

The Pyrophylic Saurian

The stolen port-service ship *Glumers Jo* stood two thousand kilometers out from Dothlit Three, its closrem drivers idling.

On the control deck Omar Olivine peered calculatngly at the screen as the viewsweep scanned the planet's single continental land mass.

From the chair where she was lounging, Icy Lingrad asked sourly, "What's the attraction of that stinky swampworld?"

"I'll brief everybody at once, after we land," Olivine replied. He was looking for a spot from which the ship's small tenders could explore a wide variety of life zones and geological structures without going too far afield. Perhaps a narrow coastal plain backed by one of the higher mountain ranges . . .

"I got a feeling you're a phony," Icy told him, making a flat statement out of it.

"I got a feeling you're psychotic," he replied with the impatience of a man too busy to talk nonsense. He was well and regretfully aware of Icy's low opinion of the human male. That was the source of her nickname Icy. Under the circumstances, he didn't expect her views of a particular male named Omar Olivine to be either favorable or informative.

"Whoever heard of a precious proxad of the Space Patrol turning outlaw?" she sneered. "For my money, Proxad Omar Olivine, you're a put-up job. Once a crummy starfuzz, always a crummy starfuzz."

Olivine's thin lips tightened, and he came within a hair of returning insult for insult. But at that moment Charlo's voice called from a speaker: "Hey, boss!"

"Yeah?"

"You better pick a landing we can stay on a while, because the minute you turn off the closrems the main bearings are gonna freeze."

"Are they running that hot?" Olivine asked.

"And dry as bones," Charlo said. "It'll take three days to let 'em cool and another day to true them out and—"

"O.K., O.K.," Olivine snapped. "I get the message." Icy was pursuing her thought. "You're a put-up job, and this whole deal's a put-up job. Whoever heard of a break-out working as easy as ours did?"

Olivine clenched his teeth, loathing the beautiful woman behind him and, at the same time, realizing that was exactly what she wanted him to do. It was her way of protecting herself, her defense mechanism for keeping men at a distance.

So what was the point in arguing with her sneering, repetitious insults? None at all.

But her last remark nagged at him, because the ease with which he and his five companions had escaped did look a bit fishy. Of course it wasn't an unheard-of practice to transfer a group of prisoners from one ship to another at a public rather than a Patrol spaceport, but it wasn't a frequent occurrence, either.

Aside from that factor . . . Olivine frowned. Well, aside from that, nothing else looked really suspicious. The thing was that a public spaceport offered possibilities, such as crowds of citizens whose presence

made the Patrol guards hesitate to use their guns. And Olivine, with his Patrol background, knew how to use opportunities.

Which was something Icy Lingrad hardly could be expected to understand. She was not used to criminals who weren't nervous, slow on their feet, or slow in the head, or in some other way too handicapped to think and act with lightning efficiency when the need arose. So the escape Olivine had led would puzzle her, and probably some of the others.

But after thinking it over again, Olivine was now confident that it was his own ability, not Patrol trickery of some sort, that had enabled them to get away. It was a comforting conclusion, because he knew the Patrol's heavy computer, the CIP, knew what went on in his head almost as well as he did himself. That was what came, he thought sourly, of being an eager Proxad for seven years, and submitting willingly to hours of psychoanalytic questioning.

In more instances than one, since the day he had wised up and decided there was more to life than the low pay and right to feel self-righteous which the Patrol offered, that damned CIP had anticipated his actions. Both his arrests had been made possible by computer predictions of where he would be, and what he'd be doing.

So he had reason to feel a little spooky about the CIP. The Patrol would be working it overtime right now to get him back in custody, he figured. But it was silly to think the Patrol and its CIP had engineered the escape!

"O.K., don't speak!" flared Icy. "I wouldn't believe your lying denials, anyway!"

"What you believe doesn't concern me, Miss Lingrad," he said in a soft, cold voice, turning to give her a steely glance, "but I do suggest there's one fatal flaw in your idea that this is a put-up job. Do you think for one second, Miss Lingrad, that if I had plotted this, you would be the one woman aboard this ship?"

"Humpf!" she grunted, obviously stung by the grating lash of his voice.

"Ship," he said.

"Yes, sir," replied the *Glumers Jo* in the flat voice of a medium-capacity compucortex.

"Freeze the viewsweep. I'm ready to mark." The picture on the screen stopped panning, and Olivine marked a small X over what looked like a suitable landing site.

"You got that, Ship?"

"Yes, sir."

"O.K., descend. I'll fine down the site as we approach."

Ravi Holbein came on the control deck just as the ship was touching down. He looked at the landscape revealed by the screen and nodded knowingly.

"A Jurassic-period world," he remarked brightly. "The age of reptiles, conifers and cycads . . . or," he chuckled, "reasonable facsimiles thereof. Except, of course, that this world is still in the mono-continent stage, and I believe continental drift is usually well under way in a typical Jurassic."

Olivine grinned at the distinguished-looking middleaged man. "Right. Another hundred million years and this planet will evolve such higher life forms as con artists."

Holbein accepted the tribute with a slight bow and a quickly suppressed fraternal smile. "Such a world as this has its obvious hazards to life and limb, but can be a haven to a man in sufficient need," he replied.

"Let's hope so," said Olivine noncommittally. It was not Holbein's way to ask questions. Instead, he talked, thus inviting others to talk back. And he had an impressive line of chatter which, coupled with his appearance, had helped him into the friendship and trust of countless lonely businessmen and businesswomen on the long hauls between the stars. And he was an expert at using such friendship and trust profitably. In Olivine's private classification system, Holbein was a con man third-class—a high rating inasmuch as Olivine could distinguish at least fifteen grades of con men.

