

KENLO

and the Crazy Planet

E. C. ELIOTT

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KEMLO
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by
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KEMLO AND THE CRAZY PLANET

Chapter 1

KRILLIE'S DIARY

‘**Y**OU'RE going to be sorry you started it,’ said Kemlo with a grin at his friend Krillie. ‘Lots of people start keeping diaries, and they do it well for the first few weeks; then it gets to be too much trouble.’

‘It won't be too much trouble for me,’ said Krillie stoutly. ‘Besides, I might win the competition.’

‘What competition?’

‘Oh, I forgot—you wouldn't know about it because you're not in our class. We've got to keep a diary and put down all that we do and write a description of what it's like here, then at the end of term there's a big prize for the best one and a lot of smaller prizes for those that are not so good.’ Krillie pulled the plastic silk pad from his locker and ruffled the slim pages. ‘Look, Kemlo,’ he said proudly; ‘I've done a lot already.’

‘We never had to do anything like that when I was in your class, but it seems a good idea,’ said Kemlo. ‘What have you written so far?’

‘Shall I read it, Kemlo? Shall I?’ Krillie's bright eyes held an eager expression.

Kemlo gazed at him kindly. Krillie was younger than he but they were firm friends, and even if Krillie became more excited than Kemlo over some things, it was fun to be with him. Like everyone else, Krillie had enthusiasms, but in his case often these rose to fever-pitch and then subsided more rapidly than did other people's. But you never knew when Krillie would come up with a quite brilliant idea for a game or even something more serious. He had a bubbling, irrepressible mind, and because Kemlo knew that his friend was easily hurt by slighting remarks or lack of interest in what he was doing, he nodded as he said:

‘Yes, you read it to me.’

Krillie took the pad and curled up on the air couch by the side of the locker while Kemlo sat on the floor at the foot of the couch.

‘This is how I’ve started,’ Krillie began:

I am writing this description of how I live because I want to win a prize and I want all the boys down on Earth to know about us the same as we know about them through the things we read.

My home is on Satellite Belt K. The Belt looks like a big wheel and it keeps spinning all the time. In the centre of the wheel is a great hub with four spokes running out to support the rim, which is three-hundred-and-sixty feet wide and three miles in circumference. The hub and spokes are full of machinery, including self-generating power motors which drive the Belt. Most of the engineers work in the hub and the spokes, and they have lots of radar-scopes and radio screens and cameras so that they can see you down on Earth and observe other planets. They also chart the courses over the space lanes for your rockets and space ships.

At the top of the hub are special intake and rejection chambers where space taxis, sent with supplies and stores from space ships, arrive and depart. These are guided by radar and electronic waves. All the people who come in these space taxis have to wear special space clothing or else they would die. Most of the Satellite Belt is air-conditioned, but there is an open section, and this is where I live with lots of other boys and girls.

Although the Satellite Belt is spinning around at a speed of about fifteen thousand Earth miles an hour, we don’t notice it because to us it seems to be standing still. I don’t know a lot about how this is done, but it is something to do with having to maintain its speed because of a balance with the Earth’s gravitational pull—something like how the moon is fixed in its orbit.

My name is Krillie. We do not have more than one name. On this Satellite Belt everybody’s name who was born here begins with a ‘K’ because this Belt’s call-signal is the letter ‘K.’ There are a number of other Satellite Belts at various levels, although we can’t see them from here without the aid of special telescopes. All Belts have a different letter and all the boys and girls on those Belts have names that begin with the same letter. Sometimes you get some awfully funny names.

I was born on the Satellite Belt and I do not need any sort of helmet or space suit like people do who come from Earth. That is why I and others born here live in the open section, but we cannot

stand the air-conditioning of the other parts of the Belt, so our parents have to wear space suits when they come to visit us, or we have to go into a special machine on a trolley, which we don't like, when we visit them.

My mother and father were brought here when they were small children. My grandparents helped to build the Satellite Belt. It was carried up in portions by space ships from Earth. First they brought the hub, which everyone says was a marvellous thing to do, although now everyone is used to it. The hub was set spinning and left in space. It couldn't fall down and once it had started spinning it was impossible to stop it. We are about twelve hundred miles from Earth, and even Earth-men can walk about in space suits, although they have to have life-lines attached to them because if they are doing repair work they get very tired. They can't fall over, but they can sometimes float away and it takes a long time to fetch them back.

After the people from Earth had brought the hub they sent the remaining spokes and the rim here in sections. By that time my grandparents were able to work quite comfortably, and they and about two hundred and fifty other people built the whole of the Satellite Belt.

Well, that is how I came to be here, and I like it very much. I will try to tell you more in my diary.

Krillie glanced down at Kemlo with a shy and rather embarrassed expression on his face.

'Well, Kemlo, do you think it sounds silly?' he asked.

'I think it sounds fine,' said Kemlo, climbing to his feet. 'That's really good, Krillie.'

'Do you mean it?'

'Of course I mean it.'

Krillie frowned suddenly as he returned the plastic silk pad to his locker.

'Something worrying you?' Kemlo asked.

'It's awfully hard,' Krillie replied. 'I never thought there was so much to describe. And things like how we do our schooling.' Krillie sighed heavily. 'I suppose there are some things I just *won't* be able to explain.'

'Why not?' said Kemlo. 'You can say that the teachers can't come into the

open section where we live, without space suits, nor can our parents, but they can see and talk to us whenever they want to, because we have large screens all round our rooms which are always glowing with light. The teachers or our parents or the Elders just stand in front of a lens in their section and talk to us through a loudspeaker. We can see them life-size and they can see us. It's very simple.'

'You make it sound simple.'

'You're growing too worried over this, Krillie,' said Kemlo with a laugh. 'Let's get my scooter out and have some fun on the lanes.'

'I guess you're right, Kemlo,' Krillie admitted. 'I thought it would be so easy to write things down. I want to put this in my diary, but how am I going to explain your scooter?'

'Say that it's a long tube with seats inside,' Kemlo suggested as he led the way from their playroom. 'It gets its power from pellets of urania and is worked by little levers that send it forward, backward, or turn it around.' He slapped Krillie's shoulder. 'You're making it sound too serious. A good bumping on the spume-wake will make you feel happy.'

They went into the parents' contact room, where Kemlo pressed a buzzer, then he stood in front of a large screen. In a few moments a tall man appeared on the screen. He was an older edition of Kemlo, with the same strong yet handsome features and keen eyes, but his hair was thinning and greying slightly. His smile was cordial and his voice kindly and resonant.

'You want me, Kemlo?' he asked. 'Or do you want to speak to your mother?'

'Hello, Dad,' said Kemlo. 'I thought I'd let you know that Krillie and I are going out on the lanes for a while.'

'That's all right, son,' said his father. 'I'll tell Krillie's parents. Be careful in that scooter of yours. I know what fun it is to bounce around on the spume-wake, but don't get too far in.'

'We'll watch it,' Kemlo said, and turned as Krillie came closer to the screen.

Kemlo's father smiled at the younger boy. 'Hello, Krillie,' he said. 'I hear you are taking a great interest in this diary competition.'

'Yes, sir,' Krillie replied, 'but there's such a lot to tell. I never thought there'd be so many things to explain.'

‘Well, just do your best and try and think of all you can. You’re growing up fast now and if you win that competition you would be in the same class as Kemlo, wouldn’t you?’

‘I’d like to get into the technical grade too,’ said Krillie. ‘They have lots more fun.’

Kemlo’s father chuckled. ‘And they are allowed a space scooter. That makes up for all sorts of hard work.’

‘We’ll see you later, Dad,’ said Kemlo. ‘Come on, Krillie.’

‘Goodbye, son.’ The screen went dark as Kemlo turned away from it.

Leaving the parents’ contact room the two boys turned right and entered the nearest air funnel, where they took the small mono-rail car down to the parking section.

Sam, the attendant, was a gruff bewhiskered man who seemed always to resent his job, which was to tend the space scooters and smaller space taxis housed in this section of the Belt. Sam had come to the Belt when he was young and therefore had to wear space clothing whenever he left the air-conditioned section. The transparent conical headgear and light-weight puffy space suit gave him an awesome appearance which, coupled with his abrupt manner, caused many of the boys to be afraid of him.

But Kemlo had many long chats with Sam and knew that beneath the grousy and grumbling manner there lay a genuine affection for boys and a real happiness in his job.

‘It’s you two again, is it?’ Sam growled. ‘You want your scooter, Kemlo?’

‘Yes, please, Sam.’

‘Go out a sight too much in that scooter of yours. Going to play bumping on the spume-wake, eh? You’ll bump once too often, then it won’t seem so funny.’

‘You know you’d like to come yourself,’ Kemlo chuckled. ‘You’re an old fraud, Sam.’

‘Maybe I am,’ Sam admitted, his eyes twinkling behind the transparent hood. His voice was not so gruff now, although there was a certain harshness as it came through the speaker fitted at the side of his hood. Kemlo suspected that Sam adjusted the speaker to make his voice sound harsh, because on various occasions when they had been talking alone Sam had trimmed the speaker control so that he spoke in his more natural voice, which was deep and

surprisingly gentle.

‘I’ve put in new pellets, Kemlo,’ said Sam as he unshipped the small space scooter from its moorings and began manoeuvring it on to the slide-chute. ‘You might find she’ll turn a bit quicker than she has been doing, so just be prepared for it.’

‘Thanks, Sam, we will,’ said Kemlo as he climbed into the drive-seat.

Krillie clambered in beside him and they pulled the transpex hood shut over them.

The scooter was torpedo-like in shape, with two comfortable seats, one of which faced some foot and hand controls. Kemlo sat in this seat and waited until Sam had opened the slide-chute exit. Immediately blue light flared along the channel chute, giving a gleam of silver-blue to objects which previously had been a dull metallic colour.

With a wave to Sam, Kemlo moved the forward speed lever. There was a second or two of humming vibration, then the noise stopped and with a hiss of power the scooter slid smoothly down the chute and sped like a scarlet fish into the deep blue around the Satellite Belt.

The Belt was small in the distance when the instruments told Kemlo that they were just about on the space lanes where the huge rocket ships hurtled along on their course to different planets. They waited quietly as they watched the scooter’s instrument panel. Their main attention was centred on the small radar screen in which they would have the first warning of a rocket ship’s approach.

Kemlo had halted the scooter some distance from the actual route of the rocket ships. For obvious reasons it was dangerous to go too close and, apart from the thrill of seeing the glowing monster hurtling on its way, the object was to remain far enough away from its course to catch the spume-waves thrown out in its wake at the height of their rippling surge.

Long after the rocket had passed, the spume-waves would spread in rolling yet invisible ridges which would bounce the scooter up and down and swing it around like a top. This was great fun to Kemlo and Krillie and many other boys of Belt K who, being in the technical grade at school, were allowed space scooters. Being born on the Belt and able to walk unhampered by space clothing anywhere they wanted in the blue void around them, their lives were very smooth. They had never experienced the effects of gravitation, although from their early schooldays they had been taught fully its true meanings. But unlike their parents they had never known, except in schooling, what it was to

fall over or to experience any jolts. Therefore, to take a space scooter to a position where the rippling spume-waves would lift their little craft and bounce it around gave them a tremendous thrill.

‘She’s coming!’ said Krillie excitedly, pointing to the radar screen where a small purple spot was gradually getting bigger, developing into an oval shape followed by long flashing lines.

Kemlo frowned in a puzzled manner.

‘It should be dead centre of the screen, though,’ he said. ‘Looks as if I’m too far over.’

‘We can’t do anything about it now,’ said Krillie, a shade of tenseness in his voice. He peered through the rear of the canopy at a tiny speck in the distance. ‘Here she comes!’ he exclaimed.

Almost before the words had left his lips, the speck became a large glowing shape with a bright silver point at its head and coloured fins flaring out on each side of its huge sleek body.

It streaked past them—so fast that their eyes could hardly absorb the beauty of its powerful lines before the glowing exhaust of its jets were disappearing to a tiny coloured light in the distance.

Kemlo was right. He was not far enough away from the first vibration arc of the spume-waves.

The first ripple hit the scooter, but instead of bouncing it about the repercussion acted as a vacuum and the little craft was sucked into the spume-wave and went hurtling along in the wake of the rocket ship.

There was nothing Kemlo could do but sit rigid at the controls, with Krillie white-faced and staring-eyed beside him.

At last, by freak or chance angle, the scooter was spun sideways.

It canted over, nose down, heading straight for the red-and-orange flare of an astral storm.

Chapter 2

AN ASTRAL STORM

VAINLY KEMLO worked the controls, but the scooter now was caught in the swirling vortex and they did not answer. He moved the levers to neutral, glanced at the scared figure beside him and said grimly:

‘I think we shall just have to wait for it. She won’t answer to any controls. We must be about two hundred leenas off our course.’

‘This will make a wonderful part of my diary,’ said Krillie in a trembling voice. ‘That is—if we live for me to write any more.’

‘Of course we’ll live,’ said Kemlo. ‘These astral storms seem worse than they really are.’

‘Two hundred leenas are about five hundred Earth miles, aren’t they, Kemlo?’

‘Just about. You’ll have to be careful of that when you’re writing in your diary, because people down there haven’t much idea of space.’ Kemlo purposely made his voice casual and matter-of-fact, knowing that Krillie was trying to do the same.

The passage through the storm seemed endless. The scooter plunged and rolled and twirled, and all the time great purple sparks flew off the hull as it struck the magnetic particles released by the astral storm. As with all space scooters and taxis, the hull was adequately armoured against these tremendous magnetic forces sometimes encountered, but this did not make the effect any less frightening.

It was as if they were being stirred by giant invisible hands in a broth of purple-reddish mist. Kemlo had no idea how far they would be from the Satellite Belt when they emerged from the storm. Until they were clear of it, all instruments on the panel in front of him were neutralised by the magnetic influences surrounding them.

Krillie gripped the passenger safety handles with more force than was necessary. The boys did not feel a great deal of buffeting inside the sealed

cabin of the scooter, as this remained level no matter at what angle the shell was inclined. It was only the effect on the eyes which caused difficulty in concentration and made them feel slightly sick.

One moment the scooter would seem to be standing still and only the swirling clouds around it moving, but the next moment the vision adjusted itself, and it was obvious that the little craft was sliding and slipping and whirling through the stationary astral storm.

‘Our parents will be mad,’ said Krillie. ‘It’ll take a long time to get back.’

‘Well, we couldn’t help it, I suppose.’ Kemlo tapped the instruments with the tips of his fingers. ‘Sam will be annoyed as well, because he won’t leave until we get back. You know how he hates *extra* work.’

‘Do you think the radar-finder was correct?’ Krillie asked, pointing to the small screen. ‘It isn’t like you to make a mistake.’

‘We all make mistakes,’ said Kemlo humbly. ‘I didn’t check the readings closely enough.’

‘Or perhaps that rocket ship was off-course?’ Krillie suggested hopefully.

‘Not a chance. That was a Mars ship, and they fly directly on a beam. It’s impossible for them to go off-course. No, it was my fault. How do you feel, Krillie?’

‘Awfully sick!’

‘Me too,’ Kemlo admitted, then heaved a great sigh of relief. ‘We’re coming out of it,’ he said as the darkness around the cabin gave place to greyish-blue vapour, and in a few moments the scooter righted itself and slowed almost to a halt.

They looked back and could see only the faint vapour-like cloud to denote what was in fact an astral storm. In many ways these storms were freaks of the astral air. Certain areas were known to be subject to them, but the storms were not consistent and sometimes appeared quite near the charted space lanes which normally were supposed to be free of such astral phenomena.

‘It wasn’t a big one,’ said Kemlo as he set the scooter moving again. Then he exclaimed in surprise when he moved the induction lever fully forward and saw the gravity instrument answering.

‘What’s the matter?’ Krillie asked.

‘We’re getting gravitational pull,’ said Kemlo. ‘We should be at least a thousand leenas from any gravity pull. Have a look through the radar-

binoculars while I check the figures on the instrument.’

Krillie opened the small compartment in front of his seat and drew out a pair of binoculars which were attached to a cable leading to the power supply. He switched on the power, adjusted the lenses and, sitting upright, peered through the canopy into the space around them.

For a few moments he saw nothing unusual, although he was aware that the scooter, while flying on an even keel and at full speed, was being drawn below its level course.

‘There it is!’ he cried. ‘I can see it clearly.’

‘I can see it too,’ said Kemlo grimly. ‘It’s in the radar-finder. With the instruments de-magnetised, I can’t check our actual position.’

‘It’s too small for one of the Saturn Satellites,’ said Krillie.

‘Don’t be idiotic!’ said Kemlo sharply. ‘Saturn’s thousands of leenas in the other direction.’ He reduced the induction and slowed the forward speed, but the scooter’s gravity instrument was swinging very close to the red marking of danger. ‘I can’t hold her up,’ he said. ‘The stabiliser fins are de-magnetised. Hang on, Krillie—I’m going into reverse lift.’

Krillie kept the radar-binoculars to his eyes, but grabbed a safety handle to steady himself against the sudden pull that would take place when the reverse lift acted. As it happened, the warning was not necessary, for the scooter did not immediately surge upward but merely steadied its downward-dropping action.

‘Well, that’s it,’ said Kemlo in a resigned tone as he leaned back from the controls. ‘Let me have the binoculars. Looks like we’re landing somewhere.’

Krillie handed them over and waited, while Kemlo focussed them to his satisfaction.

‘Can you see it, Kemlo?’ Krillie asked anxiously.

‘Yes, I see it right enough. Well—what with my making an error of judgment and the spume-wake carrying us into an astral storm, it looks as if we’re going to have a fine old time.’

‘Do you mean, there’ll be trouble when we get back?’

‘There’ll be trouble all right! But before that we’ll have trouble of our own. If you look on that chart—and it’s the latest one the technical grades are taught by—you’ll find there’s only one place where we can be.’ Kemlo paused and looked more closely through the radar-binoculars, adjusting them to an even

finer degree of sight. ‘It’s coming so near, we shall be able to see it without these any moment now.’ He handed the binoculars back to Krillie, who replaced them in the compartment.

‘Do you know where we are?’ Krillie asked.

‘I think so. That must be Planet 64.’

‘Jumping moonbeams!’ Krillie exclaimed in a startled voice. ‘Planet 64! That’s the Crazy Planet!’

‘It’s the planet that the Space Research Expedition reported as useless. They say the surface is not suitable for rocket ships.’ Kemlo made an angry exclamation as he added: ‘I wish I’d paid more attention, then I might remember. I will do in future. It’s a lesson to me not to forget that everything is important. Even our teachers admit they don’t know half enough about the worlds around us.’

‘They know enough to call it the Crazy Planet, anyway.’

‘That’s only because there aren’t many living people on it, and they’re impossible to teach.’

‘Why is it impossible to teach them?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Kemlo impatiently. ‘You do ask silly questions!’ But he smiled at his friend when he saw Krillie’s expression become hurt. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said quickly; ‘I didn’t mean to snap at you. You ask me any questions you want. I should ask a lot more than I do. Dad says when a boy stops asking questions, he’s stopped thinking.’

‘That’s all right, Kemlo. I think we’re both . . .’ Krillie hesitated before he added—‘upset.’

‘You mean scared.’ Kemlo grinned.

‘Are you scared?’

‘I’m not very happy. We’re moving closer and closer to Planet 64, and I still can’t remember all I’m supposed to know about it. It’s small and subject to lunar changes—that means it moves about once every month. Its people have a strange language that no-one has bothered to understand because the Space Research people say that the planet is useless. It’s called the Crazy Planet unofficially, because those who landed there for research said they hardly met any of the inhabitants, although they admitted they didn’t stay long, having made quick surveys and found the surface good in very few parts for space ships to land. But all the time they were there, they were laughed at.’

‘That’s crazy!’ said Krillie.

‘That’s what they mean!’ Kemlo grinned again. ‘It’s just a crazy planet, and we’re going right down on top of it. You can see it clearly now. It’s an oval shape. It doesn’t seem to have any big mountains such as there are on Earth, and no craters as on the moon.’

‘And no big canals and fiery areas like there are on Mars—I hope,’ said Krillie seriously.

‘No, it’s not a hot planet,’ said Kemlo confidently. ‘We’re so close now, all I can do is keep the upward lift operating and hope we land gently.’ He turned in the seat and pulled two plastic silk overalls from a compartment. ‘Let’s put these on—they’ll cushion any shock.’

Quickly they pulled on the plastic suits, sealed them around the neck, wrists and ankles, then inflated them.

By the time they had done this, the murky outlines of the planet were just below them. They gripped the safety handles and hung on as the scooter spun like a toy capsule, lower and lower until the grey land with its reddish-grey vegetation seemed to rise up to meet them.

The scooter landed on a gentle rise of ground—soft spongy ground which cushioned the shock, and the impact was kept from their bodies by the inflated plastic suits.

The land of the Crazy Planet seemed suddenly forbidding.

Chapter 3

THE LAUGHING PEOPLE

KEMLO deflated both plastic suits and helped Krillie to remove his. He stowed them back in the compartment and looked at his friend.

‘I’ll go and investigate,’ he said. ‘You stay here.’

‘No. Let me come with you, Kemlo.’

‘You’ll be safer here.’

‘I won’t if anything happens to you out there.’

‘But perhaps the instruments will de-magnetise themselves fairly quickly now that there’s gravity pull, and if anything happens to me, you could get the scooter away,’ Kemlo insisted. ‘Look—you just move the induction lever forward, lock the stabilisers and press the lifting switch. The scooter will go straight up.’

‘I don’t want to, and perhaps it won’t, and anyway I’m scared.’ Krillie’s lips began to quiver.

‘All right,’ said Kemlo in a gentle voice. ‘Unclip your side of the hood and we’ll both go and investigate.’

They slid back the hood and climbed from the scooter. Immediately they both fell down. Kemlo lay quietly but Krillie began to struggle.

‘Keep still,’ Kemlo warned him. ‘Keep very still for a moment, then move slowly.’

‘It’s awful!’ Krillie gasped. ‘What’s happened to me?’

‘Lie still,’ Kemlo repeated. ‘It’s nothing to be frightened about. We’ve had lessons on gravity and we’ve got a machine in the laboratory that generates it to help us understand it. You see, we’re more developed in our minds but not so strong in our muscles as—shall we say—Earth-boys.’

‘Why them?’

‘Because they are the people we know most about. In fact they are the only

people we really know about who live in gravity. We were born in space, so we can exist without gravity, *and* we can exist in it, although we have to accustom ourselves to it.'

'But how?'

'By controlling our movements—which we don't have to bother about on the Belt. You see, Krillie, our muscles are stiffer and our shoulders are wider, and we have bigger chests and lungs—all because we live in space.'

'But this old Crazy Planet *is* in space.'

'Of course it is, that's why we can breathe normally. But we've got to allow a little time for our lungs to take in the slightly heavier air and refresh the blood stream that feeds our muscles.'

'Do you mean, our muscles have gone to sleep?'

Kemlo chuckled. 'That's one way of putting it,' he replied. 'But they'll soon wake up if we don't try to do too much.' He lifted one foot from the ground, slowly and laboriously. 'See?' he said. 'We're growing stronger already.' He gazed around him.

The scene was colourful yet not varied. They had landed near the top of a small hill covered with bristly grass of a blue-grey colour. Below the grass was spongy damp soil which gave easily under pressure but filled out again once the pressure was lifted.

Small clumps of stunted bushes, red in colour with long pointed leaves, were clustered in the lee of the hill, which flowed smoothly to a high lava-like rock. Dull red foliage grew out of the rock crannies. Although this natural wall shutting out farther vision was some distance away, Kemlo had the impression that the distance was magnified.

The air was warm and moved in pulsing spurts, rippling the grass and bushes.

Krillie was less scared now because he was able to move his legs quite easily and soon had followed Kemlo's example and risen to his knees. But the gravity pull still caused them to lean forward, so that in their present positions they looked like sprinters about to take off on a race. They rested on their knees, hands on the ground and shoulders drawn forward.

'Take deep breaths, Krillie,' said Kemlo.

After some deep-breathing exercises Kemlo rose slowly to his feet and stood upright. His shoulders were still inclined forward, as if the ground were

pulling them down, but after a time even this disappeared, and he was able to move slowly and carefully.

He crossed to where Krillie was still struggling to get to his feet. He put his hands beneath his friend's arms and, although not able to give much help, his assistance enabled Krillie to stand upright. They looked at each other and chuckled.

'This is crazy!' said Krillie. 'Let's see if I can move around like you.'

Kemlo held his arm while Krillie moved stumblingly in a small circle. It was not only the gravity pull which made it difficult: because the ground was so spongy each step needed even greater effort.

But at last they had, by trial and error, found the best way to hold themselves upright and move without falling over.

The secret, Kemlo found, was to move each leg very slowly and take a longish stride. When he had moved the left leg forward he turned his shoulders so that the right shoulder gave a contra-balance.

'It's a funny old place, isn't it?' said Krillie. 'I always thought there were lots of colours on these planets. They say Saturn is beautiful.'

