
The Death-Traps of FX-31

Sewell Peaslee Wright



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The Death Traps of FX-31

A Commander John Hanson Adventure

By Sewell Peaslee Wright

Commander John Hanson recalls his harrowing expedition among the giant spiders of FX-31.

I do not wish to appear prejudiced against scientists. I am not prejudiced, but I have observed the scientific mind in action, on a great many occasions, and I find it rather incomprehensible.

It is true that there are men with a scientific turn of mind who, at the same time, you can feel safe to stand with shoulder to shoulder, in an emergency. Young Hendricks, who was my junior officer on the *Ertak*, back in those early days of the Special Patrol Service, about which I have written so much, was one of these.

Nor, now that I come to think of the matter in the cool and impartial manner which is typical of me, was young Hendricks the only one. There was a chap—let's see, now. I remember his face very well; he was one of those dark, wiry, alert men, a native of Earth, and his name was—Inverness! Carlos Inverness. Old John Hanson's memory isn't quite as tricky as some of these smart young officers of the Service, so newly commissioned that the silver braid is not yet fitted to the curve of their sleeves, would lead one to believe.

I met Inverness in the ante-room of the Chief of Command. The Chief was tied up in one of the long-winded meetings which the Silver-sleeves devoted largely to the making of new rules and regulations for the confusion of both men and officers of the Service, but he came out long enough to give me the *Ertak's* orders in person.

"Glad to see you here at Base again, Commander," he said, in his crisp, business-like way. "Hear some good reports of your work; keep it up!"

"Thank you, sir," I said, wondering what was in the air. Any time the Chief was complimentary, it was well to look out for squalls—which is an old Earth term for unexpected trouble.

"Not at all, Commander, not at all. And now, let me present Carlos Inverness, the scientist, of whom you have undoubtedly heard."

I bowed and said nothing, but we shook hands after the fashion of Earth, and Inverness smiled quite humanly.

"I imagine the good captain has been too busy to follow the activities of such as myself," he said, sensibly enough.

"A commander"—and I laid enough emphasis on the title to point out to him his error in terminology—"in the Special Patrol Service usually finds plenty to occupy his mind," I commented, wondering more than ever what was up.

At the same instant two other trap-doors swung up.
At the same instant two other trap-doors swung up.

"True," said the Chief briskly. "You'll pardon me if I'm exceedingly brief, Commander, but there's a sizeable group in there waiting my return.

"I have a special mission for you; a welcome relief from routine patrol. I believe you have made special requests, in the past, for assignments other than the routine work of the Service, Commander?"

He was boxing me up in a corner, and I knew it, but I couldn't deny what he said, so I admitted it as gracefully as I could.

"Very well," nodded the Chief, and it seemed to me his eyes twinkled for an instant. "Inverness, here, is head of a party of scientists bent upon a certain exploration. They have interested the Council in the work, and the Council has requested the cooperation of this Service."

He glanced at me to make sure I understood. I certainly did; when the Supreme Council *requested* something, that thing was done.

"Very well, sir," I said. "What are your orders?"

The Chief shrugged.

"Simply that you are to cooperate with Inverness and his party, assisting them in every possible way, including the use of your ship for transporting them and a reasonable amount of equipment, to the field of their activities. The command of the ship remains, of course, in you and your officers, but in every reasonable way the *Ertak* and her crew are to be at the disposal of Inverness and his group. Is that clear, Commander?"

"Perfectly, sir." Nothing could have been clearer. I was to run the ship, and Inverness and his crew were to run me. I could just imagine how Correy, my fighting first officer, would take this bit of news. The mental picture almost made me laugh, disgusted as I was.

"Written orders will, of course, be given you before departure. I believe that's all. Good luck, Commander!" The Chief offered his hand briefly, and then hurried back to the other room where the Silver-sleeves had gathered to make more rulings for the confusion of the Service.

"Since when," asked Correy bitterly, "are we running excursions for civilians? We'll be personally conducting elderly ladies next thing."

"Or put on Attached Police Service," growled Hendricks, referring to the poor devils who, in those days, policed the air-lanes of the populated worlds, cruising over the same pitiful routes day after day, never rising beyond the fringe of the stratosphere.

"Perhaps," suggested the level-headed Kincaide, "it isn't as bad as it sounds. Didn't you, say, sir, that this Inverness was rather a decent sort of chap?"

I nodded.

"Very much so. You'd scarcely take him for a scientist."

"And our destination is—what?" asked Kincaide.

"That I don't know. Inverness is to give us that information when he arrives, which will be very shortly, if he is on time."

"Our destination," said Correy, "will probably be some little ball of mud with a tricky atmosphere or some freak vegetation they want to study. I'd rather—"

A sharp rap on the door of the navigating room, where we had gathered for an informal council of war, interrupted.

"Party of three civilians at the main exit port, Port Number One, sir," reported the sub-officer of the guard. "One sent his name: Carlos Inverness."

"Very good. Admit them at once, and recall the outer guards. We are leaving immediately."

As the guard saluted and hurried away, I nodded to Correy. "Have the operating room crew report for duty at once," I ordered, "and ask Sub-officer Scholey to superintend the sealing of the ports. Mr. Kincaide, will you take the first watch as navigating officer? Lift her easily until we determine our objective and can set a course; this is like shoving off with sealed orders."

"Worse," said Hendricks unhappily. "Sealed orders promise something interesting, and—"

"Carlos Inverness and party," announced the guard from the doorway.

