," Dig said.

"*Quai*," the Kohoolie quacked. "*Ka Quai*."

"Dig!" It was Jim's voice from the room. "Dig, where are you?"

His voice awakened the others. Dig stepped back into the room as they were sitting up, rubbing their eyes, stretching and yawning.

"I feel great," Ken said. "No pain... I..." He looked up at Dig, his eyes wide open with amazement. "They did save us! They did."

"How do you feel, Chuck?"

The boy would not meet Dig's eyes. He looked down at the floor. "Good. Good..." he muttered.

Tim rose to his feet and walked to the door. He exchanged a few quacking sounds with the Kohoolie. The little animal scampered away.

"Better get settled, boys," Tim said. "The Wise Elder be wanting to have a talk with ye."

“A talk?” Chuck Wells asked. “I’d like to get back to camp. My father...” his voice broke, then he continued. “My father thinks I’m... I’m dead...”

“Your father,” Tim said sternly, “be what the Wise Elder wants to talk about.”

They were sitting cross-legged on the floor, forming a half circle when the old Kohoolie entered the room. He sat down beside Tim and faced the four boys.

His bright little eyes studied the faces of the Space Explorers, then shifted to look at Chuck. In a low, quacking voice, he began to talk. Tim, staring down at his hands, translated slowly.

“The Wise Elder says that they are an old civilization. They also have science, as the people of Earth have. But it is a different kind of science. It is not the kind that uses machinery, or iron. It uses living things and... and the little things of which everything is made.”

“He must mean atoms,” Ken put in.

“Aye,” Tim said. “Little things that join together to make other things. The Kohoolies, the Wise Elder says, can make all the things they need in this way. They have no use for machines.”

Dig nodded. “Tell him I think I understand. We use machines for farming and to make clothes and package foods. They do the same thing with chemistry, with plant and animal life...”

“Aye, that be so,” Tim said. “Just so.” He turned and began speaking to the old Kohoolie.

The Kohoolie listened carefully, glanced at Dig and smiled. Then he continued to speak and Tim translated.

“He says they work with all kinds of insects, too. They live in peace and help each other.”

“We saw some of it,” Ken said.

“Their ways and the ways of Earth people are different, the Wise Elder be saying. But we are not so different that we can’t live in peace and help each other. The Kohoolies like swamps and water. Earth people like

dry land. That is good. There is room for all here on this world."

The old Kohoolie stopped speaking and Tim waited. For several minutes, the room was heavy with silence. Finally the Kohoolie resumed his speech.

"The Wise Elder," Tim translated, "asks why do the people of Earth kill us? Why do they take the skin off our people and hang it up to dry, like that of an animal? We can also kill. But we do not do it. We are gentle people. But we shall not let you go on killing us. Here on this world we are as wise as you, though not in the great emptiness of space. We do not have flying machines. But on Venus we may be even wiser for this is our world and we know it better."

Tim stopped and looked at the boys. "He be wanting an answer, lads. And it better be good."

"What do you mean by 'good'?" asked Chuck.

"It be something that will give the old man hope that there will be peace... and not more killings."

Chuck Wells spoke up. "Tell him I and everyone else on Venus, except the trappers, believe the Kohoolies are not intelligent beings."

"You really still believe that, Chuck?" Jim looked at him in wonder. "You tried to kill them, and they saved you from a horrible death!"

"What they did can be explained as instinct," Chuck said. "We don't protect ants on earth as intelligent beings, do we?" The boy turned to Tim. "Tell him what I said."

"You be sure, boy? Ye want me to tell him just that? About instinct?"

"Yes."

Tim began to make the quacking sounds. He kept his head bowed low, as if ashamed of what he was saying. When he had finished, the old Kohoolie smiled.

Tim translated his words.

"It is true. We have this thing you call instinct. When

each of our children is born, he knows all the knowledge of our race... our Kohoolie people. He knows this from the moment he opens his eyes and sees he is alive."

"I told you," Chuck said. "I told you. We're talking to animals... like ants... instinct... no brains..."

He stopped suddenly and tears filled his eyes. He raised his hands and covered his face. Then he sobbed, his body shaking violently.

"I wanted a different answer," he cried. "I wanted him to deny it! I want to be friends with them... I... I've never had a real friend! Never..."

18 The Journey Back

THE old Kohoolie waited for a few moments, then touched Chuck gently on the shoulder. When he began to speak his voice was so low the Space Explorers could barely hear him. But Tim heard.

"The Wise Elder be saying, Chuck, that he does not like to see ye crying."

"I... I can't help it," Chuck sobbed.

"Weep not, the Wise Elder says," Tim continued. "He has not given you his whole answer yet. There is more to say about this thing you call instinct. Weep not and he will continue."

Chuck raised his head. "I suppose you fellows think I'm a cry-baby," he said, wiping his eyes.

"We don't think that at all," Jim replied quickly. "Imps of space! Do you think I've never cried?"

"All of us have," Ken said. "We understand Chuck. Forget it."

