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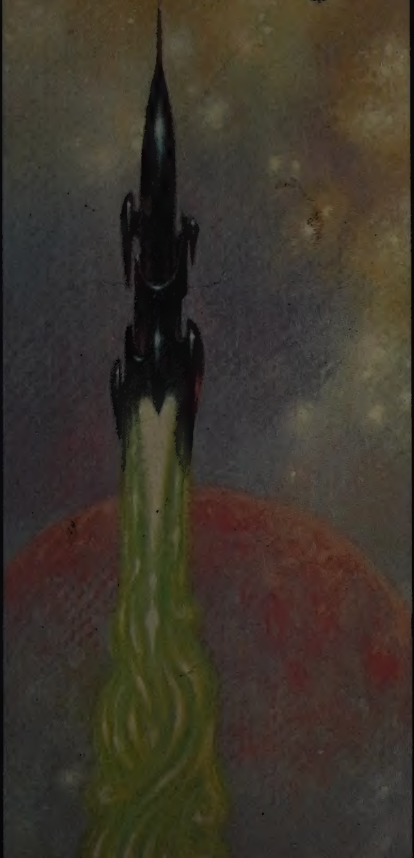

Reflections from

THE LIZARD OF WOZ:

Ynky had every justification for taking a cynical view of life. His journey to the Solar System had lasted more than ten years, and his hibernation clock had accidentally woken him up before planetfall—thus giving him ample opportunity for reflection on lizard's inlizardity to lizard. It was downright vindictive of the Senior Administrator to pack him off to this hole—and all because his sex band had turned purple at the wrong moment. . . .

The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

news from elsewhere

edmund cooper

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THE MENHIR

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The desert itself was a curiously dead land. Nothing could live here for very long—not even the most hardy animals—because of desert sickness. So once the ceremony was over, the tribes packed up their tattered tents and departed hurriedly to live in relative peace of mind for another four seasons. But even so, the days began to pass and the peace of mind grew less until everyone's thoughts turned hypnotically once more to the next Searching Out, the next count of the Perfect Ones and the dismissal of the Changelings.

As she walked with her tribe, the People of the Spur, on the last day's march toward the rendezvous, Runa felt the weight of the fear inside her far more than the weight of the small child slung over her shoulder. Runa was seventeen years old and her baby son, Thali, a mere three seasons. This was his first Searching Out. It was also likely to be his last.

When Runa was fifteen, her village had been attacked one night by a group of escaped Changelings—the wild, grotesque creatures who lived mainly in the hills and were shunned by all ordinary people. They had killed many of the Spur menfolk and stolen many of their women. Runa was among those taken. Eventually, however, she had somehow managed to break out of the cage in which they

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kept their prisoners—though not until they had already got her with child—and make her way back to the village.

Being wise for her years, she took the simple precaution of lying immediately with two or three of the Spur men, so that when Thali was born none could claim with certainty that he was a child of the Changelings. Fortunately, apart from a long, thin weal across his back, there was nothing wrong with the baby at all, and so he was not dismissed at birth.

Only Runa saw that as the baby grew, so the weal grew into a raised, horny ridge from which sprouted thick red hairs. She took care to keep him well covered, pleading a weakness for chills and fevers. But presently the ridge grew big enough to be felt through the coarse cloth in which he was wrapped. In desperation, Runa took to scraping it with a sharp stone in the still of the night. Pieces of it flaked off, but then new segments grew to take their place. The task was impossible, and besides there was the added difficulty of keeping the child's mouth stuffed with rags to deaden his crying.

It was, of course, a futile gesture, for at the Searching Out, Thali would be presented naked for inspection—like every other man, woman, and child of the lawful tribes—at the foot of the Sightless One. Then the priests would discover his imperfection. Then he would be dismissed. And his tiny body would be tossed upon the monstrous cairn that yearly grew into a bleached and terrifying mountain.

Runa was a fatalist, but no simple fatalist. She knew that in the end Thali must die, and knew too that she must do all she could to save him. For that also was ordained.

Now the tribe was less than a day's march from the rendezvous, less than a day's march from death. Tonight they would make camp with the other tribes in the greenly glowing desert only a few bowshots from the foot of the Sightless One. And tomorrow, before dawn, the priests would lead their people to the Searching Out. And when the Sightless One's shadow touched the hill of bones, the slaughter would begin.

Runa was tired and depressed and almost oblivious of her surroundings. Mechanically, she continued to place one foot before the other, vaguely aware of the background chatter and the whispered anxieties of the

other women as they followed the groups of menfolk. Now and again she managed to make some automatic response to the odd remark that was addressed to her, but for the most part she walked in a shroud of loneliness, knowing only that the red sun was bending low toward Thali's last sunset.

Later, when the camp had been set up, when the communal meal had been eaten and the fires had burned to dull embers, she lay with Thali in the lee of a massive boulder and gazed sleeplessly at the clear night sky.

The constellations were pricked out in immobile brilliance. But Runa did not know much about stars. She supposed that they were nothing more than a sprinkling of frozen fire-dust—no doubt as unhealthy to be near as the fire-dust that was carried by the winds of earth. Sometimes it drifted against the walls of huts or tents, until there was a tiny, glowing pile that had to be swept away before everyone got dust sickness.

Runa gazed at the stars and then at the sprawling cluster of tribal tents in the immense dead sea of the desert. Suddenly she decided to run away, though to do so would be to meet death just as surely as Thali would meet the dawn blade at the foot of the Sightless One. For the desert hated life and all that was living, and none could hope to escape its evil alone.

For a moment or two Runa considered the possibility of asking one of the Spur people to go with her—a boy barely her own age who had lain with her several times. But then she pushed the thought out of her mind; for if he refused, he would doubtless stop her escape also—or else give the alarm when she had gone.

Having made her decision, Runa stood up, holding the now sleeping child tightly to her body. Then she crept quietly and almost without breathing from the camp. Evidently no one had seen her departure; and when she had covered perhaps the distance of a long bowshot, she came to a halt and let out a long sigh of relief.

Thali was still asleep. Gently she eased his small, half-starved body into the shoulder sling that all the women used for carrying their babies. The problem now was where to go. But there was nowhere to go, for the desert was all around her, patchily glowing with the dull green of death.

It might have been possible to retrace the route taken by the tribe. But that was more than three day's march, and she had neither food nor water. So it did not really matter which direction she took.

In the end, noticing a bright yellow star that hung low on the horizon, she decided to follow it. It looked a much warmer and friendlier star than the others. And in any case, it was too far away to be poisonous.

Runa hitched Thali into a comfortable position and started to walk.

The desert was a place of ghosts, but the ghosts were older even than the tribes. They were as old, Runa knew, as creation itself. They were part of creation, and they whispered to each other in words that no one living could understand. As she walked, Runa heard their whisperings and was surprised that she was not more terrified. Perhaps, she told herself bitterly, it was because she had learned that there was more to fear from men than from ghosts.

The desert was also a place of glowing sands, of strangely dancing lights, of clouds of fire-dust, of rocks that were smoother than ice yet harder than iron. There were rivers of stone veined with all the colors of the rainbow and dry pools of powdery blackness that stirred and rippled like restless water. It was a wilderness indeed.

Runa found it hard to follow the yellow star. She struggled across gullies and hillocks, grazing her feet and legs on sharp unseen stones. After a time she began to regret her folly. Surely it would have been better to let them take Thali from her? But then she knew it would not. The child belonged to her. It was the only living thing that had ever belonged.

Immersed in her thoughts, she saw the narrow black chasm at her feet a moment too late. The despairing cry she gave as she fell was driven from her body by a great hammer blow between the shoulders. She could not breathe, could scarcely move. The child was jammed tight against her, and the two of them were wedged between the narrowing, dreadfully smooth surfaces of rock.

Thali had not moved or made any sound. Clearly he was dead, for the pressure of his thin little body against hers seemed enough to snap her ribs. As she tried to

breathe, Runa could hear the rattling air forced from her baby's mouth by the painful pressure of her own chest.

This was a judgment. She had tried to save Thali from the Searching Out, and so she had been condemned to kill him herself.

Fortunately the chasm was not deep. As she writhed in pain and tried desperately to ease the terrible pressure, Runa's toes touched the bottom. Working in agonizing haste against the clouds of unconsciousness that threatened to swallow her, she managed at last to ease the child's limp body round to her side. And after a time the pain in her arms and chest subsided.

Runa looked up and saw a mistily dancing pattern of stars framed by the lip of the chasm, no more than an arm's length above her head. Presently the stars became still, and she was able to think clearly once more.

She took the tattered cloth shoulder sling in which she had carried Thali and tore it into strips, knotting them together. One end of the rope she tied tightly round the baby's motionless form and the other she gripped between her teeth. Then she began to climb by the simple process of forcing her back against one side of the fissure and her feet against the other.

Twice she fell, but at the third attempt she succeeded in mustering the tremendous effort needed to haul herself out, knowing that she did not have enough strength for another try. As soon as she reached the surface, she pulled the child's body quickly after her, bumping it from side to side, desperate with the need to hold it tenderly in her arms.

She gripped the pitiful bundle to her, smothering it with kisses and meaningless soothing sounds. Then suddenly the stars fell out of the sky, the desert dissolved, and she was sucked down into a whirlpool of darkness.

When at last Runa opened her eyes once more, it was in the ghost-gray light of pre-dawn. And there before her loomed the grim stone shape of the Sightless One.

She gave a cry of anguish. Was it for this that she had faced the terrors of the desert? Was it for such awful disobedience, for such blasphemy of thought and deed, that the Sightless One had doomed her to kill her own child?

For the first time in her life, Runa was no longer afraid of the Sightless One. His monstrous, godlike implacability had become too great for fear.

Still holding Thali, she leapt to her feet and gazed defiantly at the sand-smoothed stone column. It rose massively, twice a man's height from the desert, as if the still recognizable man-shape stood upon a great finger of rock whose base might rest at the very center of the earth.

