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RAYHOUSE IN SPACE

By David Wright O'Brien

(Written as Duncan Farnsworth)

Claude Kelvin looked at the savage krickak as a biologist would, and forgot to be properly afraid.

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"I quite definitely advise you to give up the idea, Mr. Kelvin," the commander at Interplanetary Space Base One told Claude as tactfully as he could. The commander was a short, stocky, grizzled old gentleman who held no delusions about science and the progress of interplanetary unity.

Claude Kelvin had his own ideas about how the strange Krickaks ought to be treated—all of 'em wrong!

"But you say you already have a man stationed on Asteroid Eighty," Claude Kelvin answered with mild determination. "If he can endure the, ah, dangers and rigors of his post I don't see why I shouldn't be able to do likewise."

The commander looked at the tall, wiry, bespectacled young man standing before his desk. He looked at the delicate, nervous hands of the chap, noted the studious solemnity of his expression. He glanced again at the permit lying on the desk. It was signed by a staggering array of important names. He shrugged and gave up the battle.

"Very well, Mr. Kelvin. There's nothing I can do to prevent your risking your neck. This permit allows you to do that. But I might remind you that you'll be stuck on that God-forsaken little blob of matter in space for two months. Our zone space cruiser puts in there only every ten weeks."

"That should be quite satisfactory, Commander. My studies will take all of thirty weeks on Asteroid Eighty."^[A]

"And the man we have stationed there," the commander broke in for one last reminder, "is not the, ah, most gentlemanly sort of fellow, you could desire as a companion in your solitude."

"It pleases me," said Claude Kelvin with obvious pride, "to think that I can get along well with any of my fellow beings. It is no particular trick."

The Commander sighed.

"And please," he begged, "watch yourself with the *krickaks*."^[B] They're a deceitful, treacherous, nasty lot."

"Has your man there found any difficulty with them?" Claude inquired.

Again the commander sighed. "No," he admitted. "But there have been tales. And don't forget, our rayhouse there is well equipped with enough weapons to keep them quiet."

"And what was the name of the rayhouse keeper," persisted Kelvin.

"Interplanetary officer Grimes."

Claude Kelvin took out a small black notebook and entered this fact.

"Thank you, Commander. I'm certain that Officer Grimes and I will hit it off admirably."

The commander watched him leave the office. He shook his head, sighing. "You don't know Grimes," he muttered. "And

you've never seen a *krickak*!"

The interplanetary zone cruiser was two days out on its inspection journey, and its sole passenger, Claude Kelvin, leaned against the enclosed deck railing and explained his presence to a junior officer who paused to pass the time of day.

"I'm working on a fellowship grant," young Kelvin declared. "You see, my studies have been a combination of bio-chemistry and sociology."

"They are?" said the junior officer, unimpressed.

"Yes, that's why my work on this lonely little asteroid outpost is going to be so important," Kelvin went on, warming up. "You see, it's long been a theory of mine that bio-chemistry is the key to complete interplanetary union, so to speak. Ever since the discovery of the interplanetary cosmos, and since man's conquest of it has been completed, there has been constant trouble and misunderstanding among the peoples of the interplanetary systems. Look at all the wars that were fought before we Earthmen finally won our conquest."

The junior officer nodded his head in bored agreement.

"That was due solely to the fact that we didn't *understand* the peoples of other planets," Kelvin said with growing warmth. "We were unable to find useful niches for these peoples in the mode of life we had imposed on them."

The junior officer concealed a yawn.

"And you intend to solve that problem—on the *krickaks*?"

Claude Kelvin nodded eagerly.

"Through bio-chemistry, the very computation of their vastly different physical selves, and a mixture of applied sociology, I will find the key. I know it!"

The junior officer frowned.

"But why pick an asteroid infested with *krickaks*?" he persisted.

Claude Kelvin smiled tolerantly.

"Because," he said, "I have heard that they are the, ah, most unmanageable group of space creatures in this particular asteroid chain."

"You're right about that," agreed the junior officer. He half shook his head and muttered something to himself as he took in the lean, ascetic, studious appearance of the young scientist. Then he touched his hand to the visored peak of his uniform cap.

"Well, good night, Kelvin. My watch is coming up."

Claude Kelvin raised a hand to detain him, while fishing rapidly into his tunic pocket for his small black notebook.

"What did you say your name was?" young Kelvin inquired.

"MacQuales," said the junior officer. "Sub-lieutenant MacQuales is the name."

Claude Kelvin painstakingly entered this in his little black book. Then he smiled.

"Thank you, Officer MacQuales," he said. "Good night."

As Sub-lieutenant MacQuales moved down the enclosed deck to the bridge of the space cruiser, he was still shaking his head and muttering to himself dubiously.