It makes you more like... like one of us," Dig put in.

Chuck looked at the Space Explorers gratefully. "I'm ashamed of myself."

"There be nothing to be ashamed of," Tim Buckle put in gruffly, trying to hide his friendly feelings toward the pale boy. "Now, lads, hush up and let the old one speak."

Chuck sniffed a few times, wiped his nose on his sleeve and tried to smile through his tears.

"I'll be all right now," he muttered.

The old Kohoolie understood. He nodded to Tim and began to speak.

"There are many things about the brain, the Wise Elder says, that the people of Earth do not know. But the Kohoolies have known a great deal about the brain for many ages. The Earth people send their children to schools. In this way, they give the children information

over many years.”

“Sure,” said Jim, “we spend many years in school...”

Tim continued, “The Kohoolies know how to put all the knowledge and wisdom they have into the brain of a Kohoolie child when he is born. In this way, they save many years that would be spent in teaching the young.”

Tim paused and looked around the circle of eager faces.

“The Wise Elder asks if this is not a better way than making children learn in school?”

“It is,” Jim said, laughing. “Gosh! I wish we could do that. Just think, no school. Reading, writing, spelling, geography, arithmetic... Wow! The works! We’d know it without going to school.”

Ken grinned. “No homework, Jim. That’s what you’d like best of all!”

“I admit it,” Jim smiled. “What a beautiful dream!”

Chuck leaned forward. “Does the Wise Elder believe the ants and bees on Earth do that? Give knowledge to their children when they are born?” The old Kohoolie understood Chuck’s question. He spoke to Tim and the trapper turned to the boys.

“The Wise Elder does not know. Perhaps it is so, he says. Perhaps this ant creature also knows the science. Here on Venus, the Kohoolies have shown the other creatures how to do it.”

“The instinct of ants is just one sample,” Dig said. “What about birds? Some of them find their way by the position of the stars. They fly for thousands of miles and get just where they want to go.”

“Fish, too,” Ken said. “Salmon. They find their way through miles of ocean right back to the little stream where they were born. That’s instinct. But how do they do it?”

“If you will bring these creatures to him the Wise Elder says, he will find out for you. But he cannot answer your questions about the creatures of Earth

unless he sees them.”

“Fair enough,” Jim said.

Chuck remained silent. He was considering the words of the old Kohoolie, surprised at the clear thinking power of this animal. Or was it really an animal as he always thought of animals? There was a gentle way the old Kohoolie had that touched the boy. It was something new for Chuck... sympathy and understanding and friendship. He remained silent, listening to the others.

Finally he asked, “What does the Wise Elder want us to do? He saved our lives...”

The old Kohoolie raised his hand-like paw quickly and spoke to Tim.

“Nothing for saving you, he says. But you must go back to your people and stop the killing. Otherwise the Kohoolies will drive them away from this planet.” ‘

“Venus is settled by the roughest bunch in space” Dig said. “There would be trouble.”

“Aye, that be so,” Tim said. “I told ye, lad, on Mars.”

“I remember. You were trying to stop a war.”

“Aye, one that would be the death of every man that landed here on Venus.” Then the trapper’s voice became gentle as he took over the old Kohoolie’s words

“They can change the chemicals in the earth and all the food Earth people grow would become like poison. They can put little living things into the water they drink, and it would make people sick...”

“Bacteria,” Dig muttered, nodding his head.

“They can send up little plants, too small for you to see, that would use all the oxygen in the air. People would not be able to breathe.” Tim stopped and looked at the boys soberly. “And that be only a few of the things they can do, lads.”

Chuck was silent, gnawing his lip. Then he looked up.

“I’ll talk to him. I’ll convince him that the Kohoolies are an intelligent form of life.”

Dig, Jim and Ken looked at one another and grinned.

The old Kohoolie spoke, then rose to his feet, smiling. He looked at the boys for a moment, his black eyes bright and friendly, and walked out of the room.

“What did he say?” asked Chuck.

“That it be time we go and quickly,” Tim replied. “The Kohoolies will help us.”

“How do you Space Explorers feel about it?”

“We’re with you all the way, Chuck,” Dig said. “I think I speak for my spacemates.”

“You do,” Jim and Ken cried enthusiastically.

Tim chuckled. “Pierre and Peter be waiting outside on our raft,” he said. “Best we be starting, eh?”

“You seem sure that Chuck here is going to go back to stop his father?” Jim asked suspiciously.

“Aye.”

“What made you so sure?”

“I know the Wise Elder, boy. He be the smartest man I’ve ever known—on Earth or Mars or hereabout on Venus.”

“Funny... to hear you call him *man*,” Chuck said. “But let’s not waste any more time.”

“Aye,” Tim said.

He led them out into the tunnel. The trapper seemed perfectly familiar with the place though to the boys it all looked strange. They walked on a soft carpet of silk all the way, with fireflies lighting the velvet-covered tunnel. The place had a warmth and snugness that made them feel as though they were in the home of a close friend.

