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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MEETING OF THE MINDS ***



Meeting of the Minds

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

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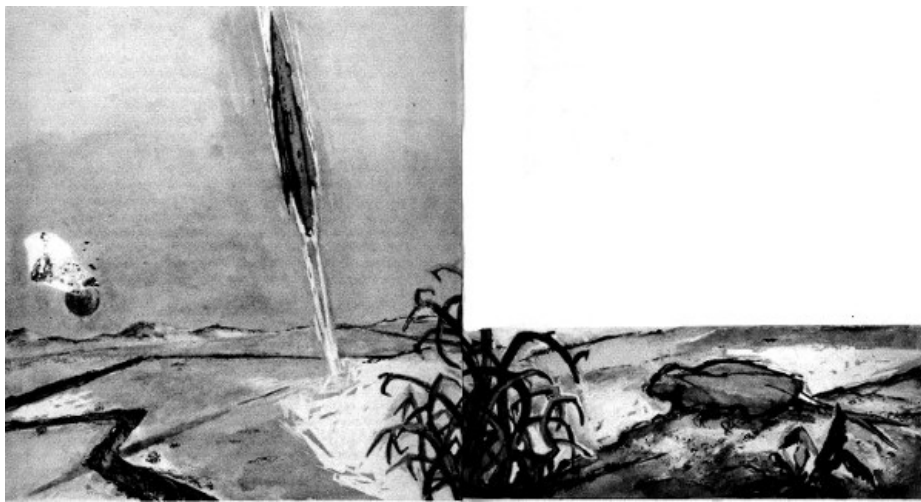
***What mission had the Quedak been given?
Even he couldn't remember any more—but
he refused to die till it was completed!***

PART ONE

The Quedak lay on a small hilltop and watched a slender jet of light descend through the sky. The feather-tailed jet was golden, and brighter than the sun. Poised above it was a glistening metallic object, fabricated rather than natural, hauntingly familiar. The Quedak tried to think what it was.

He couldn't remember. His memories had atrophied with his functions, leaving only scattered fragments of images. He searched among them now, leafing through his brief scraps of ruined cities, dying populations, a blue-water-filled canal, two moons, a spaceship....

That was it. The descending object was a *spaceship*. There had been many of them during the great days of the Quedak.



Those great days were over, buried forever beneath the powdery sands. Only the Quedak remained. He had life and he had a mission to perform. The driving urgency of his mission remained, even after memory and function had failed.

As the Quedak watched, the spaceship dipped lower. It wobbled and sidejets kicked out to straighten it. With a gentle explosion of dust, the spaceship settled tail first on the arid plain.

And the Quedak, driven by the imperative Quedak mission, dragged itself painfully down from the little hilltop. Every movement was an agony. If he were a selfish creature, the Quedak would have died. But he was not selfish. Quedaks owed a duty to the universe; and that spaceship, after all the blank years, was a link to other worlds, to planets where the Quedak could live again and give his services to the native fauna.

He crawled, a centimeter at a time, and wondered whether he had the strength to reach the alien spaceship before it left this dusty, dead planet.

Captain Jensen of the spaceship *Southern Cross* was bored sick with Mars. He and his men had been here for ten days. They had found no important archeological specimens, no tantalizing hints of ancient cities such as the *Polaris* expedition had discovered at the South Pole. Here there was nothing but sand, a few weary shrubs, and a rolling hill or two. Their biggest find so far had been three pottery shards.

Jensen readjusted his oxygen booster. Over the rise of a hill he saw his two men returning.

"Anything interesting?" he asked.

"Just this," said engineer Vayne, holding up an inch of corroded blade without a handle.

"Better than nothing," Jensen said. "How about you, Wilks?"

The navigator shrugged his shoulders. "Just photographs of the landscape."

"OK," Jensen said. "Dump everything into the sterilizer and let's get going."

Wilks looked mournful. "Captain, one quick sweep to the north might turn up something really—"

"Not a chance," Jensen said. "Fuel, food, water, everything was calculated for a ten-day stay. That's three days longer than *Polaris* had. We're taking off this evening."

The men nodded. They had no reason to complain. As the second to land on Mars, they were sure of a small but respectable footnote in the history books. They put their equipment through the sterilizer vent, sealed it, and climbed the ladder to the lock. Once they were inside, Vayne closed and dogged the hatch, and started to open the inside pressure door.

"Hold it!" Jensen called out.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought I saw something on your boot," Jensen said. "Something like a big bug."

Vayne quickly ran his hands down the sides of his boots. The two men circled him, examining his clothing.

"Shut that inner door," the captain said. "Wilks, did you see anything?"

"Not a thing," the navigator said. "Are you sure, Cap? We haven't found anything that looks like animal or insect life here. Only a few plants."

"I could have sworn I saw something," Jensen said. "Maybe I was wrong.... Anyhow, we'll fumigate our clothes before we enter the ship proper. No sense taking any chance of bringing back some kind of Martian bug."

The men removed their clothing and boots and stuffed them into the chute. They searched the bare steel room carefully.

"Nothing here," Jensen said at last. "OK, let's go inside."

Once inside the ship, they sealed off the lock and fumigated it. The Quedak, who had crept inside earlier through the partially opened pressure door, listened to the distant hiss of gas. After a while he heard the jets begin to fire.

The Quedak retreated to the dark rear of the ship. He found a metal shelf and attached himself to the underside of it near the wall. After a while he felt the ship tremble.

The Quedak clung to the shelf during the long, slow flight through space. He had forgotten what spaceships were like, but now memory revived briefly. He felt blazing heat and freezing cold. Adjusting to the temperature changes drained his small store of vitality, and the Quedak began to wonder if he was going to die.

He *refused* to die. Not while there was still a possibility of accomplishing the Quedak mission.

In time he felt the harsh pull of gravity, and felt the main jets firing again. The ship was coming down to its planet.

After a routine landing, Captain Jensen and his men were taken to Medic Checkpoint, where they were thumped, probed and tested for any sign of disease.

Their spaceship was lowered to a flatcar and taken past rows of moonships and ICBMs to Decontamination Stage One. Here the sealed outer hull was washed down with powerful cleansing sprays. By evening, the ship was taken to Decontamination Stage Two.

A team of two inspectors equipped with bulky tanks and hoses undogged the hatch and entered, shutting the hatch behind them.

They began at the bow, methodically spraying as they moved toward the rear. Everything seemed in order; no animals or plants, no trace of mold such as the first Luna expedition had brought back.

"Do you really think this is necessary?" the assistant inspector asked. He had already requested a transfer to Flight Control.

"Sure it is," the senior inspector said. "Can't tell what these ships might bring in."

"I suppose so," the assistant said. "Still, a Martian whoosis wouldn't even be able to live on Earth. Would it?"

"How should I know?" the senior inspector said. "I'm no botanist. Maybe they don't know, either."

"Seems like a waste of—hey!"

"What is it?" the senior inspector asked.

"I thought I saw something," the assistant said. "Looked a little like a palmetto bug. Over by that shelf."

The senior inspector adjusted his respirator more snugly over his face and motioned to his assistant to do the same. He advanced slowly toward the shelf, unfastening a second nozzle from

the pressure tank on his back. He turned it on, and a cloud of greenish gas sprayed out.

"There," the senior inspector said. "That should take care of your bug." He knelt down and looked under the shelf. "Nothing here."

"It was probably a shadow," the assistant said.

Together they sprayed the entire interior of the ship, paying particular attention to the small box of Martian artifacts. They left the gas-filled ship and dogged the hatch again.

"Now what?" the assistant asked.

"Now we leave the ship sealed for three days," the senior inspector said. "Then we inspect again. You find me the animal that'll live through that."

The Quedak, who had been clinging to the underside of the assistant's shoe between the heel and the sole, released his hold. He watched the shadowy biped figures move away, talking in their deep, rumbling, indecipherable voices. He felt tired and unutterably lonely.

But buoying him up was the thought of the Quedak mission. Only that was important. The first part of the mission was accomplished. He had landed safely on an inhabited planet. Now he needed food and drink. Then he had to have rest, a great deal of rest to restore his dormant faculties. After that he would be ready to give this world what it so obviously needed—the cooperation possible only through the Quedak mind.