Asteroid Eighty was almost exactly as the commander at the Interplanetary Space Base so graphically described it. It was nothing more than a God-forsaken little blob of matter in space. Being one of the fungus infested variety of asteroids, it seemed to Claude Kelvin, as he watched it growing larger from the deck of the zone space cruiser, as being nothing but a gray, greenish, ugly blob at that. But Kelvin smiled, undaunted.

Five minutes later the atomic motors of the zone space cruiser suddenly stopped throbbing beneath Claude's feet, and the space craft slowed to a complete stop.

Claude was dressed in the space gear that had been given him at the Interplanetary Base, and consequently didn't hear the approach of Sub-lieutenant MacQuales when that young officer came down the deck toward him.

MacQuales was clad in space gear also, and tapping Claude on the shoulder he indicated the communications button on his own radiophone. Claude nodded and switched his on.

"Well," MacQuales said, "are you ready?"

Claude was slightly startled.

"We're not moored on Asteroid Eighty, yet," he protested. "There's plenty of time."

MacQuales made a face that might have been a grin.

"Moored, hell. There's no way of mooring on that damned little jungle. We halt our zone cruiser here, then cover the rest of the distance in the ship's lifeboats."

Claude considered this, it seemed to MacQuales, a little unhappily. Then he shrugged.

"Very well, I'll gather my gear and equipment."

"Got much?" MacQuales asked.

"Oh, lots of it. A lifeboat should suffice, however," the tall young man replied.

"We have supplies to deliver to interplanetary officer Grimes, you know," MacQuales explained. "This trip wasn't made especially for your benefit. However, I suppose we can use an extra lifecraft."

"Thank you," said Claude Kelvin. Then he was off hastily to get his equipment.

The journey from the zone space cruiser to the squat little rayhouse on Asteroid Eighty was a bumpy one. Claude Kelvin, in the first of the lifeboats, shepherded his equipment like a cackling mother hen over a brood of chicks. He spent the trip dashing back and forth along the slim craft from the helmsman to his gear, and back again, constantly admonishing that space veteran to take it a little easier, to watch where he was going, and to remember that the Kelvin equipment was delicate stuff.

At length, however, both the lifeboats moored safely at the tiny aluminoid space landing platform that stretched circularly around the squat duralloy rayhouse.

On the platform, waiting eagerly for them, was a space-helmeted figure of surprisingly small stature. His radiophone was tuned to theirs as they stepped from the lifeboats.

"Glad to see yuh," the voice boomed. And Kelvin blinked to think that such a small man could have a voice so deep. "Where's my new bunk mate?"

Sub-lieutenant MacQuales had stepped over beside Claude Kelvin, and the two of them advanced toward the short fellow. "Ahoy, Grimes," MacQuales bellowed cheerfully. "Glad you're still alive."

And interplanetary officer Grimes, face wreathed in a huge grin, stepped up to them, hand extended.

"This is Claude Kelvin," MacQuales said. "Kelvin, officer Grimes. I hope you two hit it off well, for you'll certainly see enough of one another."

Claude extended his hand, looking down on the short, rugged, little Grimes.

"I'm sure we'll get along well," he said. "And I hope I won't be in officer Grimes', ah, hair."

Grimes was as bald as a doorknob. A fact the red-faced Claude Kelvin didn't realize until he'd finished his remark.

"Joker, eh?" Grimes looked up unsmilingly into Claude's face.

MacQuales was spluttering redly, forcing back his giggles.

And then Grimes turned, motioning toward the square, airlock door at the front of the rayhouse.

"Come on," he said. "Join me in a drink before you go, MacQuales."

They followed Grimes up the landing as the space stevedores went on with the unloading behind them. Minutes later they removed their helmets as they stepped out of the final airlock into the comfortable and compact quarters of the rayhouse.

"Well, what do you think of it?" Grimes asked Claude, waving a hand at his quarters.

"Very nice. Very nice indeed," said Claude, "but—"

"But what?" Grimes frowned.

"Will there be any room for me to set up a laboratory?"

"There's a sort of cellar below," Grimes said. "You should have plenty of room there."

By now the three had climbed from their space gear, and Grimes was rummaging around in a duralloy compartment, bringing out three glasses and a spiraled bottle.

"Venusian stuff," Grimes said, holding the bottle high as he brought it back to a table with the glasses.

"Good," MacQuales observed a few minutes later, smacking his lips and holding out his glass for a refill.

"Damned right it is," Grimes retorted. "If those *krickaks* knew I had this in stock they'd have been raiding the rayhouse every night."

Claude's ear pricked up with sudden interest.

"The *krickaks* like liquor?" he asked.

"Love it," Grimes said, "when they can get it."