"Take what must be taken, then!" cried Runa. "And take with it the curse of every such woman, of every such child between earth and sky. Kill me if you can, for my heart is sick, and there is nothing now to love, and I wish to die."

Then she flung Thali at the foot of the Sightless One and flung herself beside him, thankful that this was at least an end.

It was indeed an end. But the end was tricked out as a beginning.

Suddenly the baby uttered a great sigh. It began to whimper. Before Runa's astounded eyes it tried to sit up.

The rags in which it had been wrapped were almost torn from its back. And across the shoulders and spine there were ugly bruises and some small cuts. Across the spine also there was a weal—of pink new skin, with fragments of horn and hair clinging to it like the remains of a monstrous scab.

Thali's whimpering gathered power until it became a lusty howl. And Runa sobbed with joy. As she glanced up at the Sightless One, still impassive and immobile, there rose inside her a song without words or understanding.

Her child was alive and—as she pulled away the last remaining traces of horn and hair with her fingers—demonstrably a Perfect One. The new skin was bleeding a little from the ordeal in the chasm and from her own impatient fingers. But no matter. Thali would pass the Searching Out.

She would think of some excuse for going alone into the desert, and she would tell of the accident, and all would be well. And presently the old men would weave a new legend. . . .

Already the tribes were approaching for the ceremony. She could see them winding toward the Sightless One

across the desert, ghost-gray columns in a ghost-gray world.

She turned to look once more at the stone monument—impassive and immobile. The timeless god of time, the fearless god of fear, the deathless god of death.

Now, with unformed images of miracles and mercy tumbling through her mind, Runa began to feel that such a godhead could not be completely immune to love. And perhaps, in the end, the message of love could be made communicable—and in the space of generations grow into a new vision that would cast out fear and transcend the need of death.

But the Sightless One knew nothing of the troubles of the living or of the need for compassion in a world made harsh by men. A world of sickness and hope, of courage and desolation—the legacy of a race that brought about its own destruction on the far side of the centuries.

For the Sightless One was no more than the strangely enduring monument to a man who had once been as other men. One who had sailed seas now shrouded in history. One who in battle had lost an eye and an arm, and finally a life. One who had gained the brief immortality of fame and the more enduring immortality of stone.

Long ago the Sightless One had stood on a high stone column in the square of a great city, where fountains played and pigeons squabbled and effigies of couchant lions kept their solemn vigil.

But now the lions were buried under the patchily glowing sands of a man-made desert; the fused and blackened remains of the city were entombed forever in silence. And all that remained on the surface of a world that refused to die entirely was a thinly enduring courage and—sometimes—the tender miracle of love.

M 81: URSA MAJOR

Motion does not tire anybody. With the earth as our vehicle we are traveling at 20 miles a second round the sun; the sun carries us at 12 miles a second through the galactic system; the galactic system bears us at 250 miles a second amid the spiral nebulae; the spiral nebulae. . . . If motion could tire, we ought to be dead tired.

—SIR ARTHUR EDDINGTON, *The Nature of the Physical World*

It was twenty hours, ship's time, after firing point. A million miles astern, the earth shone coldly like a small green moon. On the navigation deck of the *Santa Maria* a profound silence was disturbed only by the steady but discreet ping of the radio probe.

Captain Mauris leaned back on his contour berth and waited patiently for his soul to catch up with his body. His sensations at the beginning of each deep voyage were invariably the same. His body had learned to adapt to a force of 10 G and to a stellar acceleration whose graph was a mad ascending curve, but his spirit, while hardly weak, retained the old subconscious reluctance. It didn't much care for the big jump. It would hang tenaciously on to the illusion that Captain Mauris would presently wake up to find himself at home in bed.

He rarely did, because more often than not, the dream became the reality. Recently he had calculated that he had slept on earth not more than nine thousand times in his

life, whereas he had voyaged among the stars for nearly twice that number of earth nights. It was the sort of calculation that he did not care to remember—which was principally why he could not forget it.

Which was the dream—earth or space? After twenty hours of space flight in planetary drive (which nowadays the younger men humorously called first gear) Captain Mauris was not too sure of the answer. He had long ago ceased to have physical spacesickness, but he had never lost the spiritual variety. And lately it had seemed to intensify. Perhaps he was just getting old. Perhaps he really would make this the last trip. . . .

The Captain sighed and took refuge in the monumental assumption of Descartes: *I think, therefore I exist.* He began to wonder if the same could be said of his boatload of physicists. With a sardonic smile, Captain Mauris decided that he had seen terrestrial positronic robots that could lay a greater claim to individuality.

Ever since the dim distant days of the twentieth century, when the scientific caste system had been formalized, physicists had tended to become less and less human; and now they were hardly more than semisubstantial extrapolations of their own theories.

They were a race apart. Watching them board the *Santa Maria,* listening to their conversation, Captain Mauris had actually wondered whether they might be the new type of omega robots which, according to rumor, were now past the experimental stage. But he had seen two of them playing chess so badly, and a third so delightfully green with spacesickness, that he had regretfully concluded that they were human. Even sigma robots played chess excellently, and clearly there was no reason why the robot engineers should endow their offspring with uncontrollable nervous systems. . . . The physicists, then, were unfortunately human—a sad comment on the sort of civilization that allowed robots to take charge of global production, while turning the best human brains into second-rate electronic calculators.

The Captain's private soliloquy was interrupted by Phylo, the first officer, climbing down from the astrodome.

"Dead on," said Phylo. "Heading straight for Zeta of the Great Bear. When do we change gear, Captain?"

Captain Mauris gave him a sour look. "While I command the *Santa Maria,* Mr. Phylo, we will not change gear."

"Sorry, sir. When do we use the stellar drive, then?"

"I think," replied the Captain, "that I will shortly inquire if the physicists are still alive, and if so, when they will be prepared to take the bump."

Phylo laughed. "I hope you're disappointed, sir."

"Meaning what?"

"I hope they're still kicking. I should hate to have to return to earth and explain why we knocked off six top S.F.P.'s."

"The world," said Captain Mauris soberly, "might even smell somewhat sweeter for the loss of a few space-frame physicists. Man is becoming just a little too clever."

"I wonder why you volunteered for the trip, then," said Phylo slyly. "A voyage with S.F.P. men for unspecified experimental purposes hardly promises to be uneventful. Besides, there's the triple danger money—just like the old days when they first tried out the stellar drive."

"Of the few parts of the world that remain unspoiled by civilization, the Amazonian hinterland is the most attractive—for me," said Captain Mauris obliquely. "One of these days, Phylo, I shall buy myself ten thousand acres in the middle of nowhere. And then the only time I shall ever take my feet off terra firma will be when I climb into my hammock. . . . The reason I signed on as Master of the *Santa Maria* is quite simple. It represents almost five thousand acres."

"If," said Philo dryly, "we survive whatever tricks the S.F.P.'s are cooking up."

"Exactly," said Captain Mauris. "But it is my firm intention to survive."

Phylo gazed through the plastiglass anti-glare dome at a swarm of hard, unwinking suns. Finally, without looking at Mauris, he said softly, "I think there's also another reason, sir."

"Do you, now." The Captain's tone was not encouraging.

Phylo took a deep breath and ploughed on. "They told me back at base that you were the first skipper to successfully use the stellar drive."

"A slight exaggeration," said Mauris with a cold smile.

"I was merely the first captain to return and collect his pay envelope. . . . However, proceed."

"I notice," said Phylo uneasily, "that there's a parallel set of gears—I mean dual controls—on the main panel."

"Well?"

"I don't understand the calibrations on the dials under the lightometer. Nor do I understand why the second bank of meters should have all their throw-in switches locked and sealed."

"An interesting little mystery," observed the Captain noncommittally. "As you have obviously given some thought to it, what conclusion do you draw?"

"Well, sir," said Phylo hesitantly, "bearing in mind that the *Santa Maria* has a cargo of S.F.P.'s, a skipper who successfully tested the stellar drive, a set of new instruments, and the fact that we are under sealed orders, I think there's only one possible conclusion."

"I should be interested to hear it," said Captain Mauris.

"There have been rumors," continued Phylo, "of a galactic drive. My guess is that the *Santa Maria* has been fitted out for a trial run. . . . What do you think, sir?"

"I think," replied Captain Mauris, glancing at the bulkhead electrochron, "that I shall shortly break the seal and discover what the Fates have in store for us. . . . I'll tell you this, though—I don't think we shall be experimenting with a galactic drive."

"Why not, sir?"

"Because," said Captain Mauris with a thin smile, "the United Space Corporation has already developed it—as a logical extension of the stellar drive."

Phylo gazed at him in sheer amazement. "It's the first I've heard of it, sir."

"I know," said Mauris imperturbably. "It's still on the secret list. But as I traveled as a paid observer on the test jump, I can definitely assure you that the galactic drive is a fact."

Phylo's voice was filled with awe. "Would it be indiscreet to inquire what distance you logged?"

"Not now," said the Captain. "I think—in view of our position—that it will do no harm to give you the facts. We—er—had a little jaunt round Beta Centauri."

"Godalmighty!"

"A matter of seven hundred light-years for the round

rip," added Mauris complacently.

"How long did it take?" demanded Phylo incredulously.

The Captain permitted a note of pride to enter his voice. "Three hours, twenty-seven minutes, ship's time—starting and finishing in the neighborhood of Pluto's orbit."

"Were there any—any casualties?"

"All of us," said Captain Mauris soberly. "We couldn't stop laughing for two days. . . . But I forgot. There was one serious casualty: Egon, the navigator. His star maps were damn near useless, of course. He swore we'd never get home. And when we finally hit the system, the relief was too much for him. . . . He was the only one who didn't stop laughing. And from what I hear, he's still enjoying himself."