He crept slowly down the shadowy yard, past the deserted hulls of spaceships. He came to a wire fence and sensed the high-voltage electricity running through it. Gauging his distance carefully, the Quedak jumped safely through one of the openings in the mesh.

This was a very different section. From here the Quedak could smell water and food. He moved hastily forward, then stopped.

He sensed the presence of a man. And something else. Something much more menacing.

"Who's there?" the watchman called out. He waited, his revolver in one hand, his flashlight in the other. Thieves had broken into the yards last week; they had stolen three cases of computer parts bound for Rio. Tonight he was ready for them.

He walked forward, an old, keen-eyed man holding his revolver in a rock-steady fist. The beam of his flashlight probed among the cargoes. The yellow light flickered along a great pile of precision machine tools for South Africa, past a water-extraction plant for Jordan and a pile of mixed goods for Rabaul.

"You better come out," the watchman shouted. His flashlight probed at sacks of rice for Shanghai and power saws for Burma. Then the beam of light stopped abruptly.

"I'll be damned," the watchman said. Then he laughed. A huge and red-eyed rat was glaring into the beam of his flashlight. It had something in its jaws, something that looked like an unusually large cockroach.

"Good eating," the watchman said. He holstered his revolver and continued his patrol.

A large black animal had seized the Quedak, and he felt heavy jaws close over his back. He tried to fight; but, blinded by a sudden beam of yellow light, he was betrayed by total and enervating confusion.

The yellow light went off. The black beast bit down hard on the Quedak's armored back. The Quedak mustered his remaining strength, and, uncoiling his long, scorpion-jointed tail, lashed out.

He missed, but the black beast released him hastily. They circled each other, the Quedak hoisting his tail for a second blow, the beast unwilling to turn loose this prey.

The Quedak waited for his chance. Elation filled him. This pugnacious animal could be the first, the first on this planet to experience the Quedak mission. From this humble creature a start could be made....

The beast sprang and its white teeth clicked together viciously. The Quedak moved out of the way and its barb-headed tail flashed out, fastening itself in the beast's back. The Quedak held on grimly while the beast leaped and squirmed. Setting his feet, the Quedak concentrated on the all-important task of pumping a tiny white crystal down the length of his tail and under the beast's skin.

But this most important of the Quedak faculties was still dormant. Unable to accomplish anything, the Quedak released his barbs, and, taking careful aim, accurately drove his sting home between the black beast's eyes. The blow, as the Quedak had known, was lethal.

The Quedak took nourishment from the body of its dead foe; regretfully, for by inclination the

Quedak was herbivorous. When he had finished, the Quedak knew that he was in desperate need of a long period of rest. Only after that could the full Quedak powers be regained.

He crawled up and down the piles of goods in the yard, looking for a place to hide. Carefully he examined several bales. At last he reached a stack of heavy boxes. One of the boxes had a crack just large enough to admit him.

The Quedak crawled inside, down the shiny, oil-slick surface of a machine, to the far end of the box. There he went into the dreamless, defenseless sleep of the Quedak, serenely trusting in what the future would bring.

PART TWO

I

The big gaff-headed schooner was pointed directly at the reef-enclosed island, moving toward it with the solidity of an express train. The sails billowed under powerful gusts of the northwest breeze, and the rusty Allison-Chambers diesel rumbled beneath a teak grating. The skipper and mate stood on the bridge deck and watched the reef approach.

"Anything yet?" the skipper asked. He was a stocky, balding man with a perpetual frown on his face. He had been sailing his schooner among the uncharted shoals and reefs of the Southwest Pacific for twenty-five years. He frowned because his old ship was not insurable. His deck cargo, however, *was* insured. Some of it had come all the way from Ogdenville, that transshipment center in the desert where spaceships landed.

"Not a thing," the mate said. He was watching the dazzling white wall of coral, looking for the gleam of blue that would reveal the narrow pass to the inner lagoon. This was his first trip to the Solomon Islands. A former television repairman in Sydney before he got the wanderlust, the mate wondered if the skipper had gone crazy and planned a spectacular suicide against the reef.

"Still nothing!" he shouted. "Shoals ahead!"

"I'll take it," the skipper said to the helmsman. He gripped the wheel and watched the unbroken face of the reef.

"Nothing," the mate said. "Skipper, we'd better come about."

"Not if we're going to get through the pass," the skipper said. He was beginning to get worried. But he had promised to deliver goods to the American treasure-hunters on this island, and the skipper's word was his bond. He had picked up the cargo in Rabaul and made his usual stops at the settlements on New Georgia and Malaita. When he finished here, he could look forward to a thousand-mile run to New Caledonia.

"There it is!" the mate shouted.

A thin slit of blue had appeared in the coral wall. They were less than thirty yards from it now, and the old schooner was making close to eight knots.

As the ship entered the pass, the skipper threw the wheel hard over. The schooner spun on its keel. Coral flashed by on either side, close enough to touch. There was a metallic shriek as an upper main-mast spreader snagged and came free. Then they were in the pass, bucking a six-knot current.

The mate pushed the diesel to full throttle, then sprang back to help the skipper wrestle with the wheel. Under sail and power the schooner forged through the pass, scraped by an outcropping to port, and came onto the placid surface of the lagoon.

The skipper mopped his forehead with a large blue bandanna. "Very snug work," he said.

"*Snug!*" the mate cried. He turned away, and the skipper smiled a brief smile.

They slid past a small ketch riding at anchor. The native hands took down sail and the schooner nosed up to a rickety pier that jutted out from the beach. Lines were made fast to palm trees. From the fringe of jungle above the beach a white man came down, walking briskly in the noonday heat.

He was very tall and thin, with knobby knees and elbows. The fierce Melanesian sun had burned out but not tanned him, and his nose and cheekbones were peeling. His horn-rimmed glasses had broken at the hinge and been repaired with a piece of tape. He looked eager, boyish, and curiously naive.

One hell-of-a-looking treasure-hunter, the mate thought.

"Glad to see you!" the man called out. "We'd about given you up for lost."

"Not likely," the skipper said. "Mr. Sorensen, I'd like you to meet my new mate, Mr. Willis."

"Glad to meet you, Professor," the mate said.

"I'm not a professor," Sorensen said, "but thanks anyhow."

"Where are the others?" the skipper asked.

"Out in the jungle," Sorensen said. "All except Drake, and he'll be down here shortly. You'll stay a while, won't you?"

"Only to unload," the skipper said. "Have to catch the tide out of here. How's the treasure-hunting?"

"We've done a lot of digging," Sorensen said. "We still have our hopes."

"But no doubloons yet?" the skipper asked. "No pieces of eight?"

"Not a damned one," Sorensen said wearily. "Did you bring the newspapers, Skipper?"

"That I did," Sorensen replied. "They're in the cabin. Did you hear about that second spaceship going to Mars?"

"Heard about it on the short wave," Sorensen said. "It didn't bring back much, did it?"

"Practically nothing. Still, just think of it. *Two* spaceships to Mars, and I hear they're getting ready to put one on Venus."

The three men looked around them and grinned.

"Well," the skipper said, "I guess maybe the space age hasn't reached the Southwest Pacific yet. And it certainly hasn't gotten to *this* place. Come on, let's unload the cargo."

This place was the island of Vuanu, southernmost of the Solomons, almost in the Louisade Archipelago. It was a fair-sized volcanic island, almost twenty miles long and several wide. Once it had supported half a dozen native villages. But the population had begun to decline after the depredations of the blackbirders in the 1850s. Then a measles epidemic wiped out almost all the rest, and the survivors emigrated to New Georgia. A ship-watcher had been stationed here during the Second World War, but no ships had come this way. The Japanese invasion had poured across New Guinea and the upper Solomons, and further north through Micronesia. At the end of the war Vuanu was still deserted. It was not made into a bird sanctuary like Canton Island, or a cable station like Christmas Island, or a refueling point like Cocos-Keeling. No one even wanted to explode alphabet bombs on it. Vuanu was a worthless, humid, jungle-covered piece of land, free to anyone who wanted it.

William Sorensen, general manager of a chain of liquor stores in California, decided he wanted it.

