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**THE SINISTER
INVASION**

by Alexander Blade



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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SIX FRIGHTENED MEN ***

SIX FRIGHTENED MEN

By Randall Garrett

**It was an unexplored planet and anything
could happen—yet none of us expected to face a
creature impossible to fight, let alone kill....**

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You put your life on the line when you join the Exploratory Wing of the Space Corps. They tell you that when you sign up. The way they told it to me, it went like this:

"You'll be out there on alien worlds where no human being has ever set foot—worlds which may or may not have been inhabited by hostile alien creatures. You take your life in your hands every time you make a planetfall out there. Still interested?"

"That's old stuff," I said. "You don't think I'd join up if it was an old ladies' tea party, do you?"

Which was how I happened to be crouching behind a fantastically-sculptured spiralling rock out on the yellow wind-blasted desert of Pollux V, huddling there with the fierce sweep of sand against my faceplate, looking at the monster that barred my path.

The thing was at least sixty feet tall and all eyes and mouth. The mouth yawned, showing yellow daggers a foot long. As for the eyes—well, they burned with the cold luminosity of an intelligent and inimical being.

I didn't know what the thing was. One minute I'd been examining an interesting rock formation, a second later I was hiding behind it, watching the ravening thing that had appeared out of nowhere.

Other members of the expedition were sprawled here and there on the desert too. I could see Max Feld, our paleontologist, curled in a tight plump little ball under an outcropping of weathered limestone, and there was Roy Laurence, the biochemist, flat on his stomach peering at the thing incredulously.

Back behind me were three others—Don Forster, Leo Mickens, Clyde Hamner. That made six. The two remaining members of the team, Medic Howard Graves and Anthropologist Lyman Donaldson, were back at the ship. We always left a shift of two back there in case of trouble.

And trouble had sure struck now!

I saw Laurence swivel in the sand and stare goggle-eyed at me. His lips moved, and over my helmet radio came: "What the hell is it, Phil? Where'd it come from?"

I'm a morphologist; I'm supposed to know things like that. But I could only shrug and say, "A thing like that could only come from the pits of Hell. I've never seen anything like it before."

I hadn't. We had been fine-combing the broad windswept plain in front of the ship, looking for archaeological remains. The planet was uninhabited, or so we thought after running a quick check—but Max Feld had discovered relics of a dead race, an exciting find, and we had all fanned out to help him in his search for more.

We had been heading toward a flat mountain wall that rose abruptly from the desert about a mile from the ship when—from nowhere—the creature appeared, towering above the desert like a dinosaur dropped from the skies.

But no dinosaur ever looked like this one. Sixty feet high, its skin a loathsome gray-green quivering jelly with thick hairy cilia projecting, its vat-like mouth gaping toothily, its cold, hard eyes flicking back and forth, searching for us as we flattened ourselves out of sight, it was an utterly ghastly being. Evolution had gone wild on this planet.

And we were cut off from the ship, hemmed between the mountain wall and the creature.

"What are we going to do?" Clyde Hamner whispered. "He's going to smell us out pretty soon."

As he spoke, the monster began to move—*flowing*, it seemed, like some vast protozoan.

"I'm going to blast it," I said, as it oozed closer to us. Cautiously, I lifted my Webley from its shoulder-holster, turned the beam to *Full*, began to squeeze the firing-stud.

A bright white-hot beam of force leaped from the nozzle and speared the creature's eye. It howled, seemed to leap in the air, thrashed around—

And changed.

It became a boiling mass of amorphous protoplasm, writhing and billowing on the sand. I fired again into the mass—again and again, and the alien creature continued to shift its form. I was cold with horror, but I kept up the firing. My

bolts seemed to be absorbed into the fluid mass without effect, but at least I had halted the oozing advance.

It reached one final hideous stage: a giant mouth, opening before us like the gate of hell. A mouth, nothing more. It yawned in front of us—

Then advanced.

I felt noxious vapors shoot out, bathing my thermosuit, and I saw a gargling larynx feet across. I fired, again and again, into the monster's throat.

My companions were firing too. We seemed to have halted the thing's advance. It paused some twenty feet from us, a wall of mouth.

Then it disappeared.

It blinked out of sight the way it had come—instantaneously. For a moment I didn't realize what had happened, and fired three useless charges into the space where the monster had been.

"It's gone," Hamner exclaimed.