'They vary, I suppose,' said Kemlo thoughtfully as he gazed around them. 'Earth has a lot of colour and a lot of water, but Earth's pretty old. This Planet 64 is one of the breakaway planets, and I don't suppose it's had time to grow properly. I can't see any signs of people.'

'I thought I saw something moving over by that big rock wall,' said Krillie. 'Can't see it now, though, so I must have been imagining it.' He licked his lips as he added: 'I'm awfully thirsty.'

'I've got some fruit juice in the scooter,' said Kemlo. 'It's a good thing we're not Earth-boys. They need all sorts of food.'

'That's something else I must put in my diary,' said Krillie, suddenly reminded of his pet subject. 'I've got to say how we mostly live on fruit and fruit drinks and fruit sweets, and that we never eat anything very solid. Dad says a lot of people on different planets live on quite simple food, but Earthmen eat all sorts of mess.'

'I don't expect it seems mess to them,' said Kemlo, walking slowly toward the scooter.

Krillie began laughing. 'You do look funny!' he said.

Kemlo was going to reply as he lifted a flask of fruit juice from inside the

scooter, but before he had time they both heard a peculiar echoing sound of laughter.

‘*That wasn’t me!*’ Krillie gasped. ‘I’d stopped laughing.’

‘Someone else hadn’t!’ Kemlo passed the flask to Krillie. ‘Take a drink while I look around,’ he said.

He turned slowly to look across the plain to the rock-like wall, then he exclaimed: ‘There is something moving. . . . Figures—coming towards us! They look big people. Will you listen to that?’

There was no mistaking it now. Laughter, soft and rising and falling like a muted chorus, was reaching them from across the plain.

Krillie gulped the fruit juice and passed the flask back to Kemlo.

‘I only laughed once,’ he said plaintively. ‘There just couldn’t be so many echoes.’

‘Echoes are something we don’t know much about on the Belt,’ said Kemlo. He drained the flask and put it back inside the scooter. ‘Although they’ve got an echo shaft in the hub on the Belt, and it’s used to magnify call-signals if the instruments aren’t powerful enough to make them clear.’

‘They’re coming toward us very fast,’ said Krillie. ‘Will the scooter move?’

Kemlo peered at the instrument, then shook his head.

‘No, we’re not de-magnetised enough yet. And we can’t run, or else we shall fall over. Nothing we can do but wait for them to come—and hope they’re friendly.’ He moved closer to Krillie and put one arm around his friend’s shoulders. ‘Don’t be scared,’ he said as they stood and watched some score of figures come swiftly across the plain. In a few moments they were pacing with long strides toward the two boys.

They were tall men, dressed in loose-fitting grey clothes. As they came nearer, Kemlo could see that these clothes were the same colour as the grass and it seemed obvious that the material was woven from the grass.

Although they were large men they did not look fierce. Their skins were the colour of reddish copper and their eyes were a startling blue against the dark hue. They were quite handsome, except for the high cheek bones and wide mouths which gave them a quizzical appearance, the corners of the mouths lifted upward.

One of the figures, taller than the others, halted a few paces away from

Kemlo, who greeted him politely.

‘How do you do?’ said Kemlo in as strong and casual a voice as possible.

‘Hu-hu-hu,’ the leader said. Krillie giggled, for the sound was like slow deep-throated laughter.

The leader glanced sharply at Krillie, who immediately was silenced.

‘He-he-he,’ said the leader, frowning disapprovingly.

‘Keep quiet, Krillie,’ said Kemlo softly. ‘That’s their way of talking and it sounds like our laughter.’

‘It’s crazy,’ Krillie gulped.

The leader pointed to Kemlo, then to the space scooter, swung his wide shoulders and pointed back toward the rock wall. All the time he was making sounds like laughter, with the ha-ha’s and ho-ho’s all mixed up. Some sounded like real laughter, others like a chuckle, others long and drawn-out, like a surprised sound.

Kemlo was fascinated by this method of talking. Already he could sense that, while to his ears the sounds were those of laughter, there was in all these sounds a meaning portrayed by the cadence of the voice. He did not think they had anything to fear from these large men, but their way of talking made their faces seem more pleasant than perhaps they really were.

‘I think they want us to go with them to that rock,’ said Kemlo to his friend.

‘I couldn’t walk as far as that,’ said Krillie.

‘I don’t think they expect us to. The leader’s making signs and chuckling away to the others.’ Kemlo moved forward and made signs that he and his friend wanted to be carried if they were going anywhere.

The leader’s eyes showed understanding and he turned again to give some orders to the men behind him.

Four men came forward and surprisingly gentle hands lifted Kemlo and Krillie as easily as if they had been two feathers. Supporting the boys on their shoulders the men turned and followed the leader.

All around them the men with their high cheek bones and large mouths kept chuckling and laughing among themselves. No-one had taken much notice of the scooter, for which Kemlo was thankful. It hadn’t seemed to interest them in the slightest. He looked at Krillie and saw that his friend was sitting very stiffly on the shoulders of two of the men. Krillie gazed ahead, his

eyes holding a mixture of fear and excitement.

As they neared the rock wall Kemlo could see a group of smaller figures watching their approach. From this group one figure ran out from the shelter of the rock on to the plain toward them.

It was a girl, a slight and attractive girl with long dark hair and brown eyes.

‘I’m Licona,’ she called brightly. ‘Hallo!’

Chapter 4

PETE AND THE ZANIANS

THE leader waved a muscular arm in the girl's direction and grunted: 'Ha-ho-ho!'

This expression made Krillie giggle again, and at once a sullen chatter of laughter-like sound came from the men around them.

'I shouldn't giggle, if I were you,' said Licona. 'They have no sense of humour. Low-pitched noises like that are an insult to them.'

'Will they hurt us?' Krillie asked anxiously, accepting the presence of the girl as something quite natural.

'Not if you don't giggle at them,' she replied. The leader halted, and almost barked at her with a series of quick grunting sounds. These appeared to be some kind of order, for she turned swiftly, ran into an opening in the rock face and disappeared.

Kemlo was mystified at the appearance of Licona, whom he recognised as being an Earth-descendant. At least, he judged she must be, otherwise she would need space protection in the form of suiting and helmet and oxygen supply.

A number of women were grouped around a larger opening to the left of the one into which the girl had disappeared. They were smaller in build than the men, but very handsome with large eyes and well-shaped features. The high cheek bones were not so apparent and their mouths were more gentle. They watched with calm serious eyes, and Kemlo could not define any reaction that might bode ill for Krillie and himself.

He was excited and curious rather than afraid. He sensed that these large men with their strange laughter-like language were more or less friendly. Except when Krillie had giggled they showed no antagonism, and when they neared the large opening in the rock face most of them moved away from the four who were carrying Kemlo and Krillie and squatted on the rocks surrounding the opening.

Kemlo and Krillie were lifted from the broad shoulders and placed gently on their feet where, for a second or two, they bent almost double. But slowly they recovered their sense of balance and stood upright to see the leader beckoning to them.

Kemlo looked around at the men but could see no expression to tell him anything at all.

‘Keep calm, Krillie,’ he whispered to his friend, ‘and don’t giggle.’

‘I won’t,’ Krillie whispered fervently. ‘I wonder where we’re being taken?’

‘I expect they live in these caves,’ Kemlo replied as they walked toward the leader, who waited until they were about a yard from him, then turned and walked very slowly into the opening in the rock.

Kemlo was surprised to find that there was a soft glow of light permeating the whole of the entrance, and this grew brighter as they went farther along a high-domed passageway. The air was cooler, more fresh and, much of the strain of gravity pressure having left them, the boys were able to walk quite jauntily. The leader glanced behind and saw this. He quickened his pace and, after turning at right-angles to the main broad passageway, led them down a narrower channel until they came to a vaulted cave.

When they reached the cave Kemlo could see that light and air were drawn from numerous holes drilled all over the roof. At the base of each hole was a shutter which could be drawn over the hole to shut out light and air.

The cave was so large that the far sides were dim and full of shadows, but even so they could see tiers of shelf-like bunks with a base of thick grass. There was much furniture in the cave, all of a very light green wood which at first looked as if it had been painted; but as they came nearer to a long table, behind which sat three men, Kemlo saw that the wood was a natural colour.

The leader held up his hand to signify that they must stay where they were before he advanced to the table. Immediately there followed a babble of laughing grunts. Krillie was still so tickled by this method of speaking that Kemlo had to clamp a hand quickly over his friend’s mouth lest any giggling should get them both into serious trouble.

Behind the table a grey-bearded man sat in a throne-like chair. On his left was a large man who looked like a twin of the leader who had fetched Kemlo and Krillie; on his right an elderly man, also bearded and grey-haired and who wore the same sort of clothing—he, however, had different features. All four men now were gesticulating with their hands and laughing in varying cadences of sound to such an extent that Kemlo felt like giggling himself.

As Krillie was going almost purple in the face Kemlo removed his hand and let his friend draw deep breaths before he fell over. But Krillie's giggles seemed to have been cured. The leader turned from the table and walked toward one side of the cave. Kemlo saw the man in the throne-like chair beckoning to them, so, taking Krillie's arm, he walked closer to the table.

'Hun?' said the grey-bearded man in a questioning voice.

'I can't speak your language, sir,' said Kemlo very clearly.

'Haw-haw!' the grey-bearded man said, and waved a hand toward the man on his right.

Kemlo and Krillie received a shock when this man addressed them in English, although his voice held an odd mixture of American accent and an intonation of laughter. His eyes and expression were serious, and Kemlo quickly understood that the jolly sound of his voice was merely because he spoke the laughing language too.

'Are you from Earth, son?' he asked.

'No, sir.'

'Where, then?'

'Satellite Belt K.'

'One of *those* crazy things, huh? How come you landed here?'

Grasping Krillie's hand Kemlo told how they had gone to the space lanes to have fun, been caught in the spume-wake and spun through an astral storm.

'You're lucky,' said the man when Kemlo had finished speaking. 'You don't know how lucky!'

'Do you mean, we're among friends, sir?'

'Maybe you are, maybe you ain't,' the man replied non-committally. 'Depends upon how you behave.'

'Are we prisoners, sir?'

'That's for the Chief to say.'

'May I ask a question?' said Kemlo hesitantly.

'Ain't no law agin it.'

'Who are you, sir, and how is it you speak their language as well as ours?'

'Because I was born here. I'm the son of one of the space pioneers. My

gran'pa owned a mighty big ranch in Texas—you know where Texas is?’

Kemlo frowned in concentration for a moment, trying to remember his lessons. ‘It’s on Earth, I think. Yes, that’s right,’ he said brightly. ‘It’s a town on Earth.’

‘It’s on Earth but it ain’t no town—leastways, not so far as my gran’pa told me. In his days there was a sort of fuel that earned a lot of money for anyone who had it. Stuff they called oil, which same they found a lot of on gran’pa’s land. That made him a rich man in Earth terms and he started putting money into space ships and suchlike. He came up here with his family. He didn’t aim for here, but they crashed and, like it or not, they had to stay. My father was born here, and I was born here, and my daughter was born here.’

At this moment the old man in the throne-chair began grunting fiercely with short chuckles of sound.

‘The Chief doesn’t like my talking for so long without his knowing what I’m saying,’ the man explained. ‘He’ll be all right if I keep stopping to tell him what I’m saying. These Zanians are mighty fine people, but they’ve no sense of humour and they’re kind of jealous. Been trying to teach ’em our lingo for years, but they’ve got something in their throats that stops ’em from using any sounds but vowels. Do you understand what vowels mean, son?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Call me “Pete”,’ said the man, his eyes twinkling. ‘What’s your name and your friend’s?’

‘I’m Kemlo, and this is Krillie.’

‘Glad to know you both,’ said Pete courteously. ‘There’s only a handful of us on Zania to talk our lingo. We’re mighty proud of being able to talk properly and we keep to exactly the same way as our ancestors talked.’ Pete glanced at the Chief and made urgent sounds. The Chief’s head nodded emphatically in answer.

‘I’ve been telling Chief Aan that you’ve told me you always wanted to visit Zania because you heard how the people here were wonderful people who lived in a fine land.’

‘But I didn’t say anything of the sort,’ Kemlo protested. ‘We came here by accident.’

‘Will you quit making a technical argument out of this?’ said Pete with a warning look. ‘Chief Aan and the rest of them can’t understand our words but they’re very quick to sense a tone in the voice. You keep your voice nice and

friendly whenever they're around. Right now, they don't know what to do with you, and I figure you shouldn't stay here much longer in case your friend starts giggling again. These fellas are very strong and one swipe of the hand might pretty near knock your head off your shoulders. Now, without letting on that I've told you, we'll talk for a few moments, then you turn to the Chief, bow to him and make a little noise—like one short laugh, one long one, then two short ones. I can't show you how I mean, but do you understand?'

'I understand, Pete.'

'Well, when you've done that, you should find Chief Aan more friendly; then I'll suggest to him that we put you in Licona's charge.'

'Oh, we met her,' said Krillie eagerly. 'She's pretty.'

'She's my daughter,' said Pete proudly. 'Her mother's a Zanian. Licona just loves to speak proper words. Now, turn to the Chief,' he added in a lower voice.

Kemlo put one arm round Krillie's shoulders and turned so that both boys were facing the Chief. He gave a little bow and smiled. Trying hard to control the impulse to giggle, because it did seem rather foolish, he said:

'Ha—haaa—ha-ha!'

The effect was immediate. Chief Aan bobbed and jerked and his deep voice exploded in stuttering vowels of laughing sound.

The man on his left raised his hands and, clasping them together, kept moving them up and down as he also added his measure of sound.

'See what I mean?' Pete said slyly, and joined in the chorus of laughter. It died away as the Chief raised his hand.

'What did I say?' Kemlo asked Pete.

'You said you were so glad to be here and asked if you could stay.'

'But I——' Kemlo began in an agitated voice.

'No "buts",' said Pete quickly. 'You're here, and unless you want to get flattened into the ground every time your friend giggles you'd best get 'em on your side.' Pete turned to the Chief and conversed for a moment, after which Aan made signs to one of the men who had escorted the boys to the cave. These men left, and Kemlo realised suddenly that Chief Aan was gazing straight at him and laughing softly.

Bewildered and afraid that Krillie might start giggling again, because he could feel his friend's shoulders lifting in suppressed laughter, Kemlo blurted

out loudly:

‘Ha—haaa—ha-ha!’

There was no doubt that the Chief liked to hear those sounds, and so strong were the feelings of the men with him that Kemlo could literally feel the friendliness exuding from them. They were strange people, with fine physique and handsome features, yet Kemlo was strongly aware of a sensitivity. Pete had helped tremendously, but, now that his fear of the Zanian people had diminished, Kemlo began to understand that despite their peculiar and rather humorous manner of speaking they were highly intelligent and possibly more sensitive than any persons with whom he had come in contact on the Belt.

Krillie was not so receptive. Being younger he perhaps dealt more naturally with the physical things he could see and hear; but Kemlo, whose education was advanced, had been taught much of the indefinable science of psychology and the effect of personality upon different people.

Those lessons had been fairly exhaustive in his schooling on the Satellite Belt where it was explained that in the Universe around them there lived on many planets different types of beings. Some of them, despite their physical shape and appearance, were more developed in their minds than many Earthmen. Thus, to the children born in space, the Elders tried to give as much education as possible so that in later life, when they journeyed to other planets, they would be able to assess and even understand the manners and customs of those who inhabited any particular planet.

Kemlo remembered one extraordinary test which had taken place in a sensitivity examination. A dozen boys were in one of the school-rooms on the Satellite Belt sitting for this examination. One at a time the boys went outside the sound-proofed room and waited while the class, under the guidance of the teacher, concentrated upon a certain form of thought. It could be a happy thought or a sad one, an angry or an aggressive one. The boy outside was then summoned back into the room, but immediately turned his back upon his classmates to prevent his observing any expression on their faces, and without a word being spoken he had to concentrate upon the feeling which existed in that room. He then wrote what he felt upon his examination pad.

As he now stood facing Chief Aan, Pete and the other man at the table, Kemlo could not see the expression on the faces of the men who stood or sat so quietly behind him in the cave. Yet by concentrating he was able to receive a clear impression that had grown from a feeling of unhappiness and uncertainty to a steady calm influence. He knew that the Zanians gradually had become friendly. Without doubt the laughing sounds which Pete had told him

to make had done much to cause this. He looked at Krillie and whispered:

‘Keep very quiet, Krillie. Please don’t giggle. These people are friendly and if you follow what I do and don’t laugh, you’ll have so much to put in your diary that you’re bound to win the competition.’

‘Do you really think so?’ said Krillie, his effervescent spirits suddenly bubbling up to eagerness. ‘I’ll do just what you say, Kemlo, and I’ll watch ever so carefully. I don’t feel afraid any more.’

‘Nor do I,’ said Kemlo. ‘And we needn’t be, as long as we remember that these people have feelings and that we mustn’t upset them.’

‘Here’s Licona,’ said Krillie, turning sharply as the men the Chief had sent away now returned.

The girl came to the table. Standing very close to Kemlo but ignoring him she bowed toward the Chief and made sounds similar to those laughing expressions Pete had taught the boy.

The Chief returned the sounds in a gentle voice. Kemlo noticed that he looked at Licona with pride. The girl then turned to her father, bowed and said:

‘Is it true that I am to be responsible for these two boys, Father?’

‘I thought you’d like it, Licona,’ said Pete gravely. ‘The Chief agrees.’

‘I’d love it,’ Licona said, and bowed again to the Chief.

The Chief nodded and raised his hand, and at that signal Licona said to Kemlo:

‘Follow me, but bow to the Chief before we go.’

Both Kemlo and Krillie bowed low before they turned away from the table.

‘I’ll see you later, son,’ said Pete quietly as Kemlo and Krillie followed the girl across the cave.

They had gone only about half-way across the floor when three Zanians hurried into the cave. All were wounded, but two were helping the third man, who appeared to be more seriously injured.

Immediately Kemlo felt the tension snap down and all the friendliness disappear. He did not need Licona’s urging voice to say: ‘Hurry, we must leave quickly!’ to tell him that something had happened that could be dangerous to himself and his friend.

Chapter 5

THE ANGRY HUNTERS

LICONA hurried them so quickly from the cave that by the time they had reached the exit Kemlo was half carrying Krillie and was almost exhausted himself.

Licona saw their plight and made signs to a young Zanian who stood with some of the women at the side of the cave entrance, then spoke to him in his language. The youth picked up Krillie, and Licona said to Kemlo:

‘You’re stronger than your friend—put your arm around my shoulder.’

The sudden exertion in the rush from the cave and the now increasing gravity pull left Kemlo breathless and so weary that he made no argument.

Licona was surprisingly strong and very agile, and Kemlo had no difficulty, with her help, in keeping his flagging muscles working.

The young man carried Krillie as if he were no weight at all, and Kemlo saw that they now were climbing up a zig-zagging path around a shoulder of the lava rock formation. He and Licona went more slowly and the youth, glancing back, paused to allow them to catch up. He was a little taller than Kemlo, with muscular shoulders and the same handsome features as the older man.

Soon they left the path and crossed a plateau where the red bush-like vegetation was profuse. The young Zanian led the way through a gap in the bushes, disappeared for a moment around a sharp angle of rock and began the long climb up to the summit.

The movement and his deep breathing brought much of Kemlo’s strength back, and now he did not need to lean so heavily upon Licona. By the time they reached the top he was able to move almost unaided.

Surprise awaited them at the summit, which was a broad smooth expanse of grey rock. They crossed this flat expanse and stood for a moment on the rim. The young Zanian set Krillie on his feet and held him while the boy slowly flexed his limbs and assured himself that he was able to stand without

help.

The far side of the rock formation was very different, and nowhere near as steep as the one they had just ascended. Numbers of wide steps cut in the rock led down to terraces. From these more steps led downward until they reached the valley below. On each terrace was a dome-like dwelling which appeared to have been hewn out of the rock. Some of the terraces had the red long-leafed bushes growing in carefully tended patterns, and here and there clumps of deep blue flowers gave added colour.

In the valley, Kemlo could see numbers of small creatures grazing. They appeared to be dappled with grey markings, though he could see these colourings clearly only when the animals stood still; when they moved they seemed to merge into the blue-grey scene surrounding them.

Some distance from where the animals were grazing was a dark oblong sheen which, for all its lack of movement, could be a lake or a highly polished surface of rock.

‘Feeling better?’ said Licona, smiling at Kemlo.

‘Yes, I feel better,’ he admitted. ‘Thanks for your help.’ He turned to Krillie and asked: ‘How are you feeling?’

‘My legs are shaky and my shoulders keep wanting to drop forward,’ Krillie replied, ‘but I’m better than when we left the cave.’

‘What are your names?’ the girl asked.

They introduced themselves, then glanced at the Zanian youth who stood with arms folded watching them gravely.

‘That’s Ton,’ said Licona. ‘He’s a’—she frowned in concentration for a second—‘a sort of cousin, I think.’

‘Don’t you know?’ said Kemlo with a grin.

‘Yes, I do know,’ she replied spiritedly, ‘only I was trying to make sure you understood. You’re Earth-boys, aren’t you?’

‘We live on a Satellite Belt. I suppose we’re like you—we’re descended from Earth-people.’

‘It’s very difficult,’ Licona sighed. ‘Father has told me everything about Earth and we’ve got a lot of books. The Zanians don’t read, you know, but our families have been here so long, we’re all sort of mixed up. We live like them and we’re all good friends, but there are a lot of things we do and they don’t—or won’t,’ she added. ‘Father is very keen on our remembering the Earth ways

and language which were handed down to us. He says that one day, when the Zanians have learned sense, this could be a great country.'

'Do you attack Earth-men if they land here, generally?'

'Not unless they laugh at the Zanians—and most of them have done up to now,' she replied. 'You two are the first people who look and talk like ourselves that we've spoken to. We've seen several others and there are some here now.'

'Some here now!' Kemlo exclaimed. 'Where?'

'Over there beyond the Kris lake. You can't see from here because there's another ridge of rock. A rocket ship was forced down there some time ago. Father says those big things can only land on rock, and over there it's nearly all rock.'

'But how did his ancestors land here?' Kemlo asked.

'They landed very near where you did. The rocket just sank and sank until it was swallowed up. You see, this land keeps changing shape. Father says it's not settled properly yet and it will grow firmer; in fact, he says, when his grandparents landed it was so soft you just couldn't walk properly.'

'There's an awful lot I don't understand,' said Kemlo. 'If there's a ship over on the rocky part, why haven't we seen any of the people who came in it, and why didn't your father and the Chief say anything about them?'

'Because they're controlled by the hunters,' she explained. 'The hunters are the men who get food for everybody and act as protectors. Even the Chief has to obey them sometimes. They're great fighters and they can run faster than any wood beast.'

'Wood beast?'

'You know what a mountain lion is like?' she asked. 'I've never seen one, of course, but we have books that show pictures of them. Well, the wood beast is like a mountain lion, and they live in the woods. The hunters catch them and rear them, then kill them for food.'

'What food do you eat?'

'We don't eat much wood beast, but the Zanians do. Those red bushes have a delicious berry and the blue flowers are like . . .' She hesitated. 'Oh, it's difficult to explain, but we drink lots of a sort of fruit drink made from the berries, and we eat the blue flowers and small shoots of other vegetables. Occasionally we have small portions of wood beast, but it has to be cooked

very thoroughly—otherwise it upsets us.’

‘This is fun,’ said Krillie, ‘think of all the things I’ve got to write about.’

‘Do you write, Krillie?’ Licona asked. ‘I love reading, but I’ve read everything we’ve got here, over and over and over.’

‘We’ve got lots of books to read on the Belt,’ said Krillie. ‘Haven’t we, Kemlo?’

‘It seems we’ve got lots to talk about too,’ said Kemlo. ‘But as we don’t know what’s going to happen and everything is so strange, perhaps Licona would tell us more about Zania.’

‘There isn’t much to tell,’ she said.

‘The rocket ship that’s over on the rocky side—could I get to see the people?’ Kemlo asked.

‘I suppose you could,’ she said rather doubtfully. ‘But if the hunters caught you they might kill you.’

‘Kill us!’ Krillie yelled. ‘Jumping moonbeams! I thought everyone was so friendly on this planet? They can’t be, if you’ve got a lot of fellows who go around killing people.’

‘Licona didn’t say they *would* kill us,’ said Kemlo soothingly. ‘She only said they might.’

‘“Might” is enough for me,’ said Krillie emphatically. ‘Anyway, that old rocket ship is nothing to do with us.’

‘But there are people on it,’ Kemlo insisted. ‘They are bound to be Earth-people. Only the Martians have space transport also, and they keep to their own orbit.’ He turned to the girl and asked: ‘I don’t understand how your Chief can treat us in a friendly way yet allow your hunters to fight Earth-men who come in a rocket ship.’