Sorensen's hobby was treasure-hunting. He had looked for Lafitte's treasure in Louisiana and Texas, and for the Lost Dutchman Mine in Arizona. He had found neither. His luck had been better on the wreck-strewn Gulf coast, and on an expedition to Dagger Cay in the Caribbean he had found a double handful of Spanish coins in a rotting canvas bag. The coins were worth about three thousand dollars. The expedition had cost very much more, but Sorensen felt amply repaid.

For many years he had been interested in the Spanish treasure galleon *Santa Teresa*. Contemporary accounts told how the ship, heavily laden with bullion, sailed from Manila in 1689. The clumsy ship, caught in a storm, had run off to the south and been wrecked. Eighteen survivors managed to get ashore with the treasure. They buried it, and set sail for the Phillipines in the ship's pinnacle. Two of them were alive when the boat reached Manila.

The treasure island was tentatively identified as one of the Solomons. But which one?

No one knew. Treasure-hunters looked for the cache on Bougainville and Buka. There was a rumor about it on Malaita, and even Ontong Java received an expedition. But no treasure was recovered.

Sorensen, researching the problem thoroughly, decided that the *Santa Teresa* had sailed completely through the Solomons, almost to the Louisades. The ship must have escaped destruction until it crashed into the reef at Vuanu.

His desire to search for the treasure might have remained only a dream if he hadn't met Dan Drake. Drake was also an amateur treasure-hunter. More important, he owned a fifty-five-foot Hanna ketch.

Over an evening's drinks the Vuanu expedition was born.

Additional members were recruited. Drake's ketch was put into seagoing condition, equipment and money saved or gathered. Several other possible treasure sites in the Southwest Pacific were researched. Finally, vacation time was synchronized and the expedition got under way.

They had put in three months' work on Vuanu already. Their morale was high, in spite of inevitable conflicts between members. This schooner, bringing in supplies from Sydney and Rabaul, was the last civilized contact they would have for another six months.

While Sorensen nervously supervised, the crew of the schooner unloaded the cargo. He didn't

want any of the equipment, some of it shipped over six thousand miles, to be broken now. No replacements were possible; whatever they didn't have, they would have to do without. He breathed out in relief when the last crate, containing a metals detector, was safely hoisted over the side and put on the beach above the high-water mark.

There was something odd about that box. He examined it and found a quarter-sized hole in one end. It had not been properly sealed.

Dan Drake, the co-manager of the expedition, joined him. "What's wrong?" Drake asked.

"Hole in that crate," Sorensen said. "Salt water might have gotten in. We'll be in tough shape if this detector doesn't work."

Drake nodded. "We better open it and see." He was a short, deeply tanned, broad-chested man with close-cropped black hair and a straggly mustache. He wore an old yachting cap jammed down over his eyes, giving his face a tough bulldog look. He pulled a big screwdriver from his belt and inserted it into the crack.

"Wait a moment," Sorensen said. "Let's get it up to the camp first. Easier to carry the crate than something packed in grease."

"Right," Drake said. "Take the other end."

The camp was built in a clearing a hundred yards from the beach, on the site of an abandoned native village. They had been able to re-thatch several huts, and there was an old copra shed with a galvanized iron roof where they stored their supplies. Here they got the benefit of any breeze from the sea. Beyond the clearing, the gray-green jungle sprang up like a solid wall.

Sorensen and Drake set the case down. The skipper, who had accompanied them with the newspapers, looked around at the bleak huts and shook his head.

"Would you like a drink, Skipper?" Sorensen asked. "Afraid we can't offer any ice."

"A drink would be fine," the skipper said. He wondered what drove men to a godforsaken place like this in search of imaginary Spanish treasure.

Sorensen went into one of the huts and brought out a bottle of Scotch and a tin cup. Drake had taken out his screwdriver and was vigorously ripping boards off the crate.

"How does it look?" Sorensen asked.

"It's OK," Drake said, gently lifting out the metals detector. "Heavily greased. Doesn't seem like there was any damage—"

He jumped back. The skipper had come forward and stamped down heavily on the sand.

"What's the matter?" Sorensen asked.

"Looked like a scorpion," the skipper said. "Damned thing crawled right out of your crate there. Might have bit you."

Sorensen shrugged. He had gotten used to the presence of an infinite number of insects during his three months on Vuanu. Another bug more or less didn't seem to make much difference.

"Another drink?" he asked.

"Can't do it," the skipper said regretfully. "I'd better get started. All your party healthy?"

"All healthy so far," Sorensen said. He smiled. "Except for some bad cases of gold fever."

"You'll never find gold in this place," the skipper said seriously. "I'll look in on you in about six months. Good luck."

After shaking hands, the skipper went down to the beach and boarded his ship. As the first pink flush of sunset touched the sky, the schooner was under way. Sorensen and Drake watched it negotiate the pass. For a few minutes its masts were visible above the reef. Then they had dipped below the horizon.

"That's that," Drake said. "Us crazy American treasure-hunters are alone again."

"You don't think he suspected anything?" Sorensen asked.

"Definitely not. As far as he's concerned, we're just crackpots."

Grinning, they looked back at their camp. Under the copra shed was nearly fifty thousand dollars worth of gold and silver bullion, dug out of the jungle and carefully reburied. They had located a part of the *Santa Teresa* treasure during their first month on the island. There was every indication of more to come. Since they had no legal title to the land, the expedition was not eager to let the news get out. Once it was known, every gold-hungry vagabond from Perth to Papeete would be heading to Vuanu.

"The boy'll be in soon," Drake said. "Let's get some stew going."

"Right," Sorensen said. He took a few steps and stopped. "That's funny."

"What is?"

"That scorpion the skipper squashed. It's gone."

"Maybe he missed it," Drake said. "Or maybe he just pushed it down into the sand. What difference does it make?"

"None, I guess," Sorensen said.

II

Edward Eakins walked through the jungle with a long-handled spade on his shoulder, sucking reflectively on a piece of candy. It was the first he'd had in weeks, and he was enjoying it to the utmost. He was in very good spirits. The schooner yesterday had brought in not only machinery and replacement parts, but also candy, cigarettes and food. He had eaten scrambled eggs this morning, and real bacon. The expedition was becoming almost civilized.

Something rustled in the bushes near him. He marched on, ignoring it.

He was a lean, sandy-haired man, amiable and slouching, with pale blue eyes and an unprepossessing manner. He felt very lucky to have been taken on the expedition. His gas station didn't put him on a financial par with the others, and he hadn't been able to put up a full share of the money. He still felt guilty about that. He had been accepted because he was an eager and indefatigable treasure-hunter with a good knowledge of jungle ways. Equally important, he was a skilled radio operator and repairman. He had kept the transmitter on the ketch in working condition in spite of salt water and mildew.

He could pay his full share now, of course. But *now*, when they were practically rich, didn't really count. He wished there were some way he could—

There was that rustle in the bushes again.

Eakins stopped and waited. The bushes trembled. And out stepped a mouse.

Eakins was amazed. The mice on this island, like most wild animal life, were terrified of man. Although they feasted off the refuse of the camp—when the rats didn't get it first—they carefully avoided any contact with humans.

"You better get yourself home," Eakins said to the mouse.

The mouse stared at him. He stared back. It was a pretty little mouse, no more than four or five inches long, and colored a light tawny brown. It didn't seem afraid.

"So long, mouse," Eakins said. "I got work to do." He shifted his spade to the other shoulder and turned to go. As he turned, he caught a flash of brown out of the corner of his eye. Instinctively he ducked. The mouse whirled past him, turned, and gathered itself for another leap.

"Mouse, are you out of your head?" Eakins asked.

The mouse bared its tiny teeth and sprang. Eakins knocked it aside.

"Now get the hell out of here," he said. He was beginning to wonder if the rodent was crazy. Did it have rabies, perhaps?

The mouse gathered itself for another charge. Eakins lifted the spade off his shoulders and waited. When the mouse sprang, he met it with a carefully timed blow. Then carefully, regretfully, he battered it to death.

"Can't have rabid mice running around," he said.

But the mouse hadn't seemed rabid; it had just seemed very determined.

Eakins scratched his head. Now what, he wondered, had gotten into that little mouse?

In the camp that evening, Eakins' story was greeted with hoots of laughter. It was just like Eakins to be attacked by a mouse. Several men suggested that he go armed in case the mouse's family wanted revenge. Eakins just smiled sheepishly.