My hands were trembling—me, who had stood up to Venusian mudworms without a whimper, who had fought the giant fleas of Rigel IX. I was shaking all over. Sweat was running down my entire body, and the wiper of my faceplate was going crazy trying to blot my forehead.

Then I heard dull groans coming from up ahead. One final grunt, then silence. They had been coming from Max Feld.

Looking around cautiously, I rose to my feet. There was no sign of the creature. I ran to where Max lay.

The plump paleontologist was sprawled flat in the sand, face down. I bent, yanked him over, peered in his facemask. His eyes were open, staring—and lifeless.



It wasn't till we got back to the ship that we could open his spacesuit and confirm what I thought I saw on his face.

Doc Graves pronounced it finally: "He's dead. Heart attack. What the devil did you see out there, anyway?"

Quickly I described it. When I was finished the medic shivered. "Lord! No wonder Max had an attack. What a nightmare!"

Donaldson, the anthropologist, appeared from somewhere in the back of the ship. Seeing Max's body, he said, "What happened?"

"We were attacked on the desert. Max was the only casualty. The thing didn't touch us—it just stood there and changed shape. Max must have died of fright."

Donaldson scowled. He was a wry, taciturn individual with a coldness about him that I didn't like. I could pretty much guess what he would say. No expression of grief, or anything like that.

"It's going to look bad for you, Doc, when it's discovered we had a man with a weak heart in the crew."

The medic stiffened. "I checked Max's heart before we left. It was as good as anyone's. But the shock of seeing that thing—"

"Yeah," Don Forster said angrily. "You'd have been shivering in your boots too if that thing had popped out of nowhere right over *your* left shoulder."

"Keep your remarks to yourself, Forster. I signed on for the Exploratory Team with the same understanding any of you did—that we were going into alien, uncharted worlds and could expect to meet up with anything. Anything at all. Fright's a mere emotional reaction. Adults—as you supposedly are—should be able to control it."

I felt like hitting him, but I restrained myself. That ordeal out on the desert had left me drained, nerves raw and shaken. I shrugged and looked away.

"Well?" Hamner said. "What do we do? Go home?"

It was said half as a joke, but I saw from the look on young Leo Mickens' face that he was perfectly willing to take the suggestion seriously and get off Pollux V as fast as he could.

To forestall any trouble, I said, "It's a tempting idea. But I don't think it would look good on our records."

"You're right," Hamner agreed. "We stay. We stay until we know what that thing is, where it came from, and how we can lick it."



We stayed. We spent the rest of that day aboard ship, having called off the day's explorations in memory of Max. The bright orb of Pollux set about 2000 ship time, and the sky was filled with a glorious sight: a horde of moons whirling above. The moons of Pollux V were incredible.

There were *one hundred* of them, ranging in size from a hunk of rock the size of Mars' Deimos to one massive high-albedo satellite almost a thousand miles in diameter. They marched across the sky in stately order, filling the Polluxian night with brightness.

Only we didn't feel much sense of wonder. We buried Max in a crude grave, laid him to rest under the light of a hundred moons, and then withdrew to the ship to consider our problem.

"Where'd it come from?" Doc Graves asked.

"Nowhere," I said. "Just nowhere. One second it wasn't there, next second it was. It vanished the same way."

"How could that be?" Donaldson asked. "Matter doesn't work that way; it's flatly impossible."

Holding myself in check, I said, "Maybe so, Donaldson. But the thing was *there*."

"How do you know?" the anthropologist persisted, sneering a little. "You sure it wasn't a mass illusion of some kind?"

"Damn you," Forster shouted, "*You* weren't there. We were—and we saw it. *Max* saw it. Ask *Max* if it was there!"

Evenly, Donaldson said, "On the basis of your description, I'm convinced it must have been an illusion. I'm willing to go out there and have a look first thing in the morning—either alone or with any of you, if you can work up the courage. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," I said. "I'll go with you."



The next morning we left the ship, clad in thermosuits, armed to the teeth—at least I was. I carried a subforce gun and a neural disruptor; Donaldson scornfully packed only the prescribed blaster.

We crossed the flat plain together, without speaking. I led the way, looking back nervously every few paces, but there was nothing behind me but Donaldson. We made a complete reconnaissance of the area, picked up a few interesting outlying fossils—Donaldson thought they might be relics of the dead race of Pollux V—and reached the bare face of the mountain without any difficulties.