Inverness nodded to me in friendly fashion and indicated his two companions.

"Commander Hanson," he said, "permit me to present Godar Tipene and Cleve Brady, who are my companions on this expedition." I bowed, and shook hands with Brady; Tipene was a Zenian, and hence did not offer me this greeting of Earth. Then, quickly, I completed the round of introductions, studying Inverness's companions with interest as I did so.

Brady was short, and rather red-faced; a beefy, taciturn type, with a trap-like mouth and thoughtful discerning eyes. He struck me as being one with whom most men would like to be friendly, but who would have exceedingly few friends.

The Zenian was a perfect foil for him. Tipene was exceedingly tall and slender, like all his race, and very dark. His eyes were almost womanly in their softness, and he had the nervous grace of a

thoroughbred—which is an Earth animal of particularly high breeding, raised for show purposes. He had the happy faculty of speaking the language of Earth without a trace of Zenian or Universal accent; the Zenians are exceeded by none in linguistic ability, which was a real accomplishment before these decadent days when native languages are slipping so rapidly into obscurity.

"And now," said Inverness crisply, when the introductions were over, "I presume you'll wish to know something about our destination and the objects of this expedition, sir?"

"It would be helpful in charting our course," I admitted, smiling.

Inverness, with beautiful disregard for the necessities of space navigation, spread voluminous papers over the table whose surface was formed by the pair of three-dimensional charts which were the *Ertak's* eyes in outer space.

"Our destination," he said, "is a body designated on the charts as FX-31. You are familiar with it, Commander Hanson?"

"Hardly familiar," I admitted, smiling at Correy. "The universe is rather sizable, and even the named bodies are so numerous that one is able to be familiar with but an exceedingly small percentage. Its designation, of course, gives me certain information regarding its size, location and status, however."

"How much information, Commander?" asked Tipene nervously.

"Well, 'F' indicates that it is large; larger than Earth, for example. The numerals tells me where to locate it upon our space charts. And the 'X' would indicate that it is inhabited, but not by intelligent beings. Or that there is reasonable doubt as to the nature of those inhabiting it."

"A very good summary of the knowledge we have," nodded Inverness approvingly. "I can add but one bit of information which may or may not be accurate: that the sphere known as FX-31 is populated by a ruling class decidedly unusual in type, and possessed of a degree of intelligence which has made them virtual masters of the sphere."

"What are they like?" asked Correy. "Will they put up a fight? Are they dangerous?"

Our knowledge came from a luckless tramp liner which set down on FX-31 in search of water, their water-producing equipment having been damaged by carelessness. They found water, a great river of it, and sent a party of five men to determine its fitness for human consumption. They were snapped up before they had gone a hundred feet from the ship—and no more men were sent out. They hovered over the stream and drew up the water in containers devised for the purpose."

"Snapped up?" asked Correy impatiently. "By whom? Or what?"

"By spiders!" replied Inverness, his eyes shining with the fanatical gleam of a scientist who scents something strange. "Great spiders—perhaps not true spiders, but akin to them, from the descriptions we have—of what is known on Earth as the trap-door variety, but possessed of a high degree of intelligence, the power of communication, and definitely organized."

"Organized," put in Tipene, "in the sense that they work together instead of individually; that there are those to command and those to obey."

"You say they are large," I commented. "How large?"

"Large enough," said Inverness grimly, "to enable one of them to instantly overpower a strong man."

I saw Correy glance forward, where our largest disintegrator-ray tubes were located, and his eyes lit up with the thought of battle.

"If there's anything I hate," he gritted, "it's a spider. The hairy, crawling beasts! I'll man one of the tubes myself, just for the fun of seeing them dissolve into nice brown dust, and—"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Correy," said Inverness, shaking his head. "We're going to study them—not to exterminate them. Our object is to learn their history, their customs, their mode of communication, and their degree of intelligence—if possible."

"Yes," grunted Brady. "If possible."

Kincaide set the *Ertak* down on FX-31, close to the shore of a river, as gently as a feather settling to earth. Correy and I made our way to the exit port, where Inverness and his companions had gathered, with a considerable amount of scientific apparatus, and what seemed to be a boat, ingeniously taken down for shipment.

All three of the scientists were clad in suits of some gray material, flexible as cloth, but possessed of a certain metallic sheen, which completely covered them. The material had been stiffened to form a sort of helmet, with a broad band of transparent material set in at the eye level, so that the wearer could see to both sides, as well as to the front. I could also discern the outlines of menores—the crude and cumbersome type of thought-transference instrument used in that day—apparently built into the helmets. Belted around their middles were atomic pistols of the latest and most deadly model.

"For emergency use only, Commander," explained Inverness, observing my glance. His voice came quite clearly through the fabric which covered his face, so I gathered it was sufficiently porous to admit air for breathing. "This garment we wear will be sufficient protection, we believe; their mandibles are the weapons of the creatures we are to study, and this fabric should be ample protection against much more deadly weapons.

"Now, we shall walk to the shore of the river; if we are not molested—and I believe we shall not be, here, because the infiltration of water would quickly fill any passage sunk into this sandy earth so close to the river—please have your men bring our supplies to us, the boat first."

I nodded, and the three men walked through the open port, out across the gleaming, golden sand, to the water's edge. A number of great scarlet birds, with long, fiercely taloned legs, swooped about them curiously, croaking hoarsely and snapping their hawkish beaks, but offering no real molestation.

