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Title: The Unprotected Species

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Release Date: April 18, 2010 [EBook #32036]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE UNPROTECTED SPECIES ***

The Unprotected Species

By Melvin Sturgis

[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from Fantastic Universe September 1956. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]

Early on the first morning after the camp had been secured—scarcely twenty-four hours after the first plastic shack had been erected—four members of the surveying section brought in Bradshaw.

Gallifa, the senior biologist of the party, was loading the halftrack in preparation for a field trip when the men placed the stretcher in the shade of the truck. He took one look; and immediately stopped congratulating himself on the ease of operations.

It was a chill, terrifying planet inhabited by furtive gnomes. And something was forcing the crew into homicidal insanity. But what?

"Damn! Is he dead?" asked the stunned Gallifa.

"He isn't dead," the mapping officer said lamely. "But he's damn well beat up."

Gallifa nodded awkwardly and looked down at the stretcher. Bradshaw was one of his team. A good man. Gallifa hadn't known he wasn't in the compound. Bradshaw wasn't a pleasant sight. Blood covered his face from a deep gash above the temple, and his clothes and body were cut and scratched in a dozen places.

"Better get him over to the hospital," Gallifa ordered brusquely. "I'll be along as soon as I can."

The mapping officer gestured, and the men moved away with their burden. The officer inspected the toes of his boots uncomfortably.

"How did it happen?" Gallifa asked quietly. "I would say that he had been clawed by some kind of animal."

"That's possible," the other agreed unconvincingly. He licked his lips nervously. "Of course, we are not sure just what did happen." He nodded at a tall, sad-faced man standing almost at his elbow. "Hawkins spotted him from the 'copter on his second recon flight this morning. He came back and directed a crew to pick Bradshaw up."

The officer's manner was hesitant and confusing. Gallifa started to speak, then glanced questioningly at Hawkins and motioned impatiently.

Hawkins cleared his throat. "I saw him almost as soon as I was in the air. He was about half a mile on the other side of camp. I probably wouldn't have paid any attention if he hadn't been acting so funny."

Hawkins paused and glanced apologetically at Gallifa. Gallifa frowned.

"You know how thick those brambles are all around here?" Hawkins continued quickly. "Well, Bradshaw was running through them, just as if something was chasing him. The thorns were cutting the clothes right off his back. I couldn't see anything from the air, so I swung the 'copter back and grabbed some men to see if we could find out what was wrong."

"It took almost an hour to find him again. He was in the bottom of a little ravine, leaning against

a rock. He seemed to be all right until we were close. Then he picked up a stick and started swinging it around like a wild man. He was clear crazy. I finally had to hit him over the head with a rock to save myself. He was true crazy."

So that was what they had been so hesitant in telling him! Gallifa shook his head in bewilderment. Bradshaw was one of his most competent men. It didn't make sense that he suddenly should go berserk. Something seemed to be missing in the report.

"That doesn't sound right," Gallifa argued stubbornly. "Are you sure Bradshaw wasn't scared half to death by something? A man sometimes does some funny things if he's scared."

"Maybe he *was* scared," Hawkins admitted. "But he was sure acting crazy. I'm sorry—" He spread his hands helplessly and walked away, accompanied by the mapping officer.

Gallifa glanced at his wrist watch and swore softly to himself. He had planned to get an early start, but the Bradshaw tragedy was too important. They still knew relatively nothing about the planet. If a man could wander around for only an hour or so and return with grievous, unexplained injuries—Well, it obviously needed looking into.

It would be difficult enough to finish the pre-colonization survey in the allotted time under the best of circumstances, and this was hardly what could be called a smooth beginning. He sighed and walked over to the hospital.

Dr. Thorndyke, a small, swarthy man with the penetrating gaze of his profession, greeted him with a shrug and a puzzled frown.

Gallifa framed the question with his eyes.

"I don't know," the doctor said slowly. "Frankly, I've never seen anything like this before. Your man seems to have lost his mind completely, yet his reactions are at least pseudo-normal. He has an intense homicidal mania, however. He regained consciousness unexpectedly and almost brained two of my medics with a headboard before we could give him a hypo. I don't know whether he'll improve or not. But I've classified him unfit for further survey duty."

Gallifa shook his head in disbelief. The doctor had told him exactly nothing. He had intelligently diagnosed Bradshaw's condition, but he apparently hadn't the slightest idea what had caused it. It was damned strange. Bradshaw's psych check certainly hadn't hinted at any instability. The initial spot check notwithstanding, maybe there *was* something disturbingly wrong with this planet. If such were the case, his team would have to uncover it. The problem would belong to Gallifa.

II

The planet—as yet unnamed—had been surveyed by the spotting cruiser and pronounced suitable for colonization to nine-point-oh on a scale of ten. Of course, the nine-point figure was really only a pro tem rating. The cruiser hadn't been able to conduct a personal survey. That more difficult undertaking would fall to the lot of the pre-col crew.

By the time the balance of the colonists arrived, in forty-five days, the survey party would have to have the initial focal point ready for occupancy, and be in a position to supply all the data the colony would need for survival.

It was the biological team's specific job not only to classify the flora and fauna of the planet, but to determine the adaptability of the colonists to all existing conditions. Bradshaw might have encountered something which would have helped tremendously with the latter category. But it was obvious he wouldn't be able to tell anyone about it.

