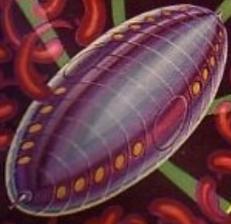


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ASTOUNDING STORIES

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VAMPIRES OF SPACE
*Another Thrilling Adventure
of the Special Patrol*
BY SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT

The Project Gutenberg EBook of Vampires of Space, by Sewell Peaslee Wright

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Our sprays met them in mid air.
Our sprays met them in mid air.

Vampires of Space

By Sewell Peaslee Wright

Commander John Hanson recounts his harrowing adventure with the Electites of space.

Sometimes, I know, I must seem a crotchety old man. "Old John Hanson," they call me, and roll their eyes as though to say, "Of course, you have to forgive him on account of his age."

But the joke isn't always on me. Not infrequently I gain much amusement observing these cocky youngsters who strut in the blue-and-silver uniforms of the Service in which, until more or less recently, I bore the rank of Commander.

There is young Clippen, for instance, a nice, clean youngster; third officer, I believe, on the *Caliobre*, one of the newest ships of the Special Patrol Service. He drops in to see me as often as he has leave here at Base, to give me the latest news, and to coax a yarn, if he can, of the old days. He is courteous, respectful ... and yet just a shade condescending. The condescension of youth.

"Something new under the sun after all, sir," he commented the other day. That, incidentally, is a saying of Earth, whence the larger part of the Service's officer personnel has always been drawn. Something new under the sun! The saying probably dates back to an age long before man mastered space.

"Yes?" I leaned back more comfortably, happy, as always, to hear my native Earth tongue, and to speak it. The Universal language has its obvious advantages, but the speech of one's fathers wings thought straightest to the mind. "What now?"

"Creatures of space!" announced Clippen importantly, in the fashion of one who brings surprising news. "'Electites,' they call them. Beings who live in space—things, anyway; I don't know that you could call them beings."

"Hm-m." I looked past him, down a mighty corridor of dimming years. Creatures that lived in space.... I smiled in my beard. "Creatures perhaps twice the height of a man in their greatest dimension? In shape like a crescent, with blunted horns somewhat straightened near the tips, and drawn close together?" I spoke slowly, drawing from my store of memories. "A pale red in color, intangible and yet—"

"You've heard, sir!" said Clippen disappointedly to me. "My news is stale."

"Yes, I've heard," I nodded. "'Electites,' they call them, eh? That's the work of our great scientific minds, I presume?"

"Er—yes. Undoubtedly." Clippen started to wander restlessly around the room. He had a great respect for the laboratory men, with their white coats and their wise, solemn airs, and he disliked exceedingly to have me present my views regarding these much overrated gentlemen. I have always been a man of action, and pottering over coils and glass vials and pages of figures has always struck me as something not to be included in a man's proper sphere of activity. "Well, I believe I'll be shoving off, sir; just dropped in for a moment," Clippen continued. "Thought perhaps you hadn't heard of the news; it seems to be causing a great deal of discussion among the officers at Base."

"Something new under the sun, eh?" I chuckled.

"Why, yes. You'll agree to that, sir, surely?" I believe the lad was slightly nettled by my chuckle. No one likes to bear stale news.

"I'll agree to that," I said, smiling broadly now. "'Tis easier than debating the matter, and an old man can't hope to hold his own in argument with you quick-witted youngsters."

"I've never noticed," replied young Clippen rather acidly, "that you were particularly averse to argument, sir. Rather the reverse. But I must be moving on; we're shoving off soon, I hear, and you know the routine here at Base."

He saluted me, rather carelessly, I should say, and I returned the salute with the crispness with which the gesture was rendered in my day. When he was gone, I turned to my desk and began searching in that huge and capacious drawer in which were kept, helter-skelter, the dusty, faded, nondescript mementoes of a thousand adventures.

I found, at last, what I was seeking. No impressive thing, this: a bit of metal, irregular in shape, no larger than my palm, and three times the thickness. One side was smooth; the other was stained as by great heat, and deeply pitted as though it had been steeped in acid.

Silently, I turned the bit of metal over and over in my hands. I had begged hard for this souvenir; had obtained it only by passing my word its secret would never reach the Universe through me. But now ... now that seal of secrecy has been removed.

As I write this, slowly and thoughtfully, as an old man writes, relishing his words for the sake of the memories they bring before his eyes, a bit of metal holds against the vagrant breeze the filled pages of my script. A bit of metal, no larger than my palm, and perhaps three times the thickness. It is irregular in shape, and smooth on one side. The other side is eroded as though by acid.

Not an imposing thing, this ancient bit of metal, but to me one of my most precious possessions. It is, beyond doubt, the only fragment of my old ship, the *Ertak*, now in existence and identifiable.

