

FICTION

Jim Harmon

The Planet with No Nightmare



eBookTakeAway

FICTION

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

BY JIM HARMON

The creatures on the little planet were real bafflers. The first puzzler about them was that they died so easily. The second was that they didn't die at all.

I

TENSION eased away as the spaceship settled down on its metallic haunches and they savored a safe planetfall.

Ekstrohm fingered loose the cinches of his deceleration couch. He sighed. An exploration camp would mean things would be simpler for him. He could hide his problem from the others more easily. Trying to keep secret what he did alone at night was very difficult under the close conditions on board a ship in space.

Ryan hefted his bulk up and supported it on one elbow. He rubbed his eyes sleepily with one huge paw. "Ekstrohm, Nogol, you guys okay?"

"Nothing wrong with me that couldn't be cured," Nogol said. He didn't say what would cure him; he had been explaining all during the trip what he needed to make him feel like himself. His small black eyes darted inside the olive oval of his face.

"Ekstrohm?" Ryan insisted.

"Okay."

"Well, let's take a ground-level look at the country around here."

The facsiport rolled open on the landscape. A range of bluffs hugged the horizon, the color of decaying moss. Above them, the sky was the black of space, or the almost equal black of the winter sky above Minneapolis, seen against neon-lit snow. That cold, empty sky was full of fire and light. It seemed almost a magnification of the Galaxy itself, of the Milky Way, blown up by some master photographer.

This fiery swath was actually only a belt of minor planets, almost like the asteroid belt in the original Solar System. These planets were much bigger, nearly all capable of holding an atmosphere. But to the infuriation of scientists, for no known reason not all of them did. This would be the fifth mapping expedition to the planetoids of Yancy-6 in three generations. They lay months away from the nearest Earth star by jump drive, and no one knew what they were good for, although it was felt that they would probably be good for something if it could only be discovered--much like the continent of Antarctica in ancient history.

"How can a planet with so many neighbors be so lonely?" Ryan asked. He was the captain, so he could ask questions like that.

"Some can be lonely in a crowd," Nogol said elaborately.

"WHAT will we need outside, Ryan?" Ekstrohm asked.

"No helmets," the captain answered. "We can breathe out there, all right. It just won't be easy. This old world lost all of its helium and trace gases long ago. Nitrogen and oxygen are about it."

"Ryan, look over there," Nogol said. "Animals. Ringing the ship. Think they're intelligent, maybe hostile?"

"I think they're dead," Ekstrohm interjected quietly. "I get no readings from them at all. Sonic, electronic, galvanic--all blank. According to these needles, they're stone dead."

"Ekstrohm, you and I will have a look," Ryan said. "You hold down the fort, Nogol. Take it easy."

"Easy," Nogol confirmed. "I heard a story once about a rookie who got excited when the captain stepped outside and he couldn't get an encephalographic reading on him. Me, I know the mind of an officer works in a strange and unfathomable manner."

"I'm not worried about you mis-reading the dials, Nogol, just about a lug like you reading them at all. Remember, when the little hand is straight up that's negative. Positive results start when it goes towards the hand you use to make your mark."

"But I'm ambidextrous."

Ryan told him what he could do then.

Ekstrohm smiled, and followed the captain through the airlock with only a glance at the lapel gauge on his coverall. The strong negative field his suit set up would help to repel bacteria and insects.

Actually, the types of infection that could attack a warm-blooded mammal were not infinite, and over the course of the last few hundred years adequate defenses had been found for all basic categories. He wasn't likely to come down with hot chills and puzzling striped fever.

They ignored the ladder down to the planet surface and, with only a glance at the seismological gauge to judge surface resistance, dropped to the ground.

It was day, but in the thin atmosphere contrasts were sharp between light and shadow. They walked from midnight to noon, noon to midnight, and came to the beast sprawled on its side.

Ekstrohm nudged it with a boot. "Hey, this is pretty close to a wart-hog."

"Uh-huh," Ryan admitted. "One of the best matches I've ever found. Well, it has to happen. Statistical average and all. Still, it sometimes gives you a creepy feeling to find a rabbit or a snapping turtle on some strange world. It makes you wonder if this exploration business isn't all some big joke, and somebody has been *everywhere* before you even started."

THE surveyor looked sidewise at the captain. The big man seldom gave out with such thoughts. Ekstrohm cleared his throat. "What shall we do with this one? Dissect it?"

Ryan nudged it with his toe, following Ekstrohm's example. "I don't know, Stormy. It sure as hell doesn't look like any dominant intelligent species to me. No hands, for one thing. Of course, that's not definite proof."