My men quickly carried their supplies to them, and before the last of the equipment had been delivered, the boat was assembled and afloat: a broad-beamed craft with hollow metal ribs, covered with some shining fabric which was unfamiliar to me. There was a small cabin forward and a small atomic engine housed back near the stern.

I walked to the edge of the water and shook hands with Inverness and Brady; with Tipene I exchanged bows.

"I am sorry," said Inverness, "that I am facing you with what will, undoubtedly, be a monotonous and wearying vigil, for we shall probably be gone several weeks." He referred, I must explain, to a period of seven Earth days, a common unit of time on Earth.

"We'll make the best of it," I said, thinking of Correy, and how he would rage at such a period of inaction. "The best of luck to you!"

"Thanks; we'll remain no longer than necessary," smiled Inverness, smiling, his shining eyes already fixed on the river ahead.

"And that will be no short time," said the taciturn Brady. "Shall we start?"

Correy raged. I had expected that, and I was in complete sympathy with him. Routine patrol was better than being earth-fast on this barren and uninteresting ball of mud.

"Have I your permission, sir," asked Correy on the fourth day, "to make a little tour of inspection and exploration? We might run into some fresh meat."

"I'm not sure that would be wise. These spider creatures—"

"Pardon me, sir," interrupted Correy eagerly, "but we could take a small landing force, armed with pistols and grenades. Even a field ray tube. Certainly we could handle anything which might turn up, then."

"And, you rather hope that something will turn up, Mr. Correy?"

Correy grinned and shrugged his shoulders.

"It would break the monotony, wouldn't it, sir? And, too, if anything should happen to them"—and he glanced up the river, in the direction taken by the three scientists—"we'd know something about what we had to contend with, wouldn't we?"

I'm not sure whether it was Correy's argument or my own venturesome disposition which swayed me, but immediately after lunch Correy and I, with a picked crew of men, started out from the ship.

Up until that time, we had confined our activities to the area between the ship and the shore—a small enough space at best. Now we rounded the shining blunt bow of the *Ertak* and headed inland, Correy and myself in the lead, the two portable disintegrator ray-men immediately behind us, and the four other men of the party flanking the ray operators, two on each side.

It was hot, but the air was dry and invigorating. There was not a cloud visible in the sky. Far ahead was a low line of bluish, fronded, vegetation; whether small trees or some fern-like undergrowth, we could not determine. The ground between the ship and the line of vegetation was almost completely barren, the only growth being a lichenous sort of vegetation, gray-green in color.

Here and there on the ground were the imprints of sharp, split hoofs, and Correy pointed these out to me with the comment that one of the guards had reported seeing a number of slender-legged animals roaming here in the star-light, apparently seeking water, but frightened by the strange apparition of our ship.

"From the way he described them, they're something like the deer we used to have on Earth," he said. "I've seen the fossils in the museums, and they had little sharp, split hoofs like—"

One of the men behind us shouted a warning at that instant, and we both whirled in our tracks. My eyes fell instantly upon one of the strangest and most fearsome sights I have ever seen—and I have explored many strange and terrible worlds.

To our left, a huge circular section of the earth had lifted, and was swinging back on a hinge of glistening white fibers; a disk as great in diameter as the height of a man, and as thick as a man's body.

Where the disk had been, gaped a tunnel slanting down into the earth, and lined with the same glistening white fibers which covered the bottom of the disk, and hinged it in place. As I looked, there sprang from this tunnel a *thing* which I shall call a spider, yet which was too monstrous to be called by such an innocuous name.

It was rust red in color, with eight bristling legs, each tipped with three curved and tufted claws. On each side of its face was an armored mandible, tipped with shining fangs, and beside them, slender, six-jointed palps stretched hungrily.

The man who had seen the disk fly up opened fire without orders, and if he had not done so, some of us would not have returned to the ship. As it was, the atomic pistol whispered a steady stream of death which spattered the hairy body into an oozing pulp while it was still in mid-air. We leaped away, adding our fire to that of the alert guard who had first seen the apparition, and the spider, a twitching bundle of bespattered legs, fell on the spot where, an instant before, we had been.

Almost at the same instant two other great circular trap-doors swung up, just beyond the first, and their hairy, malignant occupants leaped toward us.

Our pistols were ready, now, however, and the portable ray equipment was humming. The ray dissolved the first into a sifting of reddish dust, and our pistols slashed the other into ribbons.

"Back to the ship!" I shouted. "Look, Mr. Correy—there are hundreds of them!"

Before us score upon score of the great disks were lifting, and from the tunnel each revealed, monstrous rust-red bodies were pouring.

Our retreat covered by the two ray operators, we made our way swiftly to the ship. The great spiders, apparently alarmed by the magical disappearance of those of their comrades upon which the disintegrator ray rested, hesitated for a moment, their tremendous legs tensed, and their mandibles quivering with venomous anger, and then scuttled back into their holes, swinging their covers into place as they did so.

"We didn't do so badly, at that," grinned Correy rather breathlessly, as we gained the welcome shelter of the *Ertak*. "There are a score and more of those potlids still standing open—which means that many spiders didn't go back to tell about what happened to them."

"True—but had they waited until they could have surrounded us, the *Ertak* would have been short-handed on the return trip. She would have been just two officers and six men short."

I have never seen a real expression of fear on Correy's face, but I came as close to it then as I ever did.