Icy Lingrad came lower on the same gradient, about ninth-class. Her success was due to her looks and her ability for staying out of beds, not to cleverness. She made an excellent assistant to an accomplished con artist, however, and that was how she usually worked.

"Closrems off," ordered Olivine as the ship's quadrapads settled into reasonably firm ground in an expanse of fernlike grass. "Ship, run an air test. All hands, please assemble on the control deck."

The three other members of the group wandered in. Smiggly Crown, the scarred and grimly silent veteran of the Dusty Roost gang wars. Autman Noreast, a blankeyed torp of twenty-two years. And lastly, grimy from working around the closrems down in the drive room, Hall Charlo, one-time expert mechanic and current passion-crimier.

Olivine perched on the edge of a console and looked them over dubiously.

"I've had this planet in the back of my mind for a number of years," he began. "There's something worth grabbing here, and I meant to come grab it.

"But not with this particular crew," he sneered, "and not in this ship! A job like this ought to be done by carefully picked experts, not by a rag-tag lot that happened to be thrown together in a prisoner transfer. And it ought to be done in a ship that *fights*, not one that spits on brushfires and specializes in first aid for spacesick grandmas!"

"We don't like you either, you starfuzz stick!" snarled young Noreast.

"Glad to hear it, since I pick my friends with care!"

Olivine snapped back. "But here we are, like it or not, and we all need a grab. Let's find it and make it. Then we can cash it in and go our separate ways. Any arguments?" Crown grumbled, "We should've gone to Dusty Roost. I got friends there."

"A man with empty pockets hasn't got friends *anywhere*, and certainly not in the Roost!" Olivine retorted.

"We'll go there, but not until we've got something to cash in. Now if—"

"Hey, boss!" Charlo broke in, staring at the screen, "Look at that dino out there!"

Olivine turned to glance disinterestedly at the image. The beast was a couple of hundred feet from the ship, standing at the edge of the fern meadow. It was similar in appearance to the Earth's Brontosaurus—a massive body on four pillars of legs, a long tapering tail, and a small head riding on a neck that extended above the trees in the background. It was munching slowly on a dangling mass of greenery while it stared vacantly in their direction.

"Yeah," said Olivine impatiently, turning to face his crew again, "you can go look at the bones of similar

animals in the museums of a dozen planets. We're not here to gawk at the wildlife, but to make a grab, so let's get with it! I'm going to divide us into two-man squads to take the tenders out and scout the territory for—"

"It's headed this way!" Charlo reported anxiously.

"Charlo, forget that silly saurian!" Olivine roared in disgust. "It's not going to eat you!"

Holbein intervened soothingly. "A grab at this time is a consummation devoutly to be desired, we'll all agree. And it is interesting that an unsullied Jurassic world offers such a delightful possibility of gain."

"Yeah, Olivine, what makes you think there's a grab around here?" said Icy Lingrad, putting Holbein's unvoiced question in bald terms.

"Inside information, from my days in the Patrol," he replied equably. "There was a hushed-up dispute between the Patrol and the Confederate Council after this world was surveyed fifteen years ago. The Patrol wanted to station manned guard ships around it, on the grounds that the local plant and animal life is extremely dangerous and no ship should be allowed to land here under any circumstances. The Council wouldn't go along with the expense of that, and insisted that a few unmanned surveillance satellites would be plenty. The Council won, of course."

"You mean we were spotted by satellites when we came in?" yapped Icy. "You led us into a trap, Starfuzz!"

"We'll be long gone before those satellites make their reports," snapped Olivine, "so cool it!"

"And this controversy between the Council and the Patrol," Holbein commented thoughtfully, "led you to the conclusion that a grab was here."

"Yes. Do you think the Patrol would give much of a damn if this planet were merely dangerous?" Olivine replied. "Who cares if a few thousand suicidal homestakers, or adventurers, get themselves knocked over by a killer planet? Not the Patrol! The only reason for wanting a manned guard would be that the Patrol discovered something here so hot that they wanted to keep it under the securest possible wraps, so hot they wouldn't even tell those politicians on the Confederate Council about it! But the Patrol had to settle for the surveillance satellites, which are enough to keep most people away."

"Yeah," muttered Charlo, taking his attention off the dinosaur long enough to ask a question, "and how did *we* get by the satellites?"

"Because I overrode the compucortex of this ship," said Olivine. "We wouldn't have escaped in the first place if I couldn't make this ship go where I want it to, rather than where its inhibitions say it's *allowed* to go. I've overridden stronger compucortexes than this one in my time."

The others were impressed, he could see. To the average citizen, criminally inclined or not, overriding a ship's brain was the action of a master magician.

Finally Holbein murmured, "I cannot imagine the nature of the grab to be found here."

"Neither can I," Olivine admitted, "but I know damn well there is one. And that's my one reason for not being completely dissatisfied with our personnel. I don't think this bunch is one that'll take long in spotting anything of value laying around loose. So let's break this up and start looking!"

At that instant the control deck shuddered with the deafening screech of friction-tortured metal.

"What the hell's that?" Olivine bellowed over the din. The ship's flat voice replied, "The beast outside is pressing against a padfin."

"Well, get it on the screen!" Olivine yelled.

The view shifted to bring the big saurian in sight. It was rubbing itself against one of the erect, bladelike outer edges of the ship's supporting fins. Olivine was reminded of a kitten rubbing against a man's ankles, except in this instance the kitten was almost the size of the man.

"Well, drive him away before he warps that fin!" snapped Olivine.

"I am not equipped to do so, sir," the ship responded. Olivine cursed and began thinking frantically.

The young torp Noreast headed for the door. "I'll give him a taste of metal!" he said.

"Hold it, punk!" growled Olivine. "There's no gun aboard unless you've improvised something. Bullets would make that animal more of a threat! We need to scare him, not hurt him!"