However, an isolated tragic incident which held no bearing on the success or failure of the colony could not be allowed to interrupt the survey. Gallifa impatiently dismissed the gentle nagging at the back of his mind and returned to the compound. By 1300, Solar Time, the camp was considered to be on a standard operating basis.

Gallifa pressed young Samuels into service and finished loading the halftrack. While they were waiting for MacFarland, senior geologist and acting executive of the camp, the natives of the planet appeared.

Gallifa saw them first, and more from surprise than fear hopped to the platform beside the truck seat and swiveled the automatic pellet rifle until the muzzle covered the visitors.

"Samuels," he called softly. "Hey, Samuels, we have a welcoming committee."

Samuels stopped his work and peered over the back of the truck. He was well trained. He didn't move an inch.

"Are they intelligent?" he asked. His view was curtailed slightly by a tool box.

"I can't tell," Gallifa said quietly. "They're clannish, though. There must be fifteen, maybe twenty, in the group. Climb over the back of the truck and take a look," he suggested.

Samuels vaulted lightly into the truck.

Gallifa looked quizzically at his aide. "Well, what do you make of them?" he asked. "Do you think they could have anything to do with Bradshaw's sudden crackup?"

Samuels removed his hat and ran stubby fingers through his blond, short-cropped hair. "It's hard to tell," he answered. "But they sure look harmless to me. In fact, they look somewhat like a bunch of Celtic little people."

Gallifa frowned. He didn't understand.

"You know," Samuels grinned. "Gnomes or elves with big ears. Large dwarf model."

Gallifa turned his attention back to the visitors and laughed. "I see what you mean," he agreed. "Ears and all. They do seem harmless. But it's strange they aren't upset by us. They could be semi-intelligent."

Gallifa stepped gingerly from the truck. He really didn't expect to find a modicum of intelligence. The spotting cruiser had orbited around the planet for more than seventy-two hours before the crew had been deposited, and had almost definitely established the contrary.

On every Earth-type planet that had ever been discovered, if there were intelligent life it had developed according to water-oxygen evolution; and the culture invariably paralleled *homo sapiens*. It was as if a busy and preoccupied nature had hit upon a pattern which worked and never bothered to change the mold. There were minor deviations, of course, biologically and structurally, but never culture-wise.

The swift, but amazingly discerning survey, had revealed absolutely no evidence of any intelligence on the planet. There were no artifacts, dwellings, roads, dams, bridges—primitive or otherwise. Any stage of culture would have been observed by the cruiser immediately. The planet seemed ideally suited to colonization.

Gallifa, the trained biologist, carefully studied the creatures. The dwarf-like gnomes, as Samuels had dubbed them, might be considered caricatures of humanity.

They were about four feet high—bipeds, and covered with a soft, pinkish fur. They walked erect; normally so, Gallifa could tell, because their upper limbs were too short for knuckling and were not jointed correctly for moving on all fours. They had five digitated limbs, both upper and lower, just as did all higher life forms ever discovered on any planet. Their features were without hair and of a fairy story-humanoid type. With their large, floppy ears, and round-solemn eyes they were very unusual gnomes indeed.

Gallifa spoke to them quietly, trying a few standard low-order communication and classification tricks. The visitors—somehow he couldn't think of them as base animals—made no response. They didn't quite seem to fit any classification niche. The creatures faintly puzzled Gallifa. The best he could do was: Low order intelligence and probably harmless. Cultural development, nil.

As if to prove his rationalizations, the creatures suddenly seemed to ignore the humans. They walked unconcernedly past the truck and attacked the vegetation on the edge of the clearing. Every so often one would overturn a small rock and grub for the exposed insects.

Gallifa observed their broad, dull teeth. They weren't, he decided, omnivorous.

Samuels interrupted his train of thought. "Do you think they will give us any trouble?" he asked.

"No," Gallifa affirmed slowly. "Not materially, anyway. But it's going to be interesting, and a little difficult, to study this species. They don't seem to be ecologically feasible. Look at them. They are small and weak. They don't have claws, not even sheathed—and they are definitely too low in the evolutionary scale to know anything of weapons. Their feet obviously aren't constructed for climbing, and their limbs are too short and aren't planned right for running."

He removed his hat and scratched his head. "In short," he finished, "they are an unprotected species, obviously *unable* to protect themselves."

"That's odd enough," Samuels agreed. "But maybe they don't need protection. Maybe they don't have any natural enemies."

"On a raw planet?" Gallifa retorted. "That's not very likely."

"Perhaps I can catch a few for the lab," Samuels suggested. "I'll work up a behavior pattern analysis."

"That shouldn't be too hard," Gallifa said. "They certainly aren't afraid of us. You do that," he added suddenly. "I'm going to pick up Mac and be on my way. Otherwise, we'll never get out of here."

"Good hunting," Samuels said. "I'll have a couple of these fat little specimens neatly catalogued for you when you get back."

Gallifa laughed and headed the truck across the compound.

III

Gallifa found MacFarland by the main-gate shack. He helped him secure a manual excavating kit to the side of the truck, and then headed for a hogback MacFarland had spotted from the early air photos.

Gallifa jolted the truck up a rutted mound and braked close to a grove of trees. They had covered roughly ten miles. Gallifa was still uneasy about Bradshaw, but he had maintained an exceptionally sharp lookout and had seen nothing which might be termed dangerous to a wary colonist. If anything had harmed Bradshaw, the ground must have swallowed it.