"No, it isn't," Ekstrohm said.

"I think we'd better let it lay until we get a clearer picture of the ecological setup around here. In the meantime, we might be thinking on the problem all these dead beasts represent. What killed them?"

"It looks like we did, when we made blastdown."

"But *what* about our landing was lethal to the creatures?"

"Radiation?" Ekstrohm suggested. "The planet is very low in radiation from mineral deposits, and the atmosphere seems to shield out most of the solar output. Any little dose of radiation might knock off these critters."

"I don't know about that. Maybe it would work the other way. Maybe because they have had virtually no radioactive exposure and don't have any R's stored up, they could take a *lot* without harm."

"Then maybe it was the shockwave we set up. Or maybe it's sheer xenophobia. They curl up and die at the sight of something strange and alien--like a spaceship."

"Maybe," the captain admitted. "At this stage of the game anything could be possible. But there's one possibility I particularly don't like."

"And that is?"

"Suppose it was *not* us that killed these aliens. Suppose it is something right on the planet, native to it. I just hope it doesn't work on Earthmen too. These critters went real sudden."

Ekstrohm lay in his bunk and thought, the camp is quiet.

The Earthmen made camp outside the spaceship. There was no reason to leave the comfortable quarters inside the ship, except that, faced with a possibility of sleeping on solid ground, they simply had to get out.

The camp was a cluster of aluminum bubbles, ringed with a spy web to alert the Earthmen to the approach of any being.

Each man had a bubble to himself, privacy after the long period of enforced intimacy on board the ship.

Ekstrohm lay in his bunk and listened to the sounds of the night on Yancy-6 138. There was a keening of wind, and a cracking of the frozen ground. Insects there were on the world, but they were frozen solid during the night, only to revive and thaw in the morning sun.

The bunk he lay on was much more uncomfortable than the acceleration couches on board. Yet he knew the others were sleeping more soundly, now that they had renewed their contact with the matter that had birthed them to send them riding high vacuum.

Ekstrohm was not asleep.

Now there could be an end to pretending.

He threw off the light blanket and swung his feet off the bunk, to the floor. Ekstrohm stood up.

There was no longer any need to hide. But what was there to do? What had changed for him?

He no longer had to lie in his bunk all night, his eyes closed, pretending to sleep. In privacy he could walk around, leave the light on, read.

It was small comfort for insomnia.

Ekstrohm never slept. Some doctors had informed him he was mistaken about this. Actually, they said, he did sleep, but so shortly and fitfully that he forgot. Others admitted he was absolutely correct--he *never* slept. His body processes only slowed down enough for him to dispel fatigue poisons. Occasionally he fell into a waking, gritty-eyed stupor; but he never slept.

Never at all.

Naturally, he couldn't let his shipmates know this. Insomnia would ground him from the Exploration Service, on physiological if not psychological grounds. He had to hide it.

OVER the years, he had had buddies in space in whom he thought he could confide. The buddies invariably took advantage of him. Since he couldn't sleep anyway, he might as well stand their watches for them or write their reports. Where the hell did he get off threatening to report any laxness on their part to the captain? A man with

insomnia had better avoid bad dreams of that kind if he knew what was good for him.

Ekstrohm had to hide his secret.

In a camp, instead of shipboard, hiding the secret was easier. But the secret itself was just as hard.

Ekstrohm picked up a lightweight no-back from the ship's library, a book by Bloch, the famous twentieth-century expert on sex. He scanned a few lines on the social repercussions of a celebrated nineteenth-century sex murderer, but he couldn't seem to concentrate on the weighty, pontifical, ponderous style.

On impulse, he flipped up the heat control on his coverall and slid back the hatch of the bubble.

Ekstrohm walked through the alien grass and looked up at the unfamiliar constellations, smelling the frozen sterility of the thin air.

Behind him, his mates stirred without waking.

II

Ekstrohm was startled in the morning by a banging on the hatch of his bubble. It took him a few seconds to put his thoughts in order, and then he got up from the bunk where he had been resting, sleeplessly.

The angry burnt-red face of Ryan greeted him. "Okay, Stormy, this isn't the place for fun and games. What did you do with them?"

"Do with what?"

"The dead beasties. All the dead animals laying around the ship."

"What are you talking about, Ryan? What do you think I did with them?"

"I don't know. All I know is that they are gone."

"*Gone?*"

Ekstrohm shouldered his way outside and scanned the veldt.