Licona sighed and was silent for a few moments before she replied slowly: ‘Grown-ups are awfully difficult. I don’t care whether they’re real Zanians or descendants of Earth-people, like Father and Gran’pa. You’ve a right to be puzzled because it puzzles me too. The only way I can explain it now is that your own little rocket——’

‘It’s not a rocket,’ Krillie interrupted. ‘It’s a space scooter, and only boys in the highest grade of the technical classes on our Satellite Belt can use them.’

‘I’m sure it’s very wonderful,’ said Licona with admirable flattery.

‘Stop interrupting, Krillie—it’s rude,’ said Kemlo. ‘Go on, please, Licon: try and explain it so that we can understand.’

‘Well, your scooter is very small and couldn’t contain many people, and as you landed so soon before the blue veil is expected, everyone was sure that you had been thrown off your course by the astral storm.’

‘I get more mixed up,’ said Krillie. ‘What’s the blue veil. Something you wear?’

‘No, silly!’ said Licon in the manner of an elder sister to a young nuisance of a brother. ‘How do you think our vegetation lives if we don’t have moisture? Zania is situated in the path of the astral storms. Father says they were terribly fierce when he was young, but they are less fierce now. When an astral storm centre touches the hills, it breaks up and lies like a blue veil over everything, which grows much colder and very, very damp.’

‘You mean, like’—Kemlo hesitated, trying to remember his history lessons—‘like clouds of rain?’

‘You mean, like Noah’s Ark and the floods on Earth? I’ve read about that in the Big Book,’ said Licon. ‘Well, we don’t get so much water, but after the blue veil has lifted, everything is fresh and all the vegetation is wet and the Kris lake is nearly full to overflowing.’

‘So the Zanians and your father thought that as it was such a small ship and we were only boys, there was no need to be afraid?’

‘Something like that,’ she admitted. ‘You see, Kemlo, a space ship must be landed on very solid ground, which means that unless they have to crash-land, as my ancestors did, they always try for the rocky ground beyond those rock walls. Also, it can carry a lot of men. Sometimes a space ship has come and the people in it have used dreadful weapons and killed the Zanians and carried off women and children.’

‘That’s bad,’ said Kemlo seriously. ‘They have no right to do that.’

‘Some of them think they have every right,’ she said with surprising bitterness. ‘It makes me ashamed that those people come from the planet where my ancestors were born. And now any time a space ship is sighted near Zania, all the Zanians go and live in the caves where they used to live years before my gran’pa and others taught them how to build little homes like these on the terraces. The only Zanians who are allowed on this side of the terraces’—she pointed toward the valley and the lake and the distant rock walls—‘are the hunters.’

‘But that rocket ship might remain here a long time if it’s out of action.’

‘It might,’ she agreed. ‘Why do they always bring guns and horrible weapons with them?’ She spoke angrily. ‘The Zanians are happy and peaceful people. The men are very strong, but they only attack bad things.’

‘What bad things have you got on Zania?’

‘Well, the wood beasts, for one. They’re treacherous and they kill our animals.’ She pointed to the herd grazing in the valley below. ‘Our prairie deer,’ she said.

‘Prairie deer!’ Kemlo exclaimed. ‘Who called them that?’

‘My grandparents. They brought the animals with them, and you ought to hear Father tell how much trouble they had in trying to rear them; but they succeeded and now we have small herds which give lovely milk. When they die, we sometimes use their skins for bed covers.’

‘Don’t you ever kill them and eat them?’

‘Oh, no!’ she said in a shocked voice. ‘No-one ever kills a prairie deer. But the wood beasts, if the hunters don’t lay snares all along the edge of the forest and trap them, would come out and destroy all the deer. Then there’s the Kris reptile. He comes out of the lake at times, and if he scents any of the Zanians he’ll chase them. He’s very fast. If he catches them, he kills them. So the hunters protect the Zanians against the Kris reptile and the wood beasts. But really they are nothing to be afraid of, because the hunters are fine men and know just what to do. It’s the space ships that worry the Chief—and all of us. Of course,’ she added thoughtfully, ‘this is only the second space ship to stay any time, but the others have come to see what sort of a place this is, and have made the hunters angry. And if you make the hunters angry, you might as well go away as fast as you can because they’ll never forgive you.’ She fixed Krillie with a stern gaze. ‘And if certain people keep giggling—that’s just as bad as laughing at the people who use the sound of laughter as their language. Do you understand, little Krillie?’

‘I’m not so little,’ Krillie retorted, ‘and I’m not stupid either. I don’t want to laugh at their silly old language. It sounded funny, that’s all.’

‘But that is what these Zanians don’t understand,’ she said quietly, ‘and that is why the men in the rocket ship can’t venture past that rock wall. Not one of them has had the sense yet to try to understand the Zanians. Once you have proved to the Zanian that you are bad, then it’s hopeless to try to make friends with him.’

‘But none of the people on that ship could understand the language,’ said Kemlo. ‘Why don’t you or your father or somebody who speaks their language go with the hunters and explain to them?’

‘That sounds sensible, I suppose,’ Licona replied, ‘but it’s not so easy. The hunters are the defenders of the Zanians. They have the quickest minds and the strongest physique and they protect everyone. If *they* say you don’t go’—she shrugged slim shoulders—‘you just don’t go. If Father tried to cross the valley and over the far rock barrier to the ship, the hunters would set on him.’

‘But why doesn’t he explain what he could do by going to them?’

‘I’ve just told you,’ she said in a tired voice. ‘We *can’t* explain to the hunters. Father says it will take another generation for the Zanians to understand anything more than the simplest feelings. They are very, very simple people, and once they have decided that certain things are bad, you can’t argue with them. Now, the younger ones, like Ton . . .’ She smiled at the youth who had remained passive but interested while they had been talking, his brilliant eyes looking from one to the other as they spoke. ‘Ton is a good example of the younger Zanians,’ she went on. ‘I’ve talked to him a lot about the rocket ship, and he and some of his friends are willing to go and try to make peace with the people in it, but it’s even beyond Ton’s ability to learn more than a few words of our language. They just can’t talk, Kemlo.’ She broke off the wordy conversation to converse with Ton in the soft laughing vowels. The youth answered with great eagerness, waving his hands in graceful actions as he voiced those vowels, each of which to Kemlo’s ears now was noticeable in its different inflexion of tone.

‘Ton understands a lot of these things,’ said Licona, ‘and he likes you and Krillie. He wants me to teach you how to talk to him.’ Suddenly she stepped back and turned sharply.

Kemlo looked to see what had disturbed her and saw, coming toward them, a dozen large men whose grunting voices did not sound friendly.

‘It’s the hunters!’ Licona whispered tensely. ‘They want you and your friend!’

Chapter 6

HOSTAGES

THE more Kemlo heard the laughing language of the Zanians, the more he realised that it was quite a sensible language, despite the fact that when he had first heard it, like Krillie, he had wanted to giggle.

The tones of the vowels had a number of different pitches, rather like a range of musical notes. He supposed that there was a key to the language which first would have to be learned. It seemed to him that the answer lay in being able to associate the inflexion in the voice with the particular subject being discussed.

The hunters now were voluble and the tone of their deep-throated laughter was sharp and almost threatening. Licona was doing her best to make them change their minds, and although these large men treated her with courtesy, it was obvious that she was not convincing them.

‘They insist on taking you, Kemlo,’ she said in a resigned voice. ‘I keep on telling them that you don’t know those Earth-people on the stranded rocket ship, but they say you are like them in appearance, and if the Earth-men see you are prisoners they will give up their guns.’

‘Guns!’ Kemlo exclaimed. ‘Why are they using guns against the Zanians? The hunters are not armed.’

‘That is what made them angry in the first place,’ she said. ‘They use terrible weapons that fire a sort of spark.’

‘A sort of spark!’ Krillie repeated. ‘That’s a ray gun.’

‘They shouldn’t be using guns at all,’ said Kemlo. He saw that the hunters were becoming impatient, so he moved quickly to Licona’s side and said urgently: ‘Ask them if they will let me speak and you translate for me.’

Licona made emphatic sounds and waved her hands toward Kemlo.

The hunters had halted only a pace away. They were fine men with heavily muscled shoulders and clear reddish-brown skins. Their size and fierce appearance made them look forbidding, yet Kemlo sensed a certain gentleness,

particularly when they conversed with the girl. He decided that perhaps they were not so very different from the space police, who were assigned to the Satellite Belt. Those men also looked extremely fierce in their uniforms, but Kemlo was aware that they were friendly and likeable when you got to know them.

Being well trained to understand atmosphere among any group of people, Kemlo relied now upon this training, and sensed that while the hunters might be strong and fierce, they were not cruel. In wanting him and Krillie as hostages they were trying only to protect their own people and make the Earth-men relinquish their terrible weapons.

‘They will listen, but you’ll have to speak quickly,’ said Licona.

The hunters were silent now, all of them gazing steadfastly at Kemlo. At first he was nervous, but being aware that a great deal might hang in the balance at this moment his voice grew clearer and his attitude more confident. He was very careful to keep his voice low-pitched, and endeavoured to give a lilt of laughter to his words—a sort of friendly laughter.

‘Tell them, we are friends of the Zanians and that you and your father and other relatives on Zania are of my people. The Earth-men in the ship are also of my people, but they do not dwell in the outer worlds and therefore are ignorant of many things. They use the guns because they are afraid, but they will not be afraid to fight. I say the Earth-men are wrong to use guns and if the hunters will let me go with them, I will tell the Earth-men they are wrong and the Zanians are right.’

Kemlo paused, not wanting to say too much in case Licona would lose the thread of translating it, and waited while she conveyed his meaning to them. His words must have had some effect, for the hunters grouped together closely and stared at him with more friendly eyes. When the girl had finished translating, the leader of the hunters nodded, as if to say: ‘We understand—tell him to go on.’

‘They are listening, Kemlo,’ said Licona. ‘What else have you to say?’

‘Tell them, I will go with them willingly, but my friend Krillie is much younger and he should not be frightened by being made to act as a hostage. Tell them, I have been taught to believe that young children should be protected. I believe the Zanians are a kind and gentle people who understand the same things.’

Again he waited, and this time as Licona translated he saw the hunters show genuine signs of feeling.

‘They are very concerned at what you say,’ said Licona. ‘The Zanians are proud of their children, so it is easy for them to understand what you mean. They are willing for you to go to the ship. But I must go too.’

‘No!’ said Kemlo sharply. ‘It’s not right that the hunters should take a girl where there is danger.’

‘I’m not going to translate that,’ she replied stubbornly. ‘The hunters will take care that nothing happens to me; but if I don’t go with you, how else will they know what you say to the Earth-men?’

Krillie had, of course, been listening to this conversation. He now ran to Kemlo’s side and said in a pleading voice: ‘Don’t leave me, Kemlo. Let me go with you.’

‘You shouldn’t go with me,’ said Kemlo, putting his arm around his friend’s shoulders. ‘What would your father say if he knew I was letting you run the risk of being hit by a flash from a ray gun?’ Kemlo looked at Licona. ‘Where can Krillie stay?’

‘With Ton,’ Licona replied, and spoke rapidly to the young Zanian, who immediately nodded and smiled at Krillie.

Krillie looked doubtful.

‘But I can’t talk to him and he can’t talk to me,’ he complained.

‘You could try learning his language, couldn’t you?’ Kemlo suggested. ‘You’re going to look very silly putting all this in your diary and then having to confess that you couldn’t even learn any of the Zanians’ language.’

Krillie looked at his friend, then at the grinning Ton. ‘It would sound silly,’ he admitted. ‘Will Licona tell Ton I want to try and learn how he speaks?’

Ton’s reaction to this question was to move toward Krillie and lift the boy on to his shoulder, making eager chuckling sounds.

‘Say—hu—hu,’ said Licona to Krillie.

‘Hu—hu,’ said Krillie dutifully, copying Licona’s tone as far as possible.

Ton at once jabbered back to Krillie and, turning, bounded off, giving Krillie no more time for argument. They disappeared down the flight of steps leading to the dwellings below.

The hunters closed around Kemlo and one of them lifted him on to his shoulder. Another did the same with Licona, and in a few moments the big swift-footed men were racing down the zigzag steps on the far side of the lava rock formation until they came to the valley, which they crossed at such a

speed that Kemlo felt breathless.

It was difficult to assess time on the planet Zania. Kemlo had a micro-watch that said ten-past-ten, but he had no idea whether, like the instruments on the space scooter, the tiny magnetised movement was affected by gravity. In any case, time as assessed on the Satellite Belt was only a habit of a people who had come from Earth to build the Belt. Kemlo knew from his history lessons that Earth had a light and a dark period in twenty-four hours, and for the regular running of life on the Satellite Belt the people maintained the clock system; each clock face being numbered from one to twenty-four. He looked across at Licon and, after taking a few deep breaths to make sure he had some left to make conversation, he asked:

‘Does it ever become dark here?’

‘It becomes very dim when the blue veil comes,’ she replied. ‘Is it dark where you come from?’

‘No, it’s always light—very bright, and yet it has a blue tinge.’

‘You mean, like our blue veil?’

‘No, I mean that all around you there’s a sort of light with a deep blue background. Do you have clocks on Zania?’

‘What are clocks?’

‘You’d know them if you had them,’ he said with a grin.

‘Oh, I know what you mean,’ she said. ‘Father’s got some bright metal things he calls watches and clocks, I remember, but he doesn’t use them for anything.’

‘But you must be able to measure time in some way.’

‘We measure it by the blue veil. When that comes, we know it’s time to rest and practise.’

‘Practise what?’

‘Music and chanting and moulding the green bark into vessels and ornaments. And, of course, making clothes and dressing hair. All sorts of things are saved for the blue veil.’

‘But if you don’t have a time system, how do you know when to eat and sleep?’

‘When we are hungry and tired.’

And the reason was so simple that it cut short any more questions Kemlo

might have asked on the subject.

The hunters now were skirting the edge of the Kris lake and swinging in a diagonal line toward another lava rock barrier. Kemlo thought of this as lava rock because it looked like the pictures of such formations he had seen on the lesson slides in school. These large coloured pictures which were used to amplify the lesson showed lava rock formations on Earth and parts of the moon.

The rock formations on Zania were so similar to these pictures as to be indistinguishable. They even had the same reddish tinge, but this only from a distance, and Kemlo realised as they neared the next barrier across the planet that the tinge was emphasised by the colour of bushes which grew out of crevices.

The hunters seemed tireless, and the two who carried Kemlo and Licona kept pace easily with the others. As the strangeness and, he admitted to himself, some of the fear left him, Kemlo's mind was filled with many questions; but he knew there was a limit to how many he could ask until, perhaps after this period of tension was over, he and Licona and her father could be quietly at ease.

But as they neared the lower slopes of the rock barrier Kemlo decided there was one question he could ask her.

'How do you judge distance, Licona? Like the distance between the rock barrier we have just left and this one?'

'Well, all the Earth-people use Earth measurements of feet and yards and miles. But the Zanians seem to judge distance without using terms like those. Distance to the hunters, for example, is measured by their physical ability to cover it without stopping. I've seen the hunters run their races.' She smiled at Kemlo as she added: 'They play a lot of games, like racing and hand battles. I've seen them run at least four times between the two rock barriers.'

Kemlo glanced back and tried to assess the distance, but he was trained mostly in terms of leenas, which was essentially a space term, and although he knew from his lessons that basic computations by Earth-men were made in miles and light miles, he had no experience of judging such things. He knew that the Satellite Belt was approximately three miles in circumference, but that was the only example he had to measure distance in the terms of Zania.

'Then how many miles would you say is the distance between the rock barriers?'

'Exactly eight miles,' Licona replied promptly. 'The Earth-people have

surveyed the planet thoroughly, and every distance has been measured carefully.’

‘All over the planet?’

‘No, not all over. Beyond the woods is the larger part of the planet—a vast expanse which Father and the others estimate to be nearly two thousand miles deep. But it’s impossible to walk on it.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it isn’t really settled yet. The ground is still very soft, and you just sink down and disappear. There’s no sign of plant growth, but slowly it’s filling out and eventually it will become like this part. Any more questions?’ She grinned at him.

‘I didn’t mean to ask all those really,’ said Kemlo ruefully. ‘It’s just that there are so many things I want to know. Your hunters must be very fine men to run that distance.’

‘You’ll have to save your questions now,’ said Licona as the hunters reached the rocks and began to climb up the jagged slope.

The hunter who was carrying Licona went on ahead and they all proceeded in single file, which prevented any more questioning by Kemlo.

At last they reached the summit and halted beneath a great archway of rock curved like a canopy above the large plateau. The hunters lowered Kemlo and Licona to the ground. The leader beckoned to Kemlo and at the same time spoke to Licona. The tone of his laughing sounds were sharply urgent.

‘He has ordered me to stay here,’ Licona translated, ‘but he wants you to go with them.’

‘And leave you alone?’ Kemlo protested.

‘No, two of the hunters will stay with me.’

‘Will you be all right?’ Kemlo asked.

‘I shall be all right,’ she said, smiling at him. ‘You’re very thoughtful. Go with them and they will see that nothing happens to you. They like you.’

‘I like them,’ Kemlo said, and had to check himself quickly for he was going to laugh and add some joking remark. Of all the strange things on this planet, surely, he thought, the most difficult was to be unable to laugh naturally without insulting these Zanians!

He walked toward the leader and, as he did so, the other hunters closed

around him, making a living wall of protection, and Kemlo could see nothing through any space between their bodies.

They crossed the plateau and descended a narrow rough-hewn lane. Grey rock face reared up on each side and although the men were now in single file Kemlo still could see nothing. When they came to a broad ledge where the lane belled out, the hunters immediately closed around him again.

The leader halted before they emerged from behind the shelter of rocks on each side. Then he peered around the edge and beckoned to Kemlo, making soft chuckling sounds.

Joining the leader Kemlo was surprised to find the man's arm go around his shoulders and grip him gently but firmly so as to prevent him from exposing too much of his body beyond the rock edge. By signs and gestures the leader made him understand that he was to look around the rock, and this Kemlo did.

He saw a huge bronze-coloured rocket ship resting on its extended cradle. The burnished gleam of its hull was dulled by great streaks where it had caught the cosmic currents on its way through the upper air. These streaks were burn marks, caused by the twisting hurtling speed of the shell searing across the cosmic currents. Too much of such treatment and the shell would melt, the rocket would burst and the wreckage scatter, to lie suspended in the infinite space.

The ship had been landed well and did not appear to have outward damage. It stood upon a wide flat rock base. In fact the whole of the terrain from the foot of the rock barrier was a comparatively smooth and rippling area of grey rock, with the inevitable red bushes growing from the crannies and gullies which criss-crossed it.

Kemlo drew back and by signs indicated to the leader that it would be safe to have Licona behind the rocks, and that unless she came there was no way in which he could explain anything. It took him some time to make the leader understand this, but when he did he sent one of the hunters back to fetch the girl. When she joined them Kemlo said:

'Tell him there is nobody in sight near the rocket, but I will try to attract attention by waving my white handkerchief. That is a signal they might understand.'

When she had translated this, the leader nodded. Kemlo took the handkerchief from his pocket and began waving it up and down slowly.

The hunters clustered behind him, keeping Licona well back against the

rock face.

Kemlo waved the handkerchief until his arms ached, and he was about to stop and suggest another method of attracting attention when, with a hiss and a roar, the deadly charges of ray guns slammed against the rock above their heads and bounced and shivered into violet fragments.

One of the hunters gave a long moaning cry, and when Kemlo turned to look at him he saw that the man's arm was smoking and withered where he had been hit by one of the rays which had bounced off the rock.

Turning back Kemlo saw fury living in the eyes of the leader and fierce anger on the face of every hunter.

Licona was white-faced and her eyes pleaded with Kemlo as she said:

'You've got to stop them using those guns, Kemlo. You've *got* to!'

Chapter 7

THE MEN FROM EARTH

A PART from the real danger of the ray guns, Kemlo realised that even the threat of guns would have upset the Zanians. He thought that the people in the rocket ship must be very frightened—and also very foolish. Then he remembered the injured men who had come into the cave as Krillie and he left with Licona. He turned to the girl and said:

‘Those hunters who came into the cave weren’t wounded by ray guns. How is it that they went close enough to the ship without being fired on?’

‘I don’t know how to explain it,’ said Licona in a puzzled manner, and looking at the leader she jabbered away quickly to him. When this interchange was finished she said: ‘Aayo, son of Aan, says you should be made to understand that the Zanians are a simple people who live in peace. Until the coming of the space and rocket ships there was no trouble here. My father’s people didn’t use guns but only their minds to seek friendship with the Zanians.’

‘What has that got to do with these men?’ It was Kemlo’s turn to be puzzled.

‘It is Aayo’s way of explaining that Zanians have strict ways of living among themselves and do not wish for any interference. It’s so difficult to translate because they haven’t the same meanings to fit the words I use. The wounded men were . . .’ She frowned in concentration, then shrugged. ‘I suppose you would call them learners,’ she said. ‘They are young men who wish to be hunters, but before they can become a hunter they have to live for a certain time in caves beyond where the rocket ship is standing. These caves are the last habitable part of Zania. They stand at the edge of the Endless Sea.’

‘You mean, there is water—as they have on Earth?’

‘No, it’s the land which is not yet formed. It’s always moving, and my father and our people call it a sea. The Zanians don’t have a name for it. Well, it was those young men who met a party from the rocket ship. They would not have fought, but because they are training to be hunters it’s natural for them to

engage in hand battles with anyone they meet. Aayo says that being young and foolish they thought the Earth-men in their space suits were fair game.'

'Did the Earth-men beat them?'

'Aayo says they were beaten but not with fists.'

'The Earth-men probably had metal sounding-rods or some other instruments with them,' said Kemlo thoughtfully. He drew a deep breath as if he had made his decision, and added: 'Well, talking here isn't going to solve very much. Will you tell Aayo I am going to try and attract the attention of the men in the ship by shouting to them in their own language?'

'I'll tell him.'

Aayo listened gravely, then held a muttered conversation with the other hunters. At last he looked directly at Kemlo and almost barked:

'Heo—hu—heo!' The vowels were short-clipped like sharp explosive laughter.

'He says you may try. If you throw your voice against the rock it will be magnified and echo back and the men in the ship might hear it.'

'All right,' said Kemlo. 'I'll try.'

Directing his voice at the rock face and making it as loud and clear as possible he yelled: 'Stop firing your guns. I am a friend. My ancestors were Earth-people. Let me come to your ship so that we can talk.'

After the first few words he had to slow down his manner of speaking because the echoes ran the words one into the other. Then he waited. When the echoes had completely died away and no answer came from the rocket ship, Kemlo again raised his voice and repeated his message.

This time there was a response. There came a humming sound which Kemlo recognised as power being fed through an amplifier. The speaker crackled once or twice before a very magnified voice reached them clearly.

'How do we know you speak the truth?' the voice said. 'Show yourself so that we can decide. Answer.'

Kemlo waited while Licon translated these words. Aayo shook his head violently and jabbered to Licon.

'Aayo says not to trust them. He says if you show yourself they will fire their guns and perhaps you will die and he and his friends would be very sorry.'

‘Tell Aayo I’ve *got* to show myself,’ said Kemlo. ‘They have special glasses on those rocket ships, and when they look through them and see me, it will be as if I’m almost on top of them. There won’t be any mistake then about whether I belong to Earth-people or not. Tell Aayo I’ve got to try.’

But Aayo was still unconvinced. Kemlo decided nothing could be furthered by keeping up this argument behind the rocks, so he raised his voice again and called:

‘My friends think you will kill me with your guns if I show myself.’

‘I won’t translate,’ said Licona quickly, ‘if only they’ll answer fast.’

And the answer did come fast after the echoes had died away.

‘Come out from behind your shelter,’ said the voice over the speaker. ‘We promise not to fire guns.’

Aayo and the hunters could not understand the words, but they were not slow to see Kemlo’s intentions. Aayo moved to stop him, but Kemlo swung quickly and broke from the shelter of the rocks.

His first action had been fast enough, but being unused to so much gravity around him he tired very quickly and stumbled to his knees. Slowly, laboriously, he stood upright.

‘It’s a boy!’ exclaimed the voice through the speaker from the rocket ship. ‘All right, son, we won’t fire any guns at you. Did they throw you out from behind those rocks?’

‘No—I stumbled.’ Kemlo had to turn to face the rocks in order to throw the echo back, and he noticed with despair that his voice was growing weaker. Also he felt very tired. ‘I am not used to gravity,’ he called. ‘I cannot stand up for long or move fast, but I want to come and speak with you. Will you wait for me and not fire your guns or upset my friends any more?’

There was a silence following his words. It seemed that the men in the rocket ship were holding a consultation. Then the voice answered:

‘Take some rest, son. When you’re ready to come and see us, give us a hail.’

‘I can’t come inside your ship,’ Kemlo replied. ‘You need space suits to come out, but I can’t live in the air you use inside the ship.’

‘All right,’ said the voice. ‘We’ll meet you outside, but make sure your friends don’t try any tricks.’