"Well?" Donaldson asked sneeringly. "Where's your monster this time? He afraid of me?"

"So it didn't show up," I snapped. "That doesn't prove anything. For all we know it might jump us on the way back to the ship."

"So it might. But I doubt it. For one thing, I've been checking footprints in the sand. I've counted six tracks—one each for you, Feld, Hamner, Laurence, Forster, and Mickens. Unfortunately, that doesn't leave any for your monster. There's no sign of him anywhere."

I was a little startled by that. I glanced around. "You're right," I admitted, frowning. Licking dry lips, I said, "There ought to be some trace—unless the wind's covered it."

"The wind hasn't fully covered the traces of you six yet," Donaldson pointed out with obstinate logic. "Why should it obliterate only those of your nemesis?"

I scowled, but said nothing. Donaldson was right again—but I still found it hard to convince myself that what we had seen was only an illusion.

On the way back to the ship, I formulated all sorts of theories to explain the creature. It was a monster out of subspace, generated by etheric force; it was a radiation-creature without tangible physical body; it was—

I had half a dozen conjectures, each as unlikely as the next. But we returned to the ship safely, without any trouble whatever. I was sure of one thing: the creature was real, no matter what hell-void had spawned it.



When we returned, I saw the tense faces of the men in the ship ease.

"All right," Donaldson said. "We've both been out there and come back. I say we ought to investigate this place fully. There's been a high-level civilization here at one time, and—"

"Suppose it's this monster that killed off that civilization?" Forster suggested.

"Then it's our duty to investigate it," I had to say. "Even at the cost of our lives." Here I agreed with Donaldson; monster or no, it was our job to fathom the secrets of this dead world.

We agreed to explore in twos, rather than risk the customary complement of six all at once. Two men would go out; five remain within, three of them space-suited and ready to leave the ship to answer any emergency call.

Mickens and Forster drew the first assignment. They suited up and left. Tensely, we proceeded about our shipside duties, cataloguing information from our previous stops, performing routine tasks, busying ourselves desperately in unimportant work to take our minds off the men who were out on that desert together.

An hour later, Forster returned. Alone.

His face was pale, his eyes bulging, and almost before he stepped from the airlock we knew what must have happened.

"Where's Mickens?" I asked, breaking the terrible hush in the cabin.

"Dead," he said hollowly. "We—we got to the mountain, and—God, it was awful!"

He sank down in an acceleration cradle and started to sob. Doc Graves fumbled at his belt, drew out a neurotab, forced it between the boy's quivering lips. He calmed; color returned to his face.

"Tell us about it," Hamner urged gently.

"We reached the back end of the plain, and Leo suggested we try the mountain. He thought he saw a sort of cave somewhere back in there, and wanted to have a look. We had to go over that sharp rock shelf to get in there.

"So we started to scale the cliff. We were about a hundred feet up, and going along a path maybe four feet wide, when—when—" He shuddered, then forced himself to go on. "The monster appeared. It popped out of nowhere right in front of Leo. He was taken by surprise and toppled over the edge. I managed to hang on."



"Were you attacked?" I asked.

"No. It vanished, right after Leo fell off. I went down to look at him. His facemask had broken. I left him there."

I glanced around at the tight-jawed, hard faces of my crewmates. No one said a word—but we all knew the job that faced us now. We couldn't leave Pollux V until we'd discovered the nature of the beast that menaced us—even if it cost us our lives. We couldn't go back to Earth and send some other guys in to do the job. That wasn't the way the Exploratory Wing operated. We had a tradition to uphold.



We drew lots, and Hamner and Donaldson went out there to recover Mickens' body. They encountered no hazards, and brought young Mickens' shattered body back. We buried it next to Max's. The monster had taken a toll of two already,

without actually touching either.

It was almost like some evil plan unfolding to wipe us out one by one. I didn't like it—but I didn't have anything too concrete to base it on, not till the fifth day.

I was teamed with Donaldson again, and I felt strangely confident about our safety. So far the monster had yet to materialize any time Donaldson was out on the plain. That fact had been in the back of my mind for quite a while. It was the only clue I had.

We prowled over the plain, which by now had been pretty well finetoothed, and then I suggested we try the cave where Mickens had met his fate.