And this story is the story of that pitted metal and the ship from which it came; one of the strangest stories in all my storehouse of memories of days when only the highways of the Universe had been charted, and breathless adventure awaited him who dared the unknown trails of the Special Patrol Service.

The *Ertak*, as I recall the details now, had just touched at Base upon the completion of a routine patrol—one of those monotonous, fruitless affairs which used to prey so upon Correy's peace of mind. Correy was my first officer on the *Ertak*, and the keenest seeker after trouble I have ever known.

"The Chief presents his compliments and requests an immediate audience with Commander Hanson," announced one of the brisk, little attaches of Base, before I'd had time to draw a second breath of fresh air.

I glanced at Correy, who was beside me, and winked. That is, I quickly drew down the lid of one eye—a peculiar little gesture common to Earth, which may mean any one of many things.

"Sounds like something's in the wind," I commented in a swift aside. "Better give 'no leaves' until I come back."

"Right, sir!" chuckled Correy. "It's about time."

I made my way swiftly to the Chief's private office, and was promptly admitted. He returned my salute crisply, and wasted no time in getting to the point.

"How's your ship, Commander? Good condition?"

"Prime, sir."

"Supplies?"

"What's needed could be taken on in two hours." In the Service, Earth time was an almost universal standard except in official documents.

"Good!" The Chief picked up a sheaf of papers, mostly standard charts and position reports, I judged, and frowned at them thoughtfully. "I've some work cut out for you, Commander.

"Two passenger ships have recently been reported lost in space. That wouldn't be so alarming if both had not, when last reported, been in about the same position. Perhaps it is no more than a coincidence, but, with space travel still viewed with a certain doubt by so many, the Council feels something should be done to determine the cause of these two losses.

"Accordingly, all ships have been rerouted to avoid the area in which it is presumed these losses took place. The locations of the two ships, together with their routes and last reported positions, are given here. There will be no formal orders; you are to cruise until you have determined, and if possible, eliminated the danger, or until you are certain that no further danger exists."

He slid the papers across his desk, and I picked them up.

"Yes, sir!" I said. "That will be all?"

"You understand your orders?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Very well. Good luck, Commander!"

I saluted and hurried out of the room, back to my impatient first officer.

"What's up, sir?" he asked eagerly.

"Can't say that I know, to be truthful about it. Perhaps nothing; perhaps a great deal. Give orders to take on all necessary supplies—in double-quick time. I've promised the Chief we'll be ready to shove off in two hours. I'll meet you in the navigating room, and give you all the information I have."

Correy saluted and rushed away to give the necessary orders. Thoughtfully, I made my way through the narrow, ethon-lighted passageways to the navigating room, where Correy very shortly joined me.

Briefly, I repeated the Chief's conversation, and we both bent over the charts and position reports.

"Hm-m!" Correy was lost in thought for a moment as he fixed the location in his mind. "Rather on the fringe of things. Almost anything could happen out there, sir. That would be on the old Belgrade route, would it not?"

"Yes. It's still used, however, as you know, by some of the smaller, slower ships making many stops. Or was, until the recent order. Any guesses as to what we'll find?"

"None, sir, except the obvious one."

"Meteorites?"

Correy nodded.

"There's some bad swarms, now and then," he said seriously. I knew he was thinking of one disastrous experience the *Ertak* had had ... and of scores of narrow escapes. "That would be the one likely explanation."

"True. But those ships were old and slow, they could turn about and dodge more easily than a ship of the *Ertak*'s speed. At full space speed we're practically helpless; can neither stop nor change our course in time to avoid an emergency."

"Well, sir," shrugged Correy, "our job's to find the facts. I took the liberty of telling the men we were to be ready in an hour and a half. If we are, do we shove off immediately?"

"Just as soon as everything's checked. I leave it to you to give the necessary orders. I know I can depend upon you to waste no time."

"Right, sir," said Correy, grinning like a schoolboy. "We'll waste no time."

In just a shade less than two hours after we had set down at Base, we were rising swiftly at maximum atmospheric speed, on our way to a little-traveled portion of the universe, where two ships, in rapid succession, had met an unknown fate.

"I wonder, sir, if you could come to the navigating room at once?" It was Kincaide's voice, coming from the instrument in my stateroom.

"Immediately, Mr. Kincaide." I asked no questions, for I knew my second officer's cool-headed disposition. If something required my attention in the navigating room, in his opinion, it was something important. I threw on my uniform hurriedly and hastened to Kincaide's side, wondering if at last our days of unrewarded searching were to bear fruit.