‘I’m going back now.’ Kemlo tried to make his voice as loud as possible,

but the tiredness was heavy upon him.

Licona and Aayo helped him back behind the rocks, where he lay down. Licona, of course, had heard and understood the exchange between Kemlo and the voice from the rocket ship, and she explained to Aayo how Kemlo was affected by the gravity pull.

‘Aayo says you are to rest,’ said Licona to Kemlo. ‘He is sending one of the hunters for some food.’

‘Food!’ Kemlo exclaimed weakly. ‘Perhaps that is what’s the matter with me! Do you think I could eat your food, Licona?’

‘Why not? It surely can’t hurt you.’

‘I suppose not,’ Kemlo agreed wearily.

The hunters were grouped around him, gazing down with a look of concern in their eyes. By now, Aayo had explained to them what Kemlo had done and why he felt as he did. The hunters were very interested, and one or two of them bent down and touched Kemlo’s face with the backs of their hands—a gentle, almost caressing motion. As they did this they chuckled softly in a reassuring manner.

Soon the hunter who had been sent to fetch food returned with a gourd. It was made of the same green wood as the table at which Chief Aan had sat, and was shaped like a pear with a long slender neck and a curved lip.

‘Drink this slowly,’ said Licona, taking the gourd from the hunter and holding the lip near Kemlo’s mouth.

‘Has he been all the way back to the other rocks to get it?’ Kemlo asked in a weak but surprised voice.

‘No. The hunters have stores of these flasks at different points, so that they don’t ever have to travel far for food. Try it, Kemlo—it won’t hurt you, I’m sure.’

With some doubt, but now aware that he was very hungry and that his weakness might be partly due to lack of nourishment, Kemlo took a sip. The liquid tasted sweet and cool and had a nutty flavour. He drank some more, then looked up at Licona and around at the watching hunters, and grinned.

‘It’s good,’ he declared. ‘I like it.’

‘Drink some more,’ said Licona. ‘Your voice is growing stronger already. Perhaps your throat was dry?’

‘It feels warming, yet the drink is cold,’ Kemlo said, and drank some more

before he added: 'Where is the hunter who was wounded?'

'He has been taken back. How do you feel now?'

'Still awfully tired, but a lot more refreshed. Will you ask Aayo if he minds my lying here a little longer? I'm sure the drink will do me good and I shall be able to stand up soon.'

The girl looked up at Aayo who, almost as soon as she had finished speaking, made undeniable signs and sounds that Kemlo was to stay until he felt strong enough to move.

An idea suddenly came to Kemlo.

'The men in the ship know how the gravity pull upsets me,' he said to Licona. 'Why don't I crawl out there again and ask them if Aayo could carry me on his shoulder? Surely they wouldn't be afraid of just one man with me?'

'That sounds a very sensible idea,' Licona agreed enthusiastically, and she communicated it to Aayo, but the leader of the hunters did not seem quite so eager.

'It's not because he's afraid,' Licona explained. 'Aayo isn't afraid of anything, but he doesn't trust them.'

'He doesn't have to bother about trusting them,' said Kemlo. 'They won't hurt me, and it's his one chance to show the men in the ship that he can be friendly.'

Licona added her argument to the discussion going on between the hunters, and at last Aayo spoke and made signs to Kemlo of his consent.

Kemlo now felt considerably stronger, almost strong enough to stand up; but he decided it would look better if he crawled from behind the rock shelter. No doubt the men in the rocket ship would still be watching in his direction.

Slowly he moved out until he was well clear of the rock shelter and in open view of the ship. He faced the wall and hailed them.

'It's no good,' he called. 'I'm not strong enough to come on my own. I shall have to be carried by one of the Zanians. You don't mind *one*, do you?'

'Is this a trick?' the voice demanded.

'How can it be?' Kemlo called. 'I shall be carried on his shoulders. He couldn't do any harm, but you must promise me you won't harm *him*.'

There was such a long silence that Licona whispered urgently: 'Come back, Kemlo!'

But before Kemlo could reply the speaker blared again.

‘All right, we agree.’ The voice paused and then asked: ‘Did you call them—Zanians?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s a crazy name!’ said the voice.

‘This is known as the Crazy Planet,’ Kemlo replied. ‘Before we start out there is one important thing you must know. The Zanians use a language that sounds like laughter, but if we laugh in front of them, they are insulted. So please don’t laugh.’

‘I assure you we don’t feel like laughing,’ the voice retorted. ‘We’re getting ready to leave the ship now.’ The amplifier clicked, the humming background noise stopped and silence came again to the rocky plain.

Aayo stepped forward and hoisted Kemlo on to his broad shoulders.

The way down was torturous and there was no clearly defined path, but Aayo balanced from rock to rock, sure-footed, lithe and swift. As they reached level ground Kemlo saw the exit chute being lowered from the rocket ship. Four figures dressed in space helmets and clothing descended. The chute was withdrawn as they began to walk toward Kemlo and the leader of the hunters.

Even allowing for the high transparent dome of the helmets, the approaching figures were not tall—nowhere near as tall as the Zanian hunters—but Kemlo knew that these men would be equipped with every scientific aid which had been devised to save their lives in the event of landings such as these. He knew the terrible effect of the ray guns and the power which lay in the metal clamps around the wrists of the space suit. These were designed so that if attacked by some creatures living on a little-known planet, the man in the space suit would have some chance of defending himself even if he lost his gun. The metal wristlet contained long sharp spikes which were released by the wearer and could be used to wound or kill an attacker. The vulnerability of a man in a space suit lay in the fact that if the material (though it was extremely tough) were penetrated, then his oxygen supply became useless and in the high thin air an Earth-man would very soon collapse.

Kemlo did not really understand why these thoughts of attack and defence should enter his mind as he watched the men walking somewhat clumsily toward them. Perhaps subconsciously he was comparing the difference between these men from another world and the Zanians, whose fine physique, strength and swiftness of foot appeared to be the only weapons they used for attack.

For the first time in his life Kemlo was seeing people like his own family—dressed in the garb they were obliged to wear in these alien worlds—as they appeared to the dwellers of the planet they had come to investigate. He was surprised to find himself sympathising strongly with the Zanians, although another part of his mind was able to appreciate the feelings of the Earth-men. Their first task upon landing on a strange planet was to defend themselves against possible attack. The fact that they were using the vicious ray guns against an unarmed people might not seem wrong to them, but it certainly did to Kemlo.

Aayo had halted and was waiting for the leader of the space-suited men to come up to them. They halted and surveyed the hunter with considerable interest.

‘You’re an Earth-boy,’ said the leader to Kemlo, ‘but you wear no space protection. How long have you been here?’

‘I don’t live on this planet,’ Kemlo said, and explained briefly how he had arrived.

‘One of the Satellite Belt kids, eh?’ the man growled in a bad-tempered voice. ‘The new generation of Space,’ he sneered, and the men with him chuckled harshly. The sound emanating from the loudspeakers attached to one side of their space helmets was unpleasant.

‘Has your ship broken down?’ Kemlo asked politely, although he felt like making an angry retort.

‘No, it hasn’t,’ the man replied. ‘That surprises you, doesn’t it? We are a special research team, and our job is to take back living specimens. This is charted as Planet 64, but it’s a breakaway planet, and by rights there shouldn’t be anybody living on it. This will cause quite a sensation when we get back.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Kemlo in a puzzled voice.

‘I mean, that this breakaway planet shouldn’t be active according to our clever brains down there, but it seems that it is. Right now, it’s floating around, but when it fills out it’ll be attracted to some other planet and then it’ll be worth charting properly.’

‘That is very interesting,’ said Kemlo.

‘Who is this man?’ the space-suited leader asked, jerking a gauntleted hand in the direction of Aayo.

‘This is Aayo, the leader of the hunters,’ said Kemlo. ‘Who are you?’

‘Names don’t matter,’ the man growled. ‘What lies beyond that cliff?’

Kemlo thought quickly. He did not like this man’s attitude nor did he trust him. ‘There are fierce people living there,’ he replied. ‘They are . . .’ He hesitated, trying to find the right word. ‘They are cannibals.’

‘Cannibals!’ the man exclaimed. ‘How is it they haven’t eaten you?’

‘I live in space. They wouldn’t harm me.’

‘Meaning they would us?’

‘Yes, if you tried to harm them. Then there are the wood beasts who have terrible fangs, and hides so much like the foliage that you can’t see them coming until they’re on you.’

‘All very interesting,’ the man sneered, ‘but that’s a job for a settlement crew to check on. We’re much obliged to you, young fella. We’ve got what we want.’ Suddenly from behind a fold at the side of his space suit the man produced a short stubby vicious-looking ray gun. ‘Climb off that man’s shoulder,’ he ordered. ‘Tell him if he doesn’t come with us we shall kill him.’

‘But you can’t do that!’ Kemlo protested.

‘Can’t we?’ the man retorted. ‘You just sit there and argue a few minutes longer and we’ll soon show you whether we can or not. Go on—tell him.’

‘I can’t tell him. I can’t speak his language.’

‘Then make him understand by signs.’

But Aayo did not need much telling. The inflexion in the tone of the man’s voice, his belligerent attitude, the appearance of the gun were sufficient for Aayo to understand without words.

When Kemlo made signs and tried to struggle from Aayo’s shoulders, the hunter held him tightly and, shaking his head, kept barking angry-sounding vowels.

‘Make him understand, or else . . .’ said the man, levelling his ray gun.

‘If I do get down, I can’t stand upright,’ said Kemlo. ‘I’m not used to gravity pull.’

‘I don’t care what you’re used to. When we’ve got him, his friends will come and fetch you.’

‘Give me a minute more,’ Kemlo pleaded. He leaned down from Aayo’s shoulders so that he could see the hunter’s face and again made urgent signals.

This time Aayo seemed to understand and gently lowered Kemlo to the ground. As he touched the ground, Kemlo realised that the gravity pull was no longer affecting him so badly. Quickly he decided on subterfuge. He had noticed that the men with the leader carried no guns. This seemed short-sighted of them, but perhaps they thought it would be easy and one gun would be all they needed.

‘I can’t stand up,’ said Kemlo, and half fell, half crawled until he was barely a yard from the space-suited leader’s feet.

‘Go get him,’ the leader snapped to the men with him. He pointed the ray gun directly at Kemlo, and, watching Aayo, Kemlo was suddenly surprised to see the hurt mirrored in the hunter’s eyes. Although he could not speak Kemlo’s language, Aayo understood treachery. He understood also the menace of the gun, having seen what it had done to his friends.

The men in the space suits closed around the hunter and their leader laughed harshly.

‘Bring him along, boys,’ he said.

In that moment he had relaxed, now that his mission was accomplished, and the ray gun hung loosely in the gloved hand no more than a foot above Kemlo’s shoulders.

Holding his strength and energy as if it were a tightly compressed spring, Kemlo waited a few more seconds. The man ignored him and watched only the grim-faced Aayo being held by those restraining hands.

Kemlo’s hand flashed up, grabbed and pulled. Then he sprang away and leapt to his feet, the ray gun in his hand pointing menacingly at the space-suited figure.

‘Let him go,’ said Kemlo in a hard voice, ‘or I’ll kill you!’

Chapter 8

EMPTY THREAT

‘TAKE your thumb off that firing button, you young fool!’ the man cried, but he did not attempt to move.

Kemlo had wrenched the ray gun from the man’s gloved hand by grasping the barrel and had automatically gripped the butt as he sprang away. The gun was so designed that the firing button lay directly under the thumb as the hand gripped the butt so that, without knowing it, Kemlo had the gun in a position ready to fire.

It was a light-weight weapon and through the transparent breech Kemlo could see that it was fully loaded with many charges. He inclined the barrel away from the man’s body and pressed the button once. The ray hissed out, bounced against the rocky ground and caroomed off it in a searing violet streak. Then he swung the muzzle of the barrel back to cover the man in the space suit as he said grimly:

‘Tell your men to let go of the Zanian or the next time I press this button it will be at your feet.’

For a second only the man hesitated before he barked the order: ‘Let him go, and come back here.’

Sullenly the men lowered their grasping hands from Aayo’s body, but they were not to get away quite so easily.

The hunter’s arms flashed up and two of the space-suited figures suddenly left the ground, sailed through the air and landed with a jarring thud many feet away before they had a chance to release and use the metal wrist weapons.

‘Back, Aayo, back!’ Kemlo called warningly as the hunter seemed eager to apply his colossal strength and speed of movement to the punishment of the other two figures.

‘Get back to your ship quickly,’ Kemlo ordered the men as Aayo halted obediently, sensing the urgency of Kemlo’s tone. ‘It looks as if one of those two has cracked his helmet, and unless you get him back quickly he’ll die.’ He

raised the gun as he added: 'Do you move or do I fire?'

'We'll remember this,' said the leader harshly, 'and we'll be back.'

'That's an empty threat,' said Kemlo. 'By the time you can get back here, I shall have returned to the Satellite Belt and reported this. You'll be lucky if your ship isn't brought down by the space police. What you are doing is bad enough to start a war among the planets.'

'You talk big,' the man sneered as he backed away. 'You seem to know a lot—for a boy.'

'We are taught many things,' Kemlo replied. 'I've often thought I would like to visit Earth, but if you are the sort of men who live there now, I don't want to go.'

All the time he had been speaking the space-suited leader had been backing away and his companion was helping the two injured men, particularly the one with the cracked helmet, to return rapidly to the rocket ship.

'Remember,' said Kemlo firmly, 'eyes will be watching you all the time. If you don't take off just as soon as your lifting tubes can be heated, not one of you will be safe once you leave the ship, whether you've got guns or not.' He lifted the ray gun and waved it as he added: 'And don't forget I've got one now and I won't hesitate to use it.'

The man spoke again, but his words were indistinct because of the distance. The chute was being lowered from the ship and Kemlo made signs to Aayo, who was standing with his feet wide apart, shoulders bunched, his hands clenched and half lifted, as if with all his great strength he wished he could clasp the rocket ship and hurl it from his land.

Kemlo pointed back toward the rock barrier, then to himself, then to Aayo's shoulders. He saw the fierce expression on the hunter's face change to one of gentleness as Aayo lifted him. Remembering what Licona had taught Krillie, Kemlo said spontaneously: 'Hu—hu!'

The effect was equally sudden, for a great happiness came into the face of Aayo as his powerful hands gripped Kemlo and hoisted the boy on to his shoulders, then set off at a pace so fast that Kemlo had to gasp to get his breath.

The leader of the hunters sped over the ground with springing strides and in a very short time was leaping from crag to crag up the steep face of the lava rock formation until they came to the plateau. When they reached the safety of the rock shelter Licona greeted them eagerly.

‘What a wonderfully brave thing to do,’ she said, grasping Kemlo’s arm. ‘And what treacherous people they must be. They wanted to capture Aayo, didn’t they?’

‘Could you hear from this distance?’ Kemlo asked.

‘I couldn’t hear all the words but it was obvious what was happening. I had a hard job to restrain the hunters.’ She smiled toward the other men who were clustered around Aayo, patting his shoulders and head and even his cheeks in their joy at seeing him return safely.

Considering their apparent inability to express themselves in words, the Zanians seemed different from the people Kemlo knew only inasmuch as they were more demonstrative and a good deal more sensitive. Those simple sounds which meant ‘I like you’ gave them enormous pleasure, yet the sound of a giggle made them furious.

The hunters’ demonstrations were halted abruptly as they and Kemlo and Licona suddenly clapped their hands over their ears. Kemlo tried to shout above the hissing roar which filled the air and boomed reverberatingly back from the rock face: ‘They’re warming up the lifting tubes!’ but it was doubtful if Licona could hear him.

For quite a long time they had to endure this, and the hunters obviously found it very distressing, before the hissing roar ebbed slowly away to a series of puthering plops.

Another sound took its place—a low sibilant whine which rose in crescendo to a hollow fluting note. This was joined by another and another, but it was not so hard upon the ears as the noise made by the warming of the lifting tubes.

Still holding the ray gun Kemlo moved to the edge of the rocks and peered around them. He beckoned to Licona and the hunters, who crowded behind him and, without exposing their bodies, they all stared across at the rocket ship.

The base of the ship was glowing redly and already a huge hollow was being made in the rock beneath its cradle as the terrific heat and pressure of its exhausts powdered the rock into nothingness.

The red glow grew brighter. The great stabiliser fins began to move outward. The fluting note changed to a deep roar, muffled and thunderous.

Then the lifting vents opened and streaks of white flame seared out. For a fraction of time the noise seemed to shut off, then in a flash of blazing light

from its tail the rocket ship hurtled upwards—the noise of its propulsion unit dying away to a hissing whisper.

They watched it streak away and cant on its side before, tiny in the distance, it levelled out and disappeared.

Kemlo gave an exclamation of relief, which Licona echoed. The hunters appeared to be even more relieved and began conversing among themselves. Then Aayo grunted sharply, and two of the men ran off.

Kemlo inspected the ray gun closely for a few moments before he found the safety catch and locked it firmly into position. He and Licona were again hoisted on to the shoulders of the hunters, but this time Aayo made it his special task to carry Kemlo.

They crossed the rim of the lava rock barrier, sped down the far side and loped over the plain, past the Kris lake toward the dwellings on the terraces of the other rock formation.

As they neared these Kemlo was surprised to see that every terrace was filled with Zanians. And on the top terrace stood Chief Aan and, next to him, Krillie, waving madly.

‘You’re a hero, Kemlo!’ said Licona, smiling at him. ‘This means a celebration.’

‘A celebration!’ Kemlo exclaimed. ‘What for?’

‘Because you saved Zania from injury. After the celebration, you will be welcomed everywhere as the Son of the Chief.’

Chapter 9

THE SLEEP

KRILLIE looked very well and very excited. ‘We saw it go!’ he greeted Kemlo. ‘We saw the rocket ship go, then the hunters came and said you’d saved the Zanians.’

‘I did nothing of the sort,’ said Kemlo, half angrily. ‘If they had been different kind of men they wouldn’t have been scared of my threats.’

‘Who do you reckon they were, son?’ Pete asked as he stepped forward from the Chief’s side.

‘They were Earth-men, no doubt about that,’ Kemlo replied. ‘How long had they been here?’

‘Long enough,’ said Pete off-handedly. ‘We don’t take much account of time. I knew there was something wrong. I reckon Earth’s come a long way since the early days of space travel, when every man in a rocket ship was a special kind of scientist. Maybe they’re running out of scientists down there.’

‘Or perhaps they’re all living on Satellite Belts,’ said Kemlo with a smile.

‘You could be right, son,’ Pete agreed. ‘What I’m meaning is, those fellas didn’t act at all tolerantly, and I reckon if there’s one thing a scientist is mostly known for—it’s tolerance. As I see it, those fellas could be . . .’ Pete paused for a second and frowned thoughtfully. ‘Well, they could be what you might call “space robbers.” They might land on any small planet and make out they’d got trouble of some sort, then look around and see what they could steal. I know it don’t seem to make much sense, but’—he tapped his knuckles on his head—‘but it’s what I feel in here.’

‘They wanted to take a specimen of the Zanians back with them,’ said Kemlo. ‘They said it would be worth a lot.’

‘That’s your answer,’ said Pete. ‘That’s why they became scared so quickly. There’s no doubt that one of our friends the Zanians, dead or alive, would be a mighty interesting specimen to the Earth-folks.’ Pete stopped talking as the Chief came up to him and pulled at his arm, then spoke quickly

to him.

When the Chief had finished speaking, Pete's whiskery face crinkled in a rueful smile. 'The Chief's been giving me a bit of a roasting,' he informed Kemlo.

'And you deserved it, Father,' said Licona.

'Don't you be sassy!' said Pete, frowning at her in mock seriousness. 'The Chief says I take up too much of your time talking about things he doesn't understand. He says to welcome you and say that the celebration will start very soon.'

'I don't quite know what to say to that,' said Kemlo, who felt very embarrassed at this attention. He surveyed the Zanians who were clustered on the terraces and standing on the steps leading down past the dwellings. They all were gazing up at the plateau where the hunters were grouped around Kemlo, Pete and their Chief.

'Where have all the people come from?' he asked.

'They were hiding, especially the women and children, while the rocket ship was here,' Pete explained. 'Nice-looking lot of folks, ain't they?'

Kemlo looked around at the Zanians with their handsome faces and bright intelligent eyes, and he nodded slowly. More than ever now he was feeling a sense of friendliness emanating from these people. The children, younger than Ton—who was holding Krillie's hand—were cheery-faced, wide-eyed, with glowing skins and very square-shaped white teeth. Their mothers were extremely handsome, and the boys and girls were slim and graceful. The women were more serious-faced, but they had much poise and a certain calmness about their eyes. The strange thing was that there did not appear to be any fat children or, for that matter, any stout grown-ups. The hunters and a number of the other men were large in physique, but there were no signs of fatness such as Kemlo was used to seeing among the people on the Satellite Belt. Except for size, it also was difficult to determine ages, and only a few of the Zanian men were grey-haired.

Something puzzled Kemlo as he looked at the gathering of Zanians, and he asked:

'Where are your people, Pete?'

'They're down in their dwellings,' said Pete. 'Except for myself and Licona—and we hold the position of a son and daughter of the Chief—my people never mix with the Zanians unless they are invited.' He broke off to

relay the question and answer to the Chief, while Licona did the same to Aayo, the leader of the hunters.

‘You see, Kemlo, we have very strict laws on Zania,’ Pete continued. ‘Maybe this ain’t the time to tell you all about them, but I’ll just mention one or two. The Chief is the head of all the Zanians. Next to him comes Uun.’ He indicated the man who had sat at the table with the Chief. ‘And there’s me. I represent our people at the Chief’s Council Table. We’re good friends, but not for several generations will our people mingle to such an extent that we can mix in everything. This is the Zanians’ planet. My father and gran’pa made us understand very carefully that you can’t live in someone else’s home and expect to run it, nor expect to share in everything unless you’re invited to do so. We keep to that, and there ain’t many occasions like this. There are certain celebrations which we have—such as a hunt, and after the blue veil—when we are automatically invited.’

‘But wouldn’t your people want to meet Krillie and me?’

Kemlo waited while Pete translated this to the Chief.

‘You’re going to meet them separately,’ he said. ‘The Chief is a wise man and knows you would want to meet them alone.’

Kemlo turned to his friend and whispered: ‘Have you had some food?’

‘I certainly have,’ said Krillie enthusiastically. ‘A wonderful drink, and some pieces of soft fruit stuff. I don’t know what they call it but it’s very good.’

‘Are you tired?’

‘I had a little sleep, and Ton carried me all through the dwellings down below. They’re wonderful places, Kemlo.’

‘Perhaps I’ll be able to see them soon. I feel tired now.’

Pete overheard this last remark and was quickly considerate and sympathetic.

‘Sure you must be,’ he said. ‘I’ll tell the Chief that all this excitement is a little too much for you, and suggest we take you along to our folks, where you can have a good rest before the celebration.’

He talked with the Chief for a few moments before he turned back to Kemlo and said:

‘Chief Aan says we’re to take you to our people and let you sleep all you want, and nobody’s to disturb you until you and your friend are completely

rested. Is there anything else you want, son?’

‘I’d like to have the space scooter brought nearer to the caves so that I can keep an eye on the instruments. I’m afraid we shouldn’t stay too long, because our people will be getting worried. They’ll probably send out a space patrol to look for us.’

‘Well, if your scooter won’t work, you can’t leave, can you?’ said Pete with blunt reasoning. ‘It’s not as if you’re coming to any harm here. Have you got any sort of instruments in that scooter which would let you contact your people?’

‘I don’t think we could reach them,’ said Kemlo, ‘and there’s something very strong in the nature of this planet which de-magnetises the instruments.’

‘Yeah, I figure there’s quite a bit of mineral that’s still got cosmic charges in it,’ said Pete. Then his manner became brisk and authoritative: ‘Well, let’s get you settled for a time.’ He spoke to Aayo and in a moment Kemlo and Krillie were lifted and carried away through the crowd of bright-faced Zanians.

Kemlo looked over his shoulder for Licona, only to see she was following close behind them.

‘I’m coming too, Kemlo,’ she called.

They traversed the plateau and descended some steps at the far end until they came to a wide apron of rock jutting out in front of a sculptured dwelling. The two boys were set down at the entrance and the hunters turned and left them. Licona led them into the dwelling.

As soon as they stepped inside, a babble of voices rushed over their ears and in a few moments they were surrounded by people who spoke their own language and whose evident pleasure at seeing them did much, momentarily, to lift the deadly tiredness which was beginning to assail them now that they had entered a roofed dwelling. The force of gravity seemed to oppress the boys even more inside the dwelling than it did outside.

They had only time to make courteous acknowledgment of these greetings before they sank on to the smooth bark-covered floor.

Gentle hands lifted them and laid them on low-slung couches at the side of the main room they had first entered. After seeing that both boys were really asleep and would not need food or any attention for a while, Licona signalled to her relatives and they all left the room.