There was no ring of animal corpses. Nothing. Nothing but wispy grass whipping in the keen breeze.

"I'll be damned," Ekstrohm said.

"You are right now, buddy. ExPe doesn't like anybody mucking up primary evidence."

"Where do you get off, Ryan?" Ekstrohm demanded. "Why pick me for your patsy? This has got to be some kind of local phenomenon. Why accuse a shipmate of being behind this?"

"Listen, Ekstrohm, I want to give you the benefit of every doubt. But you aren't exactly the model of a surveyor, you know. You've been riding on a pink ticket for six years, you know that."

"No," Ekstrohm said. "No, I didn't know that."

"You've been hiding things from me and Nogol every jump we've made with you. Now comes this! It fits the pattern of secrecy and stealth you've been involved in."

"What could I do with your lousy dead bodies? What would I want with them?"

"All I know is that you were outside the bubbles last night, and you were the only sentient being who came in or out of our alarm web. The tapes show that. Now all the bodies are missing, like they got up and walked away."

It was not a new experience to Ekstrohm. No. Suspicion wasn't new to him at all.

"Ryan, there are other explanations for the disappearance of the bodies. Look for them, will you? I give you my word I'm not trying to pull some stupid kind of joke, or to deliberately foul up the expedition. Take my word, can't you?"

Ryan shook his head. "I don't think I can. There's still such a thing as mental illness. You may not be responsible."

Ekstrohm scowled.

"Don't try anything violent, Stormy. I outweigh you fifty pounds and I'm fast for a big man."

"I wasn't planning on jumping you. Why do you have to jump me the first time something goes wrong? You've only got a lot of formless suspicions."

"Look, Ekstrohm, do you think I looked out the door and saw a lot of dead animals missing and immediately decided you did it to bedevil me? I've been up for hours--thinking--looking into this. You're the only possibility that's left."

"Why?"

THE bodies are missing. What could it be? Scavengers? The web gives us a complete census on everything inside it. The only animals inside the ring are more wart-hogs and, despite their appearance, they aren't carnivorous. Strictly grass-eaters. Besides, no animal, no insect, no process of decay could *completely* consume animals without a trace. There are no bones, no hide, no nothing."

"You don't know the way bacteria works on this planet. Radiation is so low, it may be particularly virulent."

"That's a possible explanation, although it runs counter to all the evidence we've established so far. There's a much simpler explanation, Ekstrohm. You. You hid the bodies for some reason. What other reason could you have for prowling around out here at night?"

I couldn't sleep. The words were in his throat, but he didn't use them. They weren't an explanation. They would open more questions than they would answer.

"You're closing your eyes to the possibility of natural phenomenon, laying this on me. You haven't adequate proof and you know it."

"Ekstrohm, when something's stolen, you always suspect a suspicious character before you get around to the possibility that the stolen goods melted into thin air."

"What," Ekstrohm said with deadly patience, "what do you think I could have possibly done with your precious dead bodies?"

"You could have buried them. This is a big territory. We haven't been able to search every square foot of it."

"Ryan, it was thirty or forty below zero last night. How the devil could I dig holes in this ground to bury anything?"

"At forty below, how could your bacteria function to rot them away?"

Ekstrohm could see he was facing prejudice. There was no need to keep talking, and no use in it. Still, some reflex made him continue to frame reasonable answers.

"I don't know what bacteria on *this* planet can do. Besides, that was only *one* example of a natural phenomenon."

"Look, Ekstrohm, you don't have anything to worry about if you're not responsible. We're going to give you a fair test."

What kind of a test would it be? He wondered. And how fair?

Nogol came trotting up lightly.

"Ryan, I found some more wart-hogs and they keeled over as soon as they saw me."

"So it *was* xenophobia," Ekstrohm ventured.

"The important thing," Ryan said, with a sidelong glance at the surveyor, "is that now we've got what it takes to see if Ekstrohm has been deliberately sabotaging this expedition."

THE body heat of the three men caused the air-conditioner of the tiny bubble to labor.

"Okay," Ryan breathed. "We've got our eyes on you, Ekstrohm, and the video circuits are wide open on the dead beasts. All we have to do is wait."

"We'll have a long wait," Nogol ventured. "With Ekstrohm here, and the corpses out there, nothing is going to happen."

That would be all the proof they needed, Ekstrohm knew. Negative results would be positive proof to them. His pink ticket would turn pure red and he would be grounded for life--*if* he got off without a rehabilitation sentence.