"They're tough customers," he said. "I never did like spiders, and I like them less, now. Those things stood half again as high as a man on their long legs, and could jump half the length of the ship."

"Hardly that," I said. "But I'll say this: if they're the gentry Inverness and the other two are investigating, they're welcome to their jobs!"

There wasn't any difficulty in keeping the men close to the ship after that, although waiting was a tedious and nerve-racking procedure.

We watched the spider-infested territory closely, however, and found that they fed at night upon the deer-like creatures Correy had mentioned. These unwary beasts, seeking water, were pounced upon the instant they came close to one of the hidden dens, and dragged swiftly out of sight. These observations were made by television, and Correy in particular would sit up half the night watching the creatures at work.

It was the second day of the fourth week that the sentry on duty called out that the boat was returning. We hastened down to the river to welcome them back, and I for one felt very much relieved.

But as the boat approached, I felt my fears returning, for there was only one man visible: Tipene.

The Zenian, bedraggled and weary, had lost or discarded the protective suit he had worn, and his lean, dark face was haggard.

"We leave immediately, Commander Hanson," he said as he disembarked. "Please give the necessary orders."

"But the others, sir? Where are Inverness and Brady?"

"Dead," said Tipene. "The Aranians got them. I barely escaped myself."

"And who are the Aranians?" I asked.

"The creatures which control this world. The spider creatures. Aranians, they call themselves. Do we leave at once, as I ordered?"

I thought quickly. I didn't like Tipene, and never had, and I fancied even less the high-handed attitude he was taking.

"I would suggest, sir, that you first give us an account of what has happened," I said shortly. "If there is anything we can do for the other two, perhaps—"

"I said they were dead," snapped Tipene. "You can't do anything for dead men, can you?"

"No. But we must have a report to enter on our log, you understand, and—I'll be very busy on the return trip. I'd like to have your story before we start." Somehow, I was suspicious of Tipene.

"Very well. Although I warn you I shall report your delay to your superiors." I shrugged, and led the way to the dining saloon which, small as it was, held chairs enough to seat us all.

"My story is very brief," he said, when my three officers, Tipene, and myself were seated. "We proceeded up the river to a spot which we deemed suited as a point of entry into the country, and far enough from the ship so that its presence would not be alarming to the inhabitants.

"We permitted ourselves to be captured by the Aranians, knowing that our protective suits would prevent them from doing us serious bodily injury.

"You have seen the creatures—word of your adventure with them precipitated our misfortune, I might say here—and you know of their tunnels. We were taken down one of these tunnels, and into a still larger one. This in turn gave onto a veritable subterranean avenue, and, in time, led to a sort

of underground metropolis."

"What?" growled Correy. "An underground city of those things?"

"I should like to ask that you do not interrupt," said Tipene coldly. "This metropolis was really no more than a series of cubicles, opening off the innumerable crisscrossing tunnels, and many layers in thickness. Passage from one level to another was by means of slanting tunnels.

"Some of these cubicles were very large, and utilized as storage rooms. Others were used for community activities, schools, entertainments, and so forth. We learned these things later, and explored them by means of our *ethon* lamps—the entire system of tunnels being, of course, in utter darkness.

"The first few days they were exceedingly hostile, and tried to tear us to pieces. When they could not do this, word was sent to some of their more learned members, and we were investigated. By the use of extra menores we had brought with us, we established a contact with their minds; first by the usual process of impressing pictures of our thoughts upon their minds, and later by more direct process."

"I will say nothing of the great scientific value of our discoveries, for you would neither understand nor appreciate them—although they will set the scientific universe agog," continued Tipene, his eyes gleaming suddenly with a triumphant light. "As we perfected communication, we convinced them that we were friendly, and we gained their complete confidence.

"They are a very ancient race. Very slowly have they come to their present stage of mental development, but they now possess reasoning faculties, a language—and a form of community government. There is much more, which, as I have said, would be of no significance to you.

"And then word came that beings like ourselves had attacked and killed many of the Aranians. The news had traveled slowly, for their system of communication is crude, but it reached the community center in which we were staying.

"Instantly, all was hostility. They felt they had been betrayed, and that we might betray them. Brady and Inverness, always rash and thoughtless, had discarded their protective suits, feeling sure they were perfectly safe, and they were torn to pieces.

"I, having a more scientific and cautious mind, doubting everything as a true scientific mind must, still wore my armor. By the liberal use of my pistol, I managed to fight my way to the surface, and to the boat. And now, Commander Hanson, will you start back, as I have ordered?"

I don't know what I would have said if I had not caught a peculiar glance from Correy, a glance accompanied by a significant, momentary closing of one eye (a gesture of Earth which means many things, and which is impossible to explain) and a slight nod.

"Very well, Mr. Tipene," I said shortly. "We'll start at once. Gentlemen, will you join me in the navigating room?"

Correy was the last to arrive in the navigating room, and when he came in his eyes were dancing.

"I've just transferred Tipene to another stateroom, sir," he said. "A specially equipped stateroom."

"You what?"

"If you'll give orders, sir, for an immediate start, I'll tell you all about it," chuckled Correy. "Tipene says he's worn out, and is going to retire as soon as we start. And when he does—we'll learn something."

I nodded to Kincaide, and he gave the general attention signal. In a few seconds the outer sentry was recalled, and the exit port had been sealed. Slowly, the *Ertak* lifted.