Noreast sneered and turned to leave. Crown collared him. "Do like the man says, boy!" he rasped.

"Animals fear fire," said Holbein. "That was one of prehistoric man's most useful discoveries, allowing him to sleep in safety . . . "

"Ship, we need a flamethrower," broke in Olivine.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I am not equipped . . . "

"It's got a nozzlehead up top," reported Charlo, "for squirting extinguisher chemicals on fires. Maybe if we fed fuel-cell juice to that nozzlehead instead we could squirt flame."

"What about it, Ship?" demanded Olivine.

"That could be done, sir. The most convenient area in which the feeder lines could be cross-connected is in the utility bay of the third deck."

"Charlo, go down there and switch those pipes around," Olivine rapped. "Noreast, if you can improvise a gun, you ought to be useful on this job. Go help Charlo. The rest of you sit tight. I'm going up to take a look at that nozzlehead."

"I ain't admitting I made no gun," sulked Noreast, but he followed Charlo down toward the third deck while Olivine scurried up the service ladder into the forecone area. He spotted the nozzlehead right away and began inspecting it.

"Ship, how's the outside air?"

"Satisfactory, sir."

"O.K. Open the slits or whatever you do to get this nozzle into action."

There was a soft whine of servos and the entire circumference of the cone showed a crack two feet below nozzle level. The crack widened as the upper part of the cone rose, supported by a central pillar, well above the nozzle's line of fire. "How do we ignite, ship?"

"I'm sorry, sir, I do not comprehend."

"How do we set fire to the fuel-cell juice as it leaves that nozzle?" Olivine explained in an exasperated tone.

"I am not equipped . . . "

"*Damn!* Give me the control deck! Holbein!"

"Yes?"

"I need a welding torch up here!"

Crown's voice answered. "I know where to find one."

"O.K. Get it up here, will you?" Olivine turned from the nozzle to stare out at the dinosaur. He flinched back as he did so.

He hadn't realized the creature was so big! Its head was weaving about on the same level as his own, and with that long flexible neck the monster could easily reach over and pluck him out of his perch atop the spaceship. The dinosaur weighed, he guessed, eighty tons or more.

Why, if it put its peanut-sized mind to it, he suddenly realized, it could topple the ship completely off its pads! But for the moment, it seemed content to rub itself against one of the fins . . . and that was bad enough. Olivine could see the stiff metal bend under the pressure from the beast, then snap straight when a rub was completed.

The beast was scratching itself! And little wonder, the man observed, because hide that filthy-looking just *had* to itch! The animal was so caked with ooze and slime that Olivine could swear some of the brighter green splotches were vegetation, growing on its body!

"Ship, does this nozzle have to be manned, or can you direct its aim?"

"I am equipped to aim the nozzle, sir."

"O.K., after we get it started, I'll duck below, because the heat's going to be bad up here. You just consider that animal out there a fire, and aim the nozzle accordingly."

"Very well, sir."

Crown stuck his head through the hatch and handed a welding torch to Olivine. "Thanks, Crown. Now clear that ladder, because I'm going to want to get down in a hurry."

Crown nodded and ducked out of sight.

A couple of minutes passed, and the dinosaur seemed to be rubbing a little harder now. The whole ship shivered with the vibrations of the fin as it scraped itself, first on one side, then on the other.

Finally Charlo's voice sounded from a speaker. "All set down here, boss!"

"Right!" Olivine lit his torch and said, "O.K., Ship, start pumping!" For a few seconds the nozzle whooshed air, then ejected a thin line of yellow liquid under high pressure. Olivine flicked at it with the flame from his torch and jumped for the hatch. He moved with such alacrity that the only damage he sustained was a slight singeing of his hair, eyebrows and moustache.

And the flame was doing the trick, as his ears told him. The ship no longer shook under the strokes of the itchy saurian.

He hurried to the control deck, hoping to be in time to catch a glimpse of the rapidly retreating monster on the screen.

But the mountain of flesh wasn't retreating, as he saw in amazement. It had moved away from the fin, but was not trying to get out of the flame.

"Damn!" muttered Olivine in disgust. "I've heard of animals too dumb to get out of a fire, but this is ridiculous!"

"An amazing spectacle," agreed Holbein. "The creature's actions put me in mind of a man taking a shower." It was an apt comparison, Olivine decided after watching a moment. The saurian was indeed behaving as if the jet of flame were water to which it wanted to expose every portion of its body. The animal clumsily cocked up each leg in turn to allow the fire to play on the inner sides of its haunches. Then like an ungainly kangaroo, it reared on its hind legs and tail to expose its belly.

"I think you're right, Holbein," Olivine said. "The damn critter's taking a firebath."

"Don't be silly!" choked Icy Lingrad in a horrified voice. "Can't you see the poor thing's *burning*? Make the ship turn it off!"

Olivine grinned at this unexpected display of compassion from so unlikely a source. But there was no accounting for the oddities of a psychotic female mind, he mused.

The animal did appear to be on fire in spots—at least to the point of smoldering, but that did not seem to bother it in the least. Probably it was the outer layer of grime, not the skin of the animal, that was being burned away.

"He seems to like it," he told the girl. "Maybe he's bred with a fireproof hide."

"*Nonsense!*" she raged. "Things don't evolve fireproof hides unless they *need* them. I've had enough biology to know that! Tell the ship to turn it off before that poor stupid beast is a . . . a big third-degree burn!"

The saurian closed its eyes, with lids that looked at least a foot thick, and lowered its head into the fiery blast. Then it ran its neck up through the flame. Finally, it turned around and began trying to hoist its tail, the only part of its body that remained untouched. But that was beyond its gymnastic capacities. It couldn't get its tail much more than ten feet off the ground.

"Ship," ordered Olivine, "lower the aim of that nozzle ten degrees."