But if nothing happened, it wouldn't really prove anything. There was no way to say that the conditions tonight were identical to the conditions the previous night. What had swept away those bodies might be comparable to a flash flood. Something that occurred once a year, or once in a century.

And perhaps his presence outside *was* required in some subtle cause-and-effect relationship.

All this test would prove, if the bodies didn't disappear, was only that conditions were not identical to conditions under which they did disappear.

Ryan and Nogol were prepared to accept him, Ekstrohm, as the missing element, the one ingredient needed to vanish the corpses. But it could very well be something else.

Only Ekstrohm knew that it *had* to be something else that caused the disappearances.

Or did it?

He faced up to the question. How did he know he was sane? How could he be sure that he hadn't stolen and hid the bodies for some murky reason of his own? There was a large question as to how long a man could go without sleep, dreams and oblivion, and remain sane.

Ekstrohm forced his mind to consider the possibility. Could he remember every step he had taken the night before?

It seemed to him that he could remember walking past the creature lying in the grass, then walking in a circle, and coming back to the base. It seemed like that to him. But how could he know that it was true?

He couldn't.

THERE was no way he could prove, even to himself, that he had not disposed of those alien remains and then come back to his bubble, contented and happy at the thought of fooling those smug idiots who could sleep at night.

"How much longer do we have to wait?" Nogol asked. "We've been here nine hours. Half a day. The bodies are right where I left them outside. There doesn't seem to be any more question."

Ekstrohm frowned. There was one question. He was sure there was one question.... Oh, yes. The question was: How did he know he was sane?

He didn't know, of course. That was as good an answer as any. Might as well accept it; might as well let them do what they wanted with him. Maybe if he just gave up, gave in, maybe he could sleep then. Maybe he could ...

Ekstrohm sat upright in his chair.

No. That wasn't the answer. He couldn't know that he was sane, but then neither could anybody else. The point was, you had to go ahead living as if you were sane. That was the only way of living.

"Cosmos," Ryan gasped. "Would you look at that!"

Ekstrohm followed the staring gaze of the two men.

On the video grid, one of the "dead" animals was slowly rising, getting up, walking away.

"A natural phenomenon!" Ekstrohm said.

"Suspended animation!" Nogol ventured.

"Playing possum!" Ryan concluded.

Now came the time for apologies.

Ekstrohm had been through similar situations before, ever since he had been found walking the corridors at college the night one of the girls had been attacked. He didn't want to hear their apologies; they meant nothing to him. It was not a

matter of forgiving them. He knew the situation had not changed.

They would suspect him just as quickly a second time.

"We're supposed to be an exploration team," Ekstrohm said quickly. "Let's get down to business. Why do you suppose these alien creatures fake death?"

Nogol shrugged his wiry shoulders. "Playing dead is easier than fighting."

"More likely it's a method of fighting," Ryan suggested. "They play dead until they see an opening. Then--*rippppp*."

"I think they're trying to hide some secret," Ekstrohm said.

"What secret?" Ryan demanded.

"I don't know," he answered. "Maybe I'd better sleep on it."

III

RYAN observed his two crewmen confidently the next morning. "I did some thinking last night."

Great, Ekstrohm thought. *For that you should get a Hazardous Duty bonus.*

"This business is pretty simple," the captain went on, "these pigs simply play possum. They go into a state of suspended animation, when faced by a strange situation. Xenophobia! I don't see there's much more to it."

"Well, if you don't see that there's more to it, Ryan--" Nogol began complacently.

"Wait a minute," Ekstrohm interjected. "That's a good theory. It may even be the correct one, but where's your *proof*?"

"Look, Stormy, we don't have to have proof. Hell, we don't even have to have theories. We're explorers. We just make reports of primary evidence and let the scientists back home in the System figure them out."

"I want this thing cleared up, Ryan. Yesterday, you were accusing me of being some kind of psycho who was lousing up the expedition out of pure--pure--" he searched for a term currently in use in mentology--"*demonia*. Maybe the boys back home will think the same thing. I want to be cleared."