"Perhaps I called you needlessly, sir," Kincaide greeted me apologetically, "but, considering the nature of our mission, I thought it best to have your opinion." He motioned toward the two great navigating charts, operated by super-radio reflexes, set in the surface of the table before him.

In the center of each was the familiar red spark which represented the *Ertak* herself, and all around were the glowing points of greenish light which gave us, in terrestrial terms, the locations of the

various bodies to the right and left, above and below.

"See here, sir—and here?" Kincaide's blunt, capable forefingers indicated spots on each of the charts. "Ever see anything like that before?"

I shook my head slowly. I had seen instantly the phenomena he had pointed out. Using again the most understandable terminology, to our right, and somewhat above us, nearer by far than any of the charted bodies, was something which registered on our charts, as a dim and formless haze of pinkish light.

"Now the television, sir," said Kincaide gravely.

I bent over the huge, hooded disk, so unlike the brilliantly illuminated instruments of to-day, and studied the scene reflected there.

Centered in the field was a group of thousands of strange things, moving swiftly toward the ship. In shape they were not unlike crescents, with the horns blunted, and pushed inward, towards each other. They glowed with a reddish radiance which seemed to have its center in the thickest portion of the crescents—and, despite their appearance, they gave me, somehow, an uncanny impression that they were in some strange way, *alive!* While they remained in a more or less compact group, their relative positions changed from time to time, not aimlessly as would insensate bodies drifting thus through the black void of space, but with a sort of intelligent direction.

"What do you make of them, sir?" asked Kincaide, his eyes on my face. "Can you place them?"

"No," I admitted, still staring with a fixed fascination at the strange scene in the television disk. "Perhaps this is what we've been searching for. Please call Mr. Correy and Mr. Hendricks, and ask them to report here immediately."

Kincaide hastened to obey the order, while I watched the strange things in the field of the television disk, trying to ascertain their nature. They were not solid bodies, for even as I viewed them, one was superimposed upon another, and I could see the second quite distinctly through the substance of the first. Nor were they rigid, for now and again one of the crescent arms would move searchingly, almost like a thick, clumsy tentacle. There was something restless, *hungry*, in the movement of the sharp arms of the things, that sent a chill trickling down my spine.

Correy and Hendricks arrived together; their curiosity evident.

"I believe, gentlemen," I said, "that we're about to find out the reason why two ships already have disappeared in this vicinity. Look first at the charts, and then here."

They bent, for a moment, over the charts, and then stared down into the television disk. Correy was first to speak.

"What are they?" he gasped. "Are they ... alive?"

"That is what we don't know. I believe they are, after a fashion. And, if you'll observe, they are headed directly towards us at a speed which must be at least as great as our own. Is that correct, Mr. Kincaide?"

Kincaide nodded, and began some hasty figuring, taking his readings from the finely ruled lines which divided the charts into little measured squares, and checking speeds with the chronometers set into the wall of the room.

"But I don't understand the way in which they register on our navigating charts, sir," said Hendricks slowly. Hendricks, my youthful third officer, had an inquiring, almost scientific mind. I have often said he was the closest approach to a scientist I have ever seen in the person of an action-loving man. "They're a blur of light on the charts—all out of proportion to their actual size. They must be something more than material bodies, or less."

"They're coming towards us," commented Correy grimly, still bent over the disk, "as though they knew what they were doing, and meant business."

"Yes," nodded Kincaide, picking up the paper upon which he had been figuring. "This is just a rule-of-thumb estimate, but if they continue on their present course at their present speed, and we do

likewise, they'll be upon us in about an hour and a quarter—less, if anything."

"But I can't understand their appearance in the charts," muttered Hendricks doggedly, still turning that matter over in his mind. "Unless ... unless ... ah! I'll venture I have it, sir! The charts are operated by super-radio reflexes; in other words, electrically. They would naturally be extremely sensitive to an electrical disturbance. Those things are electrical in nature. Highly so. That's the reason for the flare of light on the charts."

"Sounds logical," said Correy immediately. "The point, as I see it, is not what they are, but what we're to do about them. Do you believe, sir, that they are dangerous?"

"Let me ask you some questions to answer that one," I suggested. "Two ships are reported lost in space—in this immediate vicinity. We come here to determine the cause of those losses. We find ourselves the evident objective of a horde of strange things which we cannot identify; which Mr. Hendricks, here, seems to have good reason to believe are somehow electrical in nature. Putting all these facts together, what is the most logical conclusion?"

"That these things caused the two lost ships to be reported missing in space!" said Hendricks.

I glanced at Kincaide, and he nodded gravely.

"And you, Mr. Correy?" I asked.

Correy shrugged.

"I believe you're, right, sir. They seem like such rather flimsy, harmless things, though, that the disintegrator rays will take care of without difficulty. Shall I order the ray operators to their stations, sir?"