Two days later, Sorensen and Al Cable were finishing up a morning's hard work at Site 4, two miles from the camp. The metals detector had shown marked activity at this spot. They were seven feet down and nothing had been produced yet except a high mound of yellow-brown earth.

"That detector must be wrong," Cable said, wiping his face wearily. He was a big, pinkish man. He had sweated off twenty pounds on Vuanu, picked up a bad case of prickly heat, and had enough treasure-hunting to last him a lifetime. He wished he were back in Baltimore taking care of his used-car agency. He didn't hesitate to say so, often and loudly. He was one member who had not worked out well.

"Nothing wrong with the detector," Sorensen said. "Trouble is, we're digging in swampy ground. The cache must have sunk."

"It's probably a hundred feet down," Cable said, stabbing angrily at the gluey mud.

"Nope," Sorensen said. "There's volcanic rock under us, no more than twenty feet down."

"Twenty feet? We should have a bulldozer."

"Might be costly bringing one in," Sorensen said mildly. "Come on, Al, let's get back to camp."

Sorensen helped Cable out of the excavation. They cleaned off their tools and started toward the narrow path leading back to the camp. They stopped abruptly.

A large, ugly bird had stepped out of the brush. It was standing on the path, blocking their way.

"What in hell is that?" Cable asked.

"A cassowary," Sorensen said.

"Well, let's boot it out of the way and get going."

"Take it easy," Sorensen said. "If anyone does any booting, it'll be the bird. Back away slowly."

The cassowary was nearly five feet high, a black-feathered ostrich-like bird standing erect on powerful legs. Each of its feet was three-toed, and the toes curved into heavy talons. It had a yellowish, bony head and short, useless wings. From its neck hung a brilliant wattle colored red, green, and purple.

"It is dangerous?" Cable asked.

Sorensen nodded. "Natives on New Guinea have been kicked to death by those birds."

"Why haven't we seen it before?" Cable asked.

"They're usually very shy," Sorensen said. "They stay as far from people as they can."

"This one sure isn't shy," Cable said, as the cassowary took a step toward them. "Can we run?"

"The bird can run a lot faster," Sorensen said. "I don't suppose you have a gun with you?"

"Of course not. There's been nothing to shoot."

Backing away, they held their spades like spears. The brush crackled and an anteater emerged. It was followed by a wild pig. The three beasts converged on the men, backing them toward the dense wall of the jungle.

"They're herding us," Cable said, his voice going shrill.

"Take it easy," Sorensen said. "The cassowary is the only one we have to watch out for."

"Aren't anteaters dangerous?"

"Only to ants."

"The hell you say," Cable said. "Bill, the animals on this island have gone crazy. Remember Eakins' mouse?"

"I remember it," Sorensen said. They had reached the far edge of the clearing. The beasts were in front of them, still advancing, with the cassowary in the center. Behind them lay the jungle—and whatever they were being herded toward.

"We'll have to make a break for it," Sorensen said.

"That damned bird is blocking the trail."

"We'll have to knock him over," Sorensen said. "Watch out for his feet. Let's go!"

They raced toward the cassowary, swinging their spades. The cassowary hesitated, unable to make up its mind between targets. Then it turned toward Cable and its right leg lashed out. The partially deflected blow sounded like the flat of a meat cleaver against a side of beef. Cable grunted and collapsed, clutching his ribs.

Sorensen stabbed, and the honed edge of his spade nearly severed the cassowary's head from its body. The wild pig and the anteater were coming at him now. He flailed with his spade, driving them back. Then, with a strength he hadn't known he possessed, he stooped, lifted Cable across his shoulders and ran down the path.

A quarter of a mile down he had to stop, completely out of breath. There were no sounds behind him. The other animals were apparently not following. He went back to the wounded man.

Cable had begun to recover consciousness. He was able to walk, half-supported by Sorensen. When they reached the camp, Sorensen called everybody in for a meeting. He counted heads while Eakins taped up Cable's side. Only one man was missing.

"Where's Drake?" Sorensen asked.

"He's across the island at North Beach, fishing," said Tom Recetich. "Want me to get him?"

Sorensen hesitated. Finally he said, "No. I'd better explain what we're up against. Then we'll issue the guns. *Then* we'll try to find Drake."

"Man, what's going on?" Recetich asked.

Sorensen began to explain what had happened at Site 4.

Fishing provided an important part of the expedition's food and there was no work Drake liked

better. At first he had gone out with face mask and spear gun. But the sharks in this corner of the world were numerous, hungry and aggressive. So, regretfully, he had given up skin diving and set out handlines on the leeward side of the island.

The lines were out now, and Drake lay in the shade of a palm tree, half asleep, his big forearms folded over his chest. His dog, Oro, was prowling the beach in search of hermit crabs. Oro was a good-natured mutt, part airdale, part terrier, part unknown. He was growling at something now.

"Leave the crabs alone," Drake called out. "You'll just get nipped again."

Oro was still growling. Drake rolled over and saw that the dog was standing stiff-legged over a large insect. It looked like some kind of scorpion.

"Oro, leave that blasted—"

Before Drake could move, the insect sprang. It landed on Oro's neck and the jointed tail whipped out. Oro yelped once. Drake was on his feet instantly. He swatted at the bug, but it jumped off the dog's neck and scuttled into the brush.

"Take it easy, old boy," Drake said. "That's a nasty-looking wound. Might be poisoned. I better open it up."

He held the panting dog firmly and drew his boat knife. He had operated on the dog for snake bite in Central America, and in the Adirondacks he had held him down and pulled porcupine quills out of his mouth with a pair of pliers. The dog always knew he was being helped. He never struggled.

This time, the dog bit.

"Oro!" Drake grabbed the dog at the jaw hinge with his free hand. He brought pressure to bear, paralyzing the muscles, forcing the dog's jaws open. He pulled his hand out and flung the dog away. Oro rolled to his feet and advanced on him again.

"Stand!" Drake shouted. The dog kept coming, edging around to get between the ocean and the man.

Turning, Drake saw the bug emerge from the jungle and creep toward him. His dog had circled around and was trying to drive him toward the bug.

Drake didn't know what was going on, and he decided he'd better not stay to find out. He picked up his knife and threw it at the bug. He missed. The bug was almost within jumping distance.

Drake ran toward the ocean. When Oro tried to intercept him, he kicked the dog out of the way and plunged into the water.

He began to swim around the island to the camp, hoping he'd make it before the sharks got him.

III

At the camp, rifles and revolvers were hastily wiped clean of cosmoline and passed around. Binoculars were taken out and adjusted. Cartridges were divided up, and the supply of knives, machetes and hatchets quickly disappeared. The expedition's two walkie-talkies were unpacked, and the men prepared to move out in search of Drake. Then they saw him, swimming vigorously around the edge of the island.

He waded ashore, tired but uninjured. He and the others put their information together and reached some unhappy conclusions.

"Do you mean to say," Cable demanded, "that a *bug* is doing all this?"

"It looks that way," Sorensen said. "We have to assume that it's able to exercise some kind of thought control. Maybe hypnotic or telepathic."

"It has to sting first," Drake said. "That's what it did with Oro."

"I just can't imagine a scorpion doing all that," Recetich said.

"It's not a scorpion," Drake said. "I saw it close up. It's got a tail like a scorpion, but its head is damn near four times as big, and its body is different. Up close, it doesn't look like anything you ever saw before."

"Do you think it's native to this island?" asked Monty Byrnes, a treasure-seeker from Indianapolis.

"I doubt it," Drake said. "If it is, why did it leave us and the animals alone for three months?"

"That's right," Sorensen said. "All our troubles began just after the schooner came. The schooner must have brought it from somewhere.... Hey!"

"What is it?" Drake asked.

"Remember that scorpion the skipper tried to squash? It came out of the detector crate. Do you think it could be the same one?"

Drake shrugged his shoulders. "Could be. Seems to me our problem right now isn't finding out where it came from. We have to figure out what to do about it."

"If it can control animals," Byrnes said, "I wonder if it can control men."

They were all silent. They had moved into a circle near the copra shed, and while they talked they watched the jungle for any sign of insect or animal life.

Sorensen said, "We'd better radio for help."

"If we do that," Recetich said, "somebody's going to find out about the *Santa Teresa* treasure. We'll be overrun in no time."

"Maybe so," Sorensen said. "But at the worst, we've cleared expenses. We've even made a small profit."