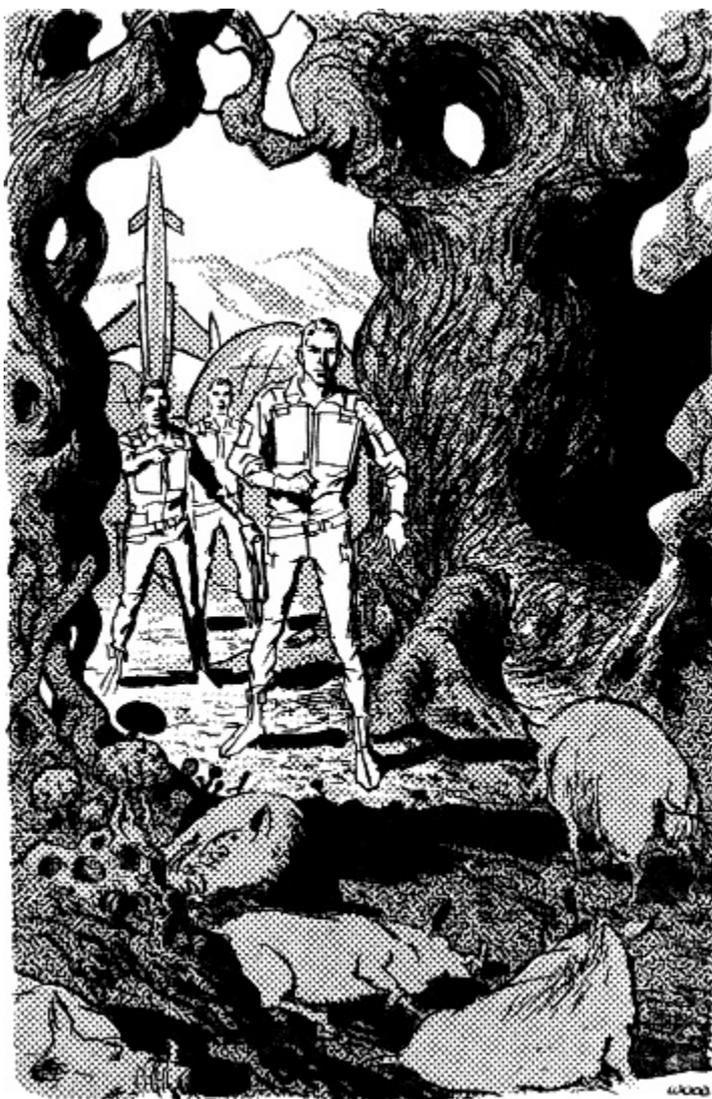
"I guess you were cleared last night, Stormy boy," Nogol put in. "We saw one of the 'dead' pigs get up and walk away."

"*That didn't clear me*," Ekstrohm said.

The other two looked like they had caught him cleaning wax out of his ear in public.

"No," Ekstrohm went on. "We still have no proof of what caused the suspended animation of the pigs. Whatever caused it before caused it last night. You thought of accusing me, but you didn't think it through about how I could have disposed of the bodies. Or, after you found out about the pseudo-death, how I might have caused *that*. If I had some drug or something to cause it the first time, I could have a smaller dose, or a slowly dissolving capsule for delayed effect."

The two men stared at him, their eyes beginning to narrow.



"I could have done that. *Or either of you could have done the same thing.*"

"Me?" Nogol protested. "Where would my profit be in that?"

"You both have an admitted motive. You hate my guts. I'm 'strange,' 'different,' 'suspicious.' You could be trying to frame me."

"That's insubordination," Ryan grated. "Accusations against a superior officer ..."

"Come off it, Ryan," Nogol sighed. "I never saw a three-man spaceship that was run very taut. Besides, he's right."

Beet-juice flowed out of Ryan's swollen face. "So where does that leave us?"

"Looking for *proof* of the *cause* of the pig's pseudo-death. Remember, I'll have to make counter-accusations against you two out of self-defense."

"Be reasonable, Stormy," Ryan pleaded. "This might be some deep scientific mystery we could never discover in our lifetime. We might never get off this planet."

That was probably behind his thinking all along, why he had been so quick to find a scapegoat to explain it all away. Explorers didn't *have* to have all the answers, or even theories. But, if they ever wanted to get anyplace in the Service, they damned well *better*.

"So what?" Ekstrohm asked. "The Service rates us as expendable, doesn't it?"

BY Ekstrohm's suggestion, they divided the work.

Nogol killed pigs. All day he did nothing but scare the wart-hogs to death by coming near them.

Ryan ran as faithful a check on the corpses as he could, both by eyeball observation and by radar, video and Pro-Tect circuits. They lacked the equipment to program every corpse for every second, but a representative job could be done.

Finally, Ekstrohm went scouting for Something Else. He didn't know what he expected to find, but he somehow knew he would find *something*.

He rode the traction-scooter (so-called because it had no traction at all--no wheels, no slides, no contact with the ground or air) and he reflected that he was a suspicious character.