A group of Kohoolies were waiting when they reached the steps. The domed cave echoed to the quacking songs of the little animals frolicking in the water.

“Better stick close, one behind the other, when we be going through the underwater tunnel,” Tim cautioned them. “Be there any that can’t swim?”

"I'm pretty good," Chuck said.

"So are the Space Explorers," Jim announced.

Without another word, Tim dived into the water. Chuck followed him, then Jim and Dig brought up the rear. The Kohoolies silently slipped under the surface and swam after Dig.

When Dig came to the surface, outside, the others were already scrambling up on the raft.

"Ah, it is my good friend Dig, no?" A mighty arm reached out and grabbed Dig by the back of his shirt. "Pierre is very happy for to see you again."

Dig suddenly found himself rising out of the water straight up into the air. Pierre had lifted him up as though the boy was weightless. He put him down on the raft.

"Pierre, he is so big and heavy, he must be careful not to break the raft, no?"

"Hi, old chap," Peter Axe called to Dig. "We'll be traveling over land. Faster that way, you know."

The Kohoolies pulled the raft across the water toward the distant shore. By the time the raft was beached in a little creek, they were all acting as though they had been friends for years.

The Kohoolies ranged ahead and along the sides of the stream as Tim led the party into the jungle. As they marched Pierre began to sing at the top of his great voice.

They went over dry land, down into endless swamps, floundered through pools of stagnant water and waded streams. The wild life of Venus was out to greet them in full force. Millions of insects hummed and whined-and bit. Brilliantly colored birds screeched in the treetops high above their heads. Strange animals that behaved like monkeys but whose bodies were long and supple like a weasel's leaped and chattered in the branches. Every pool of water swarmed with a kind of little green lizard that wriggled against the boys' legs and made them jump.

When this happened, the trappers roared with laughter.

“The swamp lizard he is cute, eh?” chuckled Pierre, catching one and holding it up. Six bright green legs waved in the air and the little lizard’s ruby-red eyes glared at them.

“Ugh!” Chuck muttered. “It’s bad enough we have to step on them. Don’t make us look at them, too.” The expressions on the other boys’ faces made it plain they felt the same way.

“This fellow, he is harmless,” Pierre said, “but watch out for his cousin, the scorpion lizard! He is the pure poison. But we know about him, do we not, Dig?”

“We sure do. A couple of baskets full of those scorpion lizards had the whole population of Venustown out on the street, afraid to step inside their houses!” replied Dig.

The walk seemed endless. For hours they kept on, until the Space Explorers were gasping for breath and Chuck Wells had begun to stagger with weariness.

Finally Tim brought them to a small clearing, thick with sweet-smelling grass.

“We be staying here for a rest,” the trapper said. “The journey will be long and we’d best travel by easy stages.”

“How long have we been walking?” Chuck asked, dropping to the ground wearily.

“Only a very little time,” Pierre answered, shrugging his great shoulders. “Maybe four, five hours. Not more. And Tim, he pick the easy way.”

“The easy way?” Chuck sprawled out on the ground and closed his eyes. “I wonder what you’d call hard...”

The Space Explorers brought out their emergency rations and began to munch on them.

“What about you, Chuck?” Jim asked. “Don’t you carry chocobars?”

“No. Never needed to. But right now I wish I did.”

“Have one of mine.” Jim reached into his spacebelt

pouch and brought out one of the rations for Chuck.

“What is this?” Pierre asked, shocked. “Do not eat this things. That is for the babies! Tim, he is cooking up a very good stew. See?” The big man pointed.

Tim Buckle had made a small fire. A plasteel pot was fixed over the flames. A fragrant odor filled the air. The four boys sniffed.

“Boy, that smells good.”

“But yes,” Pierre said. “It is a meal for a man.”

“What do you call it?” Jim asked.

“Put away this ration,” Pierre insisted. “This little candy, it will spoil the appetite, no? You want to eat trapper’s stew. It is good for to make you strong.”

“If it tastes as good as it smells, you can put this chocobar away, Jim,” Chuck grinned, handing back the little packet. “I’ll wait for some of that stew.”

They put away their rations and formed a small circle around the fire, watching hungrily as Tim stirred and sniffed the fragrant stew. Finally it was ready. Tim tasted a spoonful, smacked his lips and nodded to Peter Axe, who opened a leather bag and brought out plasteen plates and spoons.

“Come and get it,” the little trapper said. He spooned generous portions into the plates and passed them out to the boys.

Jim sniffed deeply, closing his eyes. “Boy, this is good. Sure beats those old dry chocobars!” He put a spoonful in his mouth and chewed the tangy meat, mixed with all sorts of wild vegetables and seasoned with herbs. “It tastes *better* than it smells, Chuck,” he said, grinning over the next mouthful. “

“I wouldn’t care what it tasted like, Chuck answered, taking a bite, “I’m hungry enough to eat one of those swamp lizards.”

Dig and Ken were too busy eating to say anything, but they grunted their agreement.

“You like it, no?” Pierre asked.

"I like it, yes," Ken managed to answer, at last.