"Do that, please. And take personal charge of the forward projectors, will you? Mr. Hendricks, will you command the after projectors? Mr. Kincaide and I will carry on here."

"Shall we open upon them at will, or upon orders, sir?" asked Correy.

"Upon orders," I said. "And you'll get your orders as soon as they're in range; I have a feeling we're in for trouble."

"I hope so, sir!" grinned Correy from the door.

Hendricks followed him silently, but I saw there was a deep, thoughtful frown between his brows.

"I think," commented Kincaide quietly, "that Hendricks is likely to be more useful to us in this matter than Correy."

I nodded, and bent over the television disk. The things were perceptibly nearer; the hurtling group nearly filled the disk, now.

There was something horribly eager, horribly malignant, in the way they shone, so palely red, and in the fashion in which their blunt tentacles reached out toward the *Ertak*.

I glanced up at the Earth clock on the wall.

"The next hour," I said soberly, "cannot pass too quickly for me!"

We had decelerated steadily during the hour, but we were still above maximum atmospheric speed when at last I gave the order to open the invaders with disintegrator rays. They were close, but of course the rays are not as effective in space as when operating in a more favorable medium, and I wished to make sure of our prey.

I pressed the attention signal to Correy's post, and he answered instantly.

"Ready, Mr. Correy?"

"Ready, sir!"

"Then commence action!"

Before I could repeat the command to Hendricks, I heard the deepening note of the atomic generators, and knew Correy had already begun operations.

Together, and silently, Kincaide and I bent over the television disk. We watched for a moment, and then, with one accord, lifted our heads and looked into each other's eyes.

"No go, sir," said Kincaide quietly.

I nodded. It was evident the disintegrator rays were useless here. When they struck into the horde of crescent-shaped things coming so hungrily toward us, the things changed from red to a sickly, yellowish pink, and seemed to writhe, as though in some discomfort, but that was all.

"Perhaps at closer range...?" ventured Kincaide.

"I think not. If Mr. Hendricks is correct—and I believe he is—these things aren't material; they're not matter, as we comprehend the word. And so, they can't be disintegrated."

"Then, sir, how are we to best them?"

"First, we'll have to know more about them. For one thing, their mode of attack. We should know very soon. Please recall Mr. Hendricks, and then order all hands to their posts. We may be in for it."

Hendricks came rushing in breathlessly.

"The rays are useless, sir," he said. "They'll be on us in a few minutes. Any further orders?"

"Not yet. Have you any ideas as to their mode of attack? What they can do to us?"

"No, sir. That is, no reasonable idea."

"What's your unreasonable theory, then, Mr. Hendricks?"

"I'd prefer, sir, to make further observation first," he replied. "They're close enough now, I think, to watch through the ports. Have I your permission to unshutter one of the ports?"

"Certainly, sir." The *Ertak*, like all Special Patrol ships of the period, had but few ports, and these were kept heavily shuttered. Her hull was double; she was really two ships, one inside the other, the two skins being separated and braced by innumerable trusses. Between the outer and the inner skin the air pressure was kept about one half of normal, thus distributing the strain of the pressure equally between the two hulls.

In order to arrange for a port or an exit, it was necessary to bring these two skins close together at the desired point, and strengthen this weak point with many braces. As a further protection against an emergency—and a fighting ship must be prepared against all emergencies—the ports were all shuttered with massive doors of solid metal, hermetically fitted. I am explaining this so much in detail for the benefit of those not familiar with the ships of my day, and because this information is necessary that one may have a complete understanding of subsequent events.

Hendricks, upon receiving my permission, sprang to one of the two ports in the navigating room and unshuttered it.

"The lights, please?" he asked, over his shoulder. Kincaide nodded, and switched off the *ethon* tubes which illuminated the room. The three of us crowded around the recessed port.

The things were not only close: they were veritably upon us! Even as we looked, one of them swept by the port so close that, save for the thick crystal, one might have reached out into space and touched it.

The television disk had represented them very accurately. They were, in their greatest dimension, perhaps twice the height of a man, and at close range their reddish color was more brilliant than I had imagined; in the thickest portion of the crescent, which seemed to be the nucleus, the radiance of the thing was almost blinding.

It was obvious that they were not material bodies. There were no definite boundaries to their bodies; they faded off into nothingness in a sort of fringe, almost like a dim halo.

An attention signal sounded sharply, and Kincaide groped his way swiftly to answer it.

"It's Correy, sir," he said. "He reports his rays are utterly useless, and asks for further orders."

"Tell him to cease action, and report here immediately." I turned to Hendricks, staring out the port beside me. "Well, what do you make of them now?"

Before he could reply, Kincaide called out sharply.