Leading from this room—which was high-domed and had, in addition to the graceful bay opening at the front, the same light and air vents which Kemlo

had noticed in the cave where the Chief had sat—were three passages. Licona and the others walked down the largest of these until they came to a big circular room which looked out upon the far side of the lava formation and directly over to the sloping hill where Kemlo's space scooter was now being lifted carefully and carried by a number of the hunters.

There were about twenty people in this large room, all with the definite features of Earth-descendants, although mostly they were dressed alike. The men and boys were not quite so well formed as the Zanians, but they had more expression on their faces. The women and the girls of Licona's age were more vivacious than the Zanian women and girls, but their faces had not the same calmness. They all were eager to hear the story of the two boys from the Satellite Belt, and Licona was hard put to answer the many questions.

After a time her father joined them, and more questions greeted him as he sat down, until he raised his hands in mock protest.

'Enough, enough!' he said firmly. 'Sure there's a heap of questions. Young Kemlo and his friend want to ask a heap of questions. Nothing but questions all around me. Comes a time when you've just got to take things as they are. In many ways, it's a mighty big thing that's happened to us and those two boys, but I figure we've got to be very careful how we handle this.'

'Why, Father?' Licona asked.

'Because those boys came here by accident. Now—the Zanians don't understand much about the worlds around us.' He scrubbed his whiskers with an irritated gesture as he continued: 'For that matter, nor do we. All we've got is a lot of information handed down to us from our parents and grandparents, and the books and charts and maps that were saved from the ship that brought us here. For several generations our folks have lived on this tiny planet.' He looked at them seriously. 'Make no mistake about it, folks, it is tiny. Even though Chief Aan and the wise men among the Zanians have cottoned on to the fact that the planet's growing, they ain't got the reasoning of its movement. I'd say we're spinning around looking for a place to settle, as you might say. We've no way of telling how many more hundreds of years that's going to continue. Maybe a new world is forming up here, but right now it's only a tiny speck smack in the middle of nothing. We've no real instruments, and we've no means of charting which way this planet's spinning.

'If it goes on spinning too near the sun, it's liable to shrivel us up into little pieces. If we get too near Mars, again we're liable to become too hot and the heat will calcify all new growth. We might be forced by some currents to join up with one of Saturn's satellites.' Pete made a gesture of hopelessness.

‘There’s no knowing what we might end up as,’ he said, ‘and there’s nothing we can do about it. There’s nothing anyone can do about it. But we’re happy here, ain’t we?’ He glared around him and a chorus of eager agreement answered him.

‘My father used to say, when folks are happy, keep ’em that way. The rocket ship that landed here was a bad thing. I figure the men inside it were bad too, and it’s good riddance to them and mighty lucky for us they’ve gone. Now, seeing that this planet is only a tiny speck in space and it’s moving its position all the time, we’re of no account to the men making faster and better rocket ships than ever we knew of, or know of now. We’re just a number in the sky to them, and a no-account number at that. But to us—well, as we live here, this planet is everything.’

‘Why are you telling us all this, Uncle Pete?’ said a strong-faced dark young man.

‘I’ll tell you why, Billy,’ Pete replied slowly. ‘Kemlo and Krillie have come here by accident, and I’m hoping for their sakes, and the sakes of their parents, that their crazy little scooter thing will get ’em back to their home. But before they leave here, we’ve got to make sure they understand that this planet ain’t no place for experimenting by any Earth space ships and their crews. You all know how we’ve tried to teach the Zanians to speak what is almost a universal language, I guess. Well, they just cannot be taught. There’s something in their throats that stops ’em speaking our words. But we get along fine, because we understand the inflexions in their voices. But if we get large numbers of Earth-men, or people older than these two boys coming from one of the Satellite Belts, settling here to see if they can’t start a new world—it’s going to be a pretty terrible thing for the Zanians. You can see that, can’t you?’

‘Yes, I can,’ said Billy, ‘and I think it’s up to us to see that Kemlo and Krillie understand what we mean.’

‘Then we shall have to tell them,’ said Licona, ‘because even though they might grasp a little of the Zanians’ language, they’ll find it difficult to understand all this.’

‘Of course they will,’ said Pete irritably. ‘And they could never understand it from the Zanians because the Zanians ain’t any idea themselves. Why, bless you—Chief Aan told me just before I came down here how glad he was to see two youngsters coming all that way through the sky to say “howdy” and getting on so well with his people! Aan’s a pretty wise man, but he’s no idea of what could happen if we got a heap of folks landing on this planet. It would upset the whole balance of living. Somehow, we’ve got to convince Kemlo—

and Krillie for that matter, because although he's younger he's a bright little fella—and they've got to be made to understand that when they return to their Satellite Belt they must not give out a whole lot of stories as to how there's plenty of room on this planet and that it's growing all the time.'

'How are you going to stop them?' Licona asked, voicing what seemed to be a general question.

'I don't know,' said Pete in a helpless sort of tone. 'Maybe something will come along to show us how we can explain it to them before they leave. But right now—I just don't know. Well, I'm going along to see if they've had enough sleep. You come with me, Licona. I reckon the rest of you had better stay here for a time, and we'll bring 'em along. After we've had a chat among ourselves we've got to go up on the plateau where they're preparing the celebration. Young Kemlo did a mighty fine job out there, and one of our celebrations will be an experience for him and his friend.'

Pete and his daughter went along the broad passage to the room where the sleeping boys lay, and for a time they conversed together in low tones. When they saw Kemlo stir, stretch and yawn, and then wake, followed by Krillie's performing the same actions, Pete greeted them quietly and kindly.

'Feel better, son?' he asked Kemlo.

'I do,' said Krillie. 'I feel all bright and clear again.'

'So do I,' said Kemlo. 'It's funny how we grew tired so quickly.'

'I guess there's a good reason for it,' said Pete. 'I'd like fine for you to come along and meet our folks again. You were a little too tired to say much when you first came in.'

'I'd like to,' Kemlo said, and swung his legs off the couch.

They helped Krillie up and were about to leave the room and return down the passage when, from beyond the bay entrance, there came sobbing cadences of a sound so horrible that it chilled Kemlo's blood and made Krillie suddenly afraid.

Pete stood as if frozen, and Licona was poised and tense beside him.

'There ain't going to be much celebrating yet awhiles,' Pete said grimly, and hurried from the dwelling.

The hideous sounds grew louder. The Earth-descendants came running along the passage from the other room. They all looked frightened.

Chapter 10

FANGS OF THE WILD

IT was the most spine-chilling sound Kemlo had ever heard. Krillie was so upset by it that he held his hands tightly over his ears. Neither of them was familiar with animal sounds. In their lessons they had learned about the different types of animals on Earth and the various forms of reptiles and lower life to be found on certain charted planets, but there were no animals on the Satellite Belt and only a few recordings of animal sounds were available during their lessons.

To ears well used to the noise of uranium-powered motors with their softly sibilant whine, or the gigantic roar and hiss of a rocket ship, or the thrumming song of the latest model space ship, the howling cadences from the throats of many animals had an almost paralysing effect.

Kemlo found that he was grasping Licona's hand and holding Krillie close to him by gripping an arm around the younger boy's shoulders. He could not remember deliberately doing either of these things, but realised that it was so. Some association of mutual fear and protection had brought the three of them closer together.

At the first sound of the beasts, the men had arranged themselves shoulder to shoulder at each end of the passage as a protective barrier for the women and children in the middle, and they were calling to Licona and Kemlo and Krillie to join them quickly.

'What happens now?' Kemlo asked. He was surprised to find that his voice was harsh and his throat and mouth dry.

'The hunters will go out and do battle with the wood beasts,' Licona replied.

'But they have no weapons!'

'They're very strong. Only once in my life has this happened before.'

'I thought it was peaceful here,' said Kemlo. 'I thought the wood beasts were domesticated animals.'

‘Never really domesticated,’ said Licona with a nervous smile, ‘and they always become restless and noisy just before the blue veil. That is one way we can tell when it’s near.’

‘But the hunters are used to dealing with the wood beasts, aren’t they?’ Kemlo glanced back at Licona’s relatives, who were becoming insistent that the three of them take shelter. ‘It doesn’t seem as if your people have much faith in the hunters!’ he said.

‘We have every faith in them,’ she replied, ‘but no-one knows just how many wood beasts have broken out. They live in the great woods and seldom venture out. The hunters go into the woods to catch them. The beasts keep to their hiding-places, but the hunters imitate their calls and, when they creep out, catch them. But at this time, something happens to the beasts and they all come out of the woods. Once they killed many children and Zanians before they were brought under control. Until they break from their hiding-places, neither the hunters nor anyone else knows how many beasts are in the woods.’

There was a short tense silence before Kemlo moved suddenly and pushed Krillie gently toward the passage. Then he turned to Licona and led her a few paces in the same direction.

‘Go back there,’ he said, and brought out the ray gun. ‘I think I might be able to help.’

‘No, Kemlo, no!’ Licona cried. The men behind them also called their protests when they heard Kemlo say this, and one or two moved forward as if to stop him.

After his sleep Kemlo now felt very fit and the gravity pull hardly bothered him, but he was not sure how long this feeling of well-being would last so, ignoring their efforts to keep him here, he ran from the dwelling.

When he reached the plateau he saw the hunters spread out in a long line below him. They were moving more slowly than was normal for them, but still at quite a fast pace and covering the ground with long strides, their bodies crouching, their arms outstretched as if ready to grapple with an unseen foe. Behind them was a second line of men, and among these was Pete.

The howling yelping noises continued unabated, but by now he was becoming used to them, and in so doing he decided that these cries held a strange note of longing. He couldn’t describe it more clearly, but that was the feeling it left with him. Leaving the plateau, Kemlo ran as fast as he could down the steep side. As he neared the base he saw his space scooter resting against the entrance to the large cave into which he and Krillie had first been

taken.

He released the hood, placed the ray gun on the passenger seat, climbed in and left the hood open. He noticed with disappointment that the instruments were only partly de-magnetised, but he judged that the power would be sufficient to lift the scooter high enough for the purpose he had in mind.

He moved the induction lever and set the controls. While he waited for the charge to build up he wondered briefly why he was doing this—and soon reached a very simple conclusion. As time meant nothing to the Zanians, Kemlo had no true idea of how long he and Krillie had been on the planet, but from his personal reactions he had been here long enough both to like and to admire his hosts. This was apart from the gratifying knowledge that for the first time in his life he was meeting descendants of Earth-people like himself who were living quite happily and successfully on one of the uncharted planets of the outer worlds. Yet he knew that Planet 64 was so small, so inconsistent in its movements, that it did not merit the high cost which would be involved by a complete investigation before other worlds in the orbit of Man had been properly discovered.

That did not mean that it was any less real to him. The Zanians, with their fine looks and simple gentle ways, and the wise and tolerant Pete and his people, meant at this moment far more to Kemlo than did all the theory of research or the more glamorous discoveries on the larger planets.

As the lifting tubes reached their maximum power, Kemlo knew that he was taking part against this danger because it was natural—as natural as if his own people on the Satellite Belt were faced with similar danger.

The space scooter lifted gently, turned in a wide arc to clear the rock formation, then throttled back to its slowest forward-drive speed and zoomed low over the heads of the hunters and the men behind them.

The hunters did not look up, but Pete and many of the others did, and Kemlo, glancing over the side of the scooter, saw Pete making frantic signs for him to go back.

The scooter flew on rather sluggishly, for the de-magnetising effect was very obvious. Kemlo scanned the ground below him and saw the dark reddish foliage of the woods far ahead—a colour which was streaked with light green where the bark showed through the foliage.

He decided to turn the scooter across the lake, then swing toward the woods at a lower altitude.

He was half-way across the lake when he was nearly thrown from his seat

by the violent jerking of the scooter. The instruments flickered wildly and the propulsion unit hummed with a surge of new life.

Kemlo fought for control and succeeded in keeping the craft steady. When he was across the area of the lake and above the second barrier, the instruments steadied and became normal, and the power hummed with a healthy throaty sound.

Searching his instruments, moving the controls and from them obtaining immediate answer, Kemlo frowned in concentration. What could have so suddenly and effectively de-magnetised the instruments and released the correct surge of power into the propulsion unit?

An idea occurred to him as from the depth of his mind came recollection of a lesson well learned at the time but long since absorbed into the subconscious. Knowledge acquired and stored away—now to be used with advantage. Water, Kemlo remembered having been taught, could, in certain circumstances, act as a negative base from which the currents and magnetic vibrations set up by a space propulsion unit could be thrown back. Thus, if a craft became severely de-magnetised by passing over some solid area, the effect could be counterbalanced. And this, he realised, had happened when he crossed over the Kris lake. The understanding brought urgency to his mind, for now he did not have to nurse the scooter, fearful lest its power might fade too much for him to maintain height.

Swiftly he worked the controls, swung in a zooming circle and flew backward and forward over the lake several times until he saw the compensating power gauge charged to its fullest degree.

As he now could maintain altitude by using the stabiliser fins and throttled-back power, Kemlo clicked in these controls and put the levers to their slowest degree of speed until he was almost hovering, so slow and steady was his craft. He crossed the line of advancing men, turned and came back, searching for sign of the howling wood beasts.

Then he saw them—and suddenly his spine felt cold and something very like fear, a sick sort of fear, twisted inside him.

Below him the blue-grey grass appeared to be heaving. At first sight he did not realise that it was not the grass but the beasts who were padding through it. Once the eye had picked them out it was easy to see scores of them; some slinking even below the level of the grass top, others with heads raised and great fangs gleaming as their mouths opened to emit those horrible blood-curdling screams.

The wood beasts were of a dappled grey colour which blended so well with the surrounding vegetation that possibly from the ground they would be invisible until the men on foot were right on top of them. Only the noise of their howls betrayed their presence, and the long line of hunters was evidence that the Zanians knew from which direction the beasts were approaching, being as yet unable to sight them.

Kemlo could see Aayo slightly ahead of his men, and sending the scooter even lower he flew slowly above the hunter's head, yelling and pointing in the direction of the oncoming beasts.

But neither Aayo nor any of the hunters looked upward. Their attention and their wide clear gaze was directed ahead of them.

Then suddenly it was too late for Kemlo to try to warn them.

There must have been a few of the wood beasts in front of the rest and immediately under the scooter, and as he turned he saw the beasts leap upon the hunters.

The beasts had small heads, long sinewy bodies, surprisingly short legs and strong tails which they thrashed in the air as they sprang.

It was an awesome but thrilling sight to see the lithe figures of the hunters grappling with those snarling beasts, whose slashing fangs sought to tear at the men's throats.

Perhaps the shortness of the beasts' legs aided the hunters, for once a beast sprang forward it had to retreat several paces before it could gather enough impetus to spring again.

With great skill and courage the hunters' muscular hands grasped the throats of the beasts which sprang toward them. Aayo was fighting with two, one in each hand, and it seemed to take him only a second before he either snapped their necks or choked the life out of them and flung them away, although in a swinging action he used their bodies to ward off the attacks of other beasts.

Kemlo circled again and came back along the line of men, trying to warn others who had not yet made contact with the wood beasts. There were far more beasts than ever, it seemed, the hunters could cope with, but if they *could* kill and ward off the attacks as swiftly and surely as Aayo and the men at his end were doing, perhaps they would not be so overwhelmed by numbers.

But Licona had told him that no-one knew how many wood beasts were hidden in their lairs deep in the woods. And as far as Kemlo could see in the

direction of the woods, the blue-grey undergrowth was full of slinking, howling animals. Some were much smaller and seemed quieter—these, no doubt, were the youngsters, for it was the larger ones that were making the most noise.

Kemlo turned the scooter and went slowly above Pete's head where he leaned over and shouted:

'There are hundreds of them ahead of you, Pete! You can't handle them all.'

He had to turn the scooter again to come back for Pete's answer.

'Will you quit flying around in that fool thing?' Pete's angry voice came up to him. 'Knowing how many we've got against us ain't going to help.'

Again Kemlo flew off and again he came back, and all the time the hunters were fighting the leaders of the oncoming multitude of wood beasts.

Pete and his men made no attempt to close up and help them, which made Kemlo realise that here was what was intended to be a second line of defence.

'I've got my ray gun—shall I use it?' he yelled.

But Pete was no longer able to answer, for the beasts sprang upon them from all directions, and now Pete and his men were among the first wave of that blue-grey tide of wood beasts.

Watching them fighting with a stolid yet desperate fury, Kemlo felt sick as he wondered how much they could decrease the numbers of those attacking hordes. Several men had been ripped by the fangs of the attackers, but it did not seem that any were badly wounded. Some advantage lay in the fact that the animals made only one spring; also, it seemed, they would not attack below the men's heads. Why this was, Kemlo did not understand, nor did he waste time thinking about it. He had reached his decision as to how he would help, now that his warning of the numbers had had no effect.

He manoeuvred the scooter a little ahead of the line of fighting hunters and squirming snarling creatures. Taking the ray gun from the seat beside him he pushed off the safety catch, leaned over the side of the scooter, then with his other hand moving the forward speed lever, he pressed the firing button of the gun.

The scooter hissed forward in a surge of power. The ray gun charges exploded in a seemingly unbroken line of devastating violet flame.

Kemlo stopped firing, slowed the scooter and turned to make another run

along that forward line of advancing enemies.

White smoke turning brown at the base lay in coils along the line of his fire, and behind it the wood beasts cringed and yelped, some half turning against the press of bodies behind them.

Kemlo felt sick, but as he saw the hunters and Pete and the other men still fighting for their lives against the beasts around them he knew that he must use this terrible weapon again. He steadied the scooter, set the controls, and flying as low as he dared he leaned over the side and spread a wake of violet light over those close-packed slinking shapes.

As he neared the end of his run the gun clicked futilely. He leaned back in the seat, raised the smoking weapon and saw that the breech was empty. He turned the scooter over the Kris lake and flung the ray gun into its leaden depth. Rolls of smoke covered the ground for several paces in front of the hunters. Kemlo could still see the bodies of beasts around them, but now there were so few that men were helping each other to finish off the fight.

Ahead of them, the blue-grey undergrowth was a heaving mass—rippling like a strongly flowing river.

The much-depleted numbers of wood beasts, silent now, were heading back into the woods from whence they had come.

The seared and blackened undergrowth behind them told its own grim story.

Chapter 11

THE HILL OF REST

KEMLO landed the scooter near the base of the rock formation and went back to meet Pete, who was looking very serious.

‘You did well, son,’ he greeted Kemlo, ‘but I ain’t so sure the hunters are liking it. You pretty near blinded them with those rays.’ He hesitated as if searching for the right words to use. ‘And it made them look as if they couldn’t handle the beasts on their own.’

‘But there were hundreds of them!’ Kemlo protested. ‘Neither you nor the hunters could have beaten them.’

Pete shrugged. ‘My father used to say: pride is often all a man lives by. The Zanians are a mighty proud people, and the hunters are proudest of them all. Helping them when they don’t figure they need help is liable to make ’em just as mad as laughing at them.’ Pete rubbed the long lacerations on his forearm.

‘You’re wounded!’ Kemlo exclaimed.

‘Only a few scratches,’ said Pete casually. ‘We don’t bleed hardly at all. A wound soon heals.’

Kemlo saw Aayo striding toward them, his face stern and his eyes angry.

‘Leave this to me,’ said Pete in a low voice.

‘Tell him I want to thank him for letting me help fight the wood beasts,’ said Kemlo hurriedly.

Pete glanced at him shrewdly.

‘You think fast, son,’ he said. There was no more time for words between them as the towering bulk of Aayo came close. He seemed very angry as he conversed with Pete, and kept indicating Kemlo with stabbing fingers.

At last Pete managed to convey Kemlo’s words and Aayo stared at him, then grunted in a questioning voice.

‘He says, did you come because you were made a Son of Aan?’ Pete

translated.

Before Kemlo could reply Pete added quickly: ‘You’d better nod your head because I’ve just said you did.’

Not wanting to cause trouble Kemlo nodded vigorously and made other signs of agreement, but protested to Pete: ‘I didn’t. Why did you have to say that?’

‘Listen to me, son,’ said Pete gravely. ‘Back there on the plateau when you returned from fooling that rocket ship crew, the Chief made you a Son of Aan. That’s the highest honour he can give, and it puts you on a level with the hunters. If Aayo and his men think you interfered as an ordinary person, they wouldn’t be slow in taking you to the shores of the Endless Sea and throwing you in.’

‘All because I helped them fight those beasts?’

‘Yep.’

‘But that’s crazy!’

‘Ain’t it just?’ said Pete drily. ‘But you’ve got to allow that the Zanians keep to real values. A man’s pride is his strength, and his strength is his pride—can you understand that?’

‘I—I suppose so,’ Kemlo agreed doubtfully. ‘But it sounds rather silly to me. You would think they’d be pleased because I helped.’ Kemlo would have gone on expounding this theme, because he felt quite cross that his well-meaning efforts had been misunderstood, but Pete cut him short.

‘The Zanian hunter is a proud man—right?’ he said.

Kemlo nodded.

‘He is also a very strong man—right?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then can’t you see it hurts his pride to have someone do his job for him?’

‘Oh! You mean, Aayo might think that when I helped him and his hunters it was because I thought they weren’t strong enough, but if I came as a Son of Aan, then I came as one of them?’

‘You’ve got it,’ said Pete. ‘Sounds a lot of fuss, but even if those beasts had overwhelmed the hunters, no-one would have come to their aid, except us—the Sons of Aan.’

‘Is that why you and the men with you kept behind the hunters?’

‘Yep.’

Kemlo sighed, and at the sigh Aayo suddenly leapt forward. He had been looking from one to the other while Pete and Kemlo were speaking. He grabbed Kemlo and swung the boy on to his shoulder.

‘Hey!’ Kemlo cried in alarm. ‘What have I done now?’

‘You’ll see.’ Pete’s eyes twinkled. ‘When a Zanian makes a sighing noise like that, it means he needs to go to the Hill of Rest. Let him take you. It’ll be a sight better than seeing all this mess.’ Pete pointed to the mounded corpses of the wood beasts. ‘When you come back, all this will be cleared.’

‘Tell Krillie . . .’ Kemlo called, but Aayo bounded away at a terrific speed and Kemlo had no chance to say more. But Pete must have heard the words, and after Aayo had been moving for some way he slowed his pace and glanced behind him. One of the hunters was speeding over the ground toward them, carrying Krillie on his shoulder.

‘Oh, Kemlo!’ Krillie cried as they drew near. ‘I saw the scooter go whizzing around, and Licona said if you interfered with the hunters there’d be trouble. Then I wondered if the scooter would stay up or whether you’d drop right in the lake or in the middle of the fighting with those awful beasts.’ He drew a long deep breath and exhaled it with a drawn-out: ‘Ooh!—I was scared!’

Aayo turned his head sharply, looked at Krillie and spoke rapidly to the other hunter. At once both men increased their speed and the boys were carried past the sloping hill on which they had landed, over the distant rise to a small valley, thick with red foliage and brightened by patches of light blue flowers.

Across the valley was a circular mound, totally encompassed by palisades of the light green bark. It seemed that this bark was used for many purposes. Its colour was attractive and the delicate shading belied its obvious strength, for Kemlo had seen it in use as sturdy tables and floor coverings, and now in the form of what appeared to be a protective fencing. He remembered also that a gourd containing fruit drink had been made of the same material. . . . Its many uses and attractive appearance intrigued him, but at present he wanted to concentrate on other things—such things as the dangerous inflexion of tone so vital to the Zanians. Evidently a long drawn-out sigh meant the need for rest, and the Zanians must think it very urgent as Aayo wasted no time in scooping up Kemlo and running with him to this valley.

They now had reached a large gate, which swung open as they entered and closed behind them. Two magnificently muscled young hunters stepped

forward, and after Aayo had spoken to them, Kemlo and Krillie were transferred to their shoulders. Aayo made signs that he was leaving them. He described in actions an attitude of sleep, pointing to both boys, then pointed to himself and the hunter who had come with him to indicate that both would return.

Kemlo nodded and said: 'I don't know why we're here, but thank you for bringing us.' Then he realised by the blank expression on Aayo's face that the words meant nothing. So all he could do was to repeat the only vowel sounds which up to now had made any impression. 'Hu—hu,' he said.

Once again these sounds didn't fail, and the hunters beamed at Kemlo and Krillie, and Aayo went so far as to pat them both on the head before he and his companion opened the gate and loped back the way they had come.

Kemlo and Krillie surveyed this enclosed mound with much interest as the young hunters carried them toward a low building on the far side. There were two of these buildings, one each side of the mound. No fences or other barriers separated this space from where several of the small cattle Kemlo had seen earlier were grazing. He now remembered that these animals had disappeared when they returned from the rocket ship; possibly they had been frightened into shelter by the noise.

A number of children were playing near the top of the mound. These were mostly Zanians, but a few, too, were Earth-descendants. Like children in any world, they made shrill and eager cries as they played some obscure game among themselves.