"And if we don't get help," Drake said, "we may be in no condition to take anything out of here."

"The problem isn't as bad as all that," Byrnes said. "We've got guns. We can take care of the animals."

"You haven't seen the bug yet," Drake said.

"We'll squash it."

"That won't be easy," Drake said. "It's faster than hell. And how are you going to squash it if it comes into your hut some night while you're asleep? We could post guards and they wouldn't even see the thing."

Byrnes shuddered involuntarily. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Maybe we'd better radio for help."

Eakins stood up. "Well, gents," he said, "I guess that means me. I just hope the batteries on the ketch are up to charge."

"It'll be dangerous going out there," Drake said. "We'll draw lots."

Eakins was amused. "We will? How many of you can operate a transmitter?"

Drake said, "I can."

"No offense meant," Eakins said, "but you don't operate that set of yours worth a damn. You don't even know Morse for key transmission. And can you fix the set if it goes out?"

"No," Drake said. "But the whole thing is too risky. We all should go."

Eakins shook his head. "Safest thing all around is if you cover me from the beach. That bug probably hasn't thought about the ketch yet."

Eakins stuck a tool kit in his pocket and strapped one of the camp's walkie-talkies over his shoulder. He handed the other one to Sorensen. He hurried down the beach past the launch and pushed the small dinghy into the water. The men of the expedition spread out, their rifles ready. Eakins got into the dinghy and started rowing across the quiet lagoon.

They saw him tie up to the ketch and pause a moment, looking around. Then he climbed aboard. Quickly he slid back the hatch and went inside.

"Everything all right?" Sorensen asked.

"No trouble yet," Eakins said, his voice sounding thin and sharp over the walkie-talkie. "I'm at the transmitter now, turning it on. It needs a couple of minutes to warm up."

Drake nudged Sorensen. "Look over there."

On the reef, almost hidden by the ketch, something was moving. Using binoculars, Sorensen could see three big gray rats slipping into the water. They began swimming toward the ketch.

"Start firing!" Sorensen said. "Eakins, get out of there!"

"I've got the transmitter going," Eakins said. "I just need a couple of minutes more to get a message off."

Bullets sent up white splashes around the swimming rats. One was hit; the other two managed to put the ketch between them and the riflemen. Studying the reef with his binoculars, Sorensen saw an anteater cross the reef and splash into the water. It was followed by a wild pig.



There was a crackle of static from the walkie-talkie. Sorensen called, "Eakins, have you got that message off?"

"Haven't sent it," Eakins called back. "Listen, Bill. We *mustn't* send any messages! That bug wants—" He stopped abruptly.

"What is it?" Sorensen asked. "What's happening?"

Eakins had appeared on deck, still holding the walkie-talkie. He was backing toward the stern.

"Hermit crabs," he said. "They climbed up the anchor line. I'm going to swim to shore."

"Don't do it," Sorensen said.

"Gotta do it," Eakins said. "They'll probably follow me. All of you come out here and *get that transmitter*. Bring it ashore."

Through his binoculars, Sorensen could see a solid gray carpet of hermit crabs crawling down the deck and waterways of the ketch. Eakins jumped into the water. He swam furiously toward shore, and Sorensen saw the rats turn and follow him. Hermit crabs swarmed off the boat, and the wild pig and the anteater paddled after him, trying to head him off before he reached the beach.

"Come on," Sorensen said. "I don't know what Eakins figured out, but we better get that transmitter while we have a chance."

They ran down the beach and put the launch into the water. Two hundred yards away, Eakins had reached the far edge of the beach with the animals in close pursuit. He broke into the jungle, still clinging to his walkie-talkie.

"Eakins?" Sorensen asked into the walkie-talkie.

"I'm all right," Eakins said, panting hard for air. "Get that transmitter, and don't forget the batteries!"

The men boarded the ketch. Working furiously, they ripped the transmitter off its bulkhead and dragged it up the companionway steps. Drake came last, carrying a twelve-volt battery. He went down again and brought up a second battery. He hesitated a moment, then went below for a third time.

"Drake!" Sorensen shouted. "Quit holding us up!"

Drake reappeared, carrying the ketch's two radio direction finders and the compass. He handed them down and jumped into the launch.

"OK," he said. "Let's go."

They rowed to the beach. Sorensen was trying to re-establish contact with Eakins on the walkie-talkie, but all he could hear was static. Then, as the launch grounded on the beach, he heard Eakins' voice.

"I'm surrounded," he said, very quietly. "I guess I'll have to see what Mr. Bug wants. Maybe I can

swat him first, though."

There was a long silence. Then Eakins said, "It's coming toward me now. Drake was right. It sure isn't like any bug I've ever seen. I'm going to swat hell out of—"

They heard him scream, more in surprise than pain.

Sorensen said, "Eakins, can you hear me? Where are you? Can we help?"

"It sure *is* fast," Eakins said, his voice conversational again. "Fastest damned bug I've ever seen. Jumped on my neck, stung me and jumped off again."

"How do you feel?" Sorensen asked.

"Fine," Eakins said. "Hardly felt the sting."

"Where is the bug now?"

"Back in the bush."

"The animals?"

"They went away. You know," Eakins said, "maybe this thing doesn't work on humans. Maybe—"

"What?" Sorensen asked. "What's happening now?"

There was a long silence. Then Eakins' voice, low-pitched and calm, came over the walkie-talkie.

"We'll speak with you again later," Eakins said. "We must take consultation now and decide what to do with you."

"*Eakins!*"

There was no answer from the other end of the walkie-talkie.

IV

Returning to their camp, the men were in a mood of thorough depression. They couldn't understand what had happened to Eakins and they didn't feel like speculating on it. The ravaging afternoon sun beat down, reflecting heat back from the white sand. The damp jungle steamed, and appeared to creep toward them like a huge and sleepy green dragon, trapping them against the indifferent sea. Gun barrels grew too hot to touch, and the water in the canteens was as warm as blood. Overhead, thick gray cumulus clouds began to pile up; it was the beginning of the monsoon season.

Drake sat in the shade of the copra shed. He shook off his lethargy long enough to inspect the camp from the viewpoint of defense. He saw the encircling jungle as enemy territory. In front of it was an area fifty yards deep which they had cleared. This no man's land could perhaps be defended for a while.

Then came the huts and the copra shed, their last line of defense, leading to the beach and the sea.

The expedition had been in complete control of this island for better than three months. Now they were pinned to a small and precarious beachhead.

Drake glanced at the lagoon behind him and remembered that there was still one line of retreat open. If the bug and his damned menagerie pressed too hard, they could still escape in the ketch. With luck.

Sorensen came over and sat down beside him. "What are you doing?" he asked.

Drake grinned sourly. "Planning our master strategy."

"How does it look?"

"I think we can hold out," Drake said. "We've got plenty of ammo. If necessary, we'll interdict the cleared area with gasoline. We certainly aren't going to let that bug push us off the island." He thought for a moment. "But it's going to be damned hard digging for treasure."

Sorensen nodded. "I wonder what the bug wants."

"Maybe we'll find out from Eakins," Drake said.

They had to wait half an hour. Then Eakins' voice came, sharp and shrill over the walkie-talkie.

"Sorensen? Drake?"

"We're here," Drake said. "What did that damned bug do to you?"

"Nothing," Eakins said. "You are talking to that bug now. My name is the Quedak."

"My God," Drake said to Sorensen, "that bug must have hypnotized him!"

"No. You are not speaking to a hypnotized Eakins. Nor are you speaking to a creature who is simply using Eakins as a mouthpiece. Nor are you speaking to the Eakins who was. You are speaking to many individuals who are one."

"I don't get that," Drake said.

"It's very simple," Eakins' voice replied. "I am the Quedak, the totality. But my totality is made up of separate parts, which are Eakins, several rats, a dog named Oro, a pig, an anteater, a cassowary—"

"Hold on," Sorensen said. "Let me get this straight. This is *not* Eakins I'm speaking to. This is the—the Quedak?"

"That is correct."

"And you control Eakins and the others? You speak through Eakins' mouth?"