"And you, Dig?"

"Fine."

"Ah I like to see hungry boys eat good food, Pierre said. "There is plenty of the stew. When you finish one dish, take more."

"I feel like Chuck," Jim said. "I'm so hungry I could eat a swamp lizard."

"That is good, very good," Pierre laughed. That is what you *are* eating, my friends."

Jim's spoon stopped, halfway to his mouth. "That's... what... we *are* eating?" he asked.

"Swamp lizards, like what you say you could eat, Pierre said, puzzled by the strange expression that suddenly had come over the boy's face.

"We... we're eating *lizards*?" Chuck gasped.

"But certainly. That is what the trapper s stew, It is made of. The cute green fellows, like I show you today. They are delicious, no?"

"I... don't feel so hungry any more," Chuck said, putting his plate down on the ground."

Jim pushed his plate away. Me, either. "

"I'm... er... too tired to eat, I guess, Ken said. Dig, too, had stopped eating and was staring at his plate.

"It is something I do not understand," Pierre said, turning to Tim. "One minute they say they are so hungry they would like to eat the lizard, then, *poof*! They do not want to eat the lizard."

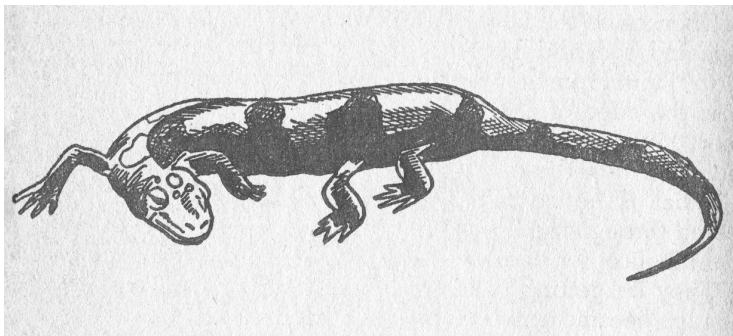
"Well, you see, Pierre, it's just that we're used to spaceman's food," Dig said hastily. "The trapper's stew is delicious, of course, but we just have a yen for some of that good old chocobar. Don't we, Jim?"

"Yes, that's right," Jim said eagerly. "Just the thought of a nice crunchy chocobar makes me homesick for the galley of the *Starover*."

"But I thought you say..., " Pierre began. Then he

shrugged and swallowed another mouthful of stew.

The three Space Explorers began digging into their spacebelts and pulling out chocobars. Jim shared his with Chuck and the four boys sat snapping off chunks of the emergency ration with their teeth. They tried not to watch Pierre, Peter and Tim going back for second and third helpings of swamp-lizard stew.



19 Hanker's Last Chance

THEY reached the hunting post set up by Linton Wells just after dawn, after a march that had lasted through most of the long Venusian night.

What rest they had during the long march came in brief half-hour snatches. They ate, they dropped to the ground exhausted and tried to steal a few minutes of sleep. Then they were up again and slogging through the swamps and heavy jungle.

A series of messages had spurred them on. Kohoolies hidden around the old trappers' camp had been watching, and sending information to Tim Buckle and the trappers.

First they reported only that the rich merchant was very ill. Then came the news that he seemed to have recovered, appeared sad and kept to himself. Finally the messages said "Trouble in the camp."

At the edge of the clearing, a Kohoolie met the group. They crowded around the little animal while Tim, Pierre and Peter talked with it.

"What is he saying?" Chuck asked anxiously. He had peered through the bordering bushes and noticed the blades of the helicopter turning slowly, as the engine warmed up.

"They be getting ready to leave," Tim told them. Then his face became grave as he spoke to Chuck. "Your father and Jud Hanker, they be having arguments. Rough ones, boy."

"What about?" Jim asked.

Tim scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Seems it be about leaving the camp. Linton Wells, he be wanting to go back into the jungle to look for..." He hesitated, throwing a worried look at Chuck, then continued, "to look for Chuck's body. And Jud, he be wanting to have the Space Explorer report sent off."

"Then they haven't given up the hunting plan?"

"Reckon not, Chuck."

"I must go to my father. I'm sure I can convince him to stop the whole thing."

"Haven't you forgotten something, Chuck?" Dig asked kindly. "Your father thinks you're dead... all of us, dead. The shock..."

"Yes..." Chuck was thoughtful. "But I've got to let him know, somehow. Is there any better way than to just walk into the camp?"

"I guess the shock will be just as great whatever we do," Ken said. "But maybe we'll go in ahead of you. He'll see us first, then wonder if you were also saved and then..."

"Then he'll see you and be too happy to be shocked," Jim finished up for his brother.

"Sure," said Dig, "that's a good idea."

Pierre stepped in. "This man Hanker, him I do not trust. Perhaps it is better if I come, too. Yes?"

"No, Pierre. This is my fight," Chuck said. "And the Space Explorers have their report to get back from Hanker."