All through life, he was going around suspecting everybody and now *everything* of having some dark secret they were trying to hide.

A simple case of transference, he diagnosed, in long-discredited terminology. He had something to hide--his insomnia. So he thought everybody else had their guilty secret too.

How could there be any deep secret to the pseudo-death on this world? It was no doubt a simple fear reaction, a retreat from a terrifying reality. How could he ever *prove* that it was more? Or even exactly that?

Internal glandular actions would be too subtle for a team of explorers to establish. They could only go on behavior. What more in the way of behavior could he really hope to establish? The pattern was clear. The pigs keeled over at any unfamiliar sight or sound, and recovered when they thought the coast was clear. That was it. All there was! Why did he stubbornly, stupidly insist there was more to it?

Actually, by his insistence, he was giving weight to the idea of the others that he was strange and suspicious himself. Under the normal, sane conditions of planetfall the phobias and preoccupations of a space crew, nurtured in the close confines of a scout ship, wouldn't be taken seriously by competent men. But hadn't his subsequent behavior given weight to Ryan's unfounded accusations of irrational sabotage? Wouldn't it seem that he was actually *daring* the others to prove his guilt? If he went on with unorthodox behavior--

That was when Ekstrohm saw the flying whale.

ENSION gripped Ekstrohm tighter than he gripped the handlebars of his scooter. He was only vaguely aware of the

Passing scenery. He knew he should switch on the homing beacon and ride in on automatic, but it seemed like too much of an effort to flick his finger. As the tension rose, the capillaries of his eyes swelled, and things began to white out for him. The rush of landscape became blurred streaks of light and dark, now mostly faceless light.

The flying whale. He had seen it.

Moreover, he had heard it, smelt and felt it. It had released a jet of air with a distinctive sound and odor. It had blown against his skin, ruffled his hair. It had been real.

But the flying whale *couldn't* have been real. Conditions on this planetoid were impossible for it. He knew planets and their life possibilities. A creature with a skeleton like that could have evolved here, but the atmosphere would never have supported his flesh and hide. Water bodies were of insufficient size. No, the whale was not native to this world.

Then what, if anything, did this flying alien behemoth have to do with the pseudo-death of the local pig creatures?

I'll never know, Ekstrohm told himself. Never. Ryan and Nogol will never believe me, they will never believe in the flying whale. They're explorers, simple men of action, unimaginative. Of course, I'm an explorer too. But I'm different, I'm sensitive--

Ekstrohm was riding for a fall.

The traction-scooter was going up a slope that had been eroded concave. It was at the very top of the half-moon angle, upside down, standing Ekstrohm on his head. Since he was not strapped into his seat, he fell.

As he fell he thought ruefully that he had contrived to have an accident in the only way possible with a traction-scooter.

Ekstrohm's cranium collided with the ground, and he stopped thinking....

Ekstrohm blinked open his eyes, wondering. He saw light, then sky, then pigs.
Live pigs.

But--the pigs shouldn't be alive. When he was this close they should be dead.

Only they weren't.

Why ... why ...

He moved slightly and the nearest pig fell dead. The others went on with their business, roaming the plain. Ekstrohm expected the dropping of the pig to stampede the rest into dropping dead, but they didn't seem to pay any attention to their fallen member.

I've been lying here for hours, he realized. I didn't move in on them. The pigs moved in on me while I was lying still. If I keep still I can get a close look at them in action.

So far, even with video, it had been difficult to get much of an idea of the way these creatures lived--when they weren't dead.

Observe, observe, he told himself.

There might be some relationship between the flying whale and the pigs.

Could it be the whales were intelligent alien masters of these herds of pigs?

Ekstrohm lay still and observed.

Item: the pigs ate the soft, mosslike grass.

Item: the pigs eliminated almost constantly.

Item: the pigs fought regularly.

Fought?

Fought?

Here was something, Ekstrohm realized.

Why did animals fight?

Rationalizations of nature-lovers aside, some fought because they had plain mean nasty dispositions--like some people. That didn't fit the pigs. They were indolent grazers. They hadn't the energy left over for sheer-cussedness. There had to be a definite goal to their battles.

It wasn't food. That was abundant. The grassy veldt reached to all horizons.

Sex. They had to be fighting for mates!

He became so excited he twitched a foot slightly. Two more pigs dropped dead, but the others paid no heed.

He watched the lazily milling herd intently, at the same time keeping an eye out for the flying whales. Back on Earth porpoises had been taught to herd schools of fish and of whales. It was not impossible an intelligent species of whale had learned to herd masses of land animals.