"Yes, sir."

"You cruel, heartless *snake!*" hissed Icy.

Olivine chuckled at her. "I'm just giving our friend what he seems to want," he said. "Do you know a better way to get on good terms with the local inhabitants?" The woman sniffed and whirled away.

The flame now angled down sharply enough to bathe the saurian's tail, and incidentally set off a grassfire where it licked the ferns. Olivine frowned, then decided the fire would not spread to any extent, the grass being too green to burn well. It was producing a lot of white, steamy smoke, but not much heat.

But as soon as the saurian seemed to have had enough, and signified the fact by moving away from the flame, Olivine ordered the jet turned off.

Charlo had returned to the control deck. "I sure hope he's going to leave us alone now," he muttered.

"I think he will," said Olivine. "Fire ought to be a better cure for his dermatitis than scratching."

That evidently was the case. The saurian stood gazing at the spaceship for perhaps two minutes, and then turned away, chomping on large mouthfuls of greenery as if it hadn't eaten in weeks. Slowly it moved across a hill and out of sight.

"O.K., we've had our fun and games with the local wildlife," said Olivine, "now let's get to work. We've got a grab to make, remember?" He looked over his group. Holbein, Crown and Charlo stood waiting his instructions, and Icy had retreated to a chair in the corner of the room where she was showing her capacity for looking sullen. "Where's Noreast?" Olivine asked.

"He was right behind me when I came back, boss," said Charlo.

"Ship, where's Noreast?"

"In the second deck lock, sir."

"*In* the lock? What's he doing there?"

"He is inactive, sir."

Olivine cursed. "We'd better go see what that crazy punk is up to. Come on!" He led the way down to the second deck and to the inner door of the lock. "Open up, Ship."

"Yes, sir. There will be a brief delay while I close the outer door first, according to regulations, sir."

"Skip the regulations and *open up!*" Olivine bellowed. The door opened, revealing the young torp Noreast flat on his stomach facing the open outer door. Beside him was a stitch-rivet embedder, or what was left of it. Noreast had stripped and jiggered the tool into a crude machine gun.

And there was a peculiar stench in the air.

"*Back off, everybody!*" Olivine yelled. "*Put on your fume filters!*"

He was feeling giddy before he got his mask on, but he had been closest to the door and had got a stronger whiff than the others. It wasn't an unpleasant giddiness; in fact it was pretty damn nice. But there was work to be done.

"Ship, blow out that stench and close the outer door." When that was done, he and the others removed their masks and went into the lock. "Charlo, take charge of that fool weapon. Take it back to the maintenance shop, try to find the parts the punk removed, and put it together again. Then hide it."

He bent down, grabbed Noreast by the shoulder, and flopped him over on his back. Noreast was obviously unconscious, but his face was more expressive than it had ever been during a state of wakefulness. A continual flux of emotions played across it, ranging from restful content to wild ecstasy.

"The little rat's coked to the gills!" grunted Crown.

"Yeah, but whoever heard of happy-powder that makes you feel like *that?*" breathed Charlo, gazing with awe at Noreast's glowing face.

There was a long pause of wonderment as they stood looking down at the young man's occasionally twitching form. Then Olivine spoke.

"Much as I hate to credit this trigger-mad creep with anything," he said, "I believe he's fingered our grab for us. Folks, we must have landed this ship squarely in the middle of a field of super-pot!"

Holbein mused, "It does seem reasonable to assume he inhaled smoke from the grassfire, and thus entered his obviously pleasant comatose condition."

"Right," said Olivine. "It isn't something normally in the atmosphere, or I would have got a dose of it while I was in the open forecone. I did get a small sniff when the inner door opened just now. If it isn't the fern grass, it's probably some smaller weed hidden in the grass."

"Well, let's be finding out!" urged Charlo, a trifle too eagerly, Olivine thought.

"Ease off!" he snapped. "We came here to make a grab, not to get ourselves coked! First, we're going to flop the punk in his sleep-tank and keep a watch over him until he wakes up and tells us what happened. Meanwhile, Miss Lingrad, since you say you know biology, you're going to put on your mask and gather plant specimens outside. Crown, you stand guard over her while she's out."

"I'll guard her, boss," Charlo volunteered.

"I said Crown," snapped Olivine. "I want you to get that stitch-riveter back in working shape. If any more dinosaurs come banging against the ship, we may need it for hull repair. Get at it, all of you."

With Holbein helping, Olivine lugged Noreast to his quarters and laid him out in his sleep-tank. He disconnected the deep-sleep needles, not wanting extraneous modifications of Noreast's drug-induced slumbers, but allowed the nutritive injectors to snuggle into their normal positions around the young man's upper arms as the tank lid closed.

"We'll take turns watching him, if he's under long enough," he said. "You take the first watch, Holbein, and yell if he starts waking."

"I will watch him like the proverbial hawk," the con man assured him.

After peeking into the maintenance shop to make sure Charlo was on the job, Olivine went to the control deck to keep an eye on what was going on outside. Crown and Icy were in view on the screen, apparently having just come out of the ship. The girl was carrying a duroplas sack for specimens and a pair of snippers. Crown was brandishing a length of iron pipe and looking around menacingly for some life form to test his weapon on.

It was, Olivine mused silently, something of a blessing that the *Glumers Jo* had carried no stock of firearms, with such trigger-happy characters as Noreast and Crown in the company. Not that he relished being stuck with a non-fighting ship with the Patrol on the lookout for him, but this untrustworthy crew was a far more immediate threat.

He frowned thoughtfully as something nagged at his memory. "Ship, you're sure there are no guns aboard?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir."

"But I seem to recall that a small-arms locker is part of standard equipment for a port-service vessel," he persisted.

"That is correct, sir," the ship responded.

"Then where's yours?"