Phylo couldn't make up his mind whether or not Captain Mauris was having a private joke. After a moment or two he said in a matter-of-fact voice: "I wonder what the hell is going to happen on this trip, then?"

"Probably," said Captain Mauris, "we shall cease to exist."

Four hours later, in the privacy of his cabin, the Captain of the *Santa Maria* broke the seal on a slim envelope and read his instructions. He skipped impatiently through the conventional wording until he came to the part that mattered. He went through it carefully, word for word, three times. The final paragraph gave him a certain grim amusement.

While the normal articles of space travel obtain for this experimental voyage, he read, *there must of necessity be a fluid definition of the Safety Clause. Clearly the primary responsibility of the Master for the safety of his ship and all personnel must be to some extent subordinated by the actual program sanctioned by the Field Testing Executive of the United Space Corporation. It is not implied, however, that the prerogative of Master's Discretion will inevitably be superseded by test requirements. If the Master should satisfy himself, and the authorized scientists concerned, that the danger factor is sufficient to render the ship's safe return as improbable, therefore neutralizing the validity of the experiment, he is entitled to cancel the test program and return immediately to base. A*

Court of Inquiry will then evaluate the circumstances leading to such a decision. It is, however, earnestly hoped that scientific and ship personnel will so cooperate as to bring both the experiment and the voyage to a successful conclusion.

"Why the devil," said Captain Mauris to himself, "do they use a lot of big words to tell me that I'm merely acting wet nurse for a bunch of S.F.P.'s? *If the Master should satisfy himself and the authorized scientists concerned . . .* Very funny! The whole idea is not less than one hundred per cent suicidal, and then they talk about a sufficient danger factor!"

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," called Mauris.

It was Kobler, chief of the S.F.P. team. He was a thin, pasty-faced man of perhaps forty. His mouth looked as if it would split if he tried to smile.

Mauris motioned him into a chair and reached for two glasses and the decanter. As he poured the drinks, Kobler glanced at the ship's articles lying on the desk.

"I see you have been studying the scriptures," said the physicist.

"I was merely trying to find out," explained Captain Mauris equably, "what authority, if any, I possess—in case of an emergency."

"And have you found out?" enquired Kobler, sipping his whisky.

"Yes."

"Are you satisfied?"

"No. From the point of view of getting a clear-cut definition, it's as woolly as hell."

"I shouldn't worry, if I were you," said Kobler pleasantly. "If anything goes wrong, you'll probably have a megasecond in which to think a last beautiful thought."

"That," retorted Mauris thinly, "is why I would have liked sufficient power to overrule you people—just in case I happened to anticipate the hypothetically fatal megasecond."

"Sorry," said Kobler, "but I'm the boss-man. That's the way it has to be for this sort of thing. You'd better resign yourself to praying for my spiritual guidance."

"I don't know why you people need a space captain," said Mauris testily. "You could have programmed the

Santa Maria to take you to dissolution point under her own steam."

Kobler smiled, and his face didn't crack. "You may not believe it," he said ironically, "but we space-frame gentry have nice orderly minds. We're very conventional really. Besides, even a space captain has his uses. . . . How did you enjoy the hop round Beta Centauri?"

"So that was why they wanted me to go," said Mauris. "I wondered about it."

"You were lucky," said Kobler. "They wouldn't let me go because some idiot mathematician suggested that the ship might surface too near a sun, or something damn silly like that. . . . It seems that my brain was considered too valuable to be fried."

"Mine evidently wasn't," observed the Captain.

"You, my friend, are unique," said Kobler dryly. "You are a veteran of the stellar drive and the galactic jump. We regard you as a curio, a kind of talisman."

"I am flattered," said Captain Mauris. "And now, I think, we had better discuss ways and means."

"You know the destination?" asked Kobler.

The Captain inclined his head toward the papers on the desk. "According to the Field Testing Executive," he said calmly, "it is Messier 81."

"What do you think of it?" asked Kobler smugly.

"I think it might be—interesting," said Captain Mauris with sarcasm. "I don't think I've ever visited a spiral nebula before."

Kobler grinned. "One million six hundred thousand light-years," he said. "Quite a little hop when you come to think of it."

"How long do you think it will take."

The physicist's grin broadened. "I don't know," he said happily. "Probably just that hypothetically fatal meta-second."

Mauris restrained himself with an effort. "I'd appreciate a brief exposition of the theory," he said. "It might be useful."

Kobler helped himself to more whiskey, leaned back in his chair, and regarded the ceiling. "Essentially," he began, "it involves my private theory of matter, which also involves the stress characteristic of space and the so-called temporal regression."

"Proceed," said Mauris. "For a moment I thought you were going to get complicated."

Kobler ignored him. "You understand, of course," he continued, "that matter is a form of locked-up energy?"

"Yes."

"Good. I now have news for you. Energy is simply a form of locked-up space. There is, from the physicist's point of view, quite a reasonable amount of energy in the cosmos: there is also a devil of a lot of space. Now there is, as well, the curious phenomenon of the expansion and unwrinkling of space alongside the actual diminution of energy."

"You wouldn't be throwing overboard the first and second laws of thermodynamics, would you?" interrupted the Captain mildly.

Kobler admired his own fingernails complacently.

"Child's play," he said. "Entropy and the first and second laws are all washed up. Funny thing, when I was a student I instinctively knew there was something wrong. . . . But back to the point. I have established a definite coefficient—the practical application of which means, my friend, that we too can adopt the charming habit of energy. We can *submerge* in space. Just as energy, when it thinks nobody is looking, opens a little door into the fifth dimension and smartly sidesteps all detection by *becoming* space, so we can play the same trick. . . . Only we can go one better: we can become energy again. Which, in effect, means that we can knock the mainspring out of time. . . . Because, Captain Mauris, by becoming virtually nonexistent, we escape the temporal regression. That, in a simpler fashion, is why you were able to hop round Beta Centauri and swallow seven hundred light-years. And of the three hours twenty-seven minutes it took, you spent most of the time surfacing so that Egon could panic over his star maps."

"That is true," said Mauris. "But—if you will forgive a simple space captain for pointing out the obvious—we were functioning in a known energy system. . . . By making the new target M 81, you are postulating a jump clean out of the local energy pattern."

"Not *out* of, but *through*," corrected the physicist. "On the Beta Centauri trip you were still slightly limited by a temporal regression. This time the deceleration will be so

sharp as to make a total breakthrough. We shall make a neat hole in our own space frame and enter sub-space. We shall become a pattern of space on the frame of sub-space. Then we shall localize our return breakthrough when a pretty little instrument that I have programmed for M 81 recognizes the surface energy pattern."

"Suppose the programming fails."

Kobler laughed. "As it is the first true cosmometer, there is the possibility. But you can take it from me that it is theoretically perfect."

Captain Mauris thought nostalgically of the Amazonian hinterland. After nearly a minute's silence, he said, "It's nice to feel that somebody's confident, anyway."

"Space has a very definite direction," pursued Kobler. "Its vortices are the galactic leaks. In some respects, we can regard the sub-echoes of nebulae as stepping-stones. In the extragalactic jump, it's chiefly a question of defining the direction/deceleration crisis—or in plain language, of making the right hole at the right time."

"I expect you'll want to clear the System before the—er—experiment begins," ventured Mauris.

"Naturally," said Kobler. "By the way, would you like me to tell the crew what it's all about?"

"I was going to suggest a brief lecture," replied Mauris. "But since you have explained the background to me so lucidly, I think I might save you that little job. I'll tell them we're going to make a nice little hole in the balloon of space and pop up again sixteen hundred thousand light-years away. That should make for some interesting discussion."

"You think they'll panic?"

The Captain shook his head. "They'll just laugh politely and think I'm getting too old for the job."

"So far as I can see," said Kobler, downing the remainder of his whiskey, "everything is predictable—except the human reaction."

"It makes for a nice philosophical problem," observed Mauris.

"What does?"

"Whether or not we can be conscious of our own nonexistence."

Kobler gave him a look of respect. "That's the crux of the matter," he admitted. "You see, the *Santa Maria* and

all aboard will cease to be a system of molecular organizations."

"Conversely," said the Captain in a matter-of-fact voice, "it will become the abstract memory of an energy pattern which will be resynthesized out of space—when and if your infallible cosmometer correlates the pattern of M 81 with that of its own environment."

Kobler sat up. "I didn't know you were a physicist."

"I'm not," retorted Mauris dryly. "But I'll tell you something else, too. It's going to be damn cold!"

Pluto's orbit was a hundred million miles astern, and the *Santa Maria* had achieved a satisfactory clearance of the System. For the last ten hours she had voyaged under her stellar drive. Through the dark plastiglass portholes, men occasionally stared at the long star-torn silence of total night.

The navigation deck was a scene of activity and tension, for deceleration point was rapidly approaching. A fat copper cylinder had been battened to the deck in front of the main control panel, and the second bank of switches, with their mysterious calibrations, had now been unsealed. Kobler had lovingly supervised the installation of his cosmometer and was now displaying sufficient humanity to fuss about it much as an anxious father nursing his firstborn. Phylo, the first officer, was surreptitiously biting his nails. He was definitely unhappy. His appreciation of the science of physics being rather more limited than usual for one in his position, he had come to believe simply that the approaching experiment was merely the most elaborate method yet invented of committing suicide.

Of all the personnel of the *Santa Maria,* Captain Mauris was the most calm. He was very busy breaking several regulations. He lay on his master's contour berth and watched all the extra berths that were needed by the physicists being bolted down. Kobler had decided, after much consultation, that the entire S.F.P. team should foregather on the navigation deck for the experiment. Half a dozen extra berths had then been hastily erected, giving the impression of a surrealist hospital.

Normally Captain Mauris would have regarded the invasion with frigid resentment. But now he watched the proceedings with a benevolent air.