"Maybe I'm wrong, sir," said Correy then, "but I'm convinced that Tipene is lying. Something's wrong; he was in altogether too much of a hurry to get away.

"So, before I transferred him to the other stateroom, I concealed a minore under the mattress of his bunk, immediately under where his head will lie. It's adjusted to full strength, and I believe it will

pick up enough energy to emanate what he's thinking about. We'll be in the next stateroom and see what we can pick up. How does that sound, sir?"

"Like something you'd cook up, Mr. Correy!" I said promptly. "And I believe, as you do, that if it works at all, we'll find out something interesting."

We equipped ourselves with menores, adjusted to maximum power, and silently filed into the stateroom adjacent to Tipene's.

He was moving about slowly, apparently undressing, for we heard first one boot and then another drop to the floor. And we could sense vague emanations, too faint to be intelligible, and unmistakably coming from him.

"Probably sitting on the edge of his bunk," whispered Correy. "When he lies down, it'll work like a charm!"

It did—almost too well. Suddenly we caught a strong emanation, in the Universal language.

Surly individual, that Hanson—didn't like my giving orders—hurt his dignity. But I had my own way, and that's all that's important. Seemed to be suspicious—they all were. Maybe I was a bit urgent—but I was afraid—those damned Aranians might have changed their spidery minds.

"They can't be very intelligent—to think I'd come back with tribute to pay for the spiders that fool Hanson and his men killed. Why, the ship's rays could wipe them all out, drill a hole in the ground—they didn't realize that. Thought that by holding Brady and that conceited Inverness for hostages, they'd be safe—and I'd be idiotic enough to not see this chance to get all the glory of the expedition for myself—instead of sharing it with those two. You're a quick thinker, Tipene—the true, ruthless, scientific mind...."

I motioned for my officers to follow me, and we made our way, silent and grim-faced, to the navigating room.

"Nice, friendly lad, isn't he?" snarled Correy. "I thought there was something up. What are your plans, sir?"

"We'll go to the rescue of Inverness and Brady, of course. Mr. Correy, place Tipene under arrest, and bring him here at once. Mr. Kincaide, take over the ship; give orders to set her down where we were. And you, Mr. Hendricks, will take personal command of the forward ray tubes."

My officers sprang to obey orders, and I paced restlessly up and down the room, thinking. Just as the *Ertak* settled softly to earth, Correy returned with his prisoner. Two men stood on guard with drawn atomic pistols at the door.

"What's the meaning of this indignity, sir?" flared Tipene. He had dressed hurriedly, and was by no means an imposing spectacle. He drew himself up to his full height, and tried to look domineering, but there was fear in his eyes. "I shall report you—"

"You'll do no reporting, Tipene," I broke in coldly. "I'll do the reporting. You see, we know all about your little plan to desert your comrades, held by the Aranians as hostages, and to grasp all the glory of your findings for yourself. But—the plan doesn't work. We're going back."

Tipene's face drained a dirty yellow—a Zenian can never be actually pale.

"You ... how..." he floundered.

"A menore, under your pillow," I explained crisply. "But that doesn't matter, now. You will guide us to the spot where you found the Aranian city, and establish communication with the Aranians. When that's done, I'll give you further orders."

"And if I won't?" breathed Tipene, his teeth clenched in a shaking rage.

"But you will. Otherwise, we'll permit you to continue your explorations on this interesting little sphere—minus your protective suit."

Tipene stared at me with horror-stricken eyes. I think he saw that I meant exactly what I said—and I

was not bluffing.

"I—I'll do it," he said.

"Then watch the river carefully," I ordered. "Kincaide, lift her just enough so we can get a good view of the river. Tipene will tell you where to set her down."

Navigating visually, Kincaide followed the winding course of the river, covering in a few minutes a distance it had taken the scientists a day to navigate.

"There—there is the place," said Tipene suddenly. "Just this side of the patch of vegetation."

"Very good. And remember what happens if you play any tricks," I nodded grimly. "Descend to within a few yards of the ground, Mr. Kincaide; we'll drop Tipene through the trap."

Correy hurried the prisoner away, and I ordered the trap in the bottom of the *Ertak's* hull to be opened.

"Now," I informed Tipene, "we'll let you down and you will establish communication with the Aranians. Tell them you have brought back, not tribute, but an enemy powerful enough to blast their entire city out of existence. It will be a simple matter for you to picture what an atomic grenade or one of the ship's rays will do. We'll arrange a little demonstration, if they're not convinced. And tell them that if they don't want to be wiped out, to bring Inverness and Brady to us, unharmed, as fast as their eight long legs will manage."

"They won't do it," whined Tipene. "They were very angry over the killing of those others. I'm just risking my life without the possibility of gain."

"You obey my orders, or you go down and stay there," I said abruptly. "Which?"

"I'll do as you say," he said, and the cage dropped with him swiftly.

As soon as he was on the ground he reached up and adjusted his menore, peering around anxiously. For several minutes nothing happened, and then, the length of the ship away, one of the great trap-doors flew open. Out of it came one of the spiders, not rust-red like those we had seen, but faded to a dirty yellow. Close behind him were two of the rust-red Aranians, which fell in one on each side of the yellow chap.

The first Aranian, I presumed—and rightly—was one of the old learned members of the race. As he scuttled closer to the cowering Tipene, I saw that, amidst the bristles which covered his head and thorax, was a menore.

The three great spiders approached the ship warily, watching it constantly with huge, glittering eyes. A safe distance away they paused, and the old one fixed his attention on Tipene.