MacFarland shouldered his pack and stalked toward an outcropping rock formation. Gallifa planned to work close to the truck in order to keep in touch with the other crews who were on less personalized missions of mass survey with highly sensitive instruments. That was the way, of course, that most of the work would have to be done.

A short time later MacFarland reappeared, red-faced and panting, and with a bulging pack. Gallifa had activated the scanning scope and was casually inspecting the terrain.

"Finding anything of interest?" MacFarland grunted, after he had caught his breath.

"Nothing except a couple of those little creatures like the ones we saw back in camp," Gallifa answered. At MacFarland's frown he remembered, and filled in the details.

"Want to take a look?" he asked.

MacFarland shrugged out of the pack and clambered into the truck. He expertly advanced the power of the scope and swung it in slow arcs.

"I'll help with the pack," Gallifa volunteered.

"Wait a minute!" MacFarland called excitedly. "Take a look at this."

Gallifa frowned and glanced into the view screen. His jaw fell. He leaned forward and swallowed hard. "That's an ugly looking beast," he affirmed, with a grimace.

"I thought the spotting cruiser said there weren't any dangerous animals in the zone where we were supposed to land," MacFarland said caustically. "I think we had better revise the theory—unless you want me to believe the teeth on that thing are used for shredding lettuce."

"No," Gallifa said. "It's a meat eater, all right. Either the cruiser made a mistake, or—and this is more likely—the beast has wandered in from a more natural habitat. You know, I believe it's after one of the gnomes."

MacFarland left the screen and swung the automatic rifle to bear on the beast. He carefully adjusted the telescopic sights, centering the hair lines on the target. There was a quiet whir and a slight shifting of the rifle as the computer device allowed for correct elevation and windage.

"I have the critter dead center," MacFarland said eagerly.

"Don't shoot," Gallifa suddenly warned. "There is something awfully peculiar about this. I'm positive our friend sees that fellow, but he doesn't seem the least bit worried. Keep the rifle trained, but let's watch a little longer. I'm interested in this."

The gnome did seem aware that he was being stalked. Every so often he stopped to peer over his shoulder where his adversary was in plain view. Then he calmly went on feeding. He made no effort to flee or find concealment.

Gallifa watched in puzzlement. Was the creature really so stupid? It wasn't logical. It just didn't make sense. How had the race survived?

The pursuer tentatively crawled a few feet and stopped, its eyes gleaming. It crawled a few more. It seemed to be appraising the distance to be traversed. All at once it gathered its powerful legs snugly under it. A quick rush and a spring ...

The gnome suddenly stopped feeding and curled into a tight ball. The charging beast seemed to be trying to change its course in mid-leap. It landed almost on top of its prey, but it didn't strike. Instead, it whirled, biting its shoulder and clawing spasmodically. Then it charged headlong across the slope and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Back at the truck, Gallifa turned to MacFarland. "Did you shoot it?" he asked with wide eyes.

MacFarland shook his head.

"The gnome just curled up like a porcupine," Gallifa said, frowning. "And that's certainly no protection ... I wouldn't think. It doesn't have spines or anything."

"You're right," MacFarland answered. "I think the meat eater had a fit, and it's a damn good thing for your friend Mr. Gnome, too!"

"You may be right," Gallifa speculated slowly. "Only—You know, it's a far-fetched thought, but maybe the gnomes throw out some scent that stops their enemies cold."

"It would have to be considerably potent," MacFarland snorted. "To cause a fuss like that!"

"Well," Gallifa affirmed with finality, "Samuels will have several specimens for us back at the base. We will find out after we get back."

"I just thought of something," MacFarland exclaimed suddenly. "Do you think maybe that—that cat—or one like it, attacked Bradshaw? It may have been the reason he ran through the brambles, figuring the beast couldn't follow."

"Hmm, I see what you mean," Gallifa replied thoughtfully. "The beast *was* sort of catlike, and it *could* have roughed Bradshaw up some. Only it doesn't seem logical that the experience could have driven him to the type of mental breakdown he suffered. Still, it's as good a guess as any, I suppose. Maybe Bradshaw will snap out of it and be able to tell us himself."

MacFarland glanced at the sky. "We'd better be getting back," he suggested. "The other crews will be in, and we have a lot of data to correlate tonight."

Gallifa agreed and secured the rifle and scope. Before he could turn the truck around, they heard the sound of a helijet approaching at maximum speed. Gallifa shaded his eyes and looked at the now hovering craft.

"I think it is Hawkins," he reported. "And I'd say offhand that he wants to talk to us."

The 'copter landed expertly a few feet away, and the blades slowed to idling speed. It was Hawkins. He waved excitedly as he ran toward the truck.

"Mac! Gallifa!" he called. "There's a space ship down a few miles from here!"

Gallifa gasped. A wrecked ship? It seemed inconceivable. A space craft wasn't dainty. Damage from a wreck should have been plainly visible even from the spotting cruiser—ignoring completely their own air maps.

He faced Hawkins. "Are you sure?" he asked incredulously. "How did we ever miss the wreckage?"

"The ship isn't wrecked," Hawkins said levelly. "It's in the same condition that it was in when it landed."

"It's not wrecked?" MacFarland repeated blankly. "Now who in hell—" He turned to Gallifa. "I thought we were the first crew on the planet," he said, almost accusingly. "It's very strange no one told us of any other expedition."

Gallifa frowned in annoyance. "We *are* the first. I'm sure of that. The other ship must be a free-lance." He turned to Hawkins. "How about the crew? Are they still with the ship?"