"Also correct. But that doesn't mean that the personalities of the others are obliterated. Quite the contrary, the Quedak state is a federation in which the various member parts retain their idiosyncrasies, their individual needs and desires. They give their knowledge, their power, their special outlook to the Quedak whole. The Quedak is the coordinating and command center; but the individual parts supply the knowledge, the insights, the special skills. And together we form the Great Cooperation."

"Cooperation?" Drake said. "But you did all this by force!"

"It was necessary in the beginning. Otherwise, how would other creatures have known about the Great Cooperation?"

"Would they stay if you released your control over them?" Drake asked.

"That is a meaningless question. We form a single indivisible entity now. Would your arm return to you if you cut it off?"

"It isn't the same thing."

"It is," Eakins' voice said. "We are a single organism. We are still growing. And we welcome you wholeheartedly into the Great Cooperation."

"To hell with that," Drake said.

"But you must join," the Quedak told them. "It is the Quedak Mission to coordinate all sentient creatures into a single collective organism. Believe me, there is only the most trifling loss of the individuality you prize so highly. And you gain so much more! You learn the viewpoints and special knowledge of all other creatures. Within the Quedak framework you can fully realize your potentialities—"

"No!"

"I am sorry," the Quedak said. "The Quedak Mission must be fulfilled. You will not join us willingly?"

"Never," Drake said.

"Then *we* will join *you*," the Quedak said.

There was a click as he turned off the walkie-talkie.

From the fringe of the jungle, several rats appeared. They hesitated, just out of rifle range. A bird of paradise flew overhead, hovering over the cleared area like an observation plane. As the men watched, the rats began to run forward in long zigzags.

"Start firing," Drake called out. "But go easy with the ammo."

The men began to fire. But it was difficult to sight on the quick-moving rats against the grayish-brown clearing. And almost immediately, the rats were joined by a dozen hermit crabs. They had an uncanny knack for moving when no one was watching them, darting forward, then freezing against the neutral background.

They saw Eakins appear on the fringe of the jungle.

"Lousy traitor," Cable said, raising his rifle.

Sorensen slapped the muzzle of the rifle aside. "Don't do it."

"But he's helping that bug!"

"He can't help it," Sorensen said. "And he's not armed. Leave him alone."

Eakins watched for a few moments, then melted back into the jungle.

The attack by the rats and crabs swept across half of the cleared space. Then, as they came closer, the men were able to pick their targets with more accuracy. Nothing was able to get closer than twenty yards. And when Recetich shot down the bird of paradise, the attack began to falter.

"You know," Drake said, "I think we're going to be all right."

"Could be," said Sorensen. "I don't understand what the Quedak is trying to accomplish. He knows we can't be taken like this. I should think—"

"Hey!" one of the men called out. "Our boat!"

They turned and saw why the Quedak had ordered the attack. While it had occupied their

attention, Drake's dog had swum out to the ketch and gnawed through the anchor line. Unattended, the ketch was drifting before the wind, moving toward the reef. They saw it bump gently, then harder. In a moment it was heeled hard over, stuck in the coral.

There was a burst of static from the walkie-talkie. Sorensen held it up and heard the Quedak say, "The ketch isn't seriously damaged. It's simply immobilized."

"The hell you say," Drake growled. "For all you know, it's got a hole punched right through it. How do you plan on getting off the island, Quedak? Or are you just going to stay here?"

"I will leave at the proper time," the Quedak said. "I want to make sure that we all leave together."

V

The wind died. Huge gray thunderheads piled up in the sky to the southeast, their tops lost in the upper atmosphere, their black anvil bottoms pressing the hot still air upon the island. The sun had lost its fiery glare. Cherry-red, it slid listlessly toward the flat sea.

High overhead, a single bird of paradise circled, just out of rifle range. It had gone up ten minutes after Recetich had shot the first one down.

Monty Byrnes stood on the edge of the cleared area, his rifle ready. He had drawn the first guard shift. The rest of the men were eating a hasty dinner inside the copra shed. Sorensen and Drake were outside, looking over the situation.

Drake said, "By nightfall we'll have to pull everybody back into the shed. Can't take a chance on being exposed to the Quedak in the dark."

Sorensen nodded. He seemed to have aged ten years in a day's time.

"In the morning," Drake said, "we'll be able to work something out. We'll.... What's wrong, Bill?"

"Do you really think we have a chance?" Sorensen asked.

"Sure we do. We've got a damned good chance."

"Be realistic," Sorensen said. "The longer this goes on, the more animals the Quedak can throw against us. What can we do about it?"

"Hunt him out and kill him."

"The damned thing is about the size of your thumb," Sorensen said irritably. "How can we hunt him?"

"We'll figure out something," Drake said. He was beginning to get worried about Sorensen. The morale among the men was low enough without Sorensen pushing it down further.

"I wish someone would shoot that damned bird," Sorensen said, glancing overhead.

About every fifteen minutes, the bird of paradise came darting down for a closer look at the camp. Then, before the guard had a chance to fire, he swept back up to a safe altitude.

"It's getting on my nerves, too," Drake said. "Maybe that's what it's supposed to do. One of these times we'll—"

He stopped abruptly. From the copra shed he could hear the loud hum of a radio. And he heard Al Cable saying, "Hello, hello, this is Vuanu calling. We need help."

Drake and Sorensen went into the shed. Cable was sitting in front of the transmitter, saying into the microphone, "Emergency, emergency, Vuanu calling, we need—"

"What in hell do you think you're doing?" Drake snapped.

Cable turned and looked at him, his pudgy pink body streaked with sweat. "I'm radioing for help, that's what I'm doing. I think I've picked up somebody. But they haven't answered me yet."

He readjusted the tuning. Over the receiver, they could hear a bored British voice saying, "Pawn to Queen four, eh? Why don't you ever try a different opening?"

There was a sharp burst of static. "Just move," a deep bass voice answered. "Just shut up and move."

"Sure," said the British voice. "Knight to king bishop three."

Drake recognized the voices. They were ham radio operators. One of them owned a plantation on Bougainville; the other was a shopkeeper in Rabaul. They came on the air for an hour of chess and argument every evening.

Cable tapped the microphone impatiently. "Hello," he said, "this is Vuanu calling, emergency call —"

Drake walked over and took the microphone out of Cable's hand. He put it down carefully.

"We can't call for help," he said.

"What are you talking about?" Cable cried. "We have to!"

Drake felt very tired. "Look, if we send out a distress call, somebody's going to come sailing right in—but they won't be prepared for this kind of trouble. The Quedak will take them over and then use them against us."

"We can explain what the trouble is," Cable said.

"*Explain? Explain what?* That a bug is taking over the island? They'd think we were crazy with fever. They'd send in a doctor on the inter-island schooner."

"Dan's right," Sorensen said. "Nobody would believe this without seeing it for himself."

"And by then," Drake said, "it'd be too late. Eakins figured it out before the Quedak got him. That's why he told us not to send any messages."

Cable looked dubious. "But why did he want us to take the transmitter?"

"So that *he* couldn't send any messages after the bug got him," Drake said. "The more people trampling around, the easier it would be for the Quedak. If he had possession of the transmitter, he'd be calling for help right now."

"Yeah, I suppose so," Cable said unhappily. "But, damn it, we can't handle this *alone*."

"We have to. If the Quedak ever gets us and then gets off the island, that's it for Earth. Period. There won't be any big war, no hydrogen bombs or fallout, no heroic little resistance groups. Everybody will become part of the Quedak Cooperation."

"We ought to get help somehow," Cable said stubbornly. "We're alone, isolated. Suppose we ask for a ship to stand offshore—"

"It won't work," Drake said. "Besides, we couldn't ask for help even if we wanted to."

"Why not?"

"Because the transmitter's not working," Drake said. "You've been talking into a dead mike."

"It's receiving OK," Cable said.

Drake checked to see if all the switches were on. "Nothing wrong with the receiver. But we must have joggled something taking the transmitter out of the ship. It isn't working."

Cable tapped the dead microphone several times, then put it down. They stood around the receiver, listening to the chess game between the man in Rabaul and the man in Bougainville.

"Pawn to queen bishop four."

"Pawn to king three."

"Knight to Queen bishop three."

There was a sudden staccato burst of static. It faded, then came again in three distinct bursts.

"What do you suppose that is?" Sorensen asked.