Evidently, what Tipene emanated caused the old fellow to become very angry; I could see his legs quivering, and his withered old mandibles fairly clattered.

"He says he won't do it!" Tipene called up to me, excitedly. "Says we can't reach them underground, and that they'll kill their hostages if we try to harm them."

"Ask him if there are any tunnels between the ship and the river," I commanded. "We'll demonstrate what we can do if he harms Inverness and Brady."

The two were in silent communion for a moment, and Tipene looked up and shook his head.

"No," he shouted. "No tunnels there. The water would seep into them."

"Then tell him to watch!"

I stepped back and pressed an attention signal.

"Mr. Hendricks?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Open up with the starboard tube, full power, concentrated beam, at any spot halfway between here and the river. At once."

"At once, sir!"

The ray generators hummed instantly, their note deepening a moment later. The ray bit into the dry, sandy soil, boring steadily into the earth, making an opening over twice the height of a man in diameter.

The fine, reddish-brown dust of disintegration hung swirling above the mouth of the tunnel at first, and then, as the ray cut deeper into the earth, settled quickly and disappeared.

"Cease operation, Mr. Hendricks!" I commanded. "Keep the generators on, and stand by for further orders."

As soon as Hendricks' quick acknowledgment came back, I called down to Tipene.

"Tell your friend to inspect the little hole we drilled," I said. "Tell him to crawl down into it, if he wishes to see how deep it is. And then inform him that we have several ray tubes like this one, and that if he does not immediately produce his hostages, unharmed, we'll rise above his city and blast out a crater big enough to bury the *Ertak*."

Tipene nodded and communicated with the aged Aranian, who had cowered from the shaft in the earth disintegrated by our ray, and who now, very cautiously, approached it, flanked by his two far from eager guards.

At the lip of the slanting tunnel he paused, peered downward, and then, circling cautiously, approached the lidded tunnel whence he had emerged.

"He agrees," Tipene called up sullenly. "He will deliver Inverness and Brady to us. But we must come and get them; he says they have barricaded themselves in one of the cubicles, and will not permit any Aranian to approach. They still have their atomic pistols; the Aranians did not realize they were weapons."

"Very well; tell him a party from the ship will be ready in a few seconds. You will go with us as interpreter; you understand how to communicate with them."

I pressed Correy's attention signal and he answered instantly.

"Pick five good men for a landing party, two of them portable disintegrator ray operators, with equipment. The others will be provided with *ethon* lamps, pistols, and atomic grenades. Get the men to the trap as quickly as possible, please."

"Immediately, sir!"

I had the cage drawn up, and by the time I had secured my own equipment and returned, Correy was waiting with his men.

"One second, Mr. Correy, and we'll leave," I said, calling the navigating room. "Mr. Kincaide, I'm leaving you in command. We are going into the Aranian city to pick up Inverness and Brady. I anticipate no trouble, and if there is no trouble, we shall return within an hour. If we are not back within three hours, blast this entire area with atomic grenades, and riddle it with the rays. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," said Kincaide.

"And then proceed immediately to Base and report. I have made an entry in the log regarding this expedition, as official evidence, if needed."

"Right, sir," said Kincaide, who was as near a perfect officer as I have ever seen.

"Mr. Correy, you've heard my orders. So have you, men. We're going underground, into a veritable warren of these spider creatures. If any of you wish to refuse this service, you have my permission to withdraw."

Not a man moved. Correy hardly repressed a grin. He knew the men he had picked for the job.

"Good!" I said, and signaled to the cage operator. Swiftly we dropped to earth, where Tipene and our three hairy guides awaited us.

The descent into the white-lined tunnel was a terrifying experience. The lining was tough and fibrous, a sort of coarse material corresponding to the silk of a spider of normal size, although these strands were as large as my little finger, and strong as cables.

A close inspection of our guides added nothing to my confidence or bravery; their eight beady eyes, set at strategic spots about their heads, seemed unwinkingly ominous. And their mandibles, with fangs folded back like the blades of a pocket-knife, paired with their bristly palps, seemed like very capable weapons.

The Aranians ran ahead of us, our *ethon* lamps making strange and distorted shadows on the curving walls of the tunnel. Correy and I herded the unwilling Tipene just ahead of us, and the five picked men brought up the rear.

About forty feet down, the floor of the tunnel curved sharply and leveled off; a short distance farther on a number of other level tunnels merged with it, and the shape changed; from a tube perfectly circular in cross-section, it became a flattened oval, perhaps half again the height of a man, and at least three times that dimension in width.

Our party was joined by scores of other Aranians, who darted in from side passages; some going ahead, some closing in behind us, until the tunnel was filled with the peculiar brittle sound of their walking.

"They don't lack for numbers," muttered Correy softly. "Think they'll make trouble, sir?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. I showed them what the ray would do; I believe it threw a scare into the old chap. Did you tell them what we would do if they played any tricks, Tipene?"

"Certainly; my own life is endangered, isn't it?" snapped the Zenian.

"It certainly is," I told him grimly. "And not only by the spiders, if you make any suspicious moves."

We went on without further conversation, until we came to the beginning of the cubicles Tipene had mentioned.

Each of these was closed, or could be closed, by a circular door such as those which concealed the outer entrance to the tunnels, save that these were swung on a side hinge. From the central passage we were following, smaller ones branched off in all directions: to the left, to the right; upward and downward. And all were lined with the cubicles, from which a constantly increasing army of Aranians emerged to accompany us.