But Ekstrohm knew he needed proof. He had to have something to link the pseudo-death of the wart-hogs to the inexplicable presence of the whales. Perhaps, he thought, the "death" of the pigs was the whales' way of putting them into cold storage--a method of making the meat seem unattractive to other animals, on a world perhaps without carrion scavengers....

Something was stirring among the pigs.

ONE under-sized beastie was pawing the dirt, a red eye set on the fattest animal in sight. Then Shortie charged Fatso. But abruptly a large raw-boned critter was in Shortie's path, barring him from Fatso.

Faced by Big Boy, Shortie trembled with rage and went into a terrible temper tantrum, rolling on the ground, pawing it in frenzy, squealing in maddened rage. Then Shortie was on his feet, desperate determination showing in every line of his body. With heedless, desperate, foolhardy courage he charged Big Boy.

Big Boy took the headlong charge in his side with only a trifling grunt.

Shortie bounced ten feet in the light gravity, and grimly wallowed to his feet. He leveled an eye at Big Boy, and his legs were pumping in frenzied fury again.

Big Boy shifted his kilos of weight casually and met Shortie head on.

The tremendous *ker-rack* reverberated from the bluff behind Ekstrohm.

Shortie lay on the ground.

No, Ekstrohm thought, he isn't dead. His sides were pumping in and out. But he was knocked cold.

Ekstrohm had to sympathize with him. He had never seen a more valiant try against insurmountable odds.

Big Boy was ambling over towards Fatso, apparently to claim his prize. Fatso apparently was the sow.

But Big Boy stalked on past Fatso. She squealed after him tentatively, but he turned and blasted her back with a bellowing snort.

Ekstrohm watched the scene repeated with other actors several times before he was sure.

The older males, the Big Boys, *never* collected the favors of the harem for themselves.

Instinctively, the pigs were practicing *birth control*. The older males abstained, and forced the younger males to do the same.

On a world like this, Ekstrohm's first thought was of death.

He thought, these pigs must be like lemmings, deliberately trying to destroy their own race, to commit geno-suicide.

But that didn't answer any of the other questions, about the *pseudo*-death, the alien whales ...

And then Ekstrohm thought not of death but of *life*.

IV

THE traction-scooter was where he had left it, hanging upside down on the underside of the concave slope. It had stopped automatically when his weight had left the seat. He reached up, toggled the OVERRIDE switch and put it manually into reverse.

Once straightened out, he was on his way back to the base.

I feel good, he thought. I feel like I could lick my weight in spacemen.

Only then did he realize why he felt so good.

What had happened had been so strange for him, he couldn't realize what it had been until now.

While he had been knocked out, he had been asleep.

Asleep.

For the first time in years.

Sleep. He felt wonderful. He felt like he could lick all of his problems....

Ekstrohm roared back into the base. The motor was silent on the traction-scooter, of course, but the air he kicked up made its own racket.

Ryan and Nogol came out to greet him sullenly.

"Listen," he told them, "I've got the answer to all of this."

"So have we," Ryan said ugly. "The first answer was the right one. We've been scaring pigs to death and watching them, scaring and watching. We learned nothing. You knew we wouldn't. You set us up for this. It's like you said. You fed all of these beasts your stuff in advance, something that acts when they get excited...."

It didn't make sense, but then it never had. You couldn't argue with prejudice. He was "different." He didn't act like they did. He didn't believe the same things. He was the outsider, therefore suspect. The alien on an alien world.

Ekstrohm sighed. Man would always be the final alien, the creature man would never understand, sympathize with or even tolerate.

There was no point in trying to argue further, Ekstrohm realized.

"You'll never understand, Ryan. You could have seen all the things I saw if you'd bothered to look, but you were too anxious to blame me. But if I can't make you understand, I can at least beat you into acceptance."

"Huh?" Ryan ventured.

"I said," Ekstrohm repeated, "that I'm going to beat some sense into your thick skull."

Ryan grinned, rippled his massive shoulders and charged.

EKSTROHM remembered the lesson Shortie had taught him with Big Boy. He didn't meet the captain's charge head on. He sidestepped and caught Ryan behind the ear with his fist. The big man halted, puzzled. Ekstrohm sank his fist into the thick, solid belly.

Slowly, Ryan's knees gave way and he sank towards the ground.

When his chin was at the right level of convenience, Ekstrohm put his weight behind his right.

Ryan swayed dreamily backward.