"But Pierre, he is a strong fellow." The trapper thumped his chest with a huge fist. "Pierre, he is not afraid of a little trouble, eh? He can take care of Gorgon, yes?"

"No," Chuck insisted. "We'll call if we need help."

"Aye, let it be so," Tim Buckle grunted.

"Best of luck, lads," said Peter Axe, grinning.

The Venus trappers and their Kohoolie friends fell back and soon vanished into the thick jungle. Dig pushed his way through the bushes bordering the clearing. Jim and Ken followed, with Chuck staying behind them.

Gorgon saw them first, four gaunt, mud-spattered boys coming across the meadow. Instinctively his hand dropped to the holster at his side. In an instant the stunray pistol was out. Then Gorgon recognized the three Space Explorers and Chuck Wells.

The gun fell from his hand. His eyes almost popped

out of his head. He opened his mouth to call but no sound came from his lips.

"We're not ghosts, Gorgon," Jim said cheerfully as he reached the burly man.

"The Mist Flower... no one... never..." Gorgon stammered. "They always die... always..."

"Not this time, as you can see," Chuck said. "What about Jamie?"

"He be dead, of course. There was nothing we could do."

"Where is my father?" Chuck interrupted.

Gorgon pointed to the long plasteel shed. He continued to stare open-mouthed as the four boys passed him. Several men came running to stand beside Gorgon. They, too, had recognized the four boys, and couldn't believe their eyes.

"Be it them?" one of the men cried. "They escaped the Mist Flower?"

"Aye, it's them!" Gorgon snarled. He had recovered from the first surprise. "Get back to work."

"Aye."

The men drew away from him, their faces sullen and frightened.

Gorgon snatched up his stunray pistol and ran after the boys. He reached the shed a step behind them.

Inside, Hanker looked up in annoyance as Dig entered.

"What do you want?" he asked, failing to recognize the red-headed boy. Then he saw Jim and Ken and finally Chuck. Recognition swept over him and he drew back in amazement.

"You... you... you..." he gasped, struggling to catch his breath.

"Aye, sir. We were saved from the Mist Flower," Dig said calmly.

Linton Wells was sitting quietly on a chair against the back wall. Hearing the words, he rose to his feet and came shuffling toward Dig.

"I had a boy once," the merchant said. "He was trapped by the Mist Flower and..."

He stopped and stared at Dig. Then his eyes slowly moved to Jim's face, then on to Ken's and finally, Chuck's.

For a long time, the man remained standing in the utter silence that suddenly filled the room. Then, with a great sob, he threw himself at Chuck and embraced him.

"My boy... my boy..." the man cried. He turned, a smile appearing unexpectedly on his face and shook Dig's hand, then Jim's, then Ken's. "I'm glad! Glad you're all saved"

"The Kohoolies saved us, Dad."

"The, Kohoolies?" Linton Wells stepped back to gaze into his son's, eyes. Those animals saved you?"

"They re not animals, Dad. They're intelligent and kind and... and better than a lot of people I know."

"It's some kind of trick, Mr. Wells" Gorgon warned from the doorway. "Those trappers, they be sneaky..."

Wells looked at the man indignantly. "What kind of a fool are you, Gorgon? My boy's life was saved. And these Space Explorers. " He turned back to his son. "I've been thinking a great deal, Chuck. Ever since I thought... I thought I had lost you. I'm rich enough. I don t need to grab the wealth of this planet... I was a fool to come here and..."

"Wells, just what do you mean by that?" It was Hanker.

He advanced slowly, an ugly expression on his face. "Are you quitting?"

"Yes. I don't need this—" he waved his hand toward the window. "And now, I want to get to know the Kohoolies better. They saved these boys..."

"You can do what you want," Hanker said bitterly. "But this is my chance to get rich. I'm going ahead." He signaled to Gorgon. "Cover them."

Instantly Gorgon's stunray pistol was up, aimed at Linton Wells. The stout merchant did not lack courage. He faced the burly hunter angrily.

"I'm going to fight to stop you. Put that gun down, Gorgon."

"I'm working for Jud Hanker," Gorgon muttered. "This be my chance for wealth, too. I'm not going to miss out on it."

Hanker stepped to the table and picked up Wells' briefcase. He opened it and shuffled through the papers quickly.

"It's here," he said. "The petition to the World Council... the report from the Space Explorers... everything signed and ready to go."

"I'll have my lawyers stop it," Wells said coolly. "It won't work."

Hanker hesitated, his eyes narrowing into two furious slits. He glanced at Gorgon.

"What do you think, Gorgon?"

"He can't stop us if he be dead," Gorgon said.

"There might be questions from the Space Guards. Wells is an important man. And Space Explorers don't just disappear without someone wondering why."

"Accidents happen to important ones same as they do to us poor hunters, Jud. I have a basket of scorpion lizards back there." Gorgon pointed to the small store room. "Kept it in case I needed them."

Hanker thought it over for a moment. "A shed in the jungle," he said in a low voice, as though talking to himself. "The scorpions like to crawl into houses... Why not?"