It was his duty as Master of the ship to present at all times an aspect of confidence. With the aid of a bottle of Scotch and a somewhat prehistoric corncob pipe, he was fulfilling this obligation admirably. He was also sweating, for he had discarded his uniform jacket in favor of two old polo-necked jerseys. . . . Doubtless the Field Testing Executive would strongly disapprove of his unconventional approach, but then the F.T.E. were millions of miles away.

Having taken what he considered to be a sufficiency of spirit, the Captain was now engaged in chewing glucose tablets. Phylo watched him with silent awe.

Eventually Kobler looked up from his cosmometer. "Nine minutes to go, Captain," he said formally.

Mauris glanced at the bulkhead electrochron and nodded. "Five hundred seconds," he said pleasantly. "And then sixteen hundred thousand light-years. . . . Science is quite wonderful."

Kobler was nettled. "What are you eating—nerve pills?"

"Glucose," said Mauris affably. "I've been dieting on whiskey and glucose."

"Why?"

"Because," explained Mauris, "I intend to keep both warm and energetic."

"There should not be any drop in temperature," said Kobler. "In any case, the thermostat will fix it."

"The nonexistent thermostat," corrected Mauris gently. "But I was not thinking of coldness that can be measured in degrees centigrade."

"There is no other," said Kobler authoritatively. "Neither is there any need to keep your strength up. There will be no fatigue."

"Nor was I thinking of physical fatigue."

Kobler shrugged. "Every man to his own superstitions," he said.

Captain Mauris smiled. "Would it be indiscreet to suggest that yours are non-Euclidean?"

Kobler turned away in disgust and spoke to one of his aides. "Get everyone in their contour berths and switch the auto-announcer on. We might as well let the brain take over."

Captain Mauris made a last attempt to be helpful.

"It is well known," he said placidly, "that smooth motion never made anybody tired. But I am not so sure about smooth stillness. It may be very fatiguing. . . . Perhaps it may even be possible for a nonexistent man to be too tired to maintain his nonexistent bodily heat. . . . Would you care for some glucose?"

Kobler did not turn around, but his shoulders shook convulsively. Captain Mauris interpreted the movement as one of silent laughter.

"One minute to deceleration point," boomed the auto-announcer.

Men with strained faces lay strapped on their contour berths awaiting the indefinable shock of total stillness. They stared with unseeing eyes at their neighbors, at the bulkhead, at the fat, ominous copper cylinder. Phylo's lips were quivering; Captain Mauris, in spite of his lighthearted precautions, felt a strange icy finger probing his heart; even Kobler's massive confidence wavered as the critical moment drew near.

"Forty-five seconds," said that damnably calm automatic voice. "Thirty seconds . . . fifteen seconds . . . ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one—zero!"

And then there was nothing—no lurch, no pressure, no sudden stress. Only a great vacancy, a sensation of utter darkness, a sharp instantaneous dream of unbeing, and then only the bare memory of the dream.

In the dimensions of physical space, the *Santa Maria* and all aboard her had ceased to exist. Where, before, a tiny metallic capsule—a caravel of explorers—had surged out from the dustlike brood of planets circling one of the innumerable suns, there was now nothing. The track of a strange silver bullet, coursing at a fantastic speed that was yet a mere snail's pace through the long deserts of the home galaxy, had stopped suddenly. There was no wreckage, there were no survivors. For what had existed in the apparent reality of space-time was now as if it had never been. . . .

Captain Mauris was alone. He was alone because there

was nothing else. He was alone with the illusion of his own existence. The stillness had settled like a slow inward frost.

His premonition was justified. In a vacancy of nonsensation, there was yet the overwhelming weight of a curious fatigue—as if, at the moment of deceleration, the material cosmos had suddenly become too tired to hold together. As if Mauris himself must support the tiredness of a phantom universe.

"So this is what it's like to be dead," he mumbled in a sleepy voice. He was surprised. He was pulled up with a sickening jolt. He had heard his own voice, reverberating as in an empty room. . . . The voice that followed was less of a shock than this disturbing mockery of survival.

"Captain Mauris! Captain Mauris! Soon you will be too tired to be dead, too cold to be an illusion. For you are condemned to be reborn."

It was a woman's voice, low, musical, drifting without urgency through the deep canyons of unbeing.

Mauris listened, appalled. It was a voice he recognized—the voice of a woman he might have married, a familiar voice, belonging to one he had never known.

"Who are you?" he called desperately, hearing the words echo on a wall of blackness.

There was laughter tumbling through the emptiness of stars.

"Mary Smith," said the voice, "Betty Jones, and Pearl White. Marie-Antoinette, Cleopatra, Helen of Troy."

"I am mad!" cried Captain Mauris. "The stars are dark, and still there is something left to dream."

"You are unborn," said the voice gently. "Have patience."

Captain Mauris tried to move and could not, for there was nothing to move, no location to be changed.

"Who am I?" he shouted wildly.

"Captain Mauris."

"There is no Captain Mauris," he yelled savagely. "He is unborn, therefore he has never lived!"

"You are learning," came the answer, softly. "You are learning that it is necessary to wait."

"Who am I?" he demanded urgently.

The laughter came like an invisible tide, sweeping him on its crest.

"Punchinello," said the voice gaily, "Prometheus, Simple Simon, Alexander the Great."

"Who am I?" he called insistently.

"You are no one. . . . Who knows? Perhaps you will become the first man. Perhaps you are waiting to be Adam."

"Then you are—"

Again the dark surge of laughter.

"I am the echo of a rib that has yet to sing."

"The rib is nowhere," said Mauris, drowsy with the effort of words. "It belongs to me, and I am unborn. . . . Nowhere."

"Limbo," whispered the voice.

"Nowhere," mumbled Mauris.

"Limbo," insisted the voice.

"No . . . where," repeated Mauris weakly, fighting the cold fatigue of stillness, the weight of unbeing.

He could feel the laughter gathering, and knew that it would drown him. Desperation fought against the blind weariness sucking him into the heaving tide of sound. He tried to remember what it was like to pray.

"Oh, God," he whispered, "if I cannot die, let me become alive. Let there be light!"

Once more the laughter struck. And the whirlpool opened.

There were no stars yet, but the light came like a pallid finger, probing the interior of the stricken ship. Captain Mauris looked about him at dim shapes, and the sensation of wonder grew while fear plucked its familiar music from his taut nerves.

There was something wrong—desperately wrong!

Suddenly he understood. Everything had been reversed.

The copper cylinder, which had been bolted to the deck on the port side of the main control panel, now lay on the starboard side, its smooth fiery surface crumpled like paper. Below it on the deck lay beads of still liquid copper rain.

The starboard electrochron, with its numerals reversed, now lay on the port side, above the gaping hole where the lightometer had been.

Captain Mauris turned his head to look at Kobler, but Phylo's berth now lay there in place of the physicist's. The

Captain knew without moving that his first officer was dead. Phylo stared at the deckhead, his features locked in a permanently vacant smile.

Glancing around at the S.F.P. chief in Phylo's old place, Captain Mauris saw that Kobler's body was entirely relaxed. His eyes were closed, and in death he had the appearance of one who is concentrating very hard. Judging from his expression, thought Mauris, he had been trying *in extremis* to discover his error.

The navigation deck of the *Santa Maria* was a mausoleum—through the looking glass. Everything—even, as Mauris discovered, the parting in his own hair—had been reversed. He knew, without feeling the necessity to confirm it by exploration, that he was the last man alive. The *Santa Maria,* with the sole exception of its Captain, was manned entirely by the dead.

"Poor devils," said Captain Mauris aloud. "Poor devils, they couldn't take the stillness. It made them too tired—dead tired!" The sound of his own voice, normal now, gave him greater grasp on reality.

With ponderous, heavy movements, like a drunken man, he undid the straps of his contour berth and struggled wearily to his feet. He went across to Kobler, feeling for his pulse with a forlorn hope.

"Dead tired," repeated Mauris slowly. He gazed ruefully at Kobler's pale face, set in a last frown of concentration. "*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*"

Mauris felt neither regret nor satisfaction. There was no joy in knowing that he had the final word, that Kobler would never laugh that one away.

Presently he pulled himself together and made a cautious tour of the ship. He was as methodical as if it was a monthly routine inspection, and checked everything from the conditioner to the recycling plant. The ship, he noted ironically, was in perfect condition—but for two small details: the planetary and stellar drives were completely wrecked. Apart from the fact that the landing retard and auxiliary brake rockets were intact, the *Santa Maria* was at the mercy of normal gravity fields.

There were only two reasonable possibilities. She might coast merrily in the void forever, or drop eventually into a sun. The alternative was too improbable for consideration,

for the chances of falling into the gravity field of an hospitable planet were several billion billion to one.

Finally Captain Mauris was confronted with the task he had been subconsciously shirking. Steeling himself against a paralyzing reluctance, he climbed up into the astrodome and looked at the stars.

He did not need star charts to tell him that this was not the home galaxy. As he gazed at the sharp, unfamiliar patterns, an already tight band seemed to constrict around his heart. . . . Perhaps Kobler had succeeded. Perhaps the galaxy M 81 had been entered by a terrene ship for the first time. . . . Much good it would do the United Space Corporation!

With a grim smile, Mauris recalled that final paragraph of the ship's articles. *If the Master should satisfy himself, and the authorized scientists concerned, that the danger factor is sufficient* . . . It was really very funny! Probably, sixteen hundred thousand light-years away on a speck of cosmic dust, the Field Testing Executive had already set up their officious Court of Inquiry to consider possible reasons for the loss of their experimental ship.

Then suddenly he realized that if the *Santa Maria* had indeed reached M 81, the planet Earth was not only sixteen hundred thousand light-years away, it was also sixteen hundred thousand years ago.

He had a sudden image of the Field Testing Executive with apelike faces, sitting and jabbering pompously around a mud pool in some prehistoric steamy jungle. . . . And Mauris laughed. He laughed loudly, raucously. He laughed until he cried—until weariness, in a sudden triumph, toppled him senseless on the deck. And there he lay, sleeping like a child whose nightmares materialize only when he is awake.