"They're still with the ship," Hawkins said quietly. "But they're all dead. It's quite a mess," he added simply.

"A mess?" Gallifa echoed. "Could you tell how they died? Was it a disease? Were they killed by some animals? Speak up, man!"

"You aren't going to believe this," Hawkins said grimly. "But it sure looks like they killed each other."

"Why would they want to do that?" MacFarland protested. "Are you sure, Hawkins? How could you tell, anyway?"

"I could tell," Hawkins insisted. "You better come and have a look for yourselves. I'll take you in the 'copter, then bring you back for the truck."

Gallifa shrugged, and the men joined Hawkins in the helijet. The mapping man handled the controls, and the ship soared into the air.

"There is something else kind of funny, too," Hawkins volunteered. "The ship landed almost on top of a colony of the screwiest bunch of things you ever saw. They look something like little gnomes, only with a pinkish fur. They are all around the ship, but they haven't bothered anything."

"More gnomes," Gallifa told MacFarland. "I wonder if they're ecologically basic?" He addressed Hawkins. "Gnomes are exactly what I called them, but I'm quite sure there were never such gnomes on Earth. What do you mean by colony? Like a village?"

"No," Hawkins said slowly. "Not that. Maybe I don't mean colony. They just sort of hang around and eat together. They don't have any dwellings, or anything like that. At least, none that I could see," he amended.

Gallifa wasn't sure why he sighed with relief. At least his hypothesis wasn't spoiled. They were clannish. But hell, rabbits were clannish. Herd development wasn't anything more than instinct.

The helijet suddenly swooped around and settled for a landing. It was easy to see how the grounded ship had avoided detection. It was camouflaged almost perfectly—although whether purposely or not wasn't readily discernible.

The space craft wasn't large. Gallifa estimated an eight-man crew, and Hawkins proved him correct. He had found all of them at once. They had been dead a long while; decomposition had been thorough. But Hawkins was right. It did look as if they had killed themselves.

They were scattered haphazardly around an irregular perimeter of the ship, and no two of the bodies were close together. The positions of the skeletons showed that they hadn't been molested by any wild animals—nor had they been killed by any.

But the strange thing—and this to Gallifa was also a senseless thing—was the startling fact that each skeleton had a pellet pistol still firmly clasped in its fleshless hand.

The magazines of all the weapons were either completely discharged or nearly so. Hence it was obvious that they had been firing at each other. But why? If it had been a battle between two rival factions—in itself incredible—Gallifa could have understood to some degree. But these men were all alone. Each of them had obviously been against all the rest. No matter how you looked at it, there wasn't any answer.

MacFarland was hard to convince. "Maybe they didn't kill each other," he insisted. "How do you know those creatures—gnomes, as you call them—didn't attack the ship?"

"If you had ever been close to a gnome," Gallifa answered wearily, "you'd have your answer. I can't guess why, but these men killed themselves, beyond any possible doubt."

"Then they must have gone completely crazy," MacFarland said stubbornly. "Every last one of them."

Gallifa frowned as he remembered Bradshaw. Crazy? Could it be possible that the crew of this ship had stumbled on something which had driven them into insanity? Psychologically, Gallifa couldn't discount an idea simply because it seemed impossible. A newly established colony was a fragile thing.

"While we are here," Gallifa said, "let's take a closer look at that colony of gnomes. I think I noticed something from the air which doesn't jibe with our first impression of them."

The three men climbed a little hillock, and Gallifa carefully studied the area in front of him. He finally shook his head in bafflement.

"This is an unbelievably screwy planet. These creatures apparently haven't reached any stage of development higher than the herd instinct, and yet they are farming. It doesn't make any kind of sense. The species is completely out of character."

MacFarland looked at the virgin growth below him, and shook his head. "That's a farm?" he asked sarcastically.

Gallifa grinned. "You would have to be a biologist to catch on," he explained. "See that yellowish bush? The one with the purple blossoms? Now look at the area directly in front of us. Not a single bush. If you will look carefully you will find several types of plant life which are growing freely everywhere except in the area I showed you. The gnomes are allowing only the plants they want to grow in the area.

"Perhaps they aren't exactly *farming*," he elaborated. "That is, they may not be planting anything in an orderly fashion. But they *are* cultivating. And it all adds up to the same thing. They are increasing an edible crop by eliminating—well, weeds. And if they can do that, they should have a corresponding cultural development.

"Another thing bothers me," Gallifa complained. "If these stupid are a natural prey for animals, as unprotected as they are, I should think they would live in some kind of thick brambles. That at least would give them some measure of safety. I think the bio team is going to have more than their share of headaches."

"Let's work on it tomorrow," MacFarland suggested tiredly. "I want to get back to camp."

Hawkins returned them to the truck, and Gallifa and MacFarland jolted off into the gathering dusk. It was fully dark by the time they reached the camp.

Gallifa checked his team, then gathered their various findings together and sent them over to the Administration Building for further evaluation. Samuels didn't check in with the rest. Gallifa assumed that he was busy with the gnomes. He wanted to discuss the queer creatures with him, and wandered over to the specimen shack. Samuels wasn't there. Neither were any of the natives.

Gallifa returned to the team shack and left a note on Samuel's bunk telling him where he could be found. Then he went over to the Administration Building to work with MacFarland. The next few hours he and MacFarland were so busy sorting material and feeding it to the analyzers that he forgot his aide.