We had gone but a short distance into the "city" when our ancient guide paused, turning to stare down a deserted passage.

"He says," grunted Tipene—as near a grunt as the high-pitched Zenian voice is capable of, "that they're down there. He asks that we go and get them; he is afraid. They have killed two of the Aranians already with their atomic pistols."

"For which I don't blame them in the least," said Correy. "I'd get as many as I could before I let them sink their mandibles into me."

"But I thought they were hostages, and being treated as such?"

"The Aranians got tired of waiting; some of the younger ones tried to do their own executing," explained Tipene. "The whole brood of them is in an ugly mood, the old fellow tells me. We were fools to come!"

I didn't argue the matter. You can't argue such a matter with a man like Tipene. Instead, I lifted my voice in a shout which echoed down the long corridors.

"Brady! Inverness! Can you hear us?"

For a moment there was no reply, and then, as our *ethon* lights played hopefully along the passage, a circular door opened, and Inverness, his pistol drawn, peered out at us. A moment later, both he and Brady were running toward us.

"Hanson!" cried Inverness. "Man, but we're glad to see a human face again—but why did you come? Now they've got us all."

"But they'll let us all go," I said, with a confidence I did not feel. "I've demonstrated to one of their

leaders just what the *Ertak* can do—and will do—if we aren't aboard, safe and unhurt, in three hours."

"The young bloods don't obey well, though," said Brady, shaking his head. "Look at them, milling around there in the central passage! They didn't see your demonstration, whatever it was. They started for us some time back, and we had to rip a couple of them to pieces, and barricade ourselves."

"Well," said Correy grimly, "we'll soon find out. Ready to start back, sir?"

I turned to Tipene, who was staring at the packed mass of Aranians, who choked the tunnel in both directions.

"Tell them to make way," I commanded. "We're leaving."

"I've—I've been in communication with him," moaned Tipene. "And he hasn't any power over these youngsters. They want blood. Blood! They say the ship won't dare do anything so long as so many of us are here."

"It will, though," I snapped. "Kincaide will obey my orders to the letter. It'll be a wholesale slaughter, if we're not there by the specified time."

"I know! I know!" groaned Tipene. "But I can't make them understand that. They can't appreciate the meaning of such discipline."

"I believe that," put in Brady. "Their state of society is still low in the scale. You shouldn't have come, Commander. Better the two of us than the whole group."

"It may not be so simple as they think. Mr. Correy, shall we make a dash for it?"

"I'd be in favor of that, sir!" he grinned.

"Very well, you take three of the enlisted men, Mr. Correy, and give us a brisk rear-guard action when we get into the main passage—if we do. Use the grenades if you have to, but throw them as fast as possible, or we'll have the roof coming down on us.

"The two ray operators and myself will try to open a way, backed up by Inverness and Brady. Understand, everybody?" The men took the places I had indicated, nodding, and we stood at the mouth of the side tunnel, facing the main passage which intersected it at a right angle. The mouth of the passage was blocked by a crowded mass of the spider creatures, evidently eager to pounce on us, but afraid to start an action in those narrow quarters.

As we came toward them, the Aranians packed about the entrance gave way grudgingly, all save two or three. Without an instant's hesitation, I lifted my pistol and slashed them into jerking pulp.

"Hold the ray," I ordered the two men by my side, "until we need it. They'll get a surprise when it goes into action."

We needed it the moment we turned into the main corridor, for here the passage was broad, and in order to prevent the creatures from flanking us, we had to spread our front and rear guards until they were no more than two thin lines.

Seeing their advantage, the Aranians rushed us. At a word from me, the ray operators went into action, and I did what I could with my comparatively ineffective pistol. Between us, we swept the passage clean as far as we could see—which was not far, for the reddish dust of disintegration hung in the quiet air, and the light of our *ethon* lamps could not pierce it.

For a moment I thought we would have clear sailing; Correy and his men were doing fine work behind us, and our ray was sweeping everything before us.

Then we came to the first of the intersecting passages, and a clattering horde of Aranians leaped out at us. The ray operators stopped them, but another passage on the opposite side was spewing out more than I could handle with my pistol.

Two of the hairy creatures were fairly upon me before the ray swung to that side and dissolved

them into dust. For an instant the party stopped, checked by these unexpected flank attacks.

And there would be more of these sallies from the hundreds of passages which opened off the main corridor; I had no doubt of that. And there the creatures had us: our deadly ray could not reach them out ahead; we must wait until we were abreast, and then the single ray could work upon but one side. Correy needed every man he had to protect our rear, and my pistol was not adequate against a rush at such close quarters. That fact had just been proved to me with unpleasant emphasis.

It was rank folly to press on; the party would be annihilated.

"Down this passage, men," I ordered the two ray operators. "We'll have to think up a better plan."

They turned off into the passage they had swept clean with their ray, and the rest of the party followed swiftly. A few yards from the main corridor the passage turned and ran parallel to the corridor we had just left. Doors opened off this passage on both sides, but all the doors were open, and the cubicles thus revealed were empty.

"Well, sir," said Correy, when we had come to the dead end of the passage, "now what?"

"I don't know," I confessed. "If we had two ray machines, we could make it. But if I remember correctly, it's seven hundred yards, yet, to the first of the tunnels leading to the surface—and that means several hundred side passages from which they can attack. We can't make it."