"Come here, sir! The charts are out of commission. We've gone blind."

It was true. The charts were no more than twin rectangles of lambent red flame, with a yellow spark glowing dimly in the center of each, the fine black lines ruled in the surface showing clearly against the wavering red fire.

"Mr. Hendricks!" I snapped. "Let's have your theory—reasonable or otherwise."

Hendricks, his face pressed at an angle against one side of the port, turned toward me, and swung the shutter into place. Kincaide snapped on the lights.

"It's no longer a theory, sir," he said in a choked, hushed voice, "although it's still unreasonable. These things—are *eating* us!"

"Eating us?" Correy's voice joined Kincaide's and mine in the exclamation of amazement. He had just entered the navigating room in response to my order.

"Eroding us, absorbing us—whatever you want to call it. There's one at work close enough to the port so that I could see it. It is feeding upon our hull as an electric arc feeds upon its electrodes!"

"Farewell *Ertak*!" said Correy grimly. "Anything the rays can't lick—wins!"

"Not yet!" I contradicted him. "Kincaide, what's the nearest body upon which we can set down?"

"N-127, sir," he replied promptly. "Just logged her a few minutes ago." He poured hastily through a dog-eared index. "Here it is: 'N-127, atmosphere unbreathable; largely nitrogen, oxygen insufficient to support human life; no animal life reported; insects, large but reported non-poisonous; vegetation heroic in size, probably with edible fruits, although reports are incomplete on this score; water unfit for drinking purpose unless distilled; land area approximately—'"

"That's enough," I interrupted. "Mr. Correy, set a course for N-127 by the readings of the television instrument. Mr. Kincaide, accelerate to maximum space speed, and set us down on dry land as quickly as emergency speed can put us there. And you, Mr. Hendricks, please tell us all you know—or guess—about the enemy."

Hendricks waited, moodily silent, until the ship was coming around on her course, picking up speed every instant. Kincaide had gradually increased the pull of the gravity pads to about twice normal, so that we found it barely possible to move about. The *Ertak* was an old-timer, but she could pick up speed when she had to that would have thrown us all headlong were it not for the artificial gravity anchorage of the pads.

"It's all guess-work," began Hendricks slowly, "so I hope you won't place too much reliance in my theories, sir. I'll just give you my line of reasoning, and you can evaluate it for yourself.

"These things are creatures of space. No form of life, as we know it, can live in space. Therefore, they are not material; they are not matter, like ourselves.

"From their effect upon the charts, we decided they were electrical in nature. Not made up of atoms and electrons, but of pure electrical energy in an unfamiliar form.

"Then, remembering that they exist in space, and concluding that they were the destroyers of the two ships we know of, I began wondering how they brought about the destruction—or at least, the disappearance—of these two ships. Life of any kind must have something to feed upon. To produce one kind of energy we must convert, apparently consume, some other kind of energy. Even our

atomic generators slowly but surely eat up the metal in which is locked the power which makes this ship's power possible.

"But, in space, what could these things feed upon? What—if not those troublesome bodies, meteorites? And meteorites, as we know, are largely metallic in composition. And ships are made of metal.

"Here are the only proofs, if proofs you can call them, that these are not wild ideas: first, the disintegrator rays, working upon an electrical principle, reacted upon but did not destroy these things, as might be expected from the meeting of two not dissimilar manifestations of energy; and the fact that I did, from the port, see one of these space-things, or part of one, flattened out upon the body of the *Ertak*, and feeding upon her skin, already roughened and pitted slightly from the thing's hungry activities."

Hendricks fell silent, staring down at the floor. He was only a youngster, and the significance of his remarks was as plain to him as it was to the rest of us. If these monsters from the void were truly feeding on the skin of our ship, vampire-like, it would not be long before it would be weakened; weakened to the danger point, weakened until we would explode in space like a gigantic bomb, to leave our fragments to whirl onward forever through the darkness and the silence of outer space.

"And what, sir, do you plan to do when we reach this N-127?" asked Correy. "Burn them off with a run through the atmosphere?"

"No; that wouldn't work, I imagine." I glanced at Hendricks inquiringly, and he shook his head. "My only thought was to land, so that we would have some chance. Outside the ship we can at least attack; locked in here we're helpless."

"Attack, sir? With what?" asked Kincaide curiously.

"That I can't answer. But at least we can fight—with solid ground under our feet. And that's something."

"You're right, sir!" grinned Correy. It was the first smile that had appeared on the faces of any of us in many minutes. "And fight we will! And if we lose the ship, at least we'll be alive, with a hope of rescue."

Hendricks glanced up at him and shook his head, smiling crookedly.

"You forget," he remarked, "that there's no air to breathe on N-127. An atmosphere of nitrogen. And no water that's drinkable—if the reports are accurate. A breathing mask will not last long, even the new types."