Finally Gallifa finished verifying the last of a huge stack of photographs, and stuffed the important ones into a plastic envelope. He added the date seal, initialed it, and handed it to one

of the men to take to the laboratory for micro-filming. Then he produced a battered pipe and filled it with tobacco, slowly tamping the bowl with his fingers.

He had just about finished his smoke when the messenger returned to the Administration Building. "—Gallifa," he began.

Gallifa knew that something was wrong by the way the man hesitated. He sprang up. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Some of the boys ran into Samuels over on the edge of camp," the messenger said miserably. "He was clear out of his head. He fought like a tiger, and they had to tie him hand and foot to get him over to the sick bay. The doctor wants you to come right over."

Gallifa turned a white face to MacFarland. "What the devil," he said woodenly. "Is my whole team going crazy?"

MacFarland slipped into his field boots. "I'll go with you," he said.

Outside a cold drizzle was falling, and from the way the leaden skies were piling up, Gallifa was convinced that it would stay around for several days. Evidently the weather boys had been right in predicting that the planet was about to be plagued by a rainy season.

As they drew near to the edge of camp, Cummings, the little, bald-headed meteorologist of the weather group, burst out of the weather shack, cursing soundly and waving a boot in one hand.

"Damn those piebald dwarfs," he shouted. "They've got more brass than a fire pole. They stole one of my boots."

He threw the boot and disappeared around the corner. "Get out of here, you little devils!"

"The gnomes seem to have invaded the camp," MacFarland remarked. "We'll have to take steps to chase them out. They might get into our stores."

"Yeah," Gallifa nodded glumly. He was too upset with the problem of Bradshaw and Samuels to worry about gnomes.

From all indications Samuels had developed the same malady as Bradshaw. The doctor pursed his lips and shrugged his shoulders. Thirty-three hours on the planet and two men suddenly, violently insane! Did that herald an epidemic, Gallifa wanted to know. Or could it simply be put down to an unlucky coincidence? Could it be a disease or a virus?

There were tests that might shed some light on the mystery, the doctor admitted. But it would take time to apply them and reach any kind of conclusion. Meanwhile, the work had to continue. The survey could not wait.

Samuels had been given a hypo and been moved to the ward with Bradshaw. Gallifa walked past the ward corpsman and looked in the door. Bradshaw was tossing fretfully in his sleep. Both he and Samuels were in restraint jackets.

Gallifa shuddered and swabbed a perspiring brow. The rain was making everything muggy.

He left MacFarland still talking to Dr. Thorndyke, and started back—heading directly for the team shack. Gallifa was obviously worried. He found himself wishing that he could somehow avoid telling the rest of the crew about Samuels.

Damn! Was the Bio team jinxed?

V

Gallifa kept close to the shacks in a futile effort to protect himself from the rain, which was really driving now. A single light burned in the Administration Building, but the rest of the compound was dark and quiet.

He skirted the deserted equipment building and paused for an instant in the lee of a truck to light his pipe. There was a loud tinkle of glass, and the windshield on the vehicle magically spouted a hole.

Gallifa ducked instinctively and only just in time. The windshield spouted a second hole—and then a third. A faint, bluish flash located his attacker. It was uncomfortably close.

Gallifa lashed out, and fell over a crouching figure. In a moment the two men were thrashing in the mud. The unseen attacker was strong and he fought like a maniac. But Gallifa was even stronger and his determined anger quickly gave him the advantage. He wrested the pellet gun from the other's grasp, and brought the butt down hard—brought it down twice. The man slumped, and was still.

Gallifa snapped on his wrist torch and played the tiny, luminous glow over the sprawled figure. The man who had tried to kill him was Cummings. Gallifa numbly wiped the mud from his pipe and lit it with a flickering lighter. The flame made a weird, cameo-like oval of his gaunt face, with

the olive-toned skin of his ancestry stretched tightly across the high cheekbones.

Why? Bradshaw ... Samuels ... Cummings ...

A pattern was forming. And it was forming with a viciousness and a regularity which left little doubt as to the probable outcome.

Did that pattern embrace the space ship with its ring of rain-washed skeletons? Had they disintegrated under a pressure as relentless as the swiftly-tightening jaws of a vise. *Something* was forcing normal men into homicidal insanity. But what?

Gallifa didn't know. But he did know that someone had better come up with some answers—intelligent ones, and very much to the point. Or was it already too late? Was the compound already infected—with each man only waiting to be struck down?

Gallifa draped the limp body of Cummings over his shoulder, and slogged his way back to the hospital. The doctor grimly made room in the ward room for the new patient. While he was treating the gash in Gallifa's cheek, MacFarland, Hawkins, and some of the early-rising camp cooks brought in two more men from the weather group.

Gallifa watched in tight-lipped silence as the corpsmen administered hypos and set the new cots end to end in the already overcrowded sickbay.

"There were only two restraint jackets," Dr. Thorndyke said jerkily. "We'll have to secure the rest of them to the bunks."

MacFarland nodded. When he spoke, his voice was low and strained. "This is getting out of hand. I think we'd better get everybody over to the Administration Building as soon as possible."

"All right," Gallifa said quietly. "Only—"

"Only what?" MacFarland asked sharply.

"What if everybody in camp isn't available," Gallifa said flatly. He opened the door and stepped into the rain.

The Administration Building was hot. The windows were steamed over, and the men nearest to them had wiped clear spots with their hands, as if they could not bear the thought of not being able to peer out into the night.