Drake shrugged his shoulders. "Could be anything. Storm's shaping up and—"

He stopped. He had been standing beside the door of the shed. As the static crackled, he saw the bird of paradise dive for a closer look. The static stopped when the bird returned to its slow-circling higher altitude.

"That's strange," Drake said. "Did you see that, Bill? The bird came down and the static went on at the same time."

"I saw it," Sorensen said. "Think it means anything?"

"I don't know. Let's see." Drake took out his field glasses. He turned up the volume of the receiver and stepped outside where he could observe the jungle. He waited, hearing the sounds of the chess game three or four hundred miles away.

"Come on now, move."

"Give me a minute."

"A minute? Listen, I can't stand in front of this bleeding set all night. Make your—"

Static crackled sharply. Drake saw four wild pigs come trotting out of the jungle, moving slowly, like a reconnaissance squad probing for weak spots in an enemy position. They stopped; the static stopped. Byrnes, standing guard with his rifle, took a snap shot at them. The pigs turned, and static crackled as they moved back into the jungle. There was more static as the bird of paradise swept down for a look, then climbed out of range. After that, the static stopped.

Drake put down his binoculars and went back inside the shed. "That must be it," he said. "The static is related to the Quedak. I think it comes when he's operating the animals."

"You mean he has come sort of radio control over them?" Sorensen asked.

"Seems like it," Drake said. "Either radio control or something propagated along a radio wavelength."

"If that's the case," Sorensen said, "he's like a little radio station, isn't he?"

"Sure he is. So what?"

"Then we should be able to locate him on a radio direction finder," Sorensen said.

Drake nodded emphatically. He snapped off the receiver, went to a corner of the shed and took out one of their portable direction finders. He set it to the frequency at which Cable had picked up the Rabaul-Bougainville broadcast. Then he turned it on and walked to the door.

The men watched while Drake rotated the loop antenna. He located the maximum signal, then turned the loop slowly, read the bearing and converted it to a compass course. Then he sat down with a small-scale chart of the Southwest Pacific.

"Well," Sorensen asked, "is it the Quedak?"

"It's got to be," said Drake. "I located a good null almost due south. That's straight ahead in the jungle."

"You're sure it isn't a reciprocal bearing?"

"I checked that out."

"Is there any chance the signal comes from some other station?"

"Nope. Due south, the next station is Sydney, and that's seventeen hundred miles away. Much too far for this RDF. It's the Quedak, all right."

"So we have a way of locating him," Sorensen said. "Two men with direction finders can go into the jungle—"

"—and get themselves killed," Drake said. "We can position the Quedak with RDFs, but his animals can locate us a lot faster. We wouldn't have a chance in the jungle."

Sorensen looked crestfallen. "Then we're no better off than before."

"We're a lot better off," Drake said. "We have a chance now."

"What makes you think so?"

"He controls the animals by radio," Drake said. "We know the frequency he operates on. We can broadcast on the same frequency. We can jam his signal."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Am I *sure*? Of course not. But I do know that two stations in the same area can't broadcast over the same frequency. If we tuned in to the frequency the Quedak uses, made enough noise to override his signal—"

"I see," Sorensen said. "Maybe it would work! If we could interfere with his signal, he wouldn't be able to control the animals. And then we could hunt him down with the RDFs."

"That's the idea," Drake said. "It has only one small flaw—our transmitter isn't working. With no transmitter, we can't do any broadcasting. No broadcasting, no jamming."

"Can you fix it?" Sorensen asked.

"I'll try," Drake said. "But we'd better not hope for too much. Eakins was the radio man on this expedition."

"We've got all the spare parts," Sorensen said. "Tubes, manual, everything."

"I know. Give me enough time and I'll figure out what's wrong. The question is, how much time is the Quedak going to give us?"

The bright copper disk of the sun was half submerged in the sea. Sunset colors touched the massing thunderheads and faded into the brief tropical twilight. The men began to barricade the copra shed for the night.

VI

Drake removed the back from the transmitter and scowled at the compact mass of tubes and wiring. Those metal boxlike things were probably condensers, and the waxy cylindrical gadgets might or might not be resistors. It all looked hopelessly complicated, ridiculously dense and delicate. Where should he begin?

He turned on the set and waited a few minutes. All the tubes appeared to go on, some dim, some bright. He couldn't detect any loose wires. The mike was still dead.

So much for visual inspection. Next question: was the set getting enough juice?

He turned it off and checked the battery cells with a voltmeter. The batteries were up to charge. He removed the leads, scraped them and put them back on, making sure they fit snugly. He checked all connections, murmured a propitiatory prayer, and turned the set on.

It still didn't work.

Cursing, he turned it off again. He decided to replace all the tubes, starting with the dim ones. If

that didn't work, he could try replacing condensers and resistors. If that didn't work, he could always shoot himself. With this cheerful thought, he opened the parts kit and went to work.

The men were all inside the copra shed, finishing the job of barricading it for the night. The door was wedged shut and locked. The two windows had to be kept open for ventilation; otherwise everyone would suffocate in the heat. But a double layer of heavy mosquito netting was nailed over each window, and a guard was posted beside it.

Nothing could get through the flat galvanized-iron roof. The floor was of pounded earth, a possible danger point. All they could do was keep watch over it.

The treasure-hunters settled down for a long night. Drake, with a handkerchief tied around his forehead to keep the perspiration out of his eyes, continued working on the transmitter.

An hour later, there was a buzz on the walkie-talkie. Sorensen picked it up and said, "What do you want?"

"I want you to end this senseless resistance," said the Quedak, speaking with Eakins' voice. "You've had enough time to think over the situation. I want you to join me. Surely you can see there's no other way."

"We don't want to join you," Sorensen said.

"You must," the Quedak told him.

"Are you going to make us?"

"That poses problems," the Quedak said. "My animal parts are not suitable for coercion. Eakins is an excellent mechanism, but there is only one of him. And I must not expose myself to unnecessary danger. By doing so I would endanger the Quedak Mission."

"So it's a stalemate," Sorensen said.

"No. I am faced with difficulty only in taking you over. There is no problem in killing you."

The men shifted uneasily. Drake, working on the transmitter, didn't look up.

"I would rather *not* kill you," the Quedak said. "But the Quedak Mission is of primary importance. It would be endangered if you didn't join. It would be seriously compromised if you left the island. So you must either join or be killed."

"That's not the way I see it," Sorensen said. "If you killed us—assuming that you can—you'd never get off this island. Eakins can't handle that ketch."

"There would be no need to leave in the ketch," the Quedak said. "In six months, the inter-island schooner will return. Eakins and I will leave then. The rest of you will have died."

"You're bluffing," Sorensen said. "What makes you think you could kill us? You didn't do so well today." He caught Drake's attention and gestured at the radio. Drake shrugged his shoulders and went back to work.

"I wasn't trying," the Quedak said. "The time for that was at night. *This* night, before you have a chance to work out a better system of defense. You must join me tonight or I will kill one of you."

"One of us?"

"Yes. One man an hour. In that way, perhaps the survivors will change their minds about joining. But if they don't, all of you will be dead by morning."

Drake leaned over and whispered to Sorensen, "Stall him. Give me another ten minutes. I think I've found the trouble."

Sorensen said into the walkie-talkie, "We'd like to know a little more about the Quedak Cooperation."

"You can find out best by joining."

"We'd rather have a little more information on it first."

"It is an indescribable state," the Quedak said in an urgent, earnest, eager voice. "Can you imagine yourself as *yourself* and yet experiencing an entirely new series of sensory networks? You would, for example, experience the world through the perceptors of a dog as he goes through the forest following an odor which to him—and to you—is as clear and vivid as a painted line. A hermit crab senses things differently. From him you experience the slow interaction of life at the margin of sea and land. His time-sense is very slow, unlike that of a bird of paradise, whose viewpoint is spatial, rapid, cursory. And there are many others, above and below the earth and water, who furnish their own specialized viewpoints of reality. Their outlooks, I have found, are not essentially different from those of the animals that once inhabited Mars."

"What happened on Mars?" Sorensen asked.

"All life died," the Quedak mourned. "All except the Quedak. It happened a long time ago. For centuries there was peace and prosperity on the planet. Everything and everyone was part of the

Quedak Cooperation. But the dominant race was basically weak. Their breeding rate went down; catastrophes happened. And finally there was no more life except the Quedak."