MacQuales looked meaningly at Grimes.

"Young Kelvin has an idea that he's going to make the *krickaks* one big happy part of our interplanetary family."

Claude dove head first into the conversation. With breathless enthusiasm he proceeded to tell Grimes exactly how he was going to "socialize" the *krickaks*.

Grimes listened to all this with a straight face. When Claude finally finished he said,

"I think you're going to be a little disappointed, Kelvin. Those *krickaks* are a bad lot. I don't want them within a mile radius of these quarters."

"But my work," Claude began protestingly.

"The work of running this rayhouse is of first importance around here, Kelvin," Grimes snapped. "And anything that might interfere or endanger it is out."

"A one mile radius," Claude said reflectively. Then; "I understand, perfectly, Grimes. But if I wish to go to the *krickaks*, in their own habitat—so to speak—that will be permissible, won't it?"

MacQuales was gazing neutrally at the ceiling.

Grimes poured himself another drink.

"That will be entirely up to you. Your neck is your own. If you want to risk it, it's your own business."

"Thank you," Claude said stiffly.

"But," and Grimes raised a forefinger in warning, "if you should get in trouble out there," he pointed toward the door, "I can tell you now not to expect any help from the rayhouse."

"I understand perfectly," said Claude, and his lips were compressed whitely.

MacQuales suddenly stood up.

"The supplies and Kelvin's equipment should be stored by now," he said. "I'll be running along." He began to climb into his space gear once again. Before putting on his glasscade helmet, he added: "I'll see you two gentlemen in another ten weeks. Goodbye and good luck."

Grimes and Claude watched him enter the first airlock, both silent. Then he was gone. Grimes picked up the bottle of Venusian whisky. He was silent as he refilled his glass.

"The fact that this rayhouse keeps going, the fact that I've never let these lightbeams falter once, has saved thousands of lives of space travellers. I don't intend to let this Rayhouse blink off—even once. So to repeat, you'll have to take care of yourself if you get in trouble out there."

Claude Kelvin stood up stiffly. Forgotten were his theories of getting along with people. He didn't like this stocky, rugged little Grimes, and no amount of reasoning could make him do so.

"I heard you the first time," said Claude ...

For the next four days relations between Grimes and Claude Kelvin didn't improve. They ate their dinners in silence for the first two days. And after several sharp exchanges, they ate at different intervals after that. In the meantime Claude was acquainting himself with the rayhouse and Asteroid Eighty.

It was with no little surprise that Claude found the rayhouse to contain a complete arsenal of atomic rifles and electro-handbombs. He remembered the commander at the Interplanetary Base having remarked that the rayhouse was safe from the mischief of the *krickaks* because of its supply of weapons, but somehow he hadn't imagined that such a complete store of killing gadgets would be on hand.

And Claude had seen the great ray turbines which kept the beams of the rayhouse sweeping uninterruptedly out into space. These were of scientific interest to him, but due to Grimes attitude, Claude didn't have much chance to inspect the apparatus as carefully as he'd have liked. Tersely Grimes had explained their operation to him, indicating in no uncertain terms that he didn't want Claude browsing around such important equipment.

But by the third day Claude had his own minor laboratory set up in the cellar of the rayhouse, and found himself engrossed in the first steps of his own work. Grimes didn't bother him in this. In fact the hard-bitten little space officer didn't even bother to inspect Claude's project.

And it was on the fourth day, late in the afternoon, when Claude had finished climbing into his space gear and Grimes

came down from the ray towers to prepare his own meal, that the two had their longest conversational interchange since the departure of the space zone cruiser.

"Going some place?" Grimes asked.

"I've decided to have a look at Asteroid Eighty," Claude answered briefly.

"And the *krickaks*?" Grimes persisted.

"And the *krickaks*."

Grimes didn't answer him immediately. He went over to the small supply chest at the corner of the room, rummaged around for a moment, and returned bearing a brace of atomic pistols.

"Here," Grimes said. "You'd better takes these with you."

Claude's lips went stubbornly flat.

"I don't believe I'm going to do any hunting," he said frigidly.

Grimes hesitated only an instant. Then he shrugged, jaw gone hard.

"Suit yourself," he replied. He hurled the weapons back into the supply chest.

But Claude had a word or two to say.

"Those guns," he declared, "and the arsenal you keep here, are all an indication of just why the *krickaks* have never been friendly."

"That's why they've kept their distance these past ten years," Grimes said evenly.

"If you treat them that way," Claude went on, "you can always expect trouble from them. When this little asteroid chain was first discovered did anyone make any attempts to establish friendly relations with the *krickaks*?"