The room buzzed with a kind of orderly confusion. The men were scared and they made no effort to conceal it. Gallifa studied a slip of paper covered with tally marks, and then quickly stuffed it into his pocket.

Ten men were now missing, not counting the ones already in the hospital. They couldn't be accounted for, so it had to be assumed they were either sick—or dead.

It had been decided that Gallifa and Dr. Thorndyke were the best qualified to take charge of the camp, until normality returned. Gallifa studied the men carefully.

"We haven't much to go on," he said with grim candor. "We're still in the dark as to what is happening. We only know that when it takes place, it happens damn fast—and without discrimination. Men have been affected both in and out of camp."

"So far, here are the facts. To the best of our knowledge none of the men have been bitten by animals and we haven't found any poisonous plants. Dr. Thorndyke is considering the possibility that some unknown virus which affects the brain may be responsible. He's over in the laboratory running tests now. If it is a virus, grouping together like this might be a mistake. We'll load everybody up with antibiotics and hope for the best. We've got to lick this!"

"Until now," Gallifa continued grimly, "no one has been hurt except the stricken men. We want to keep it that way. One fact stands out bluntly. All of the men have been damned anti-social. They want to be left alone, and will attempt to kill anyone who gets close to them. That should make them easy to spot. If we are to have a chance to cure them, we have to catch them first."

"We are going to have to consider the likelihood that more of us will be affected. We must do everything within our power to isolate those suspiciously-acting persons. Probably the ship Mac and I discovered didn't have the warning I am giving to you now. We can lick this thing if we're determined enough. The main thing is not to lose your head. Watch your neighbor, but don't jump to conclusions. Be sure before you act."

There was a stir and Gallifa paused. The doctor pushed his way through the men to the front of the room. His face was white and haggard.

"What about the tests?" Gallifa asked.

"There aren't going to be any tests," Dr. Thorndyke replied grimly. "At least not on the men in the hospital. They are all dead."

"What happened?" Gallifa urged, his eyes wide with shock.

Everyone was very quiet.

The doctor wiped his hand across his forehead. "Nolan was on duty in the wardroom. He went

out for a smoke. I heard him go out. I didn't hear him come back. I was setting up some new equipment. When I finally went back to the ward Nolan must have caught—whatever it is. He was gone, and he'd slit every man's throat with a scalpel."

Gallifa faced the assemblage. "We're going to inoculate everyone here. As soon as we're through, I want each team to go to their own shacks and stay there. If you *have* to go somewhere, go in pairs. If you see anyone wandering around by himself, no matter *who* he is, bang him over the head with something and bring him over to the hospital. Otherwise, stay put."

The men received their shots in an uncomfortable silence and disappeared into the night. Gallifa, MacFarland, and Dr. Thorndyke remained in the Administration room.

"Any idea what it is, doc?" MacFarland asked huskily.

"I hardly had time to take care of the patients," Dr. Thorndyke replied bitterly. "Did you honestly expect me to find out what was wrong with them in a few short hours?"

"But—" Gallifa began.

MacFarland suddenly started, and leapt to his feet. The doctor moved away, his face paling.

"What's the matter?" Gallifa asked, alarmed.

"Don't be so old womanish," MacFarland snapped. "I'm not catching it. I just thought of something. Cummings had a gun. Where did he get it?"

"The storeroom!" Gallifa exclaimed. "I'd forgotten we had weapons and ammo in the storeroom! If things got bad enough, we *could* wipe ourselves out. We'd better check."

"I'm going back to the hospital," Dr. Thorndyke said bluntly. "I'm going to lock the door. If anyone comes banging around he damn well had better know who he is and talk intelligently—or I'll slice him from his wishbone to his crotch." He stalked out.

Gallifa stared blankly after Dr. Thorndyke. It was funny hearing him talk this way. He had always thought of the doc as being rather mild-mannered. Damned flexible, humans!

VI

They found the door was torn off the storeroom. It hadn't even been secured. Someone had just been in a terrific hurry. There wasn't a single weapon left. MacFarland studied the disarray, then thoughtfully hefted a broad-bladed pick axe.

"I'm of the opinion," he said quietly, "that in a short time things are going to get a little rough around here."

"Now wait a minute, Mac," Gallifa protested.

"Sorry, boy," MacFarland said grimly. "If I knew everyone else was barehanded, I would go along with you. I may not be the next victim—or the tenth. I'll more than likely have to protect myself against someone who has come down with it, however, and I've got an overwhelming desire to stay alive."

Gallifa let his hands drop helplessly to his sides. MacFarland was right, of course. They hadn't acted soon enough. Was this how panic was born?

"Mac," Gallifa tried huskily. "We've got to keep our heads. If we don't, we'll destroy ourselves."

"I'm open to any suggestions," MacFarland said steadily. "But until I'm satisfied that the danger is past, I'll just hang on to this axe."

"Let's go back over to the hospital," Gallifa said wearily. "We'll use Thorndyke's projector and go over every inch of micro-film we have. We may be too close to the problem. There must be something we've overlooked."

Outside the rain had slackened into a fine mist. Overhead the clouds still held, but they were somewhat lighter. In a short while, it would be dawn. Every light in the compound was burning fiercely. Gallifa suddenly remembered the generator in the shack behind the Administration Building. If anyone smashed or damaged the generator beyond repair, the camp would be without power of any kind. And they might be forced to warn the colonists to stay away from the planet.