He never knew how long he slept. He was eventually wakened by a sharp, agonizing pain in his stomach. At last, through a fog of bewilderment, he diagnosed it as hunger. He staggered along to the mess deck and operated the food delivery controls. A minute and a half later he pulled a nicely roasted chicken, complete with potatoes and green peas, from the electronic cooker. He ate ravenously and followed it up with cheese and biscuits, coffee and liquer brandy. The brandy was a special bottle that

had been optimistically saved for a celebration banquet. As he sipped it luxuriously, Captain Mauris thought of all the guests who were unable to attend. Gravely, he included Kobler, Phylo, and all the rest of the *Santa Maria*'s personnel in the toast: "Absent friends!" Then he took the old corncob pipe from his pocket and lit up. Presently Captain Mauris was feeling almost human.

He spent the rest of the "day" launching dead bodies into space. Wearing his combination pressure suit, Captain Mauris lugged them one after another through the airlock and gave them a shove. Kobler, Phylo, and the rest went sailing smoothly out into the starry darkness. To each one, Captain Mauris gave a personal farewell, as if he might have been expecting an answer.

Presently the *Santa Maria* was surrounded by a slowly dispersing shoal of flying corpses whose presence was suggested only where they blotted out the background of unwinking stars.

Finally, when all that unwelcome furniture had been jettisoned, the Captain went back to the navigation deck and made the ship accelerate for three seconds on her auxiliary rockets, thus leaving the shoal behind. Having accomplished this disagreeable task, Mauris felt much better.

But as he clambered into the astrodome for a further check on the unfamiliar star positions, it dawned on him that he had probably looked on a human face for the last time.

Nine "days" later by the ship's electrochron, Captain Mauris became convinced that he would not have to wait much longer. The star on the port bow had grown to the size of a penny. Presently it would grow to the size of a football. Presently the *Santa Maria* and her Captain would reach the end of their journey—in the purification of celestial fire.

He had already resigned himself calmly to his destiny and was, in truth, a little pleased that Fate had arranged a definite appointment with death for him. It was certainly preferable to drifting aimlessly for months, waiting until the food supply was exhausted, waiting until he went mad or plucked up enough courage to make the appointment on his own initiative.

The condemned man continued to eat hearty break-

fasts, and settled down to enjoy in his last days what h had never yet experienced throughout his life—a period o sustained leisure. A period of rest and tranquility, inte rupted by nothing more serious than the push-butto operations necessary for providing first-class meals.

Captain Mauris spent more and more time in the ship' library, projecting the microfilms of books he had neve had the time to read. Intuitively he went to the old writers ranging at a leisurely pace through fiction and nonfiction from Plato to Dickens, from Homer to H.G. Wells. He al so browsed through the Bible, and amused himself b translating its profound convictions into the sort o language that Kobler used.

By the eighteenth day Captain Mauris was confused disappointed, excited, and afraid. The now brilliantly blinding sun had changed its position from port bow to starboard quarter. Its place on the port bow had been taken by what seemed to be a green marble. Captain Mauris knew it was not another sun, and tried desperately not to allow himself to hope that it might be a habitable planet. Better to die by falling into an alien sun than survive, a castaway, on an unknown planet in some alien galaxy. . . . His reason said so, but his emotions remained unconvinced.

It was then, for no reason at all, that he suddenly remembered the voice and the dreamlike laughter he had experienced in the total darkness, the absolute stillness of the galactic jump.

And Captain Mauris had a premonition.

On the twenty-fifth day the possibility became a certainty. The *Santa Maria* was falling toward the green planet. There remained the problem of choice between two courses of action. Captain Mauris could either allow the ship to continue her free fall until she vaporized on hitting the atmosphere—if any—or exploded on ground impact, or else he could apply the auxiliary brake rockets and the landing retard, thus making a bid for survival.

The period of tranquillity was over: he was in a state of chronic indecision.

He was afraid in the very core of his being. He was afraid to make up his mind. He went uncertainly to the mess deck, seeking consolation and enlightenment in the

liqueur brandy. He did not find it.

Eventually he was drawn back to the navigation deck as by a magnet. He climbed into the astrodome and regarded the green planet. It was expanding rapidly, almost visibly. With trembling fingers, Captain Mauris adjusted the manual telescope. He gazed through it at a startlingly close panorama of oceans, continents, and islands. He stared hypnotically for a while and felt the beads of cold moisture grow on his forehead.

At last he came down and went to drink more brandy. It solved nothing, because he was still sober enough to face the choice.

Suddenly he could stand it no more. He lurched unsteadily to the navigation deck, reached the control panel, and threw in three switches almost simultaneously. Reflex radar, altimeter, and positioning gyro were immediately synchronized with the auto-pilot. Whether the reversed instruments functioned correctly or not, Mauris neither knew nor cared. He had rid himself of an intolerable weight. He had made a decision.

Immediately, he who had accepted so much responsibility in his career felt an overwhelming need to escape the responsibility of attempting to survive. He fled to the library and, forcing himself to try and forget the decision, placed a random microfilm in the book projector. It was *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius.

He looked at the words, and they had no meaning for him. He was too busy awaiting the shock of the first automatic blast of the auxiliary brake rockets.

After an eternity of hours that seemed years, he felt a sharp surge as the motors produced a field of double gravity, piling on the ship's own synthetic 1/3 G force.

Mauris fell sideways from his chair and lay on the bulkhead, groaning heavily. The rocket burst lasted five seconds, and he felt crushed by its relentless force. Abruptly, it ended. He slithered painfully to the deck.

Then the old habits reasserted themselves. The Master's place in a powerful maneuver was on the navigation deck. Captain Mauris picked himself up and made his way forward.

The second automatic power maneuver hit him before he could reach a contour berth. A field of 5 G slammed him against the bulkhead of the navigation deck. He had

fallen sideways about ten feet. He lay there spreadeagled, unconscious.

The auto-pilot had positioned the ship accurately. The ship's attitude, controlled by the gyromanipulator, had brought the green planet dead astern, and with rockets blazing, the *Santa Maria* dropped backward to that rapidly expanding surface. On the screens of the external visulators, the silvery shapes of mountains and hills, of rivers and forests leaped into a growing reality. The fleecy shapes of clouds passed like fantastic birds.

But Captain Mauris lay inert against the bulkhead, the accelerating G force crushing his unconscious body to the hard metal.

He awoke with every muscle aching from the tremendous stress of ordinary physical deceleration, but he awoke with a sensation of profound peace.

He picked himself up and climbed into the astrodome. The stars were no longer sharp, unwinking points against a backcloth of jet. They twinkled, dancing to the whim of atmosphere.

Looking down, Captain Mauris felt his heart thump violently. The *Santa Maria* had made a perfect automatic landing on what appeared, in the semidarkness, to be smooth grassland. A few yards away, he thought he saw dimly the ripple of running water.

The United Space Corporation had laid down a cautious and definitive procedure for the exploration of strange planets. But, as Mauris told himself lightly, the United Space Corporation would not begin to exist even in its own galaxy for another sixteen hundred thousand years.

Casting discretion aside, Captain Mauris made his way aft toward the airlock. He seized a combination pressure suit and climbed into it impatiently. Then he entered the pressure chamber. He closed the door behind him and threw the switch. The needle remained steady, indicating that the external pressure—the planetary atmosphere —was at par.

Captain Mauris was surprised. He began to feel that it was part of some obliging dream. He pressed a luminous button on the bulkhead, and a heavy door of the entry-port swung open. The Captain took a nylon ladder from

its locker and secured one end to the stanchions of the entry-port. He tossed out the bundle of ladder and watched it drop through the misty atmosphere. Then slowly he climbed down.

Captain Mauris stood still and gazed at the terrain through a deceptive half-light. What he could see of it was so reassuringly normal as to be quite improbable. It might have been country in the temperate zones of Earth.

He tried to think of the fantastic chances against landing on such a planet after the *Santa Maria* had crippled both her stellar and planetary drives in the extragalactic jump. Logically there was no chance. What had happened was merely impossible.

"Luck," thought Captain Mauris. "Or is it something else?"

With sudden inexplicable determination, he tried to tempt Fate for the last time. He released the safety valve on his pressure suit. Nothing happened. With an audible laugh of triumph and amazement, he began to take off the headpiece. Presently he stepped out of the pressure suit, his oxygen cylinder unneeded.

Captain Mauris stood on an unknown planet and took in the unmistakable scents of summer. He felt drunk—drunk on the sheer fantasy of reality. As he gazed about him he saw, over a patch of woodland, gray streaks of light pushing back the darkness, dulling the stars. And fifty yards from the spaceship, he discerned the edge of a stream whose quiet murmur seemed suddenly to communicate with his awakened sense of hearing.

Giving a wild cry of pleasure, Mauris forgot all about space-frame physicists and the extragalactic jump. He ran swiftly to the banks of the stream, knelt down, and splashed the warm, living water over his face. Then, impatiently, he tore off his stale clothes and waded into the dark, refreshing water.

And as he bathed, the intensity of light grew over the distant trees.

At last he came out of the stream, refreshed and exhilarated. He felt a warm breeze against his body, felt the blood coursing more rapidly through his veins.

He did not bother to dress, but walked wonderingly toward the increasing light.

The vault of darkness was being pushed slowly back,

while the stars seemed to slip behind an invisible curtain.

Captain Mauris watched the landscape come quietly to life. Then he looked up at the sky.

"And darkness," said Captain Mauris as he gazed at the fading stars, "darkness was upon the face of the deep."

He stood there, feeling the years roll back, feeling the vitality of youth drive back some secret winter. At length he turned around to look at the spaceship, to assure himself of the reality of the journey. There was nothing to be seen. The thin vein of water flowed quietly through vacant land.