"They were born to make trouble at every chance. They're as nasty and treacherous as any group of interplanetary natives still existing," Grimes said with even calm. "I took over this post ten years ago, after eight men had died in the space of a decade trying to keep it going. I haven't failed. And I don't intend to."

Claude stepped over to the airlock, opening it. Then he stepped into the chamber. He had a vision of obvious disgust painted on Grime's space-seared features as the door closed. Then he waited for the second airlock to open.

When he stepped out onto the landing platform that encircled the squat bulk of the rayhouse, Claude had dismissed his irritation at Grimes' stupidity from his mind. There were now other and more interesting things to consider.

Such as the thick tangle of green gray jungle that surrounded the platform on every side. A weird scramble of lush and harsh vegetation that was ominously silent.

There was a ladder at the rear of the platform. A ladder that ran down to a path at the fringe of the strange jungle. Claude moved over to this and deliberately began his descent to the path. He looked up once, as he clambered down the ladder, and caught a glimpse of Grimes—in the ray towers—peering out through the glasscade shell at him. Then Grimes' head disappeared.

Claude smiled quietly to himself. Grimes was like the rest of the old time space officers. He'd been part of the group who discovered this asteroid chain, charted it, fought through it, and more or less "civilized" it. To him the whole thing was a simple matter of force and conflict.

Claude's feet touched the ground, and he released his grip on the ladder. Then he turned and looked around, staring through the tangled underpath that led down into the morass of wild vegetation. He smiled again, a little tightly, and

started down that path.

As he walked, his hand found the radiophone button on the front of his space gear and switched it off. Then he opened his vibration panel at his chest. This would permit him to hear any sounds that came through the atmosphere around him.

The tangled underpath grew steeper, and darker, but Claude walked on. Sounds came to him through the vibration panel. Faint scratching sounds, as Claude saw small, curiously colored insects slithering along the surface of great rough leaves.

And then there was a definite crackling coming through the vibratory panel.

An involuntary shiver of excitement ran down his spine. *Krickaks* were somewhere in the vicinity! He'd never seen anything but radifoto pictures of these creatures, but he knew—almost as surely as if he'd heard it before—that their physical mechanisms were marked by the peculiar crackling sounds constantly vibrating from their weird bodies. Their very name *krickaks*—came from the first auditory impression they'd made on Earthmen who'd discovered them.

Claude moved onward. Ten yards more and he stopped. Ahead, up on the summit of the path, was a *krickak*!

The luminous shine to the creature's body made him easily visible in the semi-darkness of the strange surroundings.

He was of standard size, about as tall as the average Earthman. But his body was round, globular, and his head was of the same shape. He had round eyes, almost an inch in diameter each, and they were lidless and staring.

There was no nose to the creature. And for a mouth there was a constantly open oval, perhaps an inch wide and three inches long. Its legs were short and straight, with apparently no joints. And its arms were long and trailing, reaching almost to the ground.

The crackling vibrations grew louder as it regarded Claude. Now Claude moved forward once again, his arms extended wide, space gauntlets open, showing that he was unarmed.

Then, less than five yards from the *krickak*, Claude stopped. He fished into the small knapsack pocket on the side of his space suit.

The crackling vibrations grew in intensity, as though in alarm or fury.

Claude brought forth a bottle—from Grimes' Venusian stock—and placed it ahead of him on the ground!

The crackling vibrations were now querulous, and after an instant's hesitation the *krickak* moved forward with lightning speed, seized the bottle, and darted back. Claude smiled. Grimes hadn't been lying. The creatures liked this stuff.

Now Claude took a few steps toward the *krickak*. The creature didn't retreat, and its vibrations were steady. Claude took a deep breath as he stepped within arm's reach of the *krickak*. He kept smiling. This was working splendidly. Grimes should see him. It would change a few of his asinine notions.

Claude extended his hand, with the notion of placing it on the *krickak's* shoulder. And then, with incredible speed, the creature whirled and bolted off into the underbrush!

Claude stood there gaping foolishly, startled by the abruptness of the *krickak's* departure. Then he shrugged in good humor.

"The first gesture has been made," he said to himself. "And now there's a slight groundwork to start on."

He stood there for perhaps ten minutes longer, listening intently for any sign of the return of the *krickak* or the approach of any others of the strange breed. Then he turned and retraced his steps down the sloping path toward the rayhouse.

Grimes was waiting for Claude when he returned. The grizzled little space officer seemed irritable and anxious about something. He was pacing back and forth in the narrow confines of the living quarters as Claude emerged from the airlock and into the room.

"What'd you find out there?" Grimes snapped.

Claude was startled. Then he was smug.

"I encountered one of the oh-so-dangerous *krickaks*," he said casually. "In no time at all I had a friendly footing established. The creature fled, of course, but not until I'd convinced him I was harmless."