"That's so," said Kincaide. "The tanks hold about a ten-hours' supply; less, if the wearer is working hard, or fighting."

Ten hours! No more, if we did not find some way to destroy these leeches of space before they destroyed the *Ertak*.

During the next half hour little was said. We were drawing close to our tiny, uninhabited haven, and both Correy and Kincaide were busy with their navigation. Working in reverse, as it were, from the rough readings of the television disk settings, an ordinarily simple task was made extremely difficult.

I helped Correy interpret his headings, and kept a weather eye on the gauges over the operating table. We were slipping into the atmospheric fringe of N-127, and the surface-temperature gauge was slowly climbing. Hendricks sat hunched heavily in a corner, his head bowed in his hands.

"I believe," said Kincaide at length, "I can take over visually now." He unshuttered one of the ports, and peered out. N-127 was full abreast of us, and we were dropping sideways toward her at a gradually diminishing speed. The impression given us, due to the gravity pads in the keel of the ship, was that we were right side up, and N-127 was approaching us swiftly from the side.

"Vegetation of heroic size' is right, too," said Correy, who had been examining the terrain at close range, through the medium of the television disk. "Two of the leaves on some of the weeds would make an awning for the whole ship. See any likely place to land, Kincaide?"

"Nowhere except along the shore—and then we'll have to do some nice work and lay the *Ertak* parallel to the edge of the water. The beach is narrow, but apparently the only barren portion. Will that be all right, sir?"

"Use your own judgment, but waste no time. Correy, break out the breathing masks, and order the men at the air-lock exit port to stand by. I'm going out to have a look at these things."

"May I go with you, sir?" asked Hendricks sharply.

"And I?" pleaded Kincaide and Correy in chorus.

"You, Hendricks, but not you two. The ship needs officers, you know."

"Then why not me instead of you, sir?" argued Correy. "You don't know what you're going up against."

"All the more reason I shouldn't be receiving any information second-hand," I said. "And as for Hendricks, he's the laboratory man of the *Ertak*. And these things are his particular pets. Right, Hendricks?"

"Right, sir!" said my third officer grimly.

Correy muttered under his breath, something which sounded very much like profanity, but I let it pass.

I knew just how he felt.

I have never liked to wear a breathing mask. I feel shut in, frustrated, more or less helpless. The hiss of the air and the everlasting *flap-flap* of the exhaust-valve disturb me. But they are very handy things when you walk abroad on a world which has no breathable atmosphere.

You've probably seen, in the museums, the breathing masks of that period. They were very new and modern then, although they certainly appear cumbersome by comparison with the devices of to-day.

Our masks consisted of a huge shirt of air-tight, light material which was belted in tightly around the waist, and bloused out like an ancient balloon when inflated. The arm-holes were sealed by two heavy bands of elastic, close to the shoulders, and the head-piece was of thin copper, set with a broad, curved band of crystal which extended from one side to the other, across the front, giving the wearer a clear view of everything except that which was directly behind him. The balloon-like blouse, of course, was designed to hold a small reserve supply of air, for an emergency, should anything happen to the tank upon the shoulders, or the valve which released the air from it.

They were cumbersome, uncomfortable things, but I donned mine and adjusted the menore, built into the helmet, to full strength. I wanted to be sure I kept in communication with both Hendricks and the sentries at the air-lock exit, and of course, inside the helmets, verbal communication was impossible.

I glanced at Hendricks, and saw that he was ready and waiting. We were standing inside the air-lock, and the mighty door of the port had just finished turning in its threads, and was swinging back slowly on its massive gimbals.

"Let's go, Hendricks," I emanated. "Remember, take no chances, and keep your eyes open."

"I'll remember, sir," replied Hendricks, and together we stepped out onto the coarse gravel of the beach.

Before us, waves of an unhealthy, cloudy green rolled slowly, heavily shoreward, but we had no eyes for this, nor for the amazing vegetation of the place, plainly visible on the curving shores. We took a few hurried steps away from the ship, and then turned to survey the monsters which had attacked it.

They literally covered the ship; in several places their transparent, glowing bodies overlapped. And the sides of the *Ertak*, ordinarily polished and smooth as the surface of a mirror, were dull and deeply eroded.

"Notice, sir," emanated Hendricks excitedly, "how much brighter the things are! They *are* feeding, and they are growing stronger and more brilliant. They —look out, sir! They're attacking! Our copper helmets—"

But I had seen it as quickly as he. Half a dozen of the glowing things, sensing in some way the presence of a metal which they apparently preferred to that of the *Ertak's* hull, suddenly detached themselves and came swarming directly down upon us.