Gorgon opened the door and went into the store room. A woven fiber basket stood in a corner.

Hanker took out his own stunray pistol. "I'll keep them covered," he said.

Gorgon stepped to the basket and with a quick kick, sent it flying across the room. The lid flew off and green scorpion lizards came boiling out, their deadly tails raised. Gorgon hurriedly backed out of the room.

"Wells, this is your last chance. You can save your life and Chuck's if you agree to do as I say."

“No, father!”

Wells hesitated. “What about the Space Explorers?”

They can’t be bought and they can’t be scared” Hanker said. “There’s just one way to deal with them.” He motioned toward the little room with his gun. “That way.”

“Hanker, we’re not alone,” Dig Allen said. “The Kohoolies are all around this camp. They know we came here. Tim Buckle and the other trappers are out there too.”

“All we have to do is call for help,” Jim said.

“You do that and I’ll stunray Wells and Chuck” Hanker said. “And throw them in to the scorpions. Think your friends will get here in time to save them?”

Dig knew that Hanker would carry out his threat, knew also that Tim and his friends would arrive too late to save the merchant and Chuck. They were helpless.

He said nothing, but the look on the faces of his spacemates showed that Jim and Ken had realized the same thing.

Smiling confidently, Hanker turned to Wells. “I’ll count three, Wells. Make up your mind.”

Gorgon laughed harshly. He pointed his finger at Dig and said, “That be one. Jim, he be two, and Ken be three. How’s that, Jud?”

“Perfect. The fourth to go into that room will be Chuck.”

Gorgon jabbed his gun into Dig’s back. “Move!” he said.

Hanker counted, “One...”

Dig looked through the doorway. Slimy, fearsome little things scurried across the floor. They moved too quickly for him to have a good look, but he could tell they were lizards, each with six hooked legs and a long, upward-curving tail.

“Do you want a blast of stunray first?” Gorgon laughed, cruelly. “I’ll be glad to throw ye in...”



"Maybe one of you would like to be first instead of Dig?" Hanker laughed at Jim and Ken.

Both boys stepped forward. "I'll go!" Both said it at the same time.

For an instant, Gorgon and Hanker were startled. In

that fraction of a second, Chuck Wells leaped through the door into the room with the scorpion lizards.

“Chuck!” Linton Wells cried in an anguished voice.

“Come back!” Dig commanded sternly. “Don’t be a big hero...”

“No I know what I’m doing,” the boy replied slowly, standing in the center of the room. “I’m not afraid.”

“Chuck, please...” his father began to plead with him.

“Dad, whatever happens, you must help the Kohoolies. Stop Hanker...”

“Chuck...”

“Dad, stop worrying. The scorpion lizards can’t hurt me. I’m immune to their poison.”

“You... you’re what?” Jim gasped.

“When the Kohoolies saved us from the poison of the Mist Flower, they made us immune to the scorpion poison, too.”

Dumfounded, Hanker and Gorgon looked at each other. But Dig, watching the boy’s face closely, saw the sweat gather on his brow. There was fear and horror in Chuck’s eyes. *He was not immune...*

Jim whispered to his brother. “Is it true? Is he immune?”

“He’s spacecrazy, Jim,” Ken whispered back. “Even the Venus trappers are scared stiff of the scorpion lizards.”

“Then what’s he trying to do?” hissed Jim. The scorpion lizards were forming a circle around Chuck’s feet. Loathsome things, they raised their tails higher and crept slowly toward the boy. Inch by inch, the circle grew smaller, tighter, closing in...

20 The Hard Way

THE scorpion lizards advanced toward Chuck very slowly, cautiously waiting for a chance to strike. From what Tim Buckle had told him, Dig knew that once these deadly creatures attacked, they moved with lightning speed.

Now was the one moment when Chuck could still save himself, the moment when the scorpions were getting ready to attack. If Chuck could leap over the line of these vicious lizards...

Dig looked at the boy. There was fear in his eyes, horror... and something else. Chuck seemed to be pleading silently with him. What was he trying to say, Dig wondered.

And then, abruptly, Dig understood. Hanker and Gorgon were staring with horrid fascination at the scorpions, their backs turned to the Space Explorers. This was the chance Chuck was giving them at the risk of his own life.

"Hanker, I'll do whatever you want," Linton Wells cried. "Only save the boy's life..."

"Shut up!" Hanker snarled. "He went in there himself I didn't want him to..."

At that moment, Dig rushed the man. The unexpected attack staggered Hanker sideways. He crashed into the table, dropping his stunray gun.

Instantly Jim and Ken went into action. Jim dived for the gun as it slid across the floor. Ken grabbed the briefcase from the table and with the same motion hurled it into Gorgon's startled face.

The big hunter staggered back a step but quickly recovered his balance. With a look of cold hatred he armed his stunray at Ken and pulled the trigger.

The blast roared wildly past the boy's head. Chuck, with a desperate leap over the line of scorpions, landed with both feet on Gorgon's back. The shock sent Gorgon down to his knees. He dropped his gun and frantically

began to grope for it. Chuck vaulted over him.