One of them sighted Kemlo and Krillie being borne toward the building and, in a few seconds, all games forgotten, the children ran pell-mell down from the mound to cluster in a wide-eyed group trailing an atmosphere of silent excitement behind the hunters carrying the two boys.

Now that the children had left the mound, Kemlo could see a large rectangle of what appeared to be grey sand, and a number of pieces of green bark which, obviously, had been a part of the game. A kind of Earth's cricket, of which he had read, the natural game of any man?

The hunters set them down gently as an old lady came from the low graceful building. She had the brownest and most wrinkled cheeks and the brightest blue eyes Kemlo had ever seen.

The only comparison he had for this building was that it looked like pictures he had seen of boats in which Earth-men used to travel over water. It had a wide doorless opening where the old lady now stood. Cut into the

smooth green texture of the bark, spreading away on each side of the main opening, were other small square openings.

The old lady spoke to the hunters in their own tongue, and with a bow the young men turned away and walked back to the gate.

‘So you are the two boys who came in that funny little space craft?’ she said, and her voice was surprisingly young and cheerful. ‘I am Dona-Marie—Mother of the Hill of Rest.’ She indicated the building on the other side of the mound as she added: ‘Yonder lives Oowano, who is also Mother of the Hill of Rest, but she is mother to the Zanians and I am mother to such as you.’

‘We are very pleased to meet you, ma’am,’ said Kemlo politely.

‘You call me “Dona-Marie”,’ she said gently. She looked beyond them at the children grouped behind Kemlo and Krillie, and clapped her hands sharply, speaking first in the Zanian tongue and then in ordinary words. ‘Go back to play, children,’ she said. ‘Perhaps later our new friends will join you, but not yet.’

The children obeyed, although as they moved away and began to walk back up the mound they did so with their heads still turning toward Kemlo and Krillie, and as a result of this several stubbed their toes on clumps of the blue-grey grass and fell over. This immediately started a rough and tumble, and soon they were shrieking and yelling again, their new interest in the two boys temporarily forgotten.

‘May I go and play with them, Dona-Marie?’ Krillie asked.

‘Later, Krillie,’ she said, taking his hand.

‘How do you know my name?’

‘I know you are Krillie because you are the smaller one, and your friend is Kemlo. We have heard a great deal about you both.’

‘What is this place, Dona-Marie?’ Kemlo asked as he followed the old lady and Krillie into the building.

‘It is the Hill of Rest,’ she replied. ‘For a certain period in their lives we have the young children stay here because it helps them to grow strong and to avoid the little things which upset them—like tummy-aches and small fevers.’ She glanced down at Krillie. ‘Have you had tummy-aches and fevers, Krillie?’

‘I had lumps,’ said Krillie, patting his cheek. ‘They came out all round here.’

‘Did they, now? You must have looked very funny. Did they hurt?’

‘Not much.’ Krillie gazed up at her. ‘You’re nice,’ he observed. ‘You look old, but your eyes are new and so is your voice.’

‘Krillie!’ said Kemlo in an admonishing tone, ‘that’s not polite.’

‘Of course it’s polite,’ said Dona-Marie. ‘A young man should always speak the truth, and then he is always polite.’

‘Are you very old?’ Krillie was unabashed by Kemlo’s warning looks.

‘I really don’t know,’ she replied. ‘We don’t think of age, but if you are used to Earth-time, I suppose I am . . .’ She smiled. ‘Oh, I don’t know,’ she said casually, ‘something over a hundred, I suppose.’

‘A hundred!’ Krillie exclaimed. ‘You must have been here a long, long time.’

‘I was born here,’ she said. ‘I was the first girl to be born here.’

She led them through a domed hallway and into a cubicle on the right, where she indicated that they both be seated on curved chairs made of light green bark. The walls, ceiling and floors were all of the same material, and its effect was most restful. It was so light and delicate in colour that it seemed to glow, and although they were inside a building it was, if anything, lighter than outside.

Dona-Marie sat in another chair next to a table facing them. On the table was a tray of a darker shade of green, and on the tray were small vessels also of the same material. Two of these vessels contained liquid, and in one of them were several flat spoon-like sticks.

On shelves behind the table were many different sized and shaped gourds, each one bearing a blue-coloured symbol.

Dona-Marie took one of the spoon-like sticks from a vessel and leaned toward Krillie as she said: ‘Open your mouth, Krillie.’

But Krillie clamped his lips together firmly and shook his head.

‘Come, now,’ she said coaxingly. ‘The quicker you open your mouth the sooner you get one of our special sweets.’

Krillie eased his expression slightly, but had a sudden change of mind and shut his lips even more firmly and shook his head again.

‘Krillie, do as Dona-Marie says.’ Kemlo spoke sharply. ‘This is a hospital, that’s all. Just like those we have on the Belt when we are examined to see if our teeth are all right.’

‘My teeth are fine,’ said Krillie. In that answer he made a mistake and, with a deft smooth action, Dona-Marie had slid the spoon-like stick between his teeth and turned it quickly so that he couldn’t close his mouth.

Holding his head in her hands, she peered intently into his mouth. After removing the stick and giving him a playful slap on the cheek, and before his mouth could close, she popped in the promised sweet.

‘I’m surprised at you,’ she said. ‘What did you think I was going to do?’

‘Don’t know,’ said Krillie, looking rather embarrassed. He slid a sidelong glance from beneath his long eyelashes. ‘What were you going to do?’

‘Look at your tongue and your mouth to see if you had any nasty spots. Is that so bad?’ She turned to Kemlo and said: ‘Open up.’

Kemlo opened his mouth wide and Dona-Marie inspected it carefully.

‘You are healthy enough,’ she declared, ‘both of you. I don’t know why the hunters brought you here, but there has been another battle with the beasts, hasn’t there?’

‘Yes,’ said Kemlo, somewhat abruptly.

‘I expect Aayo thought you would be better for a rest.’ She gazed steadily at Kemlo, and he was surprised at the brilliance of her eyes. They seemed strangely out of place in that lined face. Less strange would have been the fact that, if she were as old as she stated, her hair should be white, but it was not. She wore a kind of skull-cap made of the same blue-grey roughly woven material that everyone seemed to wear, and a flowing dress with a wide green belt made of the inevitable bark. This was looped around her waist and fastened by a grey oblong of stone.

Dona-Marie was the first woman Kemlo had seen on the planet who wore a covering on her feet. These were a kind of open-work sandal made, evidently, from the hide of the wood beast. She saw his gaze and smiled. Kemlo suddenly realised that he must have been eyeing her in a very rude manner.

‘I’m very sorry, Dona-Marie,’ he apologised, ‘but everything interests me so much, and my mind is full of questions. You all wear clothes woven from the grass that grows on the planet, yet some of it seems to be of finer quality, like yours.’

‘You do not need to apologise,’ she said. ‘I too am very curious.’ She leaned forward and ran her hands over his shoulders. ‘That feels nice and smooth—what is it?’

‘It’s a plastic that’s made from a thread that’s made from a liquid that’s condensed from a chemical,’ said Krillie in a gabble of words.

‘Dear me!’ she said. ‘All that?’

‘Yes, and it’s called “space clothing”,’ Krillie continued. ‘We wear it because we can go anywhere outside the Belt, but our mothers and fathers wear ordinary clothing, and they live in air-conditioned quarters. But if they come with us outside the Belt, they have to wear space clothing and helmets with oxygen and—and all. . . .’ His voice tailed off as he caught a warning glance from Kemlo.

‘Why do you stop his talking, Kemlo?’ said Dona-Marie. ‘It is most interesting to hear these things.’

‘It’s very interesting to us too, Dona-Marie,’ said Kemlo politely, ‘but when Krillie spoke of our clothes and the Satellite Belt, which is our home, he reminded me that we have been a long time away—at least, I don’t know how long, but our parents and friends must be growing worried.’

‘There is something I have learned, Kemlo,’ said Dona-Marie gravely. ‘Something that might help you a little if at any other time you leave your home and are unable to get back when you are expected.’

‘What is it, Dona-Marie?’

‘You are children of a new world. You are the first I have met, although I have spoken with one or two of the research ship crews who have landed here, but that was many years ago when Zania was much smaller. You will learn that you belong to Space and that, unlike your parents and mine, you can live in your own worlds. The things which would harm Earth-men and -women cannot harm you.

‘Slowly, as you grow older, you will understand this more and you will begin to feel and be a part of a way of life which your parents could not possibly understand. Because of this, and while they live, you must concentrate your mind on one very, very important thing. You must believe that no matter where you go or what happens to you—such as on this small strange planet, or in any other of the countless kingdoms in the Universe—you are but a part of a great plan.

‘It is a plan which has been created by a Master Hand. It has nothing to do with space ships or rockets—they are but the tools. Therefore, you will cast out fear from your mind—fear of the unknown. In doing so you will gain a strength which your parents will feel because, no matter how far you are away from them, the thoughts of those who love you and whom you love are always

linked. The stronger you make those thoughts, the more calmly you follow them, the less worry you will give your parents. Do you understand all this, or does it sound just a lot of nonsense?

‘I do not understand it all, Dona-Marie,’ said Kemlo seriously, ‘but I will remember what you have said and think about it a great deal so that I can understand it.’

‘I think you will.’ She glanced at Krillie and made soft clucking noises, for Krillie’s eyes were brimming with tears and his lips were quivering. ‘Well, now,’ said Dona-Marie, ‘and what is all this about?’

‘I want to go home!’ said Krillie. ‘It frightens me when people talk like that.’

Dona-Marie laid her hand upon Krillie’s head. He stopped trembling and smiled at her, as if somehow the touch of her hand had given him strength and confidence. She rose from her chair and, reaching to one of the shelves behind the table, took down a gourd. She poured from it a pink fluid into two beakers and handed one each to Kemlo and Krillie, saying briskly:

‘Drink this, then I will take you to your place of rest. You will remain there until all the tiredness and worry disappear. After that, perhaps you will have to hurry back before the blue veil comes, or else you will be here a long time.’

Obediently they drank the fluid and found that it was similar to that sweet nutty drink the hunters had brought for Kemlo and which Krillie had been given by Ton.

‘There,’ said Dona-Marie as she took the empty beakers from them. ‘That feels better, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes, thank you,’ said Krillie, ‘and I think I’m sleepy. What makes me so tired, Dona-Marie?’

‘It is because you are not used to Zania,’ she replied. ‘I would be tired if I came to your home. It’s the change of air, that is all.’

‘That, and the gravity pull,’ said Kemlo with a grin.

‘Gravity pull?’ Dona-Marie frowned, then shrugged gently. ‘I am trying to remember my lessons’—she wrinkled her nose at Krillie—‘but I was never very good at lessons. Besides, gravity, if I remember, is something to do with Earth terms, and all that learning is so long ago. Come!’

She took them both by the hand, led them from the cubicle and, turning to the right, walked along a passage which ran the whole length of the building.

As they passed other cubicles, each with its own square opening, Kemlo saw people sleeping on the green bark beds which were covered with the skins of the wood beasts.

At the end of the passage they came to a larger room with a number of square window openings around it. Two children were asleep on a bench in one corner. On another bench a small boy was sitting up playing with a carved puzzle.

Dona-Marie led them to two beds next to this small boy and said gently: 'Lie down, and when you wake you will have food.' She nodded, smiled and left them.

The small boy ceased playing with his puzzle and stared at them curiously. Kemlo smiled at him.

'Hallo,' he said. 'Who are you?'

'I'm Yacky,' said the small boy. 'I talk too much.'

Chapter 12

THE BLUE VEIL

THE small boy stared at them eagerly. He had a thin face, pointed chin and large ears. His brown eyes were little bright buttons that were never still, darting first to Kemlo, to Krillie, to their clothes, then to his own puzzle and back again.

‘Who calls you Yacky?’ said Kemlo.

‘Uncle Pete. I’m Yacky and I talk too much. I’m Yacky and I talk too much,’ he repeated.

‘I’m Kemlo, and this is Krillie,’ said Kemlo gently. ‘Why do you keep saying that?’

‘Dona-Marie made me say it. She says I’ve got to keep saying it. And Uncle Pete says I’ve got to keep saying it too. I can’t stop talking, you see. My mother says I keep chatter-chatter-chatter. But Uncle Pete says I just go yacky-yacky-yacky.’

Seeing Krillie yawn, Kemlo helped his friend on to one of the comfortable curved beds before he lay down himself on the other, which was next to Yacky.

‘Well, we’re very tired, so we’re going to have some sleep,’ he said. ‘Aren’t you tired, Yacky?’

‘I can sleep any time,’ said Yacky, throwing his puzzle down and lying flat on his bench. ‘I go to sleep very quickly.’

Kemlo suddenly felt most drowsy and, glancing toward Krillie, saw, to his surprise, that his friend was already fast asleep.

‘Well, go to sleep now,’ he said to Yacky. ‘We’ll talk when we wake up.’

‘Oh, I talk in my sleep as well,’ said Yacky cheerfully, but the words only penetrated dimly as sleep came to Kemlo. This was not the weary tiredness he had felt hitherto since they landed on Planet 64 but a sleep as natural as if he were in his own bunk on the Satellite Belt. His mind was at peace, he wasn’t worrying about feeling tired; in fact, the thought of sleep was all that held his

mind in those last moments before sleep came.

When Kemlo awoke he found that Krillie was still asleep; also the two children on the bench in the corner of the room. Yacky lay on his back, his eyes closed and his lips muttering indistinguishable words. Kemlo stretched and yawned and felt full vigour returned to his rested body. He had not felt so well since he left the Satellite Belt. Gone was the heaviness, the leaden burden of his limbs. He threw off the light coverlet which had been placed over him while he slept, and for a moment paused to feel its texture. It was of gossamer lightness, soft and finely woven, yet it looked harsh, as did all the clothing worn by the Zanians. He guessed now that these garments must be beautifully soft to the skin, but their rough appearance did much to make the men in particular look ill-fitted.

Now that Kemlo was rested and his mind more alert, he was aware of the difference in the many kinds of dress. The hunters wore theirs in a style which allowed unrestricted movement across the arms and shoulders. Pete and several of his relatives wore the material in a sort of tunic style. The children wore shorts and a blouse-like upper part, while the women wore a more flowing dress, similar to Dona-Marie's. Licona and other girls of her age wore a blouse with no collar and a skirt which fell to just below their knees.

Although at first sight the Zanians were dressed alike, there were, on reflection, many details in their style of dress which showed them to be both of different ages and holding different positions among their people.

Kemlo tiptoed from the room and down the passage past the many cubicles on each side of it. Glancing in at one of them on his way past, he halted, turned back and peeped in again. The man sleeping there had one arm bound up with what appeared to be red leaves fastened by strips of blue-grey material. Kemlo recognised him as the hunter whose arm had been withered by the ray gun flash bouncing from the rock surface. He was sleeping quietly, a faint dew of perspiration on his forehead. As Kemlo turned away he saw Dona-Marie at the far end of the passage. When she saw him look toward her, she beckoned to him.

'You are awake early, Kemlo,' she said softly as he came up to her. 'How do you feel now?'

'More rested than at any time since I've been here, thank you, Dona-Marie. Was it something in the drink you gave us that made me sleep?'

'It would help. But this is called the Hill of Rest, for that reason. The air here is very different.' She smiled at him. 'Don't ask me why. It's something to do with what Pete and the others call variation in climate. You see, Kemlo,

there is a reason for everything, and you do not need to be very clever to know that. But you would have to be very clever indeed to explain it, although why bother to explain something which is there?’

‘You mean, the air around the rock formation on the other side of the hill doesn’t let the people rest as much as they should?’ Kemlo asked.

‘It doesn’t affect everybody in the same way,’ she replied. ‘We do not understand why it should be so. Little Yacky is a good example. He came here yesterday for the fourth time. We get him properly rested and he quietyens down and doesn’t talk nearly as much. But after a time when he returns to his family he can’t sleep, and he is so full of energy he can’t stop talking.’

‘But will he get better?’

‘Oh, yes, he will get better,’ said Dona-Marie confidently. ‘My daughter was the same when she was his age; but now she is grown up and married and has children of her own. Would you like to wash?’

‘I think I would,’ Kemlo replied. ‘You must think me a funny sort of person, but I’d forgotten I haven’t washed since I came here.’ He surprised even himself by this thought.

‘I shouldn’t worry,’ she said drily. ‘Most boys find that very easy to forget. If you go to your right, you will see a canopied entrance to a washing-room where there is a shallow bath and other facilities. When Krillie wakes up I will send him to you, and then you will have a meal. But don’t make much noise, because there are young babies asleep a little farther down.’

She turned away and Kemlo went on until he came to the canopied entrance. Lifting the long drape he went inside the washing-room. After gazing around at the well-designed bath and the channelled water ducts he began to strip off his clothes.

The method of obtaining water was simple—so simple that Dona-Marie had not bothered to explain it to him. He lifted two tabs which covered the ends of the channelled ducts above the bath and immediately the water poured into it in a steady flow. On a rack by the side of the bath were piles of blue-grey cloths.

Kemlo had a shock when he saw that the water filling the shallow bath was blue. He stopped the flow when he had enough in the bath, tested it with his finger and found that it was warm. For a moment he wondered whether it would stain his skin blue, but realised that the Zanians must use it, and they certainly were not stained.

The bath rocked slightly as he stepped into it, and peering over the side he saw that it was so designed as to allow it to be tipped up. There was a rock-lined hole into which the water could flow.

After his bath Kemlo felt very hungry and when he emerged he found Krillie and several other boys waiting, including Yacky, who seemed much quieter and nothing like as voluble.

Presently one of the young hunters who had been guarding the gate when Kemlo arrived came along to see Dona-Marie. She met him at the entrance and, seeing Kemlo talking to Krillie and the other boys, beckoned to him.

‘Chief Aan has sent a message for you both to return if you are rested enough,’ she said when Kemlo joined them. ‘The blue veil is due any time now and he wants you to be back when they start the celebrations.’

‘I’d forgotten about the celebration,’ said Kemlo, ‘but we ought to be going because I have many things to discuss with Pete and Licona.’

‘I do not think you really needed to come here in the first place,’ said Dona-Marie with a smile. ‘You were both a little tired and I think we have given you more strength, but perhaps you heard that the Hill of Rest was a lovely place and so you wished to see it, eh?’

‘I wouldn’t like to have left without having seen it,’ said Kemlo quite truthfully, but not daring to say that it was only because he had made the mistake of sighing, for Dona-Marie was obviously immensely proud of the Hill of Rest.

‘When you and your friend have had your meal, Aayo will send the hunters for you,’ she said. ‘It is too far for you to walk back alone.’

‘Could I walk around the Hill of Rest before we go?’ Kemlo asked.

‘I will show you now,’ she said, grasping his hand.

They left the building and walked to the top of the mound where, to Kemlo’s surprise, he saw on the far side long green tables with curved benches surrounding them. The tables were piled high with plates of some sort of food, numerous beakers and several gourds.

‘I am amazed by the uses you find for the green bark,’ he said, ‘and how cleverly you mould things out of it.’

‘It is a wonderful craft,’ said Dona-Marie proudly. ‘When the blue veil comes, perhaps you will see how such things are made. Look—I will show you where the very young hunters practise.’

She led the way down the mound and showed Kemlo the rigid poles set at angles in the ground and laced together with thongs of the blue-grey material. Ropes of the same material were suspended from the cross-poles. There were flat boards and carved blocks. Dona-Marie explained that these were used when boys were chosen to be young hunters. Over this variously designed equipment the youngsters did all manner of exercises to strengthen the muscles of their shoulders and limbs.

‘And, of course, they run a great deal,’ she continued. ‘They stay here for a time so that we can make sure they do not overtax their growing strength before they go to live away from all the others, where they are free to develop their minds and their muscles until they become strong and swift enough to be chosen as hunters.’

She took Kemlo across to where the Zanians lived on the Hill of Rest and introduced him to Oowano, a bright-eyed round-faced Zanian woman who, of course, could not understand his words nor he hers, but Dona-Marie translated for them both.

Kemlo was puzzled why, with a separate Zanian quarter on the Hill of Rest, he had seen several of the Zanian hunters in Dona-Marie’s section.

‘I have all wounded men in my section,’ she explained. ‘I have more experience and understand how to treat them. And, of course, as there are more Zanians than Earth-descendants, Oowano’s dwelling often becomes overcrowded. We are here to help each other and the strict laws of Chief Aan to live separately do not apply so rigidly on the Hill of Rest.’

After waving goodbye to Oowano they climbed the mound to find the babbling children gathered around the long tables busy eating and drinking.

Krillie called to Kemlo to join him.

‘These are good,’ said Krillie, munching heartily and holding out a piece of food to Kemlo. It looked like a thick wad of compressed leaves from the red-foliaged bushes. Kemlo bit a small piece and chewed for a moment. It had a most delicious aromatic flavour, and before long he too was munching with much pleasure until his hunger was satisfied. The drink was the same as he had had before.

When the meal was finished the children stood up, but without moving from the tables they began to chant a grace. There were no words, although the lilt of those childish voices sounded very like the grace Kemlo and the other boys and girls on the Satellite Belt had to say before and after their meals.

All the other children dispersed to their play, except Yacky, who hung

around and suddenly seemed shy. Kemlo went up to him and held out his hand, but Yacky did not understand how to shake hands. Instead, he clasped Kemlo's hand in both his own and hung on tightly.

'I like you,' he said. 'Will you tell my Uncle Pete that I don't talk quite so much now, but I'll have to stay here for the blue veil?' He frowned as he gazed at Kemlo. 'Have you got any boys where you come from that can't stop talking?'

'I think so,' said Kemlo thoughtfully. 'In fact, I'm sure we have.' He looked at Krillie, who rose to the occasion quite quickly for once, because, as a rule, he was slow to catch any delicate point.

'Oh, yes, we have,' said Krillie. 'I've only just stopped talking a lot myself, haven't I, Kemlo?'

'Krillie used to talk and talk and talk,' said Kemlo.

'I like talking,' said Yacky, 'and I like asking lots and lots of questions, but I suppose it does get tiring for people to have to listen to you all the time. Dona-Marie says it's a sign of'—he hesitated as he tried to think of the right words—'of an unusual intelligence,' he burst out proudly. 'But she says people won't think I'm intelligent until I stop talking. That doesn't seem right, does it?'

'I think it is though,' Kemlo replied seriously. 'Dona-Marie is very wise.'

'Yes, I suppose she is,' Yacky agreed gravely. 'Well, perhaps I'll see you again?' Quickly he released Kemlo's hand, turned and ran off to join the other children.

Kemlo looked at Krillie and smiled, and together they walked down to where Dona-Marie had just greeted two hunters.

She bade them goodbye with graceful courtesy and asked Kemlo to be sure and not tax their strength too much. Then the two boys were lifted on to the hunters' shoulders and taken from the Hill of Rest.

As the gate opened for them the sky began to grow dark—not dark in the sense of obscuring vision, but everything around them grew darker. Glancing back, Kemlo saw that the palisades surrounding the Hill of Rest were now dark green instead of the delicate light colour. It was as if the land were laid with shadows, yet the air was still clear.

The hunters moved in long loping strides, and by the time they could see the rock formation ahead of them, a pall of deep blue shot with gold was drawing like a curtain above their heads. The air grew clammy and their skins

were damp, as if they suddenly had become very hot, although both boys were quite cool.

As they neared the rock formation, Kemlo could see a group of hunters carrying his space scooter into one of the lower caves. He saw Licon and Pete waving to them from the entrance of the largest cave.

Overhead the gold was fading and the blue was deepening until slowly a wet film drifted around them—a gradually thickening blue veil of moisture seeping in endless folds over the darkening land.

Chapter 13

DO NOT BETRAY US

FOR many reasons Kemlo was glad that the impenetrable blue veil had come to Planet 64. The absence of normal methods of timing made it impossible to assess how long he and Krillie had been on the planet. Now that the space scooter's instruments were de-magnetised and the propulsion unit functioning at full power, he really had no excuse for not attempting the return flight to the Satellite Belt.

The presence of life on this tiny planet and in such a civilised form intrigued Kemlo so much that a natural curiosity made him want to know all about it before he and Krillie left. Krillie's feelings alternated between wanting to go home and wanting to stay on Zania. Also, he was beginning to grow very concerned about how he could explain the Zanians in his diary.

Being older and having had a higher technical education made Kemlo react more objectively. Since discovering the Zanians, he had found his education to be lacking in regard to the 'breakaway planets' as they were termed. The accepted theory was that no breakaway planet could safely or effectively be investigated. They were spinning articles of matter hurtling through the void between the worlds. Sometimes they were a danger to space ships, but more often the reason given for not bothering with them was that, in Earth terms, it was impossible to survive for long upon them.

The number Sixty-Four given to this planet showed how many others had been logged in the scientists' case books and records. Kemlo wondered how many more of the other sixty-three would be like Zania. But in many ways that was a foolish question because he knew that a number of these breakaway planets were known to have vanished already. Perhaps they had broken up to be lost for evermore, or perhaps they had joined together and, fusing into a complete whole, become one of those whirling dangers which disturbed the cosmic void and set up such phenomena as the astral storm.