"I'm surprised your hide is still intact," Grimes snapped. "Because there's something stirring on Asteroid Eighty, Mr. Kelvin. And not space mice!"

Claude essayed his most superior smile.

"Really? You know, Grimes, I believe that you've been living in a world of your own imagination for these past ten years. When I return I'll recommend a vacation for you back in civilization. It might do you some good."

Grimes forced back the words that choked his throat. His jaw was a solid line of muscle. He jerked his thumb as he turned on his heel.

"Come on, Kelvin. I'm sure this will be of interest to you."

Still smiling in smug complacency, Claude followed Grimes up the staircase that led to the ray towers. The two were wordless until they reached the observation platform above the vast turbines that generated the ray beams.

Grimes walked over to an instrument panel at the front of the platform.

"Look at that," he invited, pointing to one large dial on the panel in particular.

Claude bent over, frowning at the dial. He straightened up.

"I'm sorry," he smiled, "but I don't get it."

"You're supposed to be a bit of a bio-chemist," Grimes said sarcastically, "and I imagine you have sense enough to note a wavering instrument needle when you see one."

Claude nodded.

"I'll agree, the instrument needle *is* doing quite a bit of wobbling back and forth. But what's that got to do with bio-chemistry?"

"You've seen a *krickak*?" Grimes asked tersely. "You've heard the crackling vibrations emanating from its body?"

Again Claude nodded.

"Bio-chemistry has proven that the *krickaks* are physiologically 'juiced' by some electrical current that gives them their life impulse. There's some sort of dynamo in them that's just as important to them as a heart is to us." Grimes stated.

Claude was somewhat taken aback. Grimes seemed to know more than he had given him credit for. He listened as the grizzled little officer went on.

"Well because of that electricity, which is a very real force, the body vibrations of the *krickaks*—when especially active—usually register here in the rayhouse on our instruments. It's not enough to affect our instruments unless they are especially strong in number and unusually excited about something."

Claude found himself looking again at the wavering needle.

"I haven't seen those instruments react as strongly from those devils in a very long time," Grimes said. "Something is afoot, I'll stake my heart on it."

For a change, Claude Kelvin didn't know quite what to say. He opened his mouth and closed it, wordlessly.

Grimes was staring at him.

"What did you do when you ran into that *krickak* out there this afternoon?"

Claude gulped.

"I gave him a present, er, a token of good will."

"What was it you gave him?"

"Some whisky—a bottle of it—belonging to you."

Grimes glared in disgust. His fists bunched and he stepped forward slightly.

"See here," Claude said hastily, backing a pace, "I intended to reimburse you for it. I'll pay you this instant if you don't believe me."

"You blundering jackass!" Grimes spat the words. "I never should have let you poke your nose outside the rayhouse. Do you think the price of the stuff meant a damned thing to me?"

"Well, then," Claude said hastily, in an effort to dismiss the affair, "I don't see why you're making such a melodramatic fuss about everything. Surely a little whisky, just a bott—"

"One bottle of whisky," said Grimes, emphasizing each word with ominous clarity, "is enough to make an entire tribe of *krickaks* crazy drunk for a week. One drop to a *krickak* can cause enough hell for two days' shooting."

"How was I to know—" began Claude.

"I shouldn't have expected you to know anything," Grimes said in disgust. "That was my mistake!"

Again Claude opened his mouth, ready to protest hotly. But Grimes leaped suddenly to the side of the flickering instrument needle on the panel. It was wobbling twice as madly as before.

Grimes' language was not delicate.

"See here—" Claude managed.

"Shut up," Grimes snapped. "Get downstairs and bring up a pair—no four—atomic rifles!"

Something in Grimes' tone made Claude wheel automatically and turn hastily down the spiral of the staircase. When at last he was pounding up the stairs again he had divested himself of the rest of his space gear and was bearing four atomic rifles.

Grimes grabbed two of the rifles from his hand.

"Know how to shoot?" the grizzled little space officer snapped.

Claude nodded mutely. Grimes shoved two of the rifles onto the railing before him. Then he reached out and threw a switch. The entire landing platform outside and beneath the rayhouse was flooded with light. The fringes of the jungle around it were also revealed.

And Claude gasped at what the sudden flood of light revealed. A swarm of *krickaks* had climbed to the landing platform and were milling about the duralloy sides of the rayhouse. Grimes had been busy pulling forth a pair of space helmets and brief garb from under a compartment by the panels. He handed one of these to Claude.

"Climb into that," he snapped, "and we'll roll down the tower turret and get down to some plain and fancy dealing with those *krickaks*!"

Claude suddenly stiffened stubbornly.

"How do you know those poor devils mean any harm?" he demanded.