"Removed several days before you came aboard, sir, for purposes of periodic shop-check and testing of the guns."

Olivine grimaced in dismay. A coincidence? Perhaps. But Icy's accusations of a put-up job, plus his own suppressed suspicions along similar lines, hammered in his mind.

Had that Patrol computer rigged this whole escape for some purpose of the Patrol's? Had he been *meant* to capture the *Glumers Jo*, carefully disarmed in preparation for his occupancy?

The whole affair smelled.

Angrily, he thrust the thought aside. There was no point in turning as paranoid as a common criminal! Guns *were* removed from ships for periodic checks, so it was silly to entertain dark suspicions over a purely routine matter.

"Don't you have any defensive weaponry at all?" he asked. "Something we can use if another dinosaur starts nudging us?"

"I am equipped with tangline, sir, for use in riot control. However, for tangline to be effective against a life form the size of the saurian, I must deploy it from an airborne position."

Olivine nodded slowly. "And we're going to be grounded here for at least four days," he muttered, thinking of those slowly cooling closrem bearings.

"Yes, sir."

Olivine got out of his chair and prowled about the deck, in search of some occupation. Now and then he glanced at the screen, but nothing untoward seemed to be going on outside. Icy had stuffed her sack half full of fern grass and was now searching for, and occasionally finding, other species of plants to snip. Crown had climbed the hill over which the dinosaur had departed, taken a look around, and returned.

"Give me quarters, Ship," Olivine ordered after a couple of hours had passed. "Holbein, is Noreast still sleeping?"

"Like an outrageously happy baby," Holbein replied.

"O.K."

He took another glance at the screen and saw Icy and Crown scooting hurriedly for the lock.

"What's happening outside, Ship?" he asked.

"I believe a saurian is approaching, sir."

Olivine scanned the portion of the horizon visible on the screen, and indeed a dinosaur was lumbering into view across the hill. "Hey, Starfuzz!" came Icy's voice over the intercom. "Your fellow reptile is back!"

As the giant animal plodded closer, Olivine saw that it was, as Icy said, the same one that had been there earlier. It showed the sooty markings of the flamethrower. But now it looked fatter, its belly being hugely distended either from gross overfeeding or perhaps from some internal reaction to the scorching the creature had received.

"Are both of you aboard?"

"Yeah."

"O.K., close the lock. Ship, prepare to use the flamethrower again. I'll go up to light it."

He grabbed the welding torch and scrambled once more into the forecone which the ship had already opened. He started his torch and stood by the nozzle, staring out at the blackened form of the colossal reptile. The animal had halted less than a hundred feet away facing the ship, and was making strange blowing sounds through its mouth, huffing air in and out in such volume that Olivine could feel the breeze, and caught a strong smell of latrine-odored breath.

Then it began grinding its teeth together in short raspy strokes, making a noise that set Olivine's own teeth on edge. Out of its mouth came a wisp of smoke, then a trickle of flame, and finally a roaring gush of fire!

"*Close the cone, Ship!*" Olivine bellowed, jumping for the hatch opening but getting another singeing before he escaped the saurian's line of fire. He dashed to the control deck, still brushing his hair for lingering sparks.

"Somebody find me some burn ointment!" he groaned, staring at the screen through watery eyes.

Icy and Crown came in, followed a moment later by Holbein who handed him a tube of Kwikzeeze. They stood watching in awe as the saurian plodded slowly around the ship while bathing it from stem to stern with his flaming jet of . . .

"Stomach gas!" said Olivine as he applied the Kwikzeeze to his tender neck, face and left arm.

"Without question," agreed Holbein. "Note that the creature's belly is rapidly returning to normal size. Perhaps we see here the source of old Earth's legends of fire-breathing dragons—pictures of such creatures as this having lingered in man's store of genetic memories ever since the Jurassic."

"But how," Icy complained, "could an animal *light* its breath? It doesn't have any fire?"

"Not its breath, its burp," Olivine corrected. "It blew its mouth dry, and then struck a spark by grinding its teeth together. I saw the whole process."

"Oh. But what purpose . . ."

"Grooming activity, my dear girl," Holbein told her.

"Wild creatures often groom one another, such actions as picking fleas out of one another's fur. We unwittingly groomed our large friend, after which he stuffed himself with food to generate digestive gas in sufficient quantity to return the favor. Such cooperative survival acts can be carried out with only the most primitive and rudimentary reasoning powers."

"Well, he's finished and leaving," grunted Olivine, "and he's started another grassfire around the ship, so outside activities will be suspended for a while. Crown, take over the watch by Noreast's tank. The rest of us will test the specimens Icy brought in."

In a hastily rigged lab on the fourth deck, Olivine, Holbein, and Icy tested the plants, with the con man serving as a very willing guinea pig. He came out from under the plastic hood after breathing smoke from burning fern grass.

"That merely makes me wish to cough," he wheezed.

"No euphoric effects, I regret to say."

"O.K., we'll try the other specimens."

The results were consistently and disappointingly negative. "This is ridiculous," Olivine protested. "The weed has to be here!"

"Maybe it takes a combination," Icy hazarded, "or maybe it's not a weed at all but a soil bacterium."

"We'll find out," Olivine vowed. "You two keep at it while I go get some soil samples."

He went down to the lock, which was standing open. He hurried to the outer door and saw Charlo kneeling in the grass a hundred feet from the ship, using a welding torch to fire the grass and then bending forward to sniff the result. He kept silent as the man moved to a new spot and repeated the routine. Charlo was using the torch long enough, he saw, to test ground and roots as well as plant tops.

"Any luck, Charlo?" he called out.

The ex-mechanic started up with a guilty expression, then shrugged. "No luck," he said.