He stopped MacFarland. "I think we better secure the door to the generator shack," he said thoughtfully. "We can put a robot control on the radio, but we have to insure power."

MacFarland understood the reason immediately. But before he could answer angry voices rang out somewhere across the compound.

Gallifa hesitated. "You better see what that is," he told MacFarland. "And I'll check the generator."

MacFarland nodded and slipped away. Gallifa detoured around the hospital and carefully approached the Administration Building. Once he saw something moving in the half-light and halted abruptly. It was only a few of the little gnomes moving through the camp.

Gallifa quickly rummaged through the spare parts cache in the shack and drove stout pegs into the door jamb and the door. Then he expertly wove a short length of wire around the pegs and drew them tight with a pair of wire nippers. He leaned a shoulder against the door until he was satisfied it would hold. Then he returned to the hospital.

MacFarland met him at the back entrance. The five corpses still lay shackled to the bunks in a mute and grisly reminder of how quickly deterioration had spread through the embryonic colony. Gallifa felt his jaw muscles tighten.

"The bio team stole all the weapons," MacFarland said without preamble. "They've barricaded themselves in the mess hall and threaten to shoot anyone who comes within ten feet of the door."

Gallifa waited, his expression somber.

"The other teams are mad clear through," MacFarland continued. "I convinced them to go back to their own shacks, but I don't know how long they will stay there."

Gallifa nodded. "If the other teams decide to rush the mess hall—" He let the sentence trail off and grimly began to sort the micro-film.

A few hours later he had uncovered a series of very surprising—and confusing—facts. He was amazed by the extent and completeness of the data the teams and machines had assembled during their brief stay on the planet. Gallifa closed his eyes and began to sift through the data with the queer, persistent sixth sense of all true research men.

The field of biology isn't limited. It begins just under the crust of a planet, encompasses the surface, and extends ... as far as needs be. Gallifa was a good biologist. And now he had a series of incredible facts at his command. He thought he had the answer to the epidemic. Only if he was on the right track—and he was almost sure of it—the cure might be so simple that it would be no cure at all.

How did you cure fear?

MacFarland was dozing across the room. Gallifa suddenly realized how tired he really was. Perhaps the doctor could give him a stimulant. In any case, he wanted to discuss an idea with Dr. Thorndyke. He stood up and gathered together the papers lying scattered on the desk.

MacFarland was immediately awake. He held the axe loosely in one big hand, but a slight tensing of the muscles in his forearm denoted his readiness to use the weapon.

Gallifa noticed only that MacFarland was awake. He gestured vaguely and walked through the room to the doctor's office.

"Dr. Thorndyke!" Gallifa called.

"Eh!" The doctor was startled. He walked quickly over to a wall cabinet and busied himself with an electronic sterilizer. When he turned he was holding a short-barreled, hair-thin hypodermic jet.

"I've been hoping you'd come by," he said. "That cut in your cheek. You should have had a tetanus shot."

Gallifa automatically bared an arm and leaned on the table. The doctor held the needle up to the light and exerted a minute pressure on the plunger. He reached for Gallifa's arm.

MacFarland was across the room in five quick strides. He hit the doctor across the side of the head with the broad blade of the axe. Dr. Thorndyke sighed and collapsed loosely on the floor. The point of the dropped hypodermic shattered and a milky fluid oozed from the splintered end.

Gallifa's reflexes were slow. For a long moment he stood as though stunned. Then shock caught at him. But the slow-motion time which gripped him wouldn't allow him to take more than two steps before the axe in MacFarland's big hand would come crashing down. He wished he could have activated the transmitter before it happened. Dazed, he wondered who would warn the colonists?

Gallifa suddenly realized he had placed the portable operating table between himself and the other man. He drew his first breath, and it caught in his throat. Then he was through the door and running across the compound. He stumbled towards the equipment shack and threw himself in the back of a truck.

MacFarland didn't follow.

VII

Gallifa rubbed his aching eyes and rested. How many hours had passed since he had slept or

eaten? It was fully light now, although the dawn sky was gray because of the clouds. A strong wind pulled at his hair, and the first heavy drops of another rainstorm pelted against his face. Gallifa moved under the half-top canvas and wished for a slicker. The rain was cold.

The crackle of small arms brought Gallifa to the edge of the truck. He hadn't realized how still the camp really was. The tension was a live thing, coiled in the wet air. There was no doubt the firing came from the mess hall. The bio team had all of the weapons.

Gallifa was sure he could stop the panic if he could contact the men. If only they weren't so scattered. He had to try. He gave another quick look at the hospital door, then sped around the Administration Building.

Something hit him from the side and hurled him joltingly to the sharp gravel. Gallifa rolled to a fighting crouch, dimly realizing that his right arm was almost paralyzed. He shook his head hard against the pain. The man was Nolan—and he was the most frightened man Gallifa had ever seen.

His face was convulsed with such abject terror that Gallifa was stunned. He was like an animal at bay, with all moving life his enemy. Gallifa remained perfectly still, his eyes on the surgeon's scalpel in Nolan's hand. Then from the mess hall came another rattle of fire.

Gallifa couldn't help jumping. Nolan drew his tight lips away from his teeth and gestured menacingly with the scalpel. Then a beefy arm appeared from nowhere and struck the corpsman a chopping blow at the base of the skull. He dropped the scalpel and fell silently to the ground.

MacFarland stepped around the corner of the building.

Gallifa tried to rise, then gave way to the weakness of his limbs. The ground spun crazily past his face and he passed out.