I was standing closer to the ship than Hendricks, and they attacked me first. Several of them dropped upon me, their glowing bodies covering the vision-piece, and blinding me with their light. I waved my arms and started to run blindly, incoherent warnings coming to me through the menore from Hendricks and the sentries.

The things had no weight, but they emitted a strange, electric warmth which seemed to penetrate my entire body instantly as I ran unseeingly, trying to find the ship, tearing at the fastenings of my mask as I ran. I could not, of course, enter the ship with these things clinging to my garments.

Suddenly I felt water splash under my feet; felt its grateful coolness upon my legs, and with a gasp I realized I had in my confusion been running away from the ship, instead of toward it. I stopped, trying to get a grip on myself.

The belt of the breathing mask came loose, and I tore the thing from me, holding my breath and staring around wildly. The ship was only a few yards away, and Hendricks, his mask already off, was running toward me.

"Back!" I shouted. "I'm all right now. Back!" He hesitated for an instant until I caught up with him, and then, together, we gained the safety of the air-lock. Without orders, the men swung shut the ponderous door, and Hendricks and I stood there panting, and drawing in breaths of the *Ertak's* clean, reviving air.

"That possibility was one we overlooked, sir," said Hendricks. "Let's see what's happening."

We opened the shutter of a port nearby and gazed out onto the beach we had so hurriedly deserted. There were three or four of the glowing things huddled shapelessly around our abandoned suits, and ragged holes showed in several places in the thin copper helmets. Even as we looked, they dissolved into nothingness, and after a few seconds of hesitation, the things swarmed swiftly back to the ship.

"Well," I commented, trying to keep my voice reasonably free from the feelings which gripped me, "I believe we're beaten, Hendricks. At least, we're helpless against them. Our only chance is that they'll leave us before they have eaten through the second skin; so long as we still have that, we can live ... and perhaps be found."

"I doubt they'll leave us while there's a scrap of metal left, sir," said Hendricks slowly. "Something's brought them from their usual haunts. There's no reason why they should leave a certainty for an uncertainty. But we're not quite through trying. I saw something—have I your permission to make another try at them? Alone, sir?"

"Any chance of success, lad?" I asked, searching his eyes.

"A chance, sir," he replied, his glance never wavering. "I can be ready in a few minutes."

"Then, go ahead—on one condition: that you let me come with you."

"Very good, sir; as you wish. Have two other breathing masks ready. I'll be back very soon."

And he left me hastily, taking the steps of the companionway two at a time.

It was nearly an hour before Hendricks returned, bringing with him two of the most amazing pieces of apparatus I have ever seen.

To make each of them, he had taken a flask of compressed air from our emergency stores, and run a flexible tube from it into a cylindrical drinking water container. Another tube, which I recognized as being a part of our fire-extinguishers, and terminating in a metal nozzle, sprouted from the water container. Both tubes were securely sealed into the mouth of the metal cylinder, and lengths of

hastily-knotted rope had been bound around each contrivance so that the two heavy containers, the air flask and the small water tank could be slung from the shoulders.

"Here, sir," he said hastily, "get into a breathing mask, and put on these things as you see me do. No time to explain anything now, except this: as soon as you're outside the ship, turn the valve that opens the compressed air flask. Hold this hose, coming from the water container, in your right hand. Don't touch the metal nozzle. Use the hose just as you'd use a portable disintegrator-ray projector."

I nodded, and followed his instructions as swiftly as possible. The two containers were heavy, but I adjusted their ropes across my shoulders so that my left hand had easy access to the valve of the air flask, and the water container was under my right arm where I could have the full use of the hose.

"Let me go first, sir," breathed Hendricks as we stood again in the air-lock, and the door turned out of its threaded seat and swung open. "Keep your eyes on me, and do as I do!"

He ran heavily out of the ship, his burdens lurching. I saw him turn the pet-cock of the air flask, and I did likewise. A fine, powerful spray shot from the nozzle of the tube in my right hand, and I whirled around to face the ship.

Several of the things were detaching themselves from the ship, and instinctively, I turned the spray upon them. Hendricks, I could see out of the corner of my eye, did likewise. And now a most amazing thing happened.

The spray seemed to dissolve the crescent-shaped creatures; where it hit, ragged holes appeared. A terrible hissing, crackling sound came to my ears, even through the muffling mask I wore.

"It works! It works!" Hendricks was crying over and over, hardly aware, in his excitement, that he was wearing a menore. "We're saved!"

I put down three of the things in as many seconds. The central nucleus, in the thickest portion of the crescent, was always the last to go, and it seemed to explode in a little shower of crackling sparks. Hendricks accounted for four in the same length of time.

"Keep back, sir!" he ordered in a sort of happy delirium. "Let them come to us! We'll get them as they come. And they'll come, all right! Look at them! Look at them! Quick, sir!"