"Well, we can try again, anyway, sir," Correy replied stoutly. "Better to go down fighting than stay here and starve, eh?"

"If you'll pardon me, gentlemen," put in Inverness, "I'd like to make a suggestion. We can't return the way we came in; I'm convinced of that. It was the sheerest luck that Commander Hanson wasn't brought down a moment ago—luck, and excellent work on the part of the two ray operators.

"But an analysis of our problem shows that our real objective is to reach the surface, and that need not be done the most obvious way, by returning over the course by which we entered."

"How, then?" I asked sharply.

"The disintegrator ray you have there should be able to cut a passage for us," said Inverness. "Then all we need do is protect our rear while the operators are working. Once on the surface, we'll be able to fight our way to the ship, will we not?"

"Of course! You should be in command, Inverness, instead of myself." His was the obvious solution to our difficulty; once proposed, I felt amazingly stupid that the thought had not occurred to me.

I gave the necessary orders to the ray men, and they started immediately, boring in steadily at an angle of about forty-five degrees.

The reddish dust came back to us in choking clouds, and the Aranians, perhaps guessing what we were doing—at least one of their number had seen how the ray could tunnel in the ground—started working around the angle of the passage.

At first they came in small groups, and our pistols readily disposed of them, but as the dust filled the air, and it became increasingly difficult to see their spidery bodies, they rushed us in great masses.

Correy and I, shoulder to shoulder, fired at the least sign of movement in the cloud of dust. A score of times the rushes of the Aranians brought a few of them scuttling almost to our feet; inside of a few minutes the passage was choked, waist high, with the riddled bodies—and still they came!

"We're through, sir!" shouted one of the ray operators. "If you can hold them off another fifteen minutes, we'll have the hole large enough to crawl through."

"Work fast!" I ordered. Even with Inverness, Brady, and the three of the *Ertak's* crew doing what they could in those narrow quarters, we were having a hard time holding back the horde of angry, desperate Aranians. Tipene was useless; he was cowering beside the ray operators, chattering at them, urging them to hurry.

Had we had good light, our task would have been easy, but the passage was choked now with dust. Our *ethon* lamps made little more than a dismal glow. The clattering Aranians were almost within leaping distance before we could see them; indeed, more than one was stopped in mid-air by a spray from one pistol or another.

"Ready, sir," gasped the ray man who had spoken before. "I think we've got it large enough, now."

"Good!" I brought down two scuttling Aranians, so close that their twitching legs fell in an untidy heap almost at my feet. "You go first, and protect our advance. Then the rest of you; Mr. Correy and I will bring up the—"

"No!" screamed Tipene, shouldering aside the ray men. "I...." He disappeared into the slanting shaft, and the two ray men followed quickly. The three members of the crew went next; then Brady and Inverness.

Correy and I backed toward the freshly cut passage.

"I'll be right behind you," I snapped, "so keep moving!"

Correy hesitated an instant; I knew he would have preferred the place of danger as the last man, but he was too good an officer to protest when time was so precious. He climbed into the slanting passage the ray had cut for us, and as he did so, I heard, or thought I heard, a cry from beyond him, from one of those ahead.

I gave Correy several seconds before I followed; when I did start, I planned on coming fast, for in that shoulder-tight tube I would be utterly at the mercy of any who might attack from behind.

Fairly spraying the oncoming horde, I drove them back, for a moment, beyond the angle in the corridor; then I fairly dived into the tunnel and crawled as fast as hands and knees could take me toward the blessed open air.

I heard the things clatter into the space I had deserted. I heard them scratching frantically in the tunnel behind me, evidently handicapped by their long legs, which must have been drawn up very close to their bodies.

Light came pouring in on me suddenly, and I realized that Correy had won free. Behind me I could hear savage mandibles snapping, and cold sweat broke out on me. How close a terrible death might be, I had no means of knowing—but it was very close.

My head emerged; I drew my body swiftly out of the hole and snatched a grenade from my belt. Instantly I flung it down the slanting passage, with a shout of warning to my companions.

With a muffled roar, the grenade shook the earth; sent a brown cloud spattering around us. I had made a desperate leap to get away, but even then I was covered by the shower of earth.

I looked around. Trapdoors were open everywhere, and from hundreds of these openings, Aranians were scuttling toward us.

But the ray operators were working; not only the little portable machine, but the big projectors on the *Ertak*, five or six hundred yards away; laying down a deadly and impassable barrage on either side of us.

"They got Tipene, sir!" said Correy. "He dodged out ahead of the ray men, and two of them pounced on him. They were dragging him away, tearing him. The ray men wiped them out. Tipene was already dead—torn to fragments, they said. Back to the ship now, sir?"

"Back to the ship," I nodded, still rather breathless. "Let the ray men cover our retreat; we can take care of those between us and the ship with our pistols—and the *Ertak's* projectors will attend to our flanks. On the double, men!"

We fought every step of the way, in a fog of reddish dust from the big disintegrator rays playing on either side of us—but we made it, a torn, weary, and bedraggled crew.

"Quite an engagement, sir," gasped Correy, when we were safely inside the *Ertak*. "Think they'll remember this little visit of ours, sir?"

"I know we'll remember it, anyway," I said, shaking some of the dust of disintegration from my clothes. "Just at the moment, I'd welcome a tour of routine patrol."

"Sure, sir," grinned Correy. "So would I—until we were a day or two out from Base!"

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