Frowning, Olivine turned and went to look in on Noreast and Crown. Noreast was still out, and when Olivine opened the tank lid and shook him by the shoulder, the happy sleeper merely grinned vapidly, drooled, and muttered "*Yeah, baby, yeah.*" Olivine cursed and retired to the control deck.

Holbein and Icy came in after a while. Olivine glanced at their expressions, and didn't have to be told the further testing of the plant specimens had been fruitless.

"We'll just have to wait," he growled, "until that punk Noreast comes out of it and tells us what happened."

That was not until three days later. By that time the whole crew, with nothing better to do, was spending most waking hours hanging around the young man's sleep-tank, eyeing his supine form with emotions ranging from annoyance to envy.

Suddenly Noreast snorted, opened his eyes, and sat up, pushing the lid aside and looking alertly about.

"This some kind of meeting?" he asked.

Charlo demanded eagerly, "Was it a good trip, kid?" Noreast blinked and his eyes grew dreamy as he remembered. "Yeah . . . yeah," he breathed. "Damn good. But it was no trip, man, it was *life!*"

"O.K.," snapped Olivine, "we're trying to find out what sent you on it. How long after the grassfire started did you—"

"What grassfire?" Noreast grunted. "I didn't see any grassfire."

"Try to remember," Olivine said with a poor effort at patience. "You were in the ship's lock with that gun you made out of the stitch-riveter, fixing to shoot the dinosaur. The grass around the dinosaur caught fire. Remember?"

"I ain't admitting anything, Starfuzz!" the young man growled. "Anyway, I must've passed out before the grass started burning. I don't remember that. I smelled the muck on that big lizard burning, and that's all I remember."

The crew stared at him.

Holbein said, "Several of us remarked upon the rather weedy patches on the creature's skin, and surmised these were perhaps parasitic plants taking nourishment from the thick muck or from the creature himself, or from both. The precarious position of such a plant in the natural scheme might well lead to the

production of unusual biochemical substances for the purpose of—"

"O.K.," Olivine broke in, "we know where to look. Charlo, let's see how quickly we can get those closrems back in service and this bucket in the air!"

The following day, about seventy kilometers from their original landing site, they bagged their first saurian. It was not difficult, because for once the ship was well equipped for the job at hand. It hovered over the monster, discharged a three-gallon charge of the strip-forming mnemoplasic, tangline, onto the beast, and settled to the ground by the giant, firmly fettered form. The beast blinked stupidly at the ship.

"Crown, will you go out and pick a sample . . ." Olivine began, but his voice was unheeded in the hubbub as the entire crew bounded toward the lock. Noreast's halfincoherent accounts of his "trip" had got to them all, even Icy Lingrad. It was an experience they wanted to share.

Olivine stared at the viewscreen in disgust as they swarmed around the saurian, yanking green growths off the animal and stuffing them into sacks, shirtfronts, or whatever container they happened to find at hand as they left the ship.

"Damn such undependable dregs!" raged Olivine.

"Ship; prepare a dozen man-sized discharges of tangline.

As long as those idiots keep picking the greenery, let them pick. But when one stops and tries to light a fire or move away from the dinosaur, tie him up! Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Olivine watched and listened as the harvesting continued. He heard Noreast assure the others that the plant smelled right, and they began picking faster.

Charlo was the first to head for the ship, lugging a half-filled packing carton. He squalled in outraged alarm when the tangline hit him. The others looked up.

"What do you think you're doing, Olivine?" Crown roared.

"I'm keeping the bunch of you unhooked!" Olivine replied coldly, the ship's speaker system carrying his voice outside.

"*Crummy starfuzz!*" Icy shouted.

"Really, Mr. Olivine," said Holbein, "such heavyhanded tactics as these—"

"Shut up, the bunch of you, and take a close look at Noreast," he replied. "For the past two hours he's had the shakes and been in a cold sweat. Needing a fix, punk?"

Noreast giggled loudly and hysterically. "Sure I need a fix, you Proxad creep, and I'm going to *get* it! I got friends to see that I do! We're all against you, Starfuzz!" Suddenly he made a break for a nearby stand of conifers. The tangline stopped him after his first three steps and he tumbled to the ground screaming. Crown, Holbein and Icy gazed at him in dismay.

"Holbein, Crown, leave your vegetables where you are and bring the punk inside. Let Charlo get a good look at him on the way."

Hesitantly, the two men complied.

"And all of you listen to me," Olivine continued. "We've got exactly three days left to make our grab and beat it before the satellites report us and the Patrol comes swarming. The grab we make may be the only one anybody *ever* makes of this planet's super-pot! Getting hooked on the stuff is the worst kind of sucker's game, because once this one load is gone, it'll be cold-turkey time for all takers! You can take a look at the punk and get an idea how much fun that's going to be . . . and keep in mind that he's just *beginning* to feel it!"

He paused and studied their faces on the screen. "Do I make myself clear?" he demanded.

"Your point's well taken," Holbein replied. The others nodded grudgingly.

"Good. Bring the punk in, put him in his tank and give him deep-sleep. That should ease him through the worst of it. Then get back to the harvest!"

Cowed and silent, the others complied.

Before the day was over, the crops from seven saurians had been harvested, and Olivine was positive that only one leaf had been burned. He had fired that one himself and taken a single quick whiff, to make sure they were getting the right weed. They were. It took all his Patrol training to enable him to stop after that one whiff. After questioning the ship, he had the weed packed away in the midship lockhold, which was equipped with a five-digit combination lock which he could reset to a combination that was not only unknown to the others but to the ship itself.

By nightfall they were all exhausted—Olivine from the strain of trying to keep four people under constant observation and the others from unaccustomed physical exertion. He confronted them sternly as the lockhold door closed on their final pickings of the day.

"O.K., strip to the skin!" he commanded.