"They're just out there to thank us for the whisky," Grimes blazed sarcastically. "Do as I say!" he thundered.

Dazed, Claude climbed into the rig Grimes had tossed him. Then Grimes grabbed him by the arm.

"Look at them closely," he ordered. Claude peered down at the *krickaks*. "See those small sticks they carry in their hands?" Grimes demanded.

Claude nodded.

"Those are weapons, and nasty ones at that," Grimes explained. "When one's pointed your way, duck. There're electrical charges in those innocent sticks that completely paralyze a man who's unfortunate enough to be in the way when they hit!"

Claude nodded again, punctuating his emotions with a gulp.

Then Grimes touched a button and the glasscade turret around their tower swiftly dropped down on all sides. Grimes leaned over the railing, atomic rifle at his shoulder.

Hastily Claude took a post several yards away from Grimes, picking up an atomic rifle and assuming the same pose.

"They haven't seen us yet," Grimes called. "They haven't grown used to the light." And with that he carefully picked out the foremost *krickak* on the landing platform and squeezed the trigger on his atomic rifle.

The *krickak* dropped flat on its round stomach, a shower of sparks splashing from its body like blood. It lay there inertly, its comrades milling around it in surprise.

"They're looking up at us now!" Grimes yelled. He squeezed the trigger on his atomic rifle again. Another *krickak* splashed sparks and rolled off the platform edge into the tangled underbrush of the jungle.

But Claude hadn't moved his rifle from its position at the rail. He was staring pop-eyed at the two fallen *krickaks*, at the showers of sparks that spewed from their bodies.

Grimes turned his head toward Claude momentarily.

"Dammit," he bellowed. "I thought you could shoot. Let fire!"

A small red ball of electrical fury suddenly zipped past Claude's helmet. Then another, and a third blazed through the chromealloy railing at his elbow.

Claude trained his rifle on a *krickak* almost directly beneath him. The creature was pointing the stick-like object in its hand up at him. Claude squeezed jerkily on the trigger. The *krickak* went over backward like a toy soldier before a cork. Again there was the shower of sparks, and again Claude's jaw hung agape in astonishment.

Grimes was firing with coolness and accuracy. One by one he picked off the leaders of the group on the platform. His atomic rifle was glowing at the duralloy barrel point, so he put it down and picked up his spare.

Another shot. Another shower of sparks.

The small blazing electrical pellets were smashing all around them now, and Claude was firing with mechanical accuracy that surprised him. And as each *krickak* fell backward, sparks showered forth and Claude shook his head unbelievably.

Then finally, Claude was aware that the platform was bare of *krickaks*—living *krickaks*, that is—and that Grimes had stopped firing. Claude could see other *krickaks* poking their round heads out of the underbrush spasmodically, while their comrades who were able to leave the platform alive retreated in confusion.

Grimes found the button that brought the glasscade tower turret up around them once again, and was pulling off his helmet a moment after it closed. Claude followed suit, and when he'd climbed out of the rest of his gear Grimes was gazing down at the *krickak*-strewn landing platform with grim satisfaction.

"Not bad for a lesson to them," he said.

Claude was a little sick. They were, after all, living, thinking creatures, even though their bodies were hardly human. He nodded whitefaced.

"Do you think they'll be back?" Claude asked.

Grimes nodded positively.

"Of course. This is just the first of a series of attacks. The light will keep them frightened off for a bit. That'll give you a chance to catch a few winks below."

Claude hesitated.

"Look," he blurted finally, "if I was in any way responsible for this, I'm sorry."

Grimes looked at him expressionlessly.

"Skip it," he said. "That can be ironed out later. Right now there's a job to be done. We've the rayhouse to protect, and we can't expect any help from the zone cruiser, since it won't be back for another six days yet."

"Surely they can't do anything against weapons such as these—" Claude began.

"They're tricky devils," Grimes said noncommittally. "You never know what to expect. There's an interspecial liner—one of the biggest passenger crates in this chain—due past here in another two days. We'll have to keep the beams going until then, or there'll be hell loose for better than a thousand of our Earth pals."

"But—" Claude began, aghast.

"Isn't that a noble enough reason for staying alive two days?" Grimes asked sarcastically. "We've got to keep the rayhouse going. Get below and grab some shut eye!"

Claude Kelvin, considerably shaken, started toward the spiral staircase. He paused before stepping down.

"Those sparks," he said. "There'd be a shower of them, like blood, every time we got one of the *krickaks*. Why?"

Grimes shrugged in annoyance.

"Never stopped to figure it out. The hooch you gave them is responsible, I'm reasonably sure. When you plug 'em when they aren't crazy drunk, nothing but a bluish liquid oozes out."

"But why—" Claude began.