Surprised at his own calmness, his lack of distress, he turned again toward the patch of trees. And from the direction that he would learn to call east, there rose the crimson edge of a new sun.

He remembered then and suddenly understood the message of a woman's voice in a dream of absolute stillness.

THE ENLIGHTENED ONES

Lukas threw a rapid glance at the bank of instruments on the navigation panel. Velocity had stabilized at thirty thousand kilometers, with a constant altitude of three hundred and fifty. Down below—and it was certainly a relief to use the concept "below" once again after several thousand hours of star flight—the red-gold continental masses of Fomalhaut Three swung slowly along their apparent rotation.

Soon the starship *Henri Poincaré* would make its first free-fall transit over the night side of the planet. For all

practical purposes, this was the end of the outward journey. Allowing his gaze to return to the procession of continents and emerald-green oceans on the surface of Fomalhaut Three, Captain Lukas felt a faint surge of anticipatory pleasure.

"Orbit maneuver concluded," he said softly over his shoulder. "O.D. shut down."

Duluth, the engineer, who was standing expectantly by the control pedestal, stooped down and threw back his master switch. He watched the red power needle slowly fall to zero. Then he stood up and yawned.

"Orbit drive shut down," he remarked drowsily. "And now I'm going to get me some sleep. . . . Do you know how long we've been awake, Skipper?"

Lukas turned from the observation screen and grinned. "What's the matter, Joe? Feeling old?"

Duluth stretched and yawned even more profoundly. "In case you haven't noticed, we've been on duty more than two days. A man gets just a little fatigued after staying awake maybe sixty hours."

Lukas watched him with red-rimmed eyes. "Don't worry," he said. "I noticed."

At that moment they heard steps on the companion ladder. A couple of seconds later, Alsdorf, the geophysicist, poked his head through the hatch. He looked fresh, almost bursting with energy, but then he hadn't needed to stay awake for the maneuvers.

"You two look like death," said Alsdorf pleasantly. "Come on down to the mess deck. Tony is fixing cocoa and sandwiches."

"The hell with sandwiches," said Duluth. "I want to sleep."

Alsdorf beamed. "Cocoa first, then a sedative. You will need it with all those action tablets you have taken."

Lukas said, "Well, we got here, Kurt. Now you can earn your living. From here on, I'm a spectator."

The intercom crackled. "What's the matter?" complained an indignant voice. "There's a gallon of hot cocoa waiting for you. Want me to recycle it?"

"Recycle yourself," growled Duluth. "O.K. We're on our way, Tony."

With Alsdorf leading, they went down to the mess deck. Tony Chirico, a dapper Italian biochemist who looked as

if he ought to have been a barber, greeted Lukas with a toothy smile.

"So you got us here, Mike. Somebody ought to make a speech about it. Have a sandwich."

"What's in 'em?" asked Duluth suspiciously, as he grabbed a pink flask of cocoa and anchored himself to a bench.

"Bombay duck," said Chirico, "same as usual."

Duluth gave a mirthless laugh. "Hydroponics garbage à la carte."

Captain Lukas sat down and sipped his cocoa. He gazed at the observation panel and saw the dark side of Fomalhaut Three turning slowly into view.

"We're a fine bunch of heroes," he remarked. "With the imaginative capacity of bedbugs. Here we knock a hole through space and find a system that nobody has ever seen before, and what do we do? We sit on our backsides, drink cocoa, and grumble about the food. For all we know, this planet we're riding might have a civilization that'd make all Earth cultures look like a cretin nightmare."

"A virgin planet," said Alsdorf with an avaricious gleam in his eye. "Trans-Solar Chemicals will set up an independent station here. . . . With one Kurt Alsdorf as director."

"A virgin planet," echoed Chirico with a sardonic grin. "I think we shall awaken her—gently."

"Can it," mumbled Duluth, slumping over the table. "You got virgins on the brain."

"You don't think we're going to find any intelligent owners down there?" asked Lukas.

Alsdorf lit a cigarette. "Face the facts, Mike. In the last two decades, seventeen new planets have been listed. The highest animal life discovered so far was the three-legged pseudo-wolf on Procyon Five. You could train it to fetch sticks, and that was all."

Lukas took a good swig of his cocoa. "Well, it's got to happen someday."

Chirico laughed. "Sure, everything has to happen someday. Give a monkey with a typewriter enough time and he'll rewrite Shakespeare with genuine improvements."

Lukas shrugged. "A few hundred years ago men thought that Earth was unique. Now they only think the human race is unique. . . . I hope I'm still around when

bright boys like you get the big surprise."

Alsdorf prodded Duluth and was rewarded with a volley of snores and grunts, "Joe is no longer with us," he remarked. "We ought to put him to bed. You, too, Mike. . . . We need you wide awake when we go down to the surface to hunt out the supermen." He gave a hearty laugh.

"Enjoy yourself," grinned Lukas. "Now it's your turn to lose some sleep. . . . How long will it take to select a touch-down point?"

The geophysicist stared absently through the observation panel. "Nine-tenths water," he murmured almost to himself. "A good continental survey should take about a hundred hours, but we can probably select a useful area in a quarter of that time."

Captain Lukas stood up and grabbed Duluth unceremoniously by the collar. "Give me a hand with the body, Tony." He turned to Alsdorf. "Don't be softhearted, Kurt. Tumble me out if anything unusual crops up." With Chirico's help, he maneuvered the still unconscious Duluth toward the doorway.

Three minutes later Duluth was installed in his bunk, and Mike Lukas headed for his own cubicle. Curiously, he had lost a great deal of his tiredness. As he settled himself luxuriously on his narrow mattress, he reached for a book and a packet of cigarettes.

Chirico watched him, amazed. "You've been awake all this time, Mike, and you want to read? You're crazy. Why don't you take a nice pill?"

"On your way, nursie. I'm just relaxing. I'll doze off in a while."

The small Italian made an economical gesture signifying a verdict of insanity and returned to the mess deck. He found Alsdorf intently studying a pocket slide rule and a scrap of paper on which were a rough pencil sketch of the hemisphere of Fomalhaut Three and a sequence of calculations.

"I'm beginning to think Mike takes his Buddhism seriously," remarked Chirico, helping himself to another sandwich.

Alsdorf looked up and raised an eyebrow. The Italian took a large bite of his sandwich, then continued. "He's been awake for fifty-six hours, and now he's busy reading

The Way to Nirvana. . . . Seems to me he's halfway there already."

The geophysicist registered a superior smile. "Overtired, Tony. . . . But I have noticed that most of these professional space pilots affect some sort of religion. A convenient safety valve for irrational fears."

Tony thought it over for a few seconds. "In the last analysis, I'm a Catholic," he said finally. "We all need something."

Alsdorf picked up his slide rule. "Not all of us, Tony. I'm with the mechanists. The universe is clockwork, all cause and effect. Frankly, I don't know how you people ever reconcile superstition with science. You and Mike must be intellectual schizoids."

Chirico smiled. "You're a computer, Kurt. Computers don't go to heaven."

The geophysicist stood up. "At the moment, I'm more interested in going to the navigation deck. And so are you, you taboo-ridden primitive. There's work to be done. The sooner it's done, the sooner we climb a little higher in Trans-Solar Chemicals."

Chirico said suddenly, "Kurt, what do you want out of life?"

"Power," said Alsdorf calmly. "And you?"

"I don't know. I'm still thinking about it. Maybe I just want a sense of direction—to do something that's worth doing."

"You want power," said Alsdorf confidently. "Everybody does. It's the life force—the mainspring of dynamic evolution.

The Italian beamed. "O.K., Mr. Mephistopheles, let's go and be dynamic about the landing site."

They went out into the alleyway and along to the navigation deck, the magnetic bars of their shoes clanking eerily through the silent ship.

The survey, conducted in Olympian remoteness three hundred and fifty kilometers over Fomalhaut Three, proceeded with almost startling efficiency. Visibility was excellent, and it was the first time in Kurt Alsdorf's experience that none of the delicate probing instruments broke down at the critical moment. Presently a stereo-

radar, vegetometer, and other probe instruments united their findings to give a clear and detailed assessment of conditions in the Tropical Zone. It was even possible to do some useful work with the manual telescope.

After fourteen hours, Chirico looked up from his contourgrams and said, "This place is better than Earth, by damn!"

Even the impassive Alsdorf could not screen his excitement. "Tony, it's the best yet. . . . Near-terrestrial temperatures, a one-to-six oxygen ratio, a four-thousand-kilometer vegetation belt—why, with these conditions we can—"

"If I were you, I'd sit on the hysteria long enough to find out whether anyone is already squatting on Fomalhaut Three."

The two men turned around to find that Lukas had quietly appeared through the companion hatch.

Alsdorf grinned sheepishly. "Hello, Mike. Still thinking in terms of supermen?"

"Maybe, maybe not."

Chirico said, "By all the laws, you should still be unconscious."

Lukas walked over to the chart bench and began to inspect the fruits of research. "My, my," he said dryly. "Just like Earth before we remodeled it with the hydrogen bombs. Now we'll have to start all over again."

Alsdorf waved a large telephoto print in front of his face. "Here's the landing area—as from an altitude of three thousand meters. What do you think of that?"

"Looks fine."

"It's got everything, Mike," said Chirico eagerly. "It's the classic survey block—a hundred square kilometers of desert, foothills, river, and seaboard. Everything from dense vegetation to bare rockface. Think of the ecology."

"*You* think of it. I'll concentrate on getting us down there. . . . When will you be ready to move, Kurt?"

The geophysicist put the telephoto print down on the bench and watched Lukas speculatively. "What's the matter, Mike? Is this trip going sour on you? Maybe you need a tonic."