But he threw himself forward and one ham of a fist connected high on Ekstrohm's cheek. He was shaken to his toes, and the several hours' old pain in the back of his head throbbed sickeningly. One more like that would do for him.

Ekstrohm stood and drove in a lot of short punches to Ryan's body, punches without much power behind them because he didn't have it. But he knew better than to try a massive attack on a massive target.

When he couldn't lift his arms any more, Ekstrohm stopped punching. He realized Ryan had fallen on his face a few seconds before.

Then he remembered, and whirled. He had left his back exposed to Nogol.

Nogol smiled. "I'm not drawing Hazard Pay."

After a while, Ekstrohm stopped panting and faced Nogol and the captain who was now sitting, rubbing his jaw. "Okay," he said, "now you'll listen or I'll beat your skulls in. I know what's behind all of this on this planet."

"Yeah? What do you think it is, Stormy?" Ryan asked.

"First of all, I think there's a basic difference between this world and any other the ExPe has investigated."

"Now what could that be?" Nogol wanted to know with a tiny smile.

"These worlds are *close*. The gravity is low. You wouldn't need much more than a jet plane to get from one of these planetoids to another. Some animals have developed with the power to travel from one of these planetoids to another--like a squid jetting out water. They harnessed some natural power system."

"What does that prove?" Ryan wanted to know.

"It proves that this world and others in this belt are *prepared* for interplanetary travel. It's probably a part of their basic evolutionary structure, unlike that of heavy, independent planets. This false 'dying' is part of their preparation for interplanetary visitors."

"Why would these aliens want others to think that they were dead?" Ryan asked.

"Correction, captain. They want visitors to believe that they *can* die."

RYAN blinked. "Meaning that they *can't* die?"

"That's right. I think everything on this planet has immortality," Ekstrohm said. "I'm not exactly sure how. Maybe it has to do with the low radiation. Every individual cell has a 'memory' of the whole creature. But as we age that 'memory' becomes faulty, our cells 'forget' how to reproduce themselves exactly. Here, that cell 'memory' never fades. Bodies renew themselves indefinitely."

"But why hide it?" Nogol asked.

"This planetoid can just support so many creatures. They practice birth control among themselves," the surveyor said. "The natives naturally want to discourage colonization."

Ryan whistled. "Once we report this, every rich and powerful man in the Federation will want to come here to live. There's not enough space to go around. There will be wars over this little hunk of rock."

Nogol's hard, dark eyes were staring into space. "There's only one sensible thing to do. We'll keep the world to ourselves."

"I don't like that kind of talk," Ryan growled.

"Ryan, this little ball of dirt isn't going to do the Federation as a whole any good. But it can be of value to us. We can make ourselves comfortable here. Later on, we can bring in some women. Any women we want. Who wouldn't want to come here?"

Ryan began to argue, but Ekstrohm could see he was hooked. The man who risked his life, the man who sought something new and different, the explorer, was basically an unstable type removed from the mainstream of civilization. Nothing was liable to change that.

By nightfall, Ryan and Ekstrohm had agreed.

"We'll have to keep a constant watch," Ryan was saying. "We'll have to watch out for ExPe scouts looking for us. Or, after a few generations, another ship may come to complete the mapping."

Nogol smiled. "We'll have to keep an eye on each other too, you know. One of us may get to wanting more room for more women. Or to have children, a normal biological urge. Death by violence isn't ruled out here."

"I don't like that kind of talk," Ryan blustered.

Nogol smiled.

Ekstrohm thought of the others, of the sleepless, watchful nights ahead of them. That was probably his trouble, all of his life. He didn't trust people; he had to stay awake and keep an eye on everybody. Well, he would be one ahead here.

Of course, it was wrong not to trust anybody, but Ekstrohm knew habit patterns were hard to break.

Sleep is a habit.

RYAN and Nogol were jarred awake in the night by the spaceship blasting off without them. They ran out and shook their tiny fists in fury at the rising flame.

Operating a spaceship alone was no cinch but it could be done. Ekstrohm would get back to the nearest Federation base and report the planetoid without death. He didn't have absolute confidence in any government, no. But he suspected the Federation could do more with the world than two men like Ryan and Nogol.

Ekstrohm took his fingers off the punchboard and lay back on his couch.

He yawned.

Ryan and Nogol were slow, but in time they might have learned to do without sleep, and to guard their treasure night and day.

Fortunately, Ekstrohm knew from long experience what the two others didn't.

An eternity without sleep isn't worth the price.

--END

Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from *If: Worlds of Science Fiction* July 1961. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.