“Get out!” the boy shouted. “Quick!”

“The briefcase,” Hanker cried. “Where is it? Where is it?”

Chuck grabbed his father by the arm and pushed him through the door.

“Jim! Dig! Ken! The scorpions...”

The four boys tumbled through the door and fell in a heap outside. “

“Gorgon, help me find the briefcase, Hanker shouted. “The papers... the report... it s all in there!

The door to the shed slammed shut just as the two men saw the briefcase lying on the floor and made a mad dash for it.

Charging from every side, Gorgon’s hunters came with rifles in their hands.

“Line up against the wall!” one of the men barked, aiming his rifle at Jim. “Drop that gun!”

“Aye,” Jim said, gasping for breath. He dropped the gun and kicked it toward the man.

“What be happening in there?” the man asked, gesturing toward the shed. “Where be Jud Hanker and Gorgon?

“Inside,” Dig replied.

“What did ye do to them?” the man demanded suspiciously. He raised his hunting rifle.

One of the hunters took a step toward the door.

“Don’t go in there!” Dig cried.

“Why?” The man halted.

The door flew open with a crash. The hunters whirled about and stopped, suddenly frozen in their tracks.

Hanker came staggering out, blood streaming from both his hands. The circle of men gasped and stepped back.

“Scorpion lizards,” one of the men said. “They got

Jud Hanker!"

"Aye, and we be dead men," Gorgon's voice croaked from the doorway. He came out, holding the briefcase in his bloody hands.

"Gorgon..." one of the men murmured hoarsely. "Gorgon... you, too?"

"Aye." He held up the briefcase for the men to see. "The papers be in here. The riches of all Venus... They be in here." With a curse he flung the briefcase away. "What good be the riches to a dead man?"

Dazed, Hanker walked to where the briefcase lay and stared down at it.

"They bit me... they bit me... they bit..." he kept repeating in a low, moaning voice.

"Aye, we be done for, both of us." Gorgon began to laugh. "Dead men, we... dead men!"

He sat down on the ground, holding his hands before him and stared at the cuts, as though he refused to believe that the poison was already working its way through his body.

The men formed a circle around Hanker and Gorgon and watched silently. One of them picked up the briefcase.

"There be no use in losing this," he said. "They be done for, but not the rest of us."

"Done for... done for..." Hanker repeated. He lowered himself to the ground and sat down beside Gorgon.

"There must be some way to help them," Dig said, turning to the men.

"There be none," a hunter replied.

"Break out a medickit, Jim."

"Aye."

"You be wasting your time, boys." It was Hanker himself who spoke, looking up into Dig's eyes. "I've seen this happen before. The medickit can't help." Then in a low voice, he added, "I'm sorry, boys... sorry."

“Wait,” Chuck suddenly broke in. “What about the Kohoolies?” He turned toward the jungle and began to wave his hands and yell, “Help! Help! Kohoolies!”

The great bulk of Pierre Hammer crashed through the undergrowth and charged like a juggernaut across the clearing. From every side, Kohoolies scurried out of the bush.

“None of that!” One of the hunters aimed his rifle at Chuck.

Another hunter pushed the gun aside. “What if the boy be right?”

His great arms flaying, Pierre charged into the group, hurling the men right and left. The trapper stopped as he reached Dig.

“I, Pierre Hammer, am here!” he announce in a booming voice. “What is the matter, eh?” He glared at the hunters. “They want to have the fight with Pierre?”

Then he saw Gorgon and Hanker on the ground. One quick look at their hands and the big trapper understood.

“The scorpion lizards?”

“In the shed,” Dig told him.

Pierre began to make the strange Kohoolie sounds just as Tim and Peter arrived. Several of the little animals slipped quietly through the door and disappeared inside the shed.

“The Kohoolies, they will clean out the scorpions, my friend.”

“What about Gorgon and Hanker?” Dig asked.

“You’ve got to help them,” Jim said.

“Let’s have a look,” Tim said, dropping to his knees beside the two men.

Peter Axe looked over Tim’s shoulder and scratched his long nose thoughtfully.

“They have a chance. Bitten just now?”

“Aye. A few minutes ago,” Ken told him.

“The Kohoolies have something to cure them,” Peter said in a low voice. I was bitten once. They saved me.”

Gorgon raised his head, hope appearing in his eyes. “You were bitten?”

“A long time ago. The Kohoolies treated me and I’m fine now,” Peter said. “They’ll help you.”

Gorgon shook his head. “Not me, trapper. I be a hunter for too many years. I’ve killed Kohoolies and put up their skins to dry. Why should they bother saving me? They must hate my kind.”

“They don’t know what hate means,” Peter said.

You be one big fool, yes!” Pierre roared at Gorgon. “You know why they save you? They do it so you learn not to kill Kohoolies any more. Understand?”

Tim turned and made a series of low, quacking sounds. Two of the Kohoolies ran off into the jungle.

“And me?” Hanker asked, raising his head. “Will they save me?”