"Gallifa! Snap out of it! Wake up, boy!"

Rough hands were shaking him. He opened his eyes.

"I didn't kill Doc," MacFarland said quietly. "There wasn't time to explain. I had to act fast. He had enough knockout juice in that needle to put you away permanently."

Gallifa searched the other man's face. Then, slowly the tension went out of his features. "I heard shots?"

"Your boys took a few shots at me," MacFarland admitted. "I guess they thought I was rushing them."

Gallifa stared at Nolan. "We've got to contact the men before it's too late," he said. "I know what caused the epidemic—and how to stop it. Anyway, temporarily. If I can only find some way to get them to listen."

MacFarland said: "We'll find a way. Tell me about it."

"There's nothing wrong with this camp now but fear," Gallifa continued wearily. "Or the *fear* of fear. There wasn't any epidemic. It was the gnomes. It's all here in the micro-film."

MacFarland stared blankly.

"You know how we survey?" Gallifa said quickly. "We send out low-flying 'copters and track the neural waves from all animal life. Later on, after we pick up some specimens, all the neural patterns on the tapes are matched. Otherwise, we wouldn't know one from the other. This information, along with other data, is fed to the analyzers and we get an excellent idea of the type and distribution of all life in a given area. The boys did a good job with the 'copters. They covered enough territory to provide all the data we need at present."

"So?" MacFarland asked.

"Somehow," Gallifa went on, "Samuels managed to get a neural trace from the natives before he went insane. It's right here in his report. And the trace matches perfectly with some of the patterns taken from the 'copters. When I fed the patterns to the analyzers, I got some damned strange results. The analyzers classified the gnomes as an oversized form of rodent, somewhat similar to rabbits and rats. This I suspected. What I hadn't suspected was that their neural wave was so strong it could be projected as a physical impulse."

"I still don't see—" interjected MacFarland.

"It's simple," Gallifa said. "The natives are *mental skunks*. I don't know how they do it. Maybe we can't even find out. But I can guess how it works. The creatures transmit a neural charge as real as an electric current. We don't yet know the range, but we've already seen it in action."

"The cat!" MacFarland said.

Gallifa nodded. "The 'copter survey showed that where the instruments located gnomes, there was very little other animal life in a wide area. Their charge may be deadly to a non-reasoning animal if it is exposed more than a few moments. To a human it isn't deadly, but it's devastating. The charge must hurt the mind so badly that it defends itself with the only bit of reasoning left. Kill or be killed. That's why our men turned homicidal."

"If this is true," MacFarland said soberly, "can we do anything about it? Can we destroy these creatures?"

"We can probably destroy them," Gallifa said slowly. "But remember the rabbits in Australia? The gnomes are ecologically basic. They are by far the most numerous animal in this area."

"Meaning," said MacFarland, "that if we killed them off here, they would swarm in from somewhere else? That will mean a running battle."

Gallifa smiled grimly at MacFarland's use of the future tense. "We may have to live with them for awhile. But our immediate problem is how to convince the men that we can solve the present crisis—while we still have time."

"You'd never dare approach the mess hall," MacFarland warned.

The camp waited, wound up to the breaking point. Along about the middle of the afternoon, maybe before, all hell was going to bust loose. Unless he could stop it.

He suddenly grabbed MacFarland's arm. "Mac!" he asked eagerly. "The generator. Do you know if it's still working?"

A look of understanding crossed MacFarland's face. "The bull horn. Of course! Everyone in camp can hear the bull horn."

They made it past the mess hall without drawing any fire. A few moments later the resonant voice of the loudspeaker was booming across the camp. Gallifa spoke slowly, methodically, trying to convince and reassure. He paused, then once more repeated the plea.

He almost gave up. Then slowly the mapping gang edged into the open and filed toward the Administration room. Finally the bio team left the mess hall, and Gallifa let the heavy horn drop. What now? The present nightmare was almost over, but what of the future?

"We will be able to control the gnomes locally," MacFarland said, seeming almost to guess his thoughts. "As we expand, they will have to give."

"Maybe," Gallifa said. "But just because they are rodents. Don't underestimate their possibilities."

"The creatures of this planet have never been pressed. Nothing has been able to push them up the evolutionary ladder. We'll be the toughest environment they've ever faced, for we know the power of their defensive mechanism. How well will we be able to compete if they learn to use it as an offensive weapon?"

"We can't," MacFarland said.

"We know it's selective," Gallifa corrected. "They didn't bother either Samuels or myself when we first contacted them. We also know all of the stricken men weren't actively molesting gnomes. Therefore, some were hit due to the actions of others. The only question is—how selective is their power?"

"Then how *can* we handle them?" MacFarland questioned soberly.

Gallifa shrugged. "I don't know," he said simply. "We're committed here, and we'll stay. This isn't the first time the human race has been challenged—it won't be the last."

Gallifa turned and walked toward the Administration Building. Humans had solved a hundred problems on a hundred planets. Problems existed to be solved. This one, too, would be solved. But no matter how hard or how easy, it would be an experiment.

As all humanity was an experiment.

Melvin Sturgis is a mechanical engineer employed by ROCKETDYNE, Propulsion field laboratory—a division of North American Aviation, Inc. Like many another brilliant young technician with an extra-curricular, electronic string to his bow he has also been a free-lance magazine writer for the past five years. We think you'll agree he has scored heavily here, on the planet of a far-off star!

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