"*Go to hell, Starfuzz!*" Icy exploded.

"Try and make us!" grated Crown threateningly.

"I don't have to make you!" Olivine snapped. "You'll make each other! I've had the ship bypass all filters in the air-control system. That means that if just one of you decides to sample a little super-pot in the middle of the night, the fumes will spread all over the ship. Tomorrow morning the entire lot of us will be hooked, including myself. Think it over: nobody to play nursemaid for you, the way we have for the punk. And nobody to keep the Patrol from picking you up. It's your decision, lady and gentlemen!"

After arguing for ten minutes, they stripped. Olivine shook over a pound of weed out of their clothing, finding some on everybody but Icy, then allowed them to dress and go to supper.

The next day went much the same. Once in the morning and again in late afternoon Olivine brought Noreast out of deep-sleep long enough to check on his progress. The kid was feeling miserable, but with the help of the sleep-tank's automated facilities he was recovering rapidly from the painful withdrawal experience.

The following morning—the last day they could safely remain on the planet—Noreast was let out of the tank.

"Have you learned anything, punk?" Olivine sneered.

The young man nodded weakly.

"O.K. It's time you started pulling your weight. I'm sending you out with the others as soon as the ship finds a dinosaur for us."

The ship found a scattered *herd* of the lumbering saurians. Olivine was pleased. They could move quickly from animal to animal, with little time lost between, and with five picking instead of four they should have the lockhold packed tight by nightfall.

Work went well all morning. Noreast was slow and sullen at first, but gradually brightened as the hours passed. Watching him, Olivine wondered if perhaps the squares were right about the virtues of hard work. Labor was certainly changing Noreast—temporarily at least—from a surly rat into a happy-acting kid.

Shortly after lunch, the happy-acting kid did something very foolish and got away with it. When one saurian was picked clean, he ran to another that had wandered close and was not bound by tangline. The surprised animal twisted its neck to peer down at him as he began jerking weed out of its tremendous forelegs. After studying him solemnly, the beast returned to its feeding. Noreast laughed and yelled at the others, telling them to quit wasting time waiting for the ship to tie up another animal.

Crown and Charlo ran over to join him, and Holbein followed more slowly. Icy hesitated a long time, but finally went over when the saurian allowed Noreast to run up its tail and start harvesting the growth on its back without objection.

Olivine had watched tensely, silently cursing the fool kid. Now he heaved a sigh of relief. The saurians apparently liked to have their weeds picked. Perhaps it was principally to get rid of them that they went in for firegrooming.

When the animal was picked clean the four men moved on to another, leaving Icy behind to load what they had gathered into the ship. Olivine ordered the ship to lift over to where Icy stood beside the loaded baskets. She gave the screen's scanner eye a meaningful look as the ship touched down.

Puzzled, Olivine left the control deck and went down to the lock. She handed a basket in to him.

"Why the grim look?" he asked.

"They're *chewing* the stuff!" she said.

"Chewing the stuff?" he echoed.

"I think Noreast must have started as soon as we came out this morning," she related. "Then one by one he got the others started. Holbein was the last. I didn't know about it until a few minutes ago when Charlo tried to put me on it. 'Have a chew and then we'll have some fun!'" she mimicked the man. "I know what kind of fun that slimy artist wants!"

Olivine nodded, frowning. Her aversion to sex, he guessed, was all that had stopped Icy from chewing with the others. "I ought to have guessed the punk was up to something," he said. "He was acting so abnormal for him."

Icy handed in another loaded basket. "The stuff seems to work differently chewed than smoked," she said.

"A lot of drugs do," he replied absently. "Look, Icy. We've got enough of a grab now. As soon as we get this load in the lockhold, I'm going to bundle those idiots in tangline. You'll have to help me lug them aboard and put them in deep-sleep. Then we're hauling out of here for Dusty Roost!"

"Suits me!" she sniffed. "I've had a bellyful of present company!" She walked away to get the last basket, then suddenly yelled, "*They're scattering, Olivine!* They're running in all directions!"

He leaned out the port to get a view of the men's position. Holbein, Crown, Charlo and Noreast had indeed taken leave of the saurian they had been harvesting and were rapidly putting distance between themselves and the ship.

"The jerks!" Icy snorted. "They must've guessed I'd squeal to you!"

"Get on board quick!" urged Olivine. She ran to the lock and he pulled her up and inside. "Take off, Ship, and have the tangline ready!"

"I'm sorry, sir, but regulations forbid lift-off while the lock is open," the ship replied.

Olivine cursed and hurried Icy through the inner door.

"Now close the lock and take off!" he bellowed.

"Yes, sir."

By the time they reached the control deck, not a man was in sight on the ground.

"They must be hiding under the saurians," Olivine guessed. "Ship, give me full amp on outside speakers and pickups! *Hey, you guys!*"

"*Take an underground jump, Starfuzz!*" came Noreast's voice dimly and obscured by the noises being picked up from the saurians.

"Use some sense!" he yelled back. "Holbein! You're no idiot! Show yourself and we'll come down for you!"

After a moment Icy pointed at the screen. "There he is, off to the left."

Olivine ran up the magnification and watched the con man stroll out from under a dinosaur and wave his arms. He was wearing a grin that was only slightly sheepish.

"Tangline him, Ship!"

"The rest of you!" Olivine called into the mike. "Come on out! Crown! Charlo! You're not crazy kids! Stop playing games and let's go cash in our grab!"

There was no response from below. Olivine called again and again. Finally he turned to Icy. "I hate to leave any of them here for the Patrol, and especially Charlo. How about . . . uh . . . promising him something if he'll show himself? You won't have to pay off."

The girl snapped a disgusted obscenity at him and whirled away.

"Set down by Holbein, Ship," Olivine ordered.