"Don't we all?" Lukas gazed moodily through the observation panel. "Me, you, and *Homo sapiens*. We need

a new perspective, a revitalized set of values. Space travel arrived when we were getting mentally and emotionally flabby. We reacted to it as to a shot in the arm. But so far, all we've done is get nowhere—a lot quicker. . . . We've found seventeen new planets, and we haven't learned a thing. We just grab what we want and push on to the next Garden of Eden. We're a bunch of traveling snakes in the grass."

Alsdorf shrugged. "You mix a nice line in metaphors, but they don't mean anything."

"There's one consolation," said Chirico with a grin. "None of us space snakes has come across any Adam and Eve setup yet."

"No," said Lukas somberly. "But we will—and then, God help 'em."

Alsdorf climbed up into the astrodome and began to readjust the manual telescope. "I'll have the rest of the data ready in about six hours, Mike—if you can drop the Garden of Eden motif long enough to plan the touch-down." His tone was heavy with sarcasm.

"On with the good work," said Lukas. "I'll go and kick Duluth out of bed and get him to check the volatility tubes."

He disappeared down the companion ladder.

"Do you think Mike is off his trolley?" asked Chirico thoughtfully.

Alsdorf squinted down the telescope. "Not yet. He's just got an ingrowing conscience. Space pilots don't last very long, you know."

The Italian began to reset the stereo-radar. "What the hell," he said softly. "We're all expendable."

Nine hours later, the *Henri Poincaré* swung slowly out of orbit into the first vast circuit of an oblique descent spiral. After fifteen minutes it hit the outer fringes of the stratosphere, and the four occupants, each strapped in a contour berth on the navigation deck, prepared to endure an agonizing switchback as the ship reduced its velocity by frictional impact on the thin layers of air.

Lukas, relieved of all responsibility by the automatic decisions of the electronic touch-down pilot, managed to achieve some degree of indifference to the tremendous pressures set up by deceleration. Long experience had

enabled him to develop a kind of mental block against the worst discomforts of a bouncy touch-down maneuver. His head lay on the pillow facing an observation panel, and during the odd moments when the G forces eased sufficiently to let him use his eyes, he could see an expanding arc of Fomalhaut Three swinging crazily against the jet backcloth of space.

In spite of having a respectable number of voyages behind him, Duluth always took the touch-down drop badly. He would strain instinctively and uselessly against the relentless forces that crushed him down. As the *Henri Poincaré* ploughed jerkily into the thicker layers of air, Duluth felt the deadly ache of resistance tearing at his muscles, and impotently muttered a broken stream of obscenities.

Alsdorf and Chirico, both comparative novices of the touch-down ordeal, had taken the sensible precaution of putting themselves completely to sleep. But even though they were unconscious, their bodies sagged and contorted as if they were twitched by invisible strings.

Presently the ship hit the atmosphere proper. This time the pressure was unendurable. Lukas and Duluth blacked out simultaneously. When they next opened their eyes, the pain was already fading from their bodies. They became conscious of a luxurious feeling of peace. The *Henri Poincaré* had made a perfect touch-down.

Duluth shook his head in momentary bewilderment. "I almost swallowed my bloody tongue," he remarked hoarsely. He looked around and saw that Lukas was already unbuckling his straps. Alsdorf and Chirico had stopped twitching, but they were still unconscious. "Look at the sleeping beauties," added Duluth, feeling better. "How long does that lullaby stuff last?"

Lukas stood up and stretched. He winced suddenly as his back muscles, still unaccustomed to the release of tension, gave a sharp twinge.

"They should be with us inside half an hour. . . . Come on, Joe, let's take a look around the next stamping ground of the Trans-Solar Chemicals."

He scrambled up into the observation dome and took his first close look at the new planet.

"What's it like?" called Duluth as he struggled impa-

tiently with the network of safety belts. "Anything startling?"

Lukas was amazed. "Holy smoke! Apart from the colors, this could be South America or the African coast!" His voice shook with excitement.

"Jesus," said Duluth. "Maybe we took the wrong turning and blasted ourselves back into the System." He hurried up the short ladder and stood by Lukas's side.

From their observation point in the nose of the ship, more than seventy meters above ground level, they commanded a panoramic view of the landing area.

The *Henri Poincaré* had come to rest on a broad sand belt. About five kilometers to the planetary east, the calm emerald-green ocean lay flat as a mirror under a misty, somewhat yellowish sky. On the opposite side of the ship, a kilometer or so to the west, a bright blue-green forest line rose abruptly from the red sand. Nothing moved anywhere, but far away on the sand belt was a colony of dark spots that proved, on inspection by the telescope, to be a flock of resting birds—something like terrestrial gulls.

High above, the noon sun contrived to filter its oddly relaxing light through the even layer of cloud. The star, Fomalhaut, was a thousand million miles away, but its intense radiation bathed the third planet with sunlight almost equal to the tropical brilliance found on Earth.

"Well, what do you know," exclaimed Duluth after several seconds of fascinated silence. "Isn't that something! What's the atmosphere like, anybody find out?"

"Tony says we can use it, but better be careful than sorry. . . . How about letting the ladder down while Kurt and Tony are finishing their beauty sleep?"

"I'm on my way," said Duluth. "Think I'll jump into a pressure suit and stroll around."

"You'll be all right with a respiration mask," Lukas assured him. "The pressure is only slightly under one atmos."

Duluth climbed down from the observation dome, kissed his fingers archly to the unconscious scientists, and disappeared down the companion ladder. Presently Lukas heard him manipulating the airlock.

Lukas stayed in the dome for a while, gazing around

him. The vague uneasiness he had felt about Fomalhaut Three intensified. He was not normally a superstitious man, or given to premonitions, and his uneasiness was hard to analyze.

As a veteran of three other planetary investigations, he was mentally prepared for any reasonable physical hazards that might be expected. But although Lukas sensed some kind of threat hidden in the almost conventional landscape of Fomalhaut Three, he felt oddly confident that it wasn't physical.

As his eyes strayed idly over the forest line, he thought he detected some kind of movement; but by the time he got the telescope focused, there was nothing to be seen. Probably, he told himself, it was some trick of the peculiar yellow light.

Somnolent groans from down below indicated that Alsdorf and Chirico were returning to consciousness. He went down the ladder to help them with their straps.

"Devil take it," grumbled the small Italian, blinking painfully, "I have the mother and father of all hangovers."

"Swallow a pill. You'll feel better."

With a hand on his forehead, Alsdorf gently worked his head up and down. He seemed surprised when it didn't fall off. "What's the situation?" he asked.

Lukas jerked a thumb toward the observation dome. "Too good to be true. See for yourself."

"Any signs of life?"

"Birds, I think. . . . But too far away for detail to show up."

"Well, well. That's an excellent start. Maybe we'll find something better than a three-legged pseudo-wolf, eh, Mike?"

"Maybe."

The two scientists went up into the observation dome. Lukas watched them, then said, "Joe's already stretching his legs. Can you see him?"

Chirico laughed. "For a moment I thought he was the welcome committee."

Lukas said, "I could use a drink before we go outside. If you need me, I'll be on the mess deck." He went down the companion ladder.

Ten minutes later, Alsdorf and Chirico joined him. They sat around the table, sipping hot coffee, enjoying the

feel of an almost normal gravity pull, and discussing plans for tackling the survey block. Alsdorf, as the senior representative of Trans-Solar Chemicals, was busy making out duty lists.

Suddenly there was a commotion on the lower deck. Then the sound of heavy metallic boots on the main ladder. The three men jumped up and went to the hatch. They met Duluth on his way up. He was wearing a pressure suit. As soon as he saw them, he pressed the emergency release and whipped off his headpiece.

"Apes," he panted. "Bloody big ones!"

"Where?" snapped Alsdorf.

"Half a kilometer away. There's a troop of them—fifteen, maybe twenty—heading toward us from the forest."

Chirico was almost bouncing with excitement. "This gets better and better. It looks like we really found something this time."

The three of them hurried into pressure suits, while Duluth picked up a couple of machine pistols to deal with any misunderstandings that might arise. Then they went down to the airlock. By the time they had got through the entry-port and climbed down the landing ladder, the approaching troop was less than a hundred meters away.

Duluth and Alsdorf held the machine pistols firmly at their hips. "Ain't this joyful?" remarked Duluth over his personal radio. "Hey, they got bundles with 'em. What's the betting they're going to pelt us with kingsize coconuts?"

"Anthropoids!" exclaimed Chirico incredulously. "By all that's holy, we've found anthropoids on the first touchdown. . . . No, by heaven, they're not anthropoids—they're hominids! Look at the size of those heads!"

Lukas was staring through his visor intently. His eyes had not yet adjusted to the strange light of Fomalhaut Three, but as the troop came closer, moving at a queer half-trot, he saw that their limbs were pale and hairless while their faces were half-hidden under dark, shaggy manes.

"The major difference between us and them," he said quietly, "is a haircut."

"Plus another small detail," said Alsdorf with some complacency. "We happen to be civilized."

Lukas gave a dry laugh. "That's our story. We might as well stick to it."

Fifteen paces away, the troop fanned out into a semicircle and came to a halt. At a signal from one in the center, they placed their burdens down on the sand and waited expectantly. Men and hominids gazed at each other. Both groups seemed reluctant to make the first move.

Lukas and his companions saw that the inhabitants of Fomalhaut Three were almost uniformly tall—each of them about two inches higher than Alsdorf, who was the tallest of the terrenes. They were massive-chested creatures with hunched shoulders and long, sinewy arms. Their toes splayed uneasily, as if they were more accustomed to gripping branches than supporting those tough, wiry bodies in even balance. Their faces—what could be seen of them under the matting of coarse hair—were almost Neanderthal, with broad, flared nostrils, thick lips, receding forehead, and an occasional glimpse of dark eyes under bushy brows.

Presently one of them, whose hair was lighter and thinner than the rest, stepped out from the group and raised his right arm forward, level with the shoulder, as if in greeting. He began to work his lips.