"I don't like the idea," Donaldson said, eyeing the narrow shelf of rock we would have to walk across. "You remember what happened to Mickens, and—"

I laughed harshly. "Don't tell me you're beginning to believe in this monster of ours?"

"Of course not. Mickens simply had an attack of vertigo and toppled off; Forster's active imagination supplied the monster. But that shelf looks treacherous. I'd just as soon not go up there."

"You're not talking like an Exploratory Wing man, Donaldson. But it's okay with me if you want to wait down here. That cave might be a goldmine of artifacts. We ought at least to have a look."

His hard face dropped within his mask. "No—I couldn't let you go alone. You win," he said. "Let's try the cave."

We began the climb—and it was, I saw, a deadly road. It narrowed dizzyingly—and while the drop was only a hundred feet, which a man could survive if he landed right, spacesuits weren't made to take falls of that sort. And without a suit, a man was instantly dead on this methane-ammonia atmosphere world.

We were about ten feet out on the ledge, I in the lead and Donaldson behind me, when I heard him gasp.

"Great God! There it is!"

I felt him lurch against me in sudden terror, nearly heaving me into the abyss, but somehow I steadied myself, dropped to my knees, hung on. I turned.

He had avoided a fall too. But I saw no monster.

"Where is it?" I asked.

"It came out of the air right next to me—just popped out of the void and vanished again. I saw it, though." His voice was hoarse. "I apologize for everything I've said. The thing is real. If it weren't for your sure footing we'd both have gone the way Mickens did."

He seemed almost hysterical. There was no sign of the monster, but I wasn't going to take any chances out on this ribbon of rock with a hysterical man.

"Let's go back," I said. "We'll try to get to the cave some other time."

"All right," Donaldson said, shaken. We turned and inched our way back along the shelf to safety, and half-ran to the sanctuary of the ship.

But once we were inside and I was thinking clearly again, I began to sprout some suspicions.



I reasoned it out very carefully. Every time Donaldson had gone out previously, the monster had failed to show. There wasn't another man aboard ship who hadn't had some encounter with the thing. And some of them were remarking about Donaldson's apparent luck.

So this time we're out on the shelf, and the monster *does* show up—but Donaldson's the only one who sees him, after staunchly denying its existence all along. It seemed to me that it might only have been pretense, that he had faked seeing the monster for some reason of his own.

I didn't know what that could be. But I had some ideas. Donaldson, after all, had been a member of the first party to explore Pollux V, the day before the exploration that killed Max. I had remained on the ship while that group had been out.

Suppose, I thought, Donaldson had found something on that first trip, something that he hadn't bothered to tell the rest of us about. Something he might want badly enough to kill all of us for.

It was pretty far-fetched, but it was worth a try. I decided to explore Donaldson's cabin.

Ordinarily we respected privacy to an extreme degree aboard the ship. I had never been in Donaldson's cabin before—he never invited anyone in, and naturally I never went uninvited. But this was a special case, I felt.

The door was locked, but it's not hard to coerce a magneplate into opening if you know how they work. Donaldson was in the ship's lab and I hoped he'd stay out of my way till I had a good look around.

The room was just like any of ours, filled with the usual things—a shelf of reference books, a file of musictapes, some minifilms, other things to help to pass away the long hours between planets. It seemed neat, precise, uncluttered, just as Donaldson himself was crisp and reserved.

I moved around the room very carefully, looking for anything out of the ordinary. And then I found it.

It was a black box, nothing more, about four inches square. It was sitting on one of his shelves. Just a bare black box, a little cube of metal—but *what* metal!

Beyond the blackness was a strange unearthly shimmer, an eye-teasing pattern of shifting molecules within the metal itself. The box had a sleek, alien appearance. I knew it hadn't been in the cabin when we left Earth.

With a sudden rush of excitement I realized my mad guess had been right. Donaldson *had* found something and kept news of it back from the rest of us. And perhaps it was linked to the deaths of Max Feld and Leo Mickens.

Cautiously I reached out to examine the box. I lifted it. It was oddly heavy, and strange to the touch.

But no sooner did I have it in my hands when the door opened behind me. Donaldson had come back.



"What are you doing with that?" he shouted.

"I—"

He crossed the cabin at top speed and seized the box from my hands. And suddenly the monster appeared.

It materialized right in the cabin, between Donaldson and me, its vast bulk pressing against the walls. I felt its noisome breath on me, sensed its evil reek.

"Donaldson!"