A few hours later the *Glumers Jo* was in interstellar space, speeding away from the Dothlit System at full thrust. Holbein was in deep-sleep. Olivine and Icy Lingrad had eaten supper together in a strained atmosphere. He guessed she felt less at ease with one man than with five around.

"Will the Patrol find them?" she asked.

"Sure. That's the hell of it. The Patrol will find them, and they'll talk. The Patrol will know we've made the grab. I doubt if we'll be able to get to Dusty Roost with the stuff. We'll probably have to unload it with some outof-the-way dealer at half what we could get in the Roost."

"O.K., and there's just three of us to split the take instead of six," she replied.

"Yeah, there's that bright point." He grimaced. "I shouldn't have wasted that planet on such a crew. I knew better, but . . . well, damn it, I needed a big grab! For a job like that I should have had a man trained in satellite servicing, who could locate those spy-gadgets and nullify their reports. And maybe just one other guy—somebody who could be counted on to put cold cash ahead of a snout full of fix. Six people were too many in any case—too many possible discipline breakers."

"To hell with discipline," Icy muttered automatically.

"Yeah, that was precisely the trouble with this crew. To hell with discipline."

Icy yawned and stood up. "I'm going to hit the tank and leave you to your lonely regrets, Starfuzz."

He sat musing for a while after she left the room, and finally decided the grab had turned out pretty well after all. First and foremost, he *had* the grab, and the Patrol didn't have *him*. If the planet Dothlit Three wound up with a manned Patrol guard as a result, so what? The galaxy was well supplied with potential grabs, after all. Why mourn the loss of one?

He grinned and went to his sleep-tank. Reasonably content he dozed off . . .

And roused several hours later to the strong smell of burning super-pot!

"Ship," he mumbled, sitting up groggily, "activate all air-system filters."

He fell back into his tank and was in too thorough a state of pure bliss to hear the ship reply, "Yes, sir."

He woke up feeling fine and stared at the face of the clock-calendar on the underside of the tank lid. He had been out for three days!

He leaped angrily from the tank and strode to Icy's quarters where he barged in without knocking. The girl was in her tank, obviously as out as he had been. *Holbein!*

He ran through the ship and finally found the man in the dining area nursing a large cup of black coffee. Holbein looked up at him with pained, sick eyes.

"Ah, Mr. Olivine," he greeted him dully, "care for some coffee? I take it you smoked whereas I chewed, and there you displayed your wisdom, friend. What that super-pot does to a man's stomach is no fit subject for discussion!"

Olivine stared at him. Was the con artist telling the truth or was he . . .

"Ship!" he snapped. "Who was responsible for that burning super-pot that knocked me out?"

"Nobody, sir. Apparently there was a malfunction in the lockhold, sir. A fire broke out inside, burning at least a portion of the vegetable matter. The fumes spread through three decks before you ordered the by-passed filters into operation."

Olivine scampered up the stairs to the lockhold. He and Icy had been only a deck away from the lockhold, he realized, while Holbein had been in a tank down on the second deck, which accounted for Holbein not getting, the smoke on top of his chew. The filters had gone up in time to spare him that

double dose.

Fumbling in his haste Olivine worked the lockhold combination, jerked the door open, and looked down blankly at the thin bed of gray ash that covered the deck inside.

Not a leaf of super-pot remained.

After a moment he strode to the nearest ventilator access panel, yanked it off the wall, and pulled out a filter that was practically dripping black tar.

"All the filters will require an early change, sir," reported the ship.

"Shut up," he growled. He lit the welding torch, pointed the flame at the tarry mess, and sniffed the resulting smoke.

It smelled like tar, and that was all. It wasn't superpot anymore.

But *how?* he kept asking himself. What could have caused a fire in the lockhold? And particularly a fire that would reduce a whole roomful of wet green leaves to a bed of dry ash? That would take heat and plenty of it! He returned to the lockhold and began searching for the answer. Two hours later he found it.

It *could* have been an accidental malfunction, he assured himself without really believing it. Certainly short-circuits in electrical wiring occurred, particularly in portions of ships that saw varied usage, and the frequent tearing out and putting in of wiring for special purposes. A part of an old circuit would be forgotten and left in place when a new one was installed. Then someone would come along and stuff the room tight with a mass of greenery that would slowly press two exposed wireends to within sparking distance.

Which would do very little damage to the soggy greenery, except for one thing. The electrical spark was near a fire-control sensor, and had warmed it enough to turn on the extinguisher spray in the lockhold.

And the extinguisher spray was, of course, interconnected with the ship's exterior, fire-fighting system, into which Olivine had had Charlo pipe fuel-cell juice in order to make a flamethrower out of the forecone nozzle! So the sprayers had sprayed a volatile liquid over the super-pot, the electric spark had supplied the ignition, and ashes were the result.

Olivine slumped down on the deck, pressing his forehead against his knees, hugging his legs convulsively, and rocking back and forth.

Damn it, grown men don't cry! he warned himself angrily.

But the warning didn't help. That stinking CIT computer! It had gimmicked him every step of the way! Even to the point of counting on his determination not to be paranoically suspicious of such coincidental events as a prisoner transfer at a civilian spaceport, an easily commandeered ship close at hand, a planet within range of the escape scene which he alone would suspect held a big grab, and . . . and no guns on the ship and frozen closrem bearings, and a crew that was plainly beyond discipline . . .

. . . And as the final result, an event that would give the Patrol all the reason it needed to put Dothlit Three under manned guard, which was what the Patrol had been after all along!

Of course, this meant that the Patrol wasn't *about* to put the arm on Olivine and his remaining companions. Their role was to escape with what the Confederation public would be led to believe was a valuable and dangerous grab of one of the wildest narcotics ever found. *Ashes! And cold-turkey time!*

Olivine's shoulders shook.