It was a vast and indeed mysterious subject, and Kemlo reasoned that he would get no satisfaction from guessing.

At some period—probably about the same time as, or even earlier than that

when his own parents were children—a space ship from Earth had crashed upon the planet’s surface and those who escaped had, by some good fortune, survived. Thus, like himself, their children became natural space dwellers. All his life Kemlo had been associated with Earth-men and -women. The very food they ate, most of the clothes they wore and much technical equipment reached them from Earth. But in many ways, Pete and his daughter and the other Earth-descendants were more advanced than the people on the Satellite Belt. They were a second generation of space dwellers, and except for knowledge handed down to them and a language which also was kept alive, they were completely severed from Earth.

Kemlo felt that the problem was too big for him to understand thoroughly, and because of this he was depressed—or perhaps it was because the blue veil laid a curtain over his spirits as well as before his eyes.

When they had arrived at the cave entrance, Krillie had been met by Ton, who was eager to show him something, so Krillie had run off with his new friend. Pete had welcomed Kemlo, then disappeared with Licona, and for almost the first time since he landed on the planet Kemlo was quite alone—hence the parade of thoughts through his puzzled mind.

He turned to greet Licona as she came to him.

‘Isn’t it lovely?’ she said, pointing to the blue veil.

Kemlo shivered. ‘I’ve never seen anything like it before,’ he said. ‘But it makes me feel miserable.’

‘Does it?’ said Licona in surprise. ‘We love it; but, of course, we’re used to it and we know what comes afterwards.’

‘What does?’

‘Everything grows very fast and there’s a lovely scent, and we all go out and cut great armsful of grass as soon as it grows to its full height.’

‘Isn’t it fully grown now?’

‘Some of it is stunted grass, but near where the cattle graze it just grows up and up almost in front of your eyes. Only with the blue veil blotting out everything you can’t see it.’ She was silent for a moment and then addressed him seriously. ‘Kemlo?’

‘Yes, Licona?’

‘You’ll be going back soon, won’t you?’

‘Yes, we shall have to.’

‘Are you glad you came?’

‘Very glad.’

‘Will you come again?’

‘I’d like to,’ he said truthfully, ‘but I think I shall get into a lot of trouble for being away so long. . . .’ Kemlo hesitated, suddenly realising he was about to give the reason, but he could hardly tell Licona that the Elders on the Satellite Belt would say that Planet 64 might blow up at any time.

Licona sensed his uncertainty and with a peculiar insight she asked quietly: ‘To the people where you live, this isn’t a real planet, is it? You came here by accident. They wouldn’t let you come here deliberately?’

‘I don’t know. Honestly, Licona, I don’t know,’ said Kemlo.

‘Sometimes I am frightened,’ she said, speaking softly and not looking at him. ‘I read some of the books our ancestors left and I’m afraid.’

‘What are you afraid of?’ Kemlo had to ask the question, yet something of the girl’s mood was being transferred to him and he felt that despite all his thoughts on the subject he really wasn’t sure of anything. He didn’t want to ask any more questions or give any more answers. It was a strange feeling to have.

Licona was a long time before she answered. ‘I’m afraid of those great rocket ships, for one thing,’ she said at last. ‘I was afraid when your craft landed and we saw you and Krillie step out and then fall down. But when I saw that you were boys I became anxious to find out why you were here. That was different. But those ships . . .’ she shivered slightly.

‘Not all the men in space and rocket ships who might land here are like those other men,’ Kemlo assured her.

‘Perhaps not, but I’m afraid of them just the same. We are all afraid of them.’

‘All of you?’ Kemlo exclaimed in surprise. ‘But you accepted Krillie and me, although, I know, at first the hunters were not very friendly.’

‘I keep telling you,’ she said sharply. ‘You’re like us, but the people who might come in a ship—what could we do against numbers of them armed with those terrible guns?’ Suddenly she smiled at him and the serious mood was gone. ‘I’m talking foolishly,’ she said. ‘I think Chief Aan will be sending for you soon, and after you’ve seen him we’ll show you what we do during the blue veil. Would you like that?’

‘I certainly would. How long does the blue veil . . . ?’ He stopped speaking

and grinned at her. ‘You don’t know, do you? You don’t know how long anything lasts?’

She stared at him with eyes full of humour for a moment.

‘No,’ she said, ‘we don’t. But that’s just something else, you see. In all the books and pictures I’ve read and seen about Earth-people, they are always thinking of time. They’ve always got to do something by this time, or go somewhere by that time. Don’t they ever do what they want to do, Kemlo?’

‘I never thought of it like that,’ Kemlo admitted. ‘I suppose time is something you become used to.’

She shrugged gently. ‘I wouldn’t. And I don’t think any of the Zanians would.’ She turned at the sound of footsteps and greeted her father.

‘Been having a little talk?’ said Pete, eyeing them shrewdly.

‘A little,’ said Licona quickly—a shade too quickly, but Kemlo did not notice it.

‘You go back to the hall, Licona,’ said her father. ‘I’m taking Kemlo along to the Chief.’

‘You won’t be long?’ she asked.

‘Not long.’

Licona left them, and Pete took Kemlo’s arm and walked him through from the mouth of the cave into that same passage along which the hunters had brought the two boys upon their arrival.

But now there was a difference. Instead of it being much darker than it was outside the cave, the whole passage was glowing with a blue light.

‘How do you get that light?’ Kemlo asked.

‘What light?’ Pete began in a puzzled voice. ‘Oh, you mean the rock light? That’s natural light. While the blue veil is over the planet, the rocks glow. When it starts to become lighter, their light fades. It’s quite simple.’

‘Yes,’ said Kemlo, feeling it was a polite but untruthful answer because he just didn’t see how it happened.

Pete led the way at a fairly fast pace, seeming disinclined to answer any questions, and so, in silence, they reached the large cave where Chief Aan and Uun sat in the same places at the long green table. Leaving Kemlo to face them, Pete took his seat by the Chief’s side.

Behind the Chief stood Aayo and three other hunters. Their eyes were

friendly, but their faces were serious and Kemlo wondered what was going to happen.

Pete began speaking and his first words reassured the boy.

‘I’ve convinced the Chief that you are a real intelligent boy,’ he said. ‘He likes you and he is grateful for what you’ve done since you’ve been here. Also, Aayo regards you as a friend, as do his hunters.’ Pete was speaking in a carefully modulated voice and a lot of the drawling accent had disappeared—perhaps it was because he wanted to impress every word upon Kemlo’s mind.

Chief Aan spoke for a moment, then Pete translated.

‘Chief Aan says, I am to tell you that because of your fine behaviour and your friendliness and help since you landed upon our planet, he confirms upon you the title already bestowed of Son of the Chief. Aayo will present you with the Belt of Honour.’

Pete made a sign toward the leader of the hunters, who came around from behind the Chief. He was carrying a very beautifully fashioned green bark belt which had for a buckle a grey stone, polished and carved in the likeness of the Chief’s head.

Kemlo stood quietly while Aayo fastened the belt around his waist and slipped the thong over the stone buckle. This fixed the belt securely and, with a brief bow, Aayo returned to his place behind Chief Aan.

‘If you ever return to Zania, you will be welcomed as a Son of the Chief,’ said Pete solemnly. ‘To you, this may not mean much, but to us it is the greatest honour we can give to a man or a boy.’ He smiled at Kemlo as he said in a softer voice: ‘It might be a good idea to speak those sounds you’ve learned.’

Kemlo gazed around at the hunters, at Uun, and directly at Chief Aan, gave a little bow, and said loudly:

‘Hu—hu!’

They all smiled and bowed in return. This appeared to close the ceremony of making Kemlo a Son of the Chief, but, obviously, there was more to come because all of them were looking toward Pete, who was fumbling with nervous fingers at a long strip of green bark.

‘I’ve taken a lot of time to write things on this,’ he said, lifting up the bark and slowly beginning to roll it. ‘Chief Aan asks that you take it with you and give it only into the hands of your Chief—or, as I believe you call him, Elder.’

‘That is right,’ said Kemlo.

‘It is a message which we are sure he will understand.’ Pete was silent while he tied the scroll of bark and handed it to Kemlo, who slid it into the top pocket of his suit. ‘We’re mighty glad to have had you and your friend visit us,’ said Pete, lapsing into his more natural idiom, ‘and we hope you get back to your home safely. We’d like fine for you to stay as long as you want, but we know your folks will be worried about you. Now, we don’t aim to bore you with a lot of talk, Kemlo, but there are things we’ve got to say to you as man to man. Come here, son.’ Pete rose from his chair and beckoned to Kemlo.

Two of the hunters with Aayo moved back, and lifting a long framework from the side of the cave they brought it nearer the table. Kemlo stood at Pete’s side and looked down at it.

The model within the framework looked like the pictures he had seen of towns on Earth. There were terraces of dwellings and lanes running from them to a broader lane, and some larger buildings set at the foot of a slope. The whole model was beautifully carved and fitted, and except for pieces of stone which marked boundaries around the larger buildings, it all was made of different shades of green bark, from very light green to deep olive.

‘That is what we hope to build on Zania,’ said Pete, speaking seriously again. ‘Our people have lived in these rocks, in the caves first discovered by our ancestors and linked up by a maze of passages. But this is what we hope to build for our people. We hope that in the years ahead we shall become one people, and if our language has to die to make that possible—then it will be worth it.’

‘It’s a wonderful model,’ said Kemlo admiringly. ‘Would you have enough tree bark to build this?’

‘We have an inexhaustible supply,’ said Pete. ‘You like it, eh?’

‘I certainly do,’ Kemlo replied.

Pete returned to the table and sat down. Kemlo took up his position in front of the Chief, but this time one of the hunters had placed a chair for him, so he sat facing them, feeling suddenly rather important.

‘We’re hoping you will understand what we’re trying to tell you, son,’ said Pete. ‘I think if you remember it and tell your Elders exactly what we’ve said, you will find that they’ll understand it. But it may be you will feel that they should not be told everything. That will be for you to decide after you have left us.’

‘It’s going to take us on Zania a long time to become a united people and we intend to do it without any violence, without any fighting and without trickery. Before you go, I’ll show you our one secret, which will add weight to what I’m saying now.

‘This planet is ours and upon it we live happily. We cannot live happily if others come to investigate and exploit our land. We are a tiny spot in the Universe, but it’s all we know and it’s all we have. We ask you not to go back to your people and tell them excitedly that here is a land worth sending a rocket ship to investigate. We do not *want* any ship to land here. We do not want their instruments, their mechanical tools or their guns. We want nothing but what we have and what we shall build with our own minds and hands.

‘Zania is slowly coming to life. Many years will pass before it is a completely living land. We ask to be left in peace. And we ask *you*—do not betray us. Paint what pictures you will, but be sure that they are not so interesting as to cause your Elders to send ships and crews from Earth to land here.’ Pete gazed steadily at Kemlo. ‘That’s all I’ve got to say, son,’ he added quietly. ‘Maybe it’s too big for you to understand—or maybe you do understand.’

Kemlo was silent for a time. As Pete had been speaking he had seen in his imagination the picture that Licon’s father had evoked for him. He felt the sincerity and the fear which lay behind the words.

He rose slowly to his feet, bowed to the Chief and Uun and said very seriously to Pete:

‘I will not betray you. My people will understand too.’

Chapter 14

CELEBRATION AND SECRET

KEMLO followed the Chief from what he knew now to be the Council Chamber of the Zanians and, with Aayo's hand resting lightly on his shoulder, they trod down a veritable maze of passages which led farther and farther into the depths of the rock.

Some of the things Licona had said to him now made sense to Kemlo. He realised that perhaps her father had told her of these fears of the Zanians or, perhaps naturally, she would know them already. Whichever it was, Kemlo was glad he had been told and proud that Pete and Chief Aan and those fine men, the hunters, trusted him. He still found the moods of the Zanians a little bewildering, for they were so resilient. Such small things made them angry or miserable, and then, just as suddenly, they were like gay children.

At this moment the Zanians were chattering among themselves in their musical-sounding laughing language, and the sense of it was one of happiness and excitement. The feeling spread to Kemlo and he remembered only just in time that to laugh because you felt happy was an insult to these people who laughed all the time. This suppressing of one's natural happy feelings was very difficult, but he mastered it and soon the desire to laugh gave way to an expression of amazement.

They had come down the last sloping passage, turned past a bulging corner of rock and now faced a long high-domed cave. It was of tremendous size, and the glowing light of its walls reflected from the mound of green bark stacked in one corner and from piles of gourds and vessels which a group of Zanian women were fashioning from the sheets of bark. They worked with a small pan of water beside them into which they dipped the bark, and after briefly immersing it, they began to mould it into the article required. In a few seconds a flask or a gourd or a vessel took shape before the eyes.

Next to them, young men were stretching pelts over a large round stone while others, using a piece of sharpened stone, were cutting the hides into symmetrical shapes. These were passed on to another group who were making sandals and long gauntlet-like gloves. Behind them, young women were

fashioning the whole pelt into the sort of mattresses Kemlo had seen on the bark beds in the building on the Hill of Rest.

Around the walls on each side of the huge cave the Zanians and Earth-descendants were modelling all manner of articles, from the green bark utensils to the woven blue-grey cloth. The section dealing with the cloth was the biggest of all, and Earth-descendants and Zanians worked side by side. Great bundles of dried grass were at one end of a long trestle. This was combed through a spiky board, then two people would hold the long cross patterns until slowly the required length and width of cloth emerged from beneath their nimble fingers.

There was much noise and the cave was literally full of laughter. This formed a pleasant and melodious low-pitched background to the screaming cries of the children playing their games at the far end of the cave near a raised platform.

Kemlo saw Krillie with a group of younger girls and boys playing some mad game which required them to face in two circles going in opposite directions until, at some signal, they all tumbled over.

A hunter standing at the side of the entrance to the cave raised what looked like a long hollow limb of a tree to his lips. A deep trumpeting note came from it, and this was repeated three times. At the third note the huge cave became silent and everyone faced the entrance.

Chief Aan bowed and everyone in the cave bowed, even the children, although somewhat clumsily as, caught in the middle of some game, one or two of them were standing on one leg. It made bowing difficult and two of them fell over.

With Uun on one side and Pete on the other, Chief Aan walked down the centre of the cave toward the far end, followed by Aayo and the hunters. Kemlo stood to one side, for something told him this was a ceremonial in which he should not take part. He felt movement close to him and, turning, saw Licona and Krillie. His friend was panting very hard.

‘Are you all right, Krillie?’ Kemlo asked anxiously.

‘Yes,’ Krillie chuffed. ‘We ran fast, didn’t we, Licona?’

‘Yes, we did. A little too fast for you, I think.’

‘Where did you come from?’ said Kemlo in surprise. ‘The last time I saw you, Krillie, you were right down the other end of the cave.’

‘There are slots in the walls where you can go through,’ Krillie explained,

‘and all round each side passages lead into rooms where there’s food—lots and lots of food—and other places where there are beds. You never saw anything like it, Kemlo.’

‘It’s very wonderful,’ Kemlo agreed. ‘I didn’t guess you had anything like this down here, Licona.’

‘This is where we all come for the blue veil,’ she said, ‘but we’ve been working extra hard so that we can make the celebration last longer.’

‘So now we have the celebration!’ said Kemlo. ‘What happens?’

‘You’ll see,’ said Licona non-committally. ‘You will have to go up on the platform where the Chief sits. That’s where all the leaders sit, and as you’re a Son of the Chief, you’ll have to sit with them. Come on, I’ll take you up there.’

She moved through the crowds of Zanians and her own people, who now were carrying all the work material back against the walls and bringing forward benches and seats. All the children were hurrying toward the great platform which filled the far end of the cave from one wall to the other.

Pete greeted the boys with a smile and indicated two chairs next to himself and Chief Aan. Licona left them and disappeared among a number of young Zanian girls. Aayo and the hunters had gone across to the other side, threading their way among the hurrying children who now were massing upon the platform.

Chief Aan gave a signal, and immediately there was silence in the cave, broken only by the little scuffling sounds made by the children’s bare feet upon the shiny surface of the green bark platform.

At first Kemlo thought he heard another sound coming from the distance, then realised that it came from the children’s voices. It began low and faintly, growing slowly in volume as each rank of children took up the song. Whether they were natural singers or whether they were skilfully trained Kemlo did not know. He knew only that it was the most beautiful blending of voices he had ever heard. He had heard plenty of music and singing on the Satellite Belt through the powerful relay machines, but nothing to approach this silvery cadence of sound which filled the great cave and swept around it in a glorious bell-like echo.

There were no words, of course—just different inflexions of sounds—yet the melody was somehow familiar. When Pete leaned close to him and whispered in his ear, Kemlo knew why it was so familiar.

‘They can’t sing words, but that’s “Abide with Me”,’ Pete whispered. ‘You

ever heard it before?’

Kemlo nodded, unable to speak, so fascinated was he by the volume and lilt of those clear young voices.

‘It’s what we call the Chief’s song,’ said Pete. ‘Those kids sure love singing.’

And sing they did!

When the Chief’s song was finished there was a pause before music trilled out again—this time a fast catchy tune which Kemlo could not place, but Pete told him it was an old Earth sea shanty. Then the Chief raised his hand and all bowed very correctly toward him, and breaking their orderly ranks the children ran from the platform and soon were absorbed into the family groups all around the cave.

Next came the young hunters, who laid piles of the wood beasts’ pelts upon the platform and there began a series of hand fights. It appeared that the loser had to be thrown on to the pelts three times before he scrambled away, leaving the victor to meet the victor of another fight. This continued until, after many exciting battles when the lithe muscles strained and rippled in the blue light, there remained only two hunters on their feet.

‘The winner of this battle will be the leader of the young hunters until the next blue veil,’ Pete explained.

‘Isn’t that Ton?’ Kemlo exclaimed.

‘Yes, it is, it is!’ Krillie cried, and joined the rest of the Zanians yelling encouragement to their favourite. He bounced up and down on his seat, yelling: ‘Go on, Ton—throw him, throw him!’

But this was not so easy a battle as some of the others. The youths were well matched, and they strained and struggled in first one grip then another. Pete explained that no blows were allowed. It had to be a trial of balance and strength.

Several times Ton swung his opponent around in a stumbling arc, but the other youth kept his feet and came again with muscle-corded arms outstretched, ready for another try.

They fought with a smile on their faces and seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves. But at last Ton got a firm grip and his opponent fell heavily.

Almost at once he bounded up, still smiling, and came at Ton again, but he

was too eager: a quick deft spin and he was on his back again. This time some of the breath seemed to be knocked out of him, because next time he approached more cautiously.

Ton, sensing that he had his opponent at a disadvantage, was leaping up and down in front of him, prancing around, grimacing and flexing his arms, taunting the other youth to try and catch hold of him. It was all over soon after that, for the youth was tempted, and with one mighty heave Ton grasped him around the waist and tossed him over his head.

After this came dancing—a strange form of dancing. Young Zanian girls, aided by a musical accompaniment made by tapping pieces of bark upon different-sized gourds, danced slow and graceful dances, which to an Earthman's eyes would seem reminiscent of a minuet.

Before Kemlo's and Krillie's fascinated eyes the various sports and dances, the singing and trials of strength, went on. None of them boring, some of them most exciting, culminating in a display of strength by Aayo and his hunters who formed themselves into pyramids, into towers and other extremely skilful formations. At one time Aayo had ten men balanced upon him in a most extraordinary feat of strength.

When at last this part of the celebration was over, long tables were brought into the centre of the cave, and heaped platters of the compressed fruit-like food, flasks and gourds of the sweet nutty liquid and hundreds of beakers, were arrayed upon them.

A special table had been set up in front of Chief Aan and his party, and Kemlo and Krillie had hardly eaten their fill before they felt their eyes closing, and so tired were they that they did not even feel the hunters lift and carry them from the cave to lay them gently on two beds in a small cubicle.

When they awoke, young hunters escorted them to a washing-room and later to a smaller eating-room. All these could be termed rooms, although, in actual fact, they were small caves hollowed into the rock walls, lined with the light green bark and curtained by the woven blue-grey cloth. Finally they were escorted into the great cave, where they found Licon waiting for them.

'The celebration is over, the blue veil is lifting, and soon you must leave,' she said.

'How long have we been asleep?' Kemlo asked.

'How long?' She shrugged. 'What does it matter how long? You have slept and you have eaten—and now I have to take you to my father.'

Licona led the way through the long high cave from where the Zanians and Earth-descendants were carrying the finished work into store-rooms. Near the entrance one of the Earth-descendants stepped forward and put his hands on Kemlo's shoulders.

'Perhaps we shall see you again,' he said. 'Goodbye, Kemlo.'

'Perhaps you will,' Kemlo replied, not knowing what else to say at this time. 'Goodbye!'

All the others waved to them and smiled, then abruptly turned and went on with their work. Licona led them up along the sloping passages which curved and twisted until they came at last to the entrance into the rock formation where first they had been brought—how long ago?

Pete stood with Aayo and several of the hunters near the space scooter.

'I have something to show you, Kemlo,' said Pete. 'Aayo will carry you. Krillie will stay here with Licona.'

'Oh, can't I come too?' said Krillie in a disappointed voice.

'No, son.' Pete patted the boy's head. 'Just wait for us, and pretty soon you'll be flying away from here.'

Kemlo knew then that he was to be shown the secret about which Pete had warned him.

'I'm ready,' he said quietly, and grasping Aayo's strong arm he hauled himself up on to the hunter's shoulders. And so they set off.

The air was still blue-tinged and damp to the skin, but it was clear and rapidly growing lighter. The hunters moved with long effortless strides through the soaking undergrowth, past the long burned yellow strip where Kemlo had used the ray gun to halt the advance of the maddened wood beasts, and swung in a wide arc past the Kris lake. They headed for a point beyond the second rock barrier where a group of young hunters joined them.

Silently they went on until the ground became more spongy and the hunters' strides slower as their feet sank up to the ankles. Then the ground grew firmer again as they came to blackened rock slopes. A huge cluster of rocks loomed up and the young hunters went on ahead.

Suddenly they stood on the edge of the Endless Sea.

At first Kemlo felt rather sick as he watched the slow rise and fall of the grey barren expanse stretching far into the blue distance.

Below them the rocks shelved steeply, and beyond these Kemlo's eyes

discerned moving figures—grey as the sea at their backs. Between thirty and forty, he estimated, and those nearest the young hunters were being patted and spoken to in low cooing sounds.

‘Our secret, Kemlo,’ said Pete harshly. ‘Look closely!’

The figures became clearer as Kemlo gazed at them. They were not so tall as the Zanians but they had the same colouring. Their faces were blank and devoid of expression. Their eyes were cold as they stared at the young hunters, and yet about them there was an air of helplessness, and although they made only soft grunting sounds, they seemed to like the presence of the hunters and the touch of their hands.

Kemlo could see only their heads and shoulders. Their hair was long and matted, and a greenish-blue in colour. Their shoulders were thinner and not so muscular as the hunters’. And they had no hands—only broad red-tinted webs which they waved futilely.

Abruptly Pete gave an order and Aayo and the hunters turned back the way they had come.

They were passing the Kris lake before Pete said: ‘Well, Kemlo?’

‘I almost dare not think what it means, Pete,’ Kemlo replied in a tense voice.

‘But you do understand?’

‘Yes.’

‘When my ancestors came here,’ said Pete slowly and deliberately, ‘those creatures were the only living things on the planet. From them have grown the graceful people whom you saw at play during the celebration. We must be left alone until our Endless Sea becomes a land and the creatures on it become like ourselves. We want no scientists—do you understand?’ His voice was very fierce.

‘Yes,’ said Kemlo, ‘I do understand.’

‘Go back then, boy of the Space Worlds,’ said Pete. ‘You have our trust.’

Chapter 15

RETURN FLIGHT

KEMLO was serious-faced as he stood by the side of the space scooter. Even Krillie had caught some of the tension of the moment and showed no signs of giggling, as he often did at the very times when he should not.

Kemlo realised that all the Zanians and Pete's people would know why he had been taken to where the young hunters watched over those poor simple creatures who lived on the shores of the Endless Sea. The shock had been a severe one, but he was now adjusting himself, for the experience had been, after all, merely the practical resolving of his more advanced lessons.

But lessons were Theory, and no matter how strange things may be when described, there is a considerable difference between the mental picture and what the eyes see and the ears hear. Yet for many years scientists and space explorers had been finding creatures such as those whom Kemlo had just seen.

Kemlo could not grasp the full details of Pete's meaning, but he did understand the reason why he had been shown the secret of Zania.

Chief Aan, Uun and Aayo and his leading hunters stood on a platform of rock a little distance from the space scooter. Licona was saying goodbye to Krillie as Ton came forward shyly with a flask of the fruit drink and a leaf-wrapped packet of the compressed food, which he handed to Krillie. He made many signs and Krillie kept nodding and smiling, although he didn't understand what Ton meant; but it seemed to satisfy the new leader of the young hunters, and, after jabbering a few words to Kemlo, Ton turned and ran back to join his friends.