"What a hell of a thing to be worried about at a time like this!" Grimes snapped in sudden vexation. "Get below!"

Claude got below.

It was sometime in the early morning when Claude Kelvin, sleepy eyed and frightened, scrambled up the spiral staircase to the ray towers where a weary Grimes still stood watch.

"I'm sorry if I took too much sleep," Claude began.

"Skip it," Grimes growled. He handed Claude the atomic rifle he'd been resting against the platform railing. "If anything comes up, wake me. Don't try to handle it yourself."

He disappeared down the spiral staircase.

Claude peered down into the dense foliage that surrounded the landing platform at the bottom of the towers. There, somewhere in the darkened thickness of the weird jungle, were the *krickaks* he had intended to use for study.

He noticed that the bodies of the roundly formed creatures who'd been slain on the platform the night before were still there, exactly as they'd fallen. Then he turned his attention once more to the tangled gray-screen morass of strange jungle.

The minutes crawled by. The hours oozed along. A cramp came into Claude's back, and a sweat of strain and anxiety clouded his spectacles. He stretched, took a firmer grip on the atomic rifle. Grimes had said that the space liner would be passing in two days.

That would mean some time tomorrow. They would have to hold out until tomorrow. And suddenly Claude was aware of the resignation of his thoughts. Until tomorrow. And after that, supposing the *krickaks* got them?

Claude Kelvin shuddered. Up until this very moment in his young life the thought of death had been but contemplation in a science laboratory. He had studied death in relation to other people. Never to himself.

It wasn't pleasant. Claude took off his spectacles with one hand and wiped them carefully on his tunic. Then he placed them back on his lean, ascetic nose and resumed his contemplation of the jungle foliage.

He looked over his shoulder for an instant. The needle on the big dial of the instrument panel was flickering with the same intensity as it had the day before. He shuddered, thinking of those pop-eyed *krickaks* lurking out there, watching him. He wondered how he had escaped death when he'd ventured out there.

Suddenly Claude felt a sense of guilt assail him. Here he was wrapped up in consideration of the salvage of his own hide when the lives of thousands were at stake. For he knew, even though Grimes hadn't said so in so many words, that the stopping of the rayhouse beams would hurl the luxury space liner into an unnavigable morass of small, interwoven asteroid belts. The liner would undoubtedly crash on one of these webs without the guidance of the ray beams.

Claude saw a round, globular body appear against the gray green thickets on his right. He turned swiftly and squeezed the trigger of the atomic rifle. The figure disappeared. Claude was unable to tell if he'd made a hit or not.

Another hour crept by, and then another. Claude was finding it difficult to keep the haze from his spectacles. They reflected too much light. Far too much light. It made everything seem hazy, dim, dim.

Claude came awake with a start. It might have been due to the loud crackling vibrations that seemed to be everywhere around him. Or it might have been due to the *splat, splat, splat* of an atomic rifle firing rapidly somewhere on the spiral staircase.

Darkness was setting in, and Claude realized even as his eyes blinked open that he'd been guilty of horrible weakness. He'd fallen asleep on watch!

He lurched erect, grabbing his atomic rifle and rushing to the staircase. It was clear to him now that that was where the noise of the rifle and the crackling vibrations of *krickaks* came from.

The *krickaks* had stormed the rayhouse as he slept—and somehow they had gained entrance!

Claude was at the staircase, now, and he looked down to see Grimes, his tunic streaked with sweat, backing up the stairs while blazing away at a swarm of *krickaks* who were trying to follow him!

He had only one emotion, a vast overpowering sense of relief at the realization that his negligence hadn't cost Grimes his life. Then Claude hurled himself recklessly down the steps until he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Grimes, blazing away at the hideous round, open-eyed faces that pressed up at them.

The two worked their way back up the staircase, step by step, rifles growing hot in their hands. Occasionally electrical pellets of fire swept around them as the *krickaks* fought back.

Grimes looked at Claude once, and the contempt that was in his glance was withering.

And finally they had gained the towers, and Grimes was pulling a thick, duralloy hatch cover over the staircase, clamping down bolts on all sides of it, while the *krickaks* milled around in crackling angry frustration on the other side.

Grimes stood back, then, and Claude saw that the grizzled space officer's right shoulder was seared gruesomely, sickeningly, almost to the bone.

"They hit you!" Claude exclaimed.

Grimes snarled his reply.

"While *both* of us were asleep!"

The crackling below the hatch cover over the staircase was receding. The *krickaks* were evidently going down to the living quarters of the rayhouse to reconnoiter.

Grimes was whitefaced, and his eyes were fever glazed. Claude watched in horror as the veteran space fighter slumped sickly to the platform. Then, suddenly, something was strangely, ominously silent.