"Sounds great," Sorensen said ironically.

"It was the fault of the race," the Quedak protested. "With sturdier stock—such as you have on this planet—the will to live will remain intact. The peace and prosperity will continue indefinitely."

"I don't believe it. What happened on Mars will happen again on Earth if you take over. After a while, slaves just don't care very strongly about living."

"You wouldn't be slaves. You would be functional parts of the Quedak Cooperation."

"Which would be run by you," Sorensen said. "Any way you slice it, it's the same old pie."

"You don't know what you're talking about," the Quedak said. "We have talked long enough. I am prepared to kill one man in the next five minutes. Are you or are you not going to join me?" Sorensen looked at Drake. Drake turned on the transmitter.

Gusts of rain splattered on the roof while the transmitter warmed up. Drake lifted the microphone and tapped it, and was able to hear the sound in the speaker.

"It's working," he said.

At that moment something flew against the netting-covered window. The netting sagged; a fruit bat was entangled in it, glaring at them with tiny red-rimmed eyes.

"Get some boards over that window!" Sorensen shouted.

As he spoke, a second bat hurtled into the netting, broke through it and tumbled to the floor. The men clubbed it to death, but four more bats flew in through the open window. Drake flailed at them, but he couldn't drive them away from the transmitter. They were diving at his eyes, and he was forced back. A wild blow caught one bat and knocked it to the floor with a broken wing. Then the others had reached the transmitter.



They pushed it off the table. Drake tried to catch the set, and failed. He heard the glass tubes shattering, but by then he was busy protecting his eyes.

In a few minutes they had killed two more bats, and the others had fled out the window. The men nailed boards over both windows, and Drake bent to examine the transmitter.

"Any chance of fixing it?" Sorensen asked.

"Not a hope," Drake said. "They ripped out the wiring while they were at it."

"What do we do now?"

"I don't know."

Then the Quedak spoke to them over the walkie-talkie. "I must have your answer right now."

Nobody said a word.

"In that case," the Quedak said, "I'm deeply sorry that one of you must die now."

VII

Rain pelted the iron roof and the gusts of wind increased in intensity. There were rumbles of distant thunder. But within the copra shed, the air was hot and still. The gasoline lantern hanging

from the center beam threw a harsh yellow light that illuminated the center of the room but left the corners in deep shadow. The treasure-hunters had moved away from the walls. They were all in the center of the room facing outward, and they made Drake think of a herd of buffalo drawn up against a wolf they could smell but could not see.

Cable said, "Listen, maybe we should try this Quedak Cooperation. Maybe it isn't so bad as—"

"Shut up," Drake said.

"Be reasonable," Cable argued. "It's better than dying, isn't it?"

"No one's dying yet," Drake said. "Just shut up and keep your eyes open."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Cable said. "Dan, let me out."

"Be sick where you are," Drake said. "Just keep your eyes open."

"You can't give me orders," Cable said. He started toward the door. Then he jumped back.

A yellowish scorpion had crept under the inch of clearance between the door and the floor. Recetich stamped on it, smashing it to pulp under his heavy boots. Then he whirled, swinging at three hornets which had come at him through the boarded windows.

"Forget the hornets!" Drake shouted. "Keep watching the ground!"

There was movement on the floor. Several hairy spiders crawled out of the shadows. Drake and Recetich beat at them with rifle butts. Byrnes saw something crawling under the door. It looked like some kind of huge flat centipede. He stamped at it, missed, and the centipede was on his boot, past it, on the flesh of his leg. He screamed; it felt like a ribbon of molten metal. He was able to smash it flat before he passed out.

Drake checked the wound and decided it was not fatal. He stamped on another spider, then felt Sorensen's hand clutching his shoulder. He looked toward the corner Sorensen was pointing at.

Sliding toward them were two large, dark-coated snakes. Drake recognized them as black adders. These normally shy creatures were coming forward like tigers.

The men panicked, trying to get away from the snakes. Drake pulled out his revolver and dropped to one knee, ignoring the hornets that buzzed around him, trying to draw a bead on the slender serpentine targets in the swaying yellow light.

Thunder roared directly overhead. A long flash of lightning suddenly flooded the room, spoiling his aim. Drake fired and missed, and waited for the snakes to strike.

They didn't strike. They were moving away from him, retreating to the rat hole from which they had emerged. One of the adders slid quickly through. The other began to follow, then stopped, half in the hole.

Sorensen took careful aim with a rifle. Drake pushed the muzzle aside. "Wait just a moment."

The adder hesitated. It came out of the hole and began to move toward them again....

And there was another crash of thunder and a vivid splash of lightning. The snake turned away and squirmed through the hole.

"What's going on?" Sorensen asked. "Is the thunder frightening them?"

"No, it's the lightning!" Drake said. "That's why the Quedak was in such a rush. He saw that a storm was coming, and he hadn't consolidated his position yet."

"What are you talking about?"

"The lightning," Drake said.

"The electrical storm! It's jamming that radio control of his! And when he's jammed, the beasts revert to normal behavior. It takes him time to re-establish control."

"The storm won't last forever," Cable said.

"But maybe it'll last long enough," Drake said. He picked up the direction finders and handed one to Sorensen. "Come on, Bill. We'll hunt out that bug right now."

"Hey," Recetich said, "isn't there something I can do?"

"You can start swimming if we don't come back in an hour," Drake said.

In slanting lines the rain drove down, pushed by the wild southwest wind. Thunder rolled continually and each flash of lightning seemed aimed at them. Drake and Sorensen reached the edge of the jungle and stopped.

"We'll separate here," Drake said. "Gives us a better chance of converging on him."

"Right," Sorensen said. "Take care of yourself, Dan."

Sorensen plunged into the jungle. Drake trotted fifty yards down the fringe and then entered the bush.

He pushed forward, the revolver in his belt, the radio direction finder in one hand, a flashlight in the other. The jungle seemed to be animated by a vicious life of its own, almost as if the Quedak controlled it. Vines curled cunningly around his ankles and the bushes reached out thorny hands toward him. Every branch took a special delight in slapping his face.

Each time the lightning flashed, Drake's direction finder tried to home on it. He was having a difficult time staying on course. But, he reminded himself, the Quedak was undoubtedly having an even more difficult time. Between flashes, he was able to set a course. The further he penetrated into the jungle, the stronger the signal became.

After a while he noticed that the flashes of lightning were spaced more widely apart. The storm was moving on toward the north, leaving the island behind. How much longer would he have the protection of the lightning? Another ten or fifteen minutes?

He heard something whimper. He swung his flashlight around and saw his dog, Oro, coming toward him.

His dog—or the Quedak's dog?

"Hey there, boy," Drake said. He wondered if he should drop the direction finder and get the revolver out of his belt. He wondered if the revolver would still work after such a thorough soaking.

Oro came up and licked his hand. He was Drake's dog, at least for the duration of the storm.

They moved on together, and the thunder rumbled distantly in the north. The signal on his RDF was very strong now. Somewhere around here....

He saw light from another flashlight. Sorensen, badly out of breath, had joined him. The jungle had ripped and clawed at him, but he still had his rifle, flashlight and direction finder.

Oro was scratching furiously at a bush. There was a long flash of lightning, and in it they saw the Quedak.

Drake realized, in those final moments, that the rain had stopped. The lightning had stopped, too. He dropped the direction finder. With the flashlight in one hand and his revolver in the other, he tried to take aim at the Quedak, who was moving, who had jumped—

To Sorensen's neck, just above the right collarbone.

Sorensen raised his hands, then lowered them again. He turned toward Drake, raising his rifle. His face was perfectly calm. He looked as though his only purpose in life was to kill Drake.

Drake fired from less than two feet away. Sorensen spun with the impact, dropped his rifle and fell.

Drake bent over him, his revolver ready. He saw that he had fired accurately. The bullet had gone in just above the right collarbone. It was a bad wound. But it had been much worse for the Quedak, who had been in the direct path of the bullet. All that was left of the Quedak was a splatter of black across Sorensen's chest.

Drake applied hasty first aid and hoisted Sorensen to his shoulders. He wondered what he would have done if the Quedak had been standing above Sorensen's heart, or on his throat, or on his head.

He decided it was better not to think about that.

He started back to camp, with his dog trotting along beside him.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MEETING OF THE MINDS ***

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