“But of course,” Pierre said. “They save you too Why not?”

“I made the plan to set up hunting posts...”

“Bah! It is a stupid thing you did. You made the mistake that is all.” Pierre snapped his fingers. “Little thing like that’ it is nothing.”

Hanker shook his head. “Not such a little thing. I wanted to kill the Kohoolies... all of them.”

“But you did not do this thing, no?”

“I wanted to. I tried...”

“I, Pierre Hammer, I tell you. What you made, it was a little mistake. From the little mistakes you learn how not to make the big mistakes. You understand? Some people learn the easy way, you learn the hard way. It is a simple thing.”

Hanker closed his eyes and lay quietly. The Kohoolies returned from the jungle, carrying handfuls of the small, prickly berries. Tim took one of these and began to

squirt the juice into Gorgon's mouth. Pierre did the same thing for Hanker.

"This be good for *ye*," Tim said. "It will slow the poison and give ye strength."

"Will it save them?" Linton Wells asked.

"It will keep them alive until they get to the Kohoolie city," Peter told the man. "It's a long journey. A hard one, too."

Tim leaned over Gorgon and Hanker. "Trust the Kohoolies," he said. "They be taking care of *ye*."

"How... how do I talk to them?" Hanker asked.

"Same as ye would to me. They understand," Tim said. "Over at the Kohoolie city, there be a trapper who'll help ye to understand them. Fellow named Johnny Boots. Good fellow."

"Got nothing to lose," Gorgon moaned. "Nothing to lose..."

The Kohoolies crowded around the two men as Tim moved back. Gently they picked them up and started across the clearing at a quick pace.

The hunters moved to one side, watching silently. The Kohoolies reached the opening of the jungle path and turned into it. They were gone. The branches of the trees moved slightly in the warm, moist breeze.

"You'll be wanting this, Mr. Wells," one of the hunters said, handing over the briefcase. "Guess we're finished here. Just like our hunting be."

"Yes, there'll be no more hunting as soon as Space Research gets our report," Dig said to the men.

Linton Wells took some papers out of the briefcase, glanced at them, then called Jim and Ken to him.

"This belongs to you," he said, handing the boys their report.

Ken tore it into little pieces and sent the scraps flying over the land.

"That's the end of it," he said.

"No, not yet," Mr. Wells said, facing the boy. "I have a debt to pay."

"Not to us, Mr. Wells. Remember, Chuck saved us all inside that shed. If he hadn't the courage to face the scorpion lizards..."

"Where did he get this courage, Dig?"

"Always had it, I guess."

"Sure, Chuck's all right," Jim put in.

"He's all right now, Jim. But he wasn't before. He was a soft, selfish, spoiled brat. That's what he was," Linton Wells said. He turned to his son. "I hate to admit it, but that's the truth."

"I know it, Dad. And you're right about Dig, Jim and Ken... I learned something from them... something about courage."

"If you learned something, come out with it," Peter Axe said quietly.

"I think I've always had courage," Chuck said. "At least, I was never afraid of anyone, or of doing anything. But just courage isn't much, though. What's important is using your courage to do something for others... to... to... you know what I mean."

"Yes, you've changed, Chuck. You're a different boy inside." His father looked at him proudly.

"Inside *and* outside," Jim laughed. "Remember when I called you chubby?"

"Do I!" Chuck grinned. "I wanted to knock your teeth out!"

"Well, I can't call you *that* now."

"Huh?"

Chuck looked down at himself. For the first time he noticed that his clothes hung loosely on his slim and tough body. "Say, that hike through the jungle... I must have lost fifty pounds."

"But yes!" Pierre exclaimed. "What for are we standing here? All we do is talk, talk, talk. I, Pierre

Hammer, I am a big man. I am very hungry. Yes.”

“You’ve reminded me of something, Pierre,” Linton Wells said.

He faced the group of hunters standing near them. The men had remained silent, watching uneasily.

“We shall leave for Venustown first thing tomorrow,” Wells said. “You men will be paid your wages in full, provided you do no more hunting of the Kohoolies. Is that agreed?”

“Aye, sir!” shouted a chorus of voices.

“And now, go to my warehouse and make yourselves the biggest and best meal you’ve ever had. Anything you want, take it!”

The men gave a hearty cheer and headed for the camp supplies.

“The idea” it is wonderful,” Pierre boomed. “The feast! That is very good. I tell you what—I, Pierre, am the best cook on Venus. I make trapper stew that is better than anything you have ever eaten, eh? Yes?”

The four boys suddenly turned pale. They looked at each other in horror.

“No, Pierre,” Dig cried. “Here in camp, you are *our* guest. We shall prepare the feast!” Dig turned to his companions. “Right?”

“Right!” The other three shouted with one voice.

“Then let’s go and get the food ready!”

The four boys sprinted toward the cook shack.

Pierre scratched his head and looked at the other trappers, then at an equally puzzled Linton Wells.

Pierre muttered. “They do not like the way we cook lizard stew... I think.”

THE END.