The jagged slopes of the rock formation were filled with people who stood silently gazing downward.

It was an awesome moment. Pete whispered to Kemlo: 'If you want to leave them happy, go to where the Chief is standing, bow twice then shout very loudly: "Haya." It means "You are a wonderful people and I am sad at leaving you."'

‘It means all that?’ said Kemlo in surprise.

Licona smiled and explained: ‘Whenever you think of the Zanians’ language, you should remember how much meaning we can get into one word.’

Kemlo looked puzzled.

‘Licona means,’ her father added in order to clarify his daughter’s explanation, ‘that you can take, for example, the number of times you and we say “Oh” and “Ah.” Think how many expressions you can get into the one word. It can be expressed in delight or sadness, or surprise, question or anger—so just by saying it, people know how you feel. When you say “Haya”—it’s really a stringing together of four different-sounding vowels. So if you can express yourself with just one “Oh” it isn’t hard to understand that “Haya” can mean much more than perhaps it sounds to you or us.’

‘I’m a little dense, I’m afraid,’ said Kemlo. ‘So much has happened that my mind is full.’ He paused as he remembered something, and asked: ‘We saw Yacky at the Hill of Rest—is it true that some of the children talk too much?’

‘All children talk too much,’ Pete replied good-humouredly. ‘So do some grown-ups, for that matter. But Yacky has so much nervous energy that he can’t stop talking, so we take him to the Hill of Rest to calm him down. He’ll grow out of it. Why do you ask at this time? Does it worry you?’

‘It did worry me,’ said Kemlo. ‘But Dona-Marie told me that even her own daughter was the same.’

‘I guess you’ve noticed that we are a quiet people,’ said Pete. ‘We do not rush and tear about, nor make ourselves slaves to time. If Yacky lived with you on the Satellite Belt, he would be called no more than an excitable boy; but to us’—Pete smiled as he shrugged—‘well, he’s just Yacky, and we know he’ll grow up.’ Pete suddenly looked embarrassed as he held out his hand in a stiff awkward gesture. ‘Ain’t never done this before, son,’ he said, lapsing into his former idiom. ‘But I reckon that’s the way all Earth-folks greet each other and say goodbye.’

‘That’s so,’ said Kemlo, and grasping Pete’s extended hand he shook it firmly.

Pete reached over the side of the scooter and offered his hand to Krillie as Kemlo turned away and walked slowly toward Chief Aan. He halted a few paces from the Chief, bowed twice, and raising his head he shouted as loudly as he could:

‘Haya, haya, haya!’

There was a second of silence before he saw pleasure and a look of pride appear on the faces of the Chief and Aayo and the hunters. Then from all around him the call came back from hundreds of throats, beating down from the rock formation and echoing over the valley floor—the long chanting vowels: ‘Haya, haya, haya!’

Kemlo walked back to the scooter, his ears ringing. For a moment he halted in front of Licona. He saw that she was crying and smiling at the same time. The tears made her eyes very bright and glistened as they rolled unchecked over her cheeks.

She held out her hand and said: ‘Goodbye, Kemlo. Please do all you can to prevent anyone harming my people.’

‘I will,’ said Kemlo earnestly, and after shaking her hand with a brisk action he released it, turned away and stepped into the scooter.

He pulled the hood shut over the cockpit and set the controls.

The lifting tubes heated quickly and power began to hum through the propulsion unit. All the instruments were levelling correctly. Kemlo glanced at Krillie, knowing that his friend must be feeling the same as he was—a mixture of sadness at leaving Planet 64 yet a tingle of excitement that they were going home, mingled with slight apprehension as to what sort of trouble they would encounter upon their return to the Satellite Belt.

Everything now was ready. Kemlo gave one last look through the transparent hood and saw the motionless figures draped like a grey curtain over the face of the towering rock formation behind them.

In swift decisive actions Kemlo regulated the controls. With a hiss of released power the scooter jerked once, then lifted smoothly and, as the stabiliser fins retracted, it sped like a scarlet bullet high into the air.

He circled the planet twice, sweeping low over the rock formation where the people stood, their faces tilted up toward them.

Then suddenly the planet was a tiny blur below them, and ahead and on each side of the scooter stretched the infinite blue void.

For a long time they sat silent, each with his own engrossing thoughts. At last Krillie said:

‘Are you hungry, Kemlo?’

‘No.’ Kemlo shook his head. ‘But you eat some, if you want to.’

‘We’ll take it back with us,’ said Krillie.

Again they were silent while the scooter hissed smoothly along, slipping the leena distances past its gleaming hull.

Kemlo kept close watch upon the instruments because as yet he had to fly blind. Until they were free of the gravitational pull of Planet 64, all the directional indicators remained at neutral. He could not set a course and the only chance they had of getting back on to the proper space lanes was to point the scooter’s nose in a direct line from that point on the planet where they had landed. Sooner or later they must pick up a directional guide, for in the highly complicated plotting of the space ship routes lay a mass of intricate detail concerning directional guides.

The sending of these guides was but one function of the Satellite Belts. Impulse generators sent out continual rays probing across the void for hundreds of leenas around the orbit of each Belt, and each Belt was so placed in the void that their directional impulse rays could cover all possible routes to and from the various planets.

At last an instrument flickered and the radar-finder became etched with light. The light slowly faded until from a small point of light in the centre a letter took shape. It was the letter ‘S.’

Seeing this, Kemlo pressed the contact button of the radar-phone, lifted the small hand microphone from its hook and spoke into it.

‘This is space scooter Kemlo heading for “K” Belt. Calling “S” Belt. Give me a directional beam on “K” Belt, please.’

The impulse-recording meter needle swung to full charge as the ‘S’ Belt engineers held the scooter on their beam. Slowly the ‘S’ on the radar-finder faded. The nose of the scooter dipped down and swung to the left as ‘S’ Belt passed the directional beam on to ‘K’ Belt’s wavelength.

The needle of the impulse-recording meter held steady at full charge for several moments before gradually it swung back to dead centre and a thin bar of green light appeared above the instrument.

The radar-finder glowed again. The glow shredded down to a fine point of misty light which spread until the letter ‘K’ was quite clear.

Kemlo spoke again into the microphone.

‘Thank you, “S” Belt,’ he said, speaking very clearly. ‘Am now on “K” beam. Tuning out.’

He replaced the microphone on its hook, pressed a button marked ‘clear speech channel’ and leaned back in his seat with a sigh. The involuntary exclamation made him jerk upright. Then he laughed, and it was Krillie’s turn to look startled.

‘Now we can sigh and laugh,’ said Kemlo, ‘and nobody will take any notice.’

‘It’s been like a dream, hasn’t it?’ said Krillie. ‘We didn’t dream it, did we?’

‘If we did, it was very real,’ Kemlo chuckled. ‘Have a look at the flask of fruit drink which is still sealed and the packet of food. And here is a long scroll of writing I have to show to the Elders. No, Krillie, it wasn’t a dream.’

‘I wonder how long we’ve been away? If we’ve been too long I might be disqualified from the diary competition.’ Krillie sounded perturbed.

‘Oh, we can’t have been away all that long,’ said Kemlo. ‘That’s going to be a big diary before you’ve finished.’

‘I shan’t know where to begin,’ said Krillie despondently. ‘What with trying to describe how we live on the Satellite Belt and all the things that happen around us and then trying to explain about the Zanians . . .’ He blew out his cheeks and exhaled. ‘Phew!’ he said. ‘That’s going to be some job.’

‘Er—Krillie?’

‘Yes, Kemlo?’

‘Would you mind very much if I asked you not to write about Planet 64 or the Zanians?’

‘Not write about them?’ Krillie exclaimed. ‘But, Kemlo, that’ll be something none of the other boys will be able to put in their diaries! Why can’t I write about them?’

‘Well, it’s rather difficult to explain,’ Kemlo replied hesitantly. He turned in his seat and looked directly at his friend as he asked: ‘Do you trust me, Krillie?’

‘That’s a silly question. Of course I trust you—you’re my friend.’

‘Then if you found out something very secret about me—so secret that if you told anybody else it would upset my whole life and make me miserable or perhaps even kill me—would you tell it to anyone?’

‘I wouldn’t breathe a word,’ said Krillie emphatically. He leaned forward eagerly and asked: ‘Why—have you got a secret, Kemlo?’

‘Yes. Planet 64 and the Zanians.’

Krillie sank back in his seat.

‘Oh, that!’ he said in a disappointed voice. ‘Do you mean, if I wrote about them in my diary it would hurt them and, as you say, make them miserable, or perhaps even kill them?’ His tone was disbelieving.

‘It could mean that,’ said Kemlo seriously, ‘I had to give my solemn promise.’

‘You did?’

‘I promised I would only tell the Elders.’

Krillie was silent for a long time, frowning in a puzzled manner as he cogitated upon this surprising information.

‘Of course, sometimes it makes a person far more important to keep a secret than to tell it,’ said Kemlo casually.

He was aware that his friend was looking at him, but he pretended not to notice and kept his gaze on the instruments.

‘You mean, if a chap has a secret, people think he’s more important because he’s been trusted to keep it to himself?’

‘That’s about it.’

‘And by *not* telling his secret he can always make out it’s more important than it really is?’

Kemlo chuckled. ‘Well, that wouldn’t be quite honest, but I suppose he could, if he wanted to. Dad says people are always inclined to exaggerate over things they don’t know anything about.’

‘How can they exaggerate when they don’t know anything about them?’

‘They guess.’

‘Oh, I see. You mean, they’d guess all sorts of things about where we’d been if I didn’t tell them?’

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘But they’re bound to ask an awful lot of questions,’ said Krillie thoughtfully. ‘I wouldn’t know how to answer them.’

‘That’s very simple. Don’t answer them at all. Tell them to ask me or one of the Elders.’

‘Yes, I could do that,’ Krillie agreed. ‘But, you know, I still don’t understand why I can’t tell them all about my friend Ton and the sort of game we played and how sleepy I grew.’ Then he shrugged. ‘Oh, well,’ he said, ‘it’ll be a pretty big secret. All right, Kemlo—I promise.’

‘That’s fine, Krillie. One day, perhaps when you’re older, I’ll be able to tell you more about it.’

The scooter hissed on its way with a silky thrash of sound. If there had not been so much to think about, the journey could have been boring, but after their conversation the two boys lapsed into silence and did not speak again until the radar-finder became shot with flashing streaks of light.

Krillie jerked up in his seat excitedly.

‘There’s a ship, there’s a ship!’ he yelled, pointing to the screen.

‘Oh!’ Kemlo exclaimed as he watched the instruments anxiously. ‘We should be slightly above the spume-wake. We’re certainly clear of the space lanes.’

‘Perhaps we’ll be caught up as we were before and finish up back on Planet 64,’ said Krillie. ‘Wouldn’t that be funny?’

‘Yes, it would!’ Kemlo replied without humour. ‘I’m going to lift her, just to make sure.’

The flashes on the screen now were settling into one long streak, slowly edging nearer to the centre.

Swiftly Kemlo operated the controls and suddenly the scooter jerked as he fed lifting power into the tubes.

He shut off the lifting power and peered out through the hood.

‘Just in time,’ he observed. ‘Here she comes!’

Although they were well used to seeing these monsters hurtle across the blue void, the sight never lost its thrill and they gazed intently at the tiny speck in the distance while the line on the radar-finder moved steadily to dead centre. It was almost centre as the space ship loomed ahead of them, far below the line of their flight.

Split seconds of time and it passed beneath them and was gone—a huge glinting shape with its red flaring tail glaring like a thousand angry eyes.

Long after it was out of sight they heard the roar of its passing, and in those same moments the space scooter leapt and bucked like a wild thing as the spume-waves buffeted and slapped it around the sky.

Krillie shrieked with laughter, and Kemlo felt the exhilaration which somehow always came when this happened.

‘Well, at least we did strike the spume-wake properly on our way back,’ said Kemlo when they were flying smoothly again. ‘Get ready, Krillie,’ he said, pointing to the directional beam instrument. ‘Any time now we’ll see the Belt.’

And not so long after he spoke—there it was ahead of them. A huge glinting wheel, with its high-turreted hub. A space taxi, probably one jettisoned from the ship they had seen, was being drawn into the induction chute in the hub.

Kemlo switched on his contact speaker, gave his call-sign and began to circle the Belt.

‘Kemlo scooter reporting in,’ he called through the two-way speaker. ‘Which chute do I take? Over.’

‘Is Krillie with you, Kemlo?’ said a man’s deep voice.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You’d better have a good reason when you get here,’ said the man with a chuckle. ‘Take number ten chute. Sam’s waiting for you. Over and out.’

Kemlo eased the scooter round, and throttled back as the flap of the chute opened. He edged the pointed nose in and they sped up the runway until the neutralising brakes pulled the scooter to a halt.

Kemlo slid back the hood and looked up at the grinning face of Sam, the chute attendant.

Chapter 16

A DANGEROUS LESSON

‘YOU’VE had the whole Belt in an uproar!’ So Sam greeted Kemlo as he and Krillie stepped from the scooter. ‘Where have you been?’

Kemlo hesitated, and Krillie looked at him anxiously, for both of them realised that this was the first of many such questions which would greet them.

‘We were lost,’ said Kemlo as casually as he could.

‘Lost is a mild word for it!’ said Sam with a harsh chuckle.

‘Why?’ Kemlo asked.

‘Why?’ Sam echoed. ‘If I were “lost” for nigh on six weeks, I’d call that a right silly question.’

‘Six weeks?’ Krillie yelped.

‘I don’t believe it!’ Kemlo protested.

‘You think I’m a liar?’ Sam growled.

‘No, Sam—I didn’t mean that. But we weren’t able to check the time and six weeks *does* seem impossible.’

‘Impossible or not, it’s . . .’ Sam moved to his craft-recording file and spun the wheel until Kemlo’s card came uppermost. ‘It’s five weeks and four days since you checked out of here.’

Krillie looked at Kemlo. ‘We’re in trouble!’ he said glumly.

Kemlo nodded and was about to say something more to Sam when the inter-view speaker bell rang. Sam flicked a switch and the frame glowed with light. The head and uniformed shoulders of a man filled the screen.

‘Has the Kemlo craft checked in?’ he asked.

‘Yes, sir,’ Sam replied.

‘Are the occupants safe and well?’

‘They look all right to me, sir.’

The man nodded curtly and his voice was stern. ‘Tell them both to report to the parents’ reception room. They will wait there until I contact them.’ The speaker clicked out and the frame went dark.

‘That was the Chief Duty Officer,’ said Sam unnecessarily. ‘You heard him?’

‘We heard,’ said Kemlo.

Krillie looked scared. ‘The Chief Duty Officer asking for *us*?’ he exclaimed. ‘Why—he’s only one rank below the Elders! What do you think they’ll do to us?’

‘Cook you for supper, I shouldn’t be surprised,’ said Sam; then he patted Krillie’s shoulder. ‘We’ve all been worried about you, so you must expect folks to be a bit sharp-tempered. You run along and see your mum and dad.’ He grasped Kemlo’s arm as the boys made their way to the mono-rail car. ‘Maybe later, you’ll tell me all about it, eh?’

Kemlo smiled and nodded but did not commit himself by words. He was thinking that the quicker he could make a confidential report to the Elders, the easier everything would be. He felt he needed advice badly.

Their parents were waiting for them in the reception room. Being Earth-people they had to wear space protection clothing when they came into this open section of the Belt. This clothing was continually being improved, and the present model, which Kemlo and Krillie had not seen before, was very attractive. They had received instruction concerning it, but even so they were surprised.

It was a ‘one-use-only’ suit of transparent polysian sheeting. The featherweight oxygen flasks could be seen suspended below each shoulder and the hood lifted gently with the wearer’s breath. The suit was one-piece from head to waist, where a self-sealing seam began and ran down each leg to around each foot and ended on the instep. It was claimed that these suits would withstand any heat and could not be punctured. The seal could be broken only by special liquid, a clamped tube of which was always available when the parents returned to their own quarters.

Krillie’s mother hugged him, and his father, although looking stern at first, soon relented and made an equal fuss of him.

Being older, Kemlo was treated with more reserve, but both his parents were obviously overjoyed to see him. His mother cried a little, which made the

polysian clothing skid about on her face and finally stick to the end of her nose—crying inside the self-moulding hood was a point the designers had overlooked.

Once the first emotional greetings were over, their parents asked the inevitable questions, and for Krillie’s sake Kemlo had to risk upsetting his friend’s parents as well as his own.

‘I’m very sorry,’ he said, ‘but Krillie and I have given our solemn word we will not tell anyone except the Elders where we have been.’

‘Not even your own parents?’ asked his mother in amazement.

‘I’m sorry, Mum,’ said Kemlo, gently but stubbornly. ‘We gave our word.’

‘I don’t profess to understand, Kemlo,’ said his father, ‘and I’m a little hurt that you feel you can’t confide in us; but since you have given your word, I’ll not ask you to break it.’

‘Thanks, Dad.’

‘Well, I think it’s crazy!’ said Krillie’s father. ‘We’re entitled to know where our boy has been all this time.’ He pointed to the green flask and packet of food Krillie had left on a chair. ‘And what are those? Where did you get them?’

‘We can’t tell you yet—it’s a big secret,’ said Krillie.

‘Now look here, young Krillie——’ his father began in a pompous tone, but his wife interrupted.

‘Don’t fuss so,’ she said. ‘He’s back safe and sound. And if he’s got a secret, let him keep it—at least until Kemlo has sent his message to the Elders.’

‘Oh, very well,’ said Krillie’s father irritably. ‘But there’ll be no joy-riding for you for a long time. You understand?’

‘Yes, Dad,’ said Krillie meekly.

‘We’ll go back while you get your message through,’ said Kemlo’s father. ‘Let us know when you’re ready.’

When they were left alone, Krillie said plaintively: ‘Grown-ups can be awfully wearing, can’t they?’

Kemlo smiled. ‘Are you tired?’

‘Not very. I’m still scared of that old Duty Officer though. He looked cross!’

‘Duty Officers always look cross. When they’re on duty they carry the whole responsibility of the Belt. They’ve got to know about everything.’

The Duty Officer still looked stern when, a little later, he came through on the inter-view screen.

‘Have you seen your parents?’ he asked.

‘Yes, sir,’ Kemlo replied.

‘Then perhaps you will tell me why you have worried everyone on this Belt by disappearing for nearly six weeks and where you have been?’

‘It’s a long story, sir,’ said Kemlo.

‘Make it a short one,’ said the Officer. ‘I’ve no time to listen to a boy’s fairy tales, but the Elders need a report. Well?’ he snapped.

Kemlo refused to be stampeded by this brusque treatment. He believed that what he had to say was very important, so he began right at the start of their trip to the space lanes for the fun of spume-wake bumping.

For several moments the Duty Officer showed obvious impatience, but when Kemlo told of the astral storm and the first sight of Planet 64, his face lost its stern expression. Every man on the Belt who occupied any position of authority earned his rank by possession of knowledge, by technical skill and an insatiable desire to learn more of the vast and unpredictable outer worlds.

Before many more moments had passed, the Duty Officer was recording Kemlo’s report and interrupting frequently with well-phrased questions. Kemlo held up the scroll of green bark containing Pete’s writing close to the screen so that it was photo-recorded. Next he held up the flask and packet of food. It was when he turned to get these from the chair that he saw that Krillie was fast asleep.

When at last his story was told, the Duty Officer was as excited as a schoolboy presented with his first space scooter.

‘Incredible!’ he exclaimed. ‘Amazing!’ Then he became more businesslike. ‘Take Krillie and go to the private dormitory. I’ll inform the dormitory officer there that you are to be left alone to sleep and that no-one is to question you. When you wake, you will have food and go to the Officers’ Private Report Room in your section. I will contact you there. You understand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

The Duty Officer nodded dismissal. The screen went dark.

Krillie stirred when Kemlo picked him up but soon fell asleep again.

Kemlo had quite a job to manage his friend and the flask and packet of food, but the dormitory officer met him half-way and carried Krillie.

Both boys slept for nearly twelve hours and awoke hungry. Fresh clothes had been brought, and after a bath they dressed, ate a meal and were escorted to the Officers' Private Report Room.

On the way they passed several class-rooms as they crossed the school section, and were aware of all the boys and girls craning their necks to see them pass. Kemlo's and Krillie's own special friends waved and pulled faces at them, but the officer hurried them on with a jocular remark.

'Time enough for your friends later,' he said. 'Hurry along—Their Nibs are waiting for you.'

He ushered them into the room and left them alone. They had not long to wait before the large screen came to life and they saw the Chief Duty Officer standing by the side of a tall white-haired man.

Krillie gasped, then whispered: 'Ooh, Kemlo! That's the Head of all the Elders! We must be in bad trouble!'

Krillie had forgotten that his whispering voice could be heard clearly by the men visioned in the screen. The white-haired man smiled—a warm and friendly smile.

'Hallo, Krillie,' he said. 'Don't be nervous. You are not frightened of me, are you?'

'Yes—n-no!' Krillie gulped.

'His Honour is addressed as Sir, or Elder,' said the Duty Officer sternly.

'Hallo, Elder,' Krillie said and, turning swiftly, bolted from the room.

'Hallo, Kemlo,' said the Elder, still smiling. 'I hope you are not going to run away too?'

'No, sir.'

'Good. I have been studying your report, Kemlo.'

'Yes, sir?'

The Elder became serious. 'It is a remarkable story,' he said. 'Some of our theories could be proved wrong, especially in regard to the breakaway planets. Did you see any signs of crumbling on the planet? Were there any big fissures or cracks in the surface?'

'None at all, sir.'

‘This rocket ship with the aggressive crew—what type was it?’

‘An old type, much used and with its hull seared. It looked very similar to the Cardell-Royson type, but I’ve only seen drawings of them. I’ve never seen one in flight.’

The Elder glanced at the Duty Officer, who nodded and said: ‘That was the one, sir.’

‘That same ship exploded near Satellite “T,” Kemlo,’ said the Elder gravely. ‘The space police have been seeking it for a long while. It was kept at the Earth base and used for training, but was stolen.’

‘Stolen?’ Kemlo exclaimed.

‘For some nefarious purpose at which we can only guess.’ The Elder coughed gently. ‘This interview is absolutely private, Kemlo. It has to be because, after checking and cross-checking your report and reading the message from your friend on Planet 64, we are making it top secret.’

‘We will take proper measures to see that Planet 64 remains inviolate. Perhaps in fifty years or so we might try to contact them, but until then they will be left in peace to build their civilisation and, it is to be hoped, develop the sub-humans of their Endless Sea into useful and intelligent people.’

‘It is a dangerous lesson you have learned, young man. No matter how much we try to teach you in your class-rooms, no matter what high-flown technical terms are used—we can never entirely estimate the power of life. Such a power, as you have seen, brought clean and wholesome life to Planet 64.’

‘Around us in the limitless depths of space lie the worlds of tomorrow. *Your* worlds, Kemlo. Approach them with the same tolerance and patience you showed on Planet 64 and you will bring honour and fame to your race.’

He laughed softly and spoke again in a lighter voice. ‘A lecture, no less. When one is old, one cannot resist the opportunity to lecture the young. Do you think you will find people’s questions difficult?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Kemlo replied.

‘I am issuing an order that you are not to be questioned. You and Krillie will say that you were just—lost in space. You understand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘One more thing, Kemlo. I cannot honour you publicly without disclosing the secret of what we have known as the Crazy Planet. But I am forming a

Satellite Belt section of space scouts. Boys will have to pass certain tests before they can join. You have passed all the tests we could ever devise, so you will be—Kemlo, Captain of Space Scouts. You will have twenty space scooters allocated to you. What do you think of that?’

‘Thank you, sir. Thank you very much, but . . .’

‘But what?’ the Duty Officer snapped.

‘Krillie has earned something too.’

‘Then we will make Krillie an Honorary Captain,’ said the Elder, smiling broadly, ‘and perhaps his diary will one day become history.’ The tall white-haired figure bowed as the screen began to fade.

Kemlo bowed in answer. ‘Goodbye, sir,’ he said.

‘Goodbye—Captain Kemlo!’

The screen went dark.

THE END

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KEMLO

AND THE ZONES OF SILENCE

Kemlo and Krillie, together with Krillie's sister Krinsetta, set out for a visit to S Belt in Kemlo's space scooter. They are attacked by three boys from S Belt, who kidnap Krinsetta. Kemlo gives chase, and both his and the other craft are forced down, off course, on to the Zones of Silence, part of a large area known as the Dead World where the slightest whisper is magnified into a roar. . . .

The inhabitants of the Zones have no audible form of speech, but use instead a highly developed system of thought transference. These creatures are friendly, but too friendly: they attempt to drug the minds of visitors with thought impulses compelling them to stay on the Zones. Kemlo is able to resist this powerful impulse, but . . .

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