Grimes looked up at Claude, his teeth biting down the anguish of his wound.

"That sudden silence is the stopping of the ray turbines by our friends the *krickaks*," he said bitterly. "The beams have stopped." His speech was labored, thickening.

Claude stood there, wordless, filled with burning shame and self-accusation.

"The beams *can't* stop!" Grimes muttered thickly. "The liner'll probably be passing tonight. Gotta have beams—gotta!" He made a futile attempt to climb to his knees. This failed and he tried to drag himself toward the hatch cover. "Start the beams myself," he muttered, "*have* to start 'em!"

And then interplanetary officer Grimes lost consciousness, and sprawled face downward on the platform of the towers. Claude was sobbing blindly in shame and rage as he bent over the inert figure.

He dragged Grimes' body over to a comparatively safe corner of the platform, then, still carrying his atomic rifle, he rummaged through one of the compartments beneath the instrument panels until he found what he sought.

When he walked over to the hatch that covered the spiral staircase he had a haversack of metacloth slung over his neck. In the haversack were two dozen electro-hand bombs. Then, deliberately, Claude set to work unfastening the bolts Grimes had thrown over the hatch. Moments later and he was prying the hatch off the opening.

Claude Kelvin marched down the spiral staircase unmolested. The *krickaks* were gathered in the living quarters. He could hear the wild confusion of crackling that went on down there, and the smashing of furniture and the breaking of bottles. They were probably having a hell of a time on Grimes' Venusian whisky.

Passing the level on which the ray turbines were stationed, Claude saw sickly that they had been utterly smashed by the *krickaks*. He had feared, yet expected that. The crackling grew louder. He was but a few yards from the living quarters. The first *krickak* appeared at the bottom of the stairs, just three steps away.

Claude fired the atomic rifle from his hip, straight into the *krickak's* face. There was a shower of sparks. Then other round heads appeared at the doorway. Claude fired rapidly, efficiently, his mind a blaze of fury. The faces showered sparks, fell back.

Claude stepped into the living quarters. He hurled his first electro-handbomb at a group of some fifteen *krickaks* milling about in the far corner of the room. The explosion was terrific. Somehow the walls withstood it. Claude was hurled to the floor by the force of the shock. Then he was crawling to his feet, rifle still at his hip, firing again and again at the now terrified creatures. Sparks showered everywhere.

Those who could were swarming toward the airlocks through which they entered. The jam there gave Claude time to pick off each *krickak* like a clay duck. None got out.

And in the smoke and sparks and horrible confusion, Claude Kelvin, no longer an ascetic young man, looked eagerly

about the room for another *krickak* to kill. There were none.

Claude dropped his rifle, his electro-handbombs. He grabbed the thin tendril-like arms of four of the creatures and dragged their inert bodies up the spiral staircase.

He dropped them on the landing where the useless ray turbines stood. Then, with the grim unseeing stare of a man under hypnosis, he went to work. His brain was bare of all but one thought. The beams had to be there for the liner.

Sub-lieutenant MacQuales was naturally dumbfounded when he arrived at the rayhouse on Asteroid Eighty some four days later. The place was a scene of incredible confusion and chaos. And young Claude Kelvin, tattered, smoke-streaked, and delirious from overwork and hunger, was incoherently unable to explain much.

But the rayhouse was operating. Its beams were flashing with consistent and surprising strength. And officer Grimes, with a wound that could only have been inflicted by a *krickak*, was also beyond anything but delirious babbling.

There was also an extremely peculiar odor about, and absolutely no *krickaks* except the two found beside the ray turbines. The odor was of burning electrical matter—almost fleshy—and Venusian whisky.

It wasn't until later that young Claude Kelvin explained that the electrically powered bodies of the *krickaks*—soaked in whisky—had provided excellent, sparking, dynamos to replace the turbines they'd destroyed, and had kept the ray beams sweeping forth from the towers and out into the space lanes.

As officer Grimes put it, after he and Claude had buried the hatchet at his bedside,

"The kid knew nothing at all about sociology, but boy what a whiz at bio-chemistry!"

Asteroid Eighty—One of the Rayhouse Stations in the asteroid belt. Unsettled, savage, and—except for the rayhouse—almost as it was before the first Earthmen decided to use its strategic position as a beam signal outpost for the space lanes of that none-too-well charted area.—Ed.

Krickaks are the still savage, "uncivilized" inhabitants of a certain desolate outer asteroid belt of which asteroid 80 is a key beam base for the space lanes in that vicinity, Krickaks got their name from the first Earthmen to observe their almost electrically controlled bodies and hear the loud "crick-crackling" that is the vibratory sound that emanates from their strange bodies.—Ed.

[The end of *Rayhouse in Space* by Duncan Farnsworth]