The things showed no fear, no intelligence. But one by one they sensed the nearness of the copper helmets we wore, and detached themselves from the ship. They moved like red tongues of flame upon the fat sides of the *Ertak*; crawling, uneasy flames, releasing themselves swiftly, one after the other.

Our sprays met them in mid-air, and they dissolved like mist, one after the other.... I directed my death-dealing spray with a grim delight, and as each glowing heart crackled and exploded, I chuckled to myself.

The sweat was running down my face; I was shaking with excitement. One side of the ship was already cleared of the things; they were slipping over the top now, one or two at a time, and as rapidly as they came, we wiped them out.

At last there came a period in which there were none of the things in sight; none coming over the top of the sorely tried ship.

"Stay here and watch, Hendricks," I ordered. "I'll look on the other side. I believe we've got them all!"

I hurried, as best I could, around to the other side of the *Ertak*. Her hull was pitted and corroded, but there was no other evidence of the crescent-shaped things which had so nearly brought about the ship's untimely, ghastly end.

"Hendricks!" I emanated happily. "'Nothing Less Than Complete Success!' And that's ours right now! They're gone—all of them!"

I slipped the contrivances from my shoulders and ran back to the other side of the ship. Hendricks was executing some weird sort of dance, patting the containers, swinging them wildly about his body, with an understandable fondness.

"Come inside, you idiot," I suggested, "and tell us how you did it. And see how it feels to be a hero!"

"It was just luck," Hendricks tried to make us believe, a few minutes later, when Kincaide, Correy, and myself were through slapping his back and shaking his hands. "When you, sir, splashed into the water, I had just torn off my mask. I saw some of the water fall on one of the things clustered upon your helmet, and I distinctly heard it hiss, as it fell. And where it fell, it made a ragged hole, which very slowly closed up, leaving a dim spot in the tentacle where the hole had been. As I figure it, the water—to put it crudely—short-circuited the electrical energy of the things. That, too, is just a guess, but I think it's a good one.

"Of course, it was a long chance, but it seemed like our only one. There was nothing more or less than acidulated water in the containers; and the air flasks, of course, were merely to supply the pressure to throw the water out in a powerful spray. It happened to work, and there isn't anybody any happier about it than I am. I'm young, and there're lots of things I want to do before I bleach my bones on a little deserted world like this, that isn't important enough to even have a name!"

That was typical of Hendricks. He was a practical scientist, willing and eager to try out his own devices. A man of action first—as a man should be.

None of us, I think, spent a really easy moment until the *Ertak* was back at Base. Our outer hull was weakened by at least half, and we were obliged to increase the degree of vacuum there and thus place the major portion of the load on the inner skin. It was a ticklish business, but those old ships were solidly built, and we made it.

As soon as I had completed my report to the Chief, the *Ertak* was sent instantly to a secret field, under heavy guard, and a new outer hull put in place.

"This can't be made public," the Chief warned me. "It would ruin the whole future of space travel, as people are just learning to accept it as a matter of course. You will swear your men to utter secrecy, and pass me your word, in behalf of your officers and yourself, that you will not divulge any details of this trip."

The scientists, of course, questioned me for days; they turned up their noses at the crude apparatus Hendricks had made, and which had saved the *Ertak* and all her crew—but they kept it, I noticed, for future reference.

All ships were immediately supplied with devices very similar, but more compact, the use of which only chief officers knew. And the scientists, to my knowledge, never did improve greatly on the model made for them by my third officer.

Whether or not these devices were ever used, I do not know. The silver-sleeves at Base are a close-mouthed crew. Hendricks always held that the group of things which so nearly caused the deaths of all of us had wandered into our portion of Universe from some part of space beyond the fringe of our knowledge.

But the same source which supplied one brood may supply another. Evidently, from young Clippen's report, this thing has happened. And since starting this account, I have determined why the powers that be are willing now to have the knowledge made public. The new silicide coating with which all space ships have been covered, is proof against all electrical action. That it is smoother and reduces friction, is, in my opinion, no more than a rather halty explanation. It is, in reality, the decidedly belated scientific answer to a question raised back in the hey-day of the *Ertak*, and my own youth.

That was many, many years ago, as the crabbed, uncertain writing on these pages proves.

And now, rather thankfully, I am about to place the last of these pages under the curious weight which has held the others in place as I have written. That irregular bit of metal from the hull of the *Ertak*, so deeply pitted on the one side, where the hungry things had sapped our precious strength.

"Electites," the scientists have dubbed these strange crescent-shaped things, young Clippen said. "Electites!" Something new under the sun!

New to this generation, perhaps, but not to old John Hanson.

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