But Donaldson was no longer there. I was alone in the cabin with the creature.

I backed away into the far corner, my mouth working in terror. I tried to call for help, but couldn't get a word out. And the beast squirmed and changed like a vast amoeba, writhing and twisting from one grey oily shape to another.

I sank to the floor, numb with horror—and then realized that the monster wasn't approaching.

It was just staying there, making faces at me.

Making faces. Like a bogeyman.

It was trying to scare me to death. That was how Max Feld had died, that was how Leo Mickens had died.

But I wasn't going to die that way.

I rose and confronted the thing. It just remained in the middle of the cabin, blotting everything out behind it, stretching from wall to wall and floor to ceiling, changing from one hell-shape to another and hoping I'd curl up and die.

I stepped forward.

Cautiously I touched the monster's writhing surface. It was like touching a cloud. I sank right in.

The monster changed, took the dragon form again—much smaller, of course, to fit the cabin. Teeth gnashed the air before my nose—but didn't bite into my throat as they promised to do. Nervelessly I stood my ground.

Then I waded into the heart of the monster, right into its middle with the grey oiliness billowing out all around me. There seemed to be nothing material, nothing to grapple hold of. It was like fighting a dream.

But then I hit something solid. My groping hands closed around warm flesh. I started to squeeze.

I had a throat. A living core of flesh within the monster? It might be. I constricted my fingers, dug them in, heard strangled gasps coming from further in. I couldn't see, but I hung on.

Then a human voice said, "Damn you—you're choking me!" And the monster thinned.

Through the diminishing smoke of the dream-creature, I saw Donaldson, and I was clutching his throat. He still held the black box in his hand, but it was slipping from his grasp, slipping....

He dropped it. It clattered to the floor and I kicked it far across the cabin.
The monster vanished completely.

It was just the two of us, there in the cabin. I heard fists pounding on the door from outside, but I ignored them. This was between me and Donaldson.

"What is that thing?" I asked, facing him, tugging at his throat. I shook him.
"Where'd you find that hell-thing?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he wheezed.

My fingers tightened. Suddenly he drew up his foot and lashed out at my stomach. I let go of his throat and fell back, the wind knocked out of me. As I staggered backward, he darted for the fallen box, but I recovered and brought my foot down hard on his outstretched hand.

He snarled in pain. I felt his other fist crash into my stomach again. I was almost numb, sick, ready to curl up in a knot and close my eyes. But I forced myself to suck in breath and hit him.

His head snapped back. I hit him again, and he reeled soggily. His neat, precise lips swelled into a bloody mass. His fists moved hazily; I blackened one of his eyes, and he groaned and slumped. Fury was in my fists; I was avenging the honor of the Exploratory Wing against the one man who had broken its oaths.

"Enough ... enough...."

But I hit him again and again, till he sagged to the floor. I picked up the black metal box, fondled it in my hands. Then, tentatively, I threw a thought at it.

Monster.

The monster appeared in all its ugliness.

Vanish.

It vanished.

"That's how it works, isn't it?" I said. "It's a thought projector. That monster never existed outside your own mind, Donaldson."

"Don't hit me again," he whined. I didn't. He was beneath contempt.

I threw open the door and saw the other crewmen huddled outside, their faces pale. "It's all over," I said. "Here's your monster."

I held out the black box.



We held court on Donaldson that night, and he made full confession. That first day, he had stumbled over an alien treasure in the cave beyond the hill—that, and the thought-converter. The idea came to him that perhaps, as sole survivor of the expedition, he could turn some of the treasure to his own uses.

So he utilized the thought-converter in a campaign to pick us off one by one without aiming suspicion at himself. Only his clumsy way of pretending to see the creature himself had given him away; else he might have killed us all.

Our rulebook gave no guide on what to do about him—but we reached a decision easily enough.

When we left Pollux V, taking with us samples of the treasure, and other specimens of the long-dead race (including the thought-converter) we left Donaldson behind, on the bare, lifeless planet, with about a week's supply of food and air.

No one ever learned of his treachery. We listed him as a casualty, along with Max and Leo, when we returned to Earth. The Exploratory Wing had too noble a name to tarnish by revealing what Donaldson had done ... and none of us will ever speak the truth. The Wing means too much to us for that.

And I think they're going to award him a posthumous medal....

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SIX FRIGHTENED
MEN ***

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