Encased in their pressure suits, the terrenes could hear no sound. But Lukas suddenly decided that it was worth risking a few alien bugs to hear what Neanderthal Man, Fomalhaut Three version, had to say. He took off his headpiece.

"*Czanyas,*" said the hominid, touching his own chest. Then, pointing at the terrenes, he added: "*Olye ma nye kran czanyas.*"

Lukas took a couple of steps forward and repeated the word *czanyas* experimentally with his finger pointing at the hominid.

The whole troop made a rumbling noise in their throats, and lips curved in broad grins. Encouraged, Lukas thumped his own chest: "*Olye ma nye kran czanyas?*" He displayed his bewilderment with exaggerated gestures.

The old hominid pointed to the sky: "*Olye!*" Then he pointed to the ship: "*Ma nye kran!*" Then he pointed to Lukas, Alsdorf, Duluth, and Chirico in turn: "*Czanyas. . . . Olye ma nye kran czanyas.*"

Duluth had taken his headpiece off. "What does the old bird say, Mike?"

"In case we didn't notice it," said Lukas with a grin, "he's pointing out the difference between us and them—I think. They are men, and we are men of the ship of the sky, or something like that."

The old hominid turned and made a small hand signal to his own kind. One at a time, they came forward and laid their presents at the feet of the terrenes. Then they returned to the semicircle and squatted. Presently each of the terrenes had at his feet a pile of assorted fruits of varying shapes, sizes, and colors. Chirico, unable to restrain his interest, took off his headpiece and sat down to examine his pile. He began to sort out the local equivalents of melon, grapes, oranges, nuts, and even maize.

Only Alsdorf remained unrelaxed, still wearing his headpiece, still covering the hominids with his machine pistol.

Lukas examined his own pile of fruit, then with much gesture and patient repetition, managed to make the hominids understand that he and his companions were grateful. Finally he turned to Duluth. "Better make this mutual. What can we give 'em, Joe?"

Duluth grinned. "How about a machine pistol, or a gas bomb?"

But Lukas wasn't in the mood for humor. "They'll be getting the benefits of civilization soon enough. . . . Better break out a few plastic bowls. Jump to it!"

"Aye-aye, Skipper. Keep your shirt on." Duluth went back into the ship, and emerged a few minutes later with an armful of utensils, which he presented to the hominids, gravely wishing each one in turn a Merry Christmas.

For the next hour or so, Lukas and Chirico concentrated on establishing the meaning of various words. Even Alsdorf became sufficiently interested to take off his headpiece and join in. They discovered that *solyenas* was food; *czanyas solyenas ra* meant man eats food. They learned that *koshevo* was the word for water, *ilshevo* the word for land, and *lashevo* the word for air. From this, they finally elucidated that *olye* was not the sky but the sun.

And while these language concepts were being established, the sun sank slowly down the yellowish sky until it hung just over the forest line. The hominids then indicated

that they wished to go back to the forest, but would return again "when the sun swam out of the ocean."

"*Mahrata,*" said the old, grizzled leader, raising his arm. "*Olye kalengo, czanyas kalengo. Olye rin koshevo, da czanyas va.*"

"Me too," grinned Duluth. "What's he saying, Mike?"

"He says: 'Farewell. Sun sleeps, men sleep. Sun swims from water, then men return.' "

The four terrenes watched the troop of hominids make their way back across the sand belt to the now darkening forest line. Then they went back into the ship, taking most of the fruit with them and dumping it in the laboratory for Chirico's further attention.

The brief but tremendous stress of touch-down, followed by the equally tremendous discovery that Fomalhaut Three was inhabited by manlike beings, had almost drained them of emotional and intellectual energy. They were tired and, to their surprise, ravenously hungry.

However, there was still some daylight left, and Alsdorf suggested that they rig up the cargo derrick and lower the caterpillar tractor to the ground in readiness for the first survey trip. But by the time the derrick was ready to take the tractor, it was too dark to see what they were doing. Duluth went up to the navigation deck and swung out three searchlights, focusing them on the ground immediately below the derrick. For another ten or fifteen minutes the men worked in silence, lugging the tractor out of the bowels of the ship and hooking it up to the derrick with hiduminium hawsers. At last they lowered away, and had the satisfaction of knowing that the first survey party could push off as soon as the sun rose.

"By the Lord Harry, I'm dead on my feet," panted Duluth as he stared down at the tractor in the pale, circular glare of the arc lights.

Chirico wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Bet I could eat one of our tame hominids raw."

"I have a suggestion," said Lukas. "Iced beer and chicken. Anybody with me?"

There was a minor stampede to the mess deck.

Throughout a long, luxurious meal, discussion centered mainly upon the hominids and the possibility of Fomalhaut Three containing more highly developed cultures. Of the four of them, Alsdorf was the least interested

in what he referred to as "the organic curiosities of the planet." Being one of the star geophysicists of Trans-Solar Chemicals, his preoccupation was solely with the mineral content of the planet, how best it could be exploited and the resulting products transported to the Solar System.

"Do not forget," he said dryly, "that we are here to look for rare metals, not to investigate the indigenous life forms. The hominids are interesting, but we must not let them sidetrack us. . . . On the other hand, if there are possibilities of large-scale mining, they may provide a convenient labor force. Otherwise—"

Lukas slammed his beer mug down. "Kurt, there are times when you make me sick. These poor bastards have a right to their own existence. I'm damned if I'd see them turned into a bunch of coolies so that Trans-Solar can double their dividends. Don't you have any conscience?"

Alsdorf grinned. "My duty toward my neighbor," he said slyly, "is surely my duty toward my fellow human beings. If the situation demanded it, I would not hesitate to exploit these creatures for the benefit of humanity. . . . We should, of course, civilize them in the process."

"Bluebells to both of you," drawled Duluth with an inane grin. "Quit arguin' about what ain't happenin', and for Chrissake have another beer. . . . I wonder if those long-haired boys got any idea how to make wallop? Thash the way to shivilishe 'em—teash 'em to make corn brandy and shay shir to the nishe zhentlemen from shpace."

Next morning at dawn, the hominids returned, bringing with them more presents—only this time the presents were such as to make Alsdorf's eyes practically pop out of his head.

Nobody was awake when they arrived, so they squatted patiently outside the *Henri Poincaré,* nursing their presents and chanting a kind of tuneless psalm, either to the ship or its occupants.

Lukas was the first to go down to them. He saw that their presents consisted of small whitish metal drinking bowls, crudely ornamented, and it occurred to him that these were offered in exchange for the colored plastic bowls that had been presented to the hominids the day before.

The old one who had previously done the talking again

stepped out and opened the ceremony.

"*Mahrata-nua,*" he said. "*Olye rin a koshevo, e czanyas va kala mu omeso.*" He touched the bowl he was holding to the center of his forehead, then held it out to Lukas.

Lukas had a peculiar feeling. For one odd moment, he had the conviction that the hominids were staging an elaborate joke—the sort of joke that sophisticated adults might rig for the benefit of credulous children. Then he met the innocent gaze of the old hominid, and the feeling passed.

He took the bowl, and was still busy expressing his thanks in mime and language when Alsdorf came down. The geophysicist was immediately presented with a bowl himself. With a brief gesture and a patronizing smile for the old one, he suddenly forgot everything and began to examine the bowl intently. He took a small knife from his pocket and scratched the surface. Then he took out a lens and peered at the scratch through it. Uttering a sharp exclamation, he hurried back into the ship. Five minutes later he returned, pale and trembling.

"Mike, do you know what this thing is made of?" He stared at the bowl in his hand with an expression of sheer disbelief.

"Haven't a clue," said Lukas calmly. "You tell me."

"Platinum," croaked Alsdorf. "Solid platinum! We've just been presented with a small fortune."

Though it was obviously impossible for the hominids to understand what Alsdorf was saying, they grinned broadly, as if they were delighted with his excitement—or as if their subtle private joke was a big success.

While Alsdorf was assuring himself that the bowl Lukas held was also made of platinum, Duluth and Chirico appeared. They, too, went through the presentation ceremony.

"Well, I'll be sugared," said Duluth, clutching his bowl tightly. "Pure platinum, by Hades! Now suppose we fix up a little trading post. . . . Plastics for platinum, and fair exchange is no robbery. We wouldn't have to stay in business long. . . . You know, I always planned on buying a little estate in the South of France when I get too old for space travel. Now, I'll just buy me the South of France."

Chirico looked glum. "The moment we hit the Solar System," he said, "Trans-Solar will step in. Before you

know it, the bottom will have dropped out of the platinum market."

"We'll make a killing with the first load," said Duluth happily. "Think I'll buy Switzerland, as well—just for the winter sports."

Lukas grinned. "This ship is under charter," he remarked. "Read your articles, son. All cargo belongs to Trans-Solar."

Meanwhile the old hominid began another speech. After much effort on both sides, it became clear that he was offering the hospitality of his village.

Alsdorf said, "We can't all go. Somebody has to stay with the ship. Also, I need Tony for the survey. We're going to make a start this morning." He paused. "Now we know what we are looking for."

Duluth tossed up his bowl and caught it. He grinned at Lukas. "You just been elected, Mike. Have a good time, and don't get fresh with the women."

"Why don't you go yourself? I thought you would have been straining at the leash, Joe. Something wrong?"

"No, nothing wrong," said Duluth innocently. "Only I'd like someone else to find out if these boys are cannibals. . . . Be a pal, and bring back some more free samples. I got an idea Trans-Solar won't worry about a few kilograms—not where I put 'em."

Five minutes later, Lukas was trailing across the sand belt toward the forest, walking with the old hominid at the head of the column.

Alsdorf watched the procession silently for a while, then said, "Did he take a machine pistol?"

Chirico began to examine the curious pattern on his bowl. "He didn't take anything, Kurt. At least, I don't think so."

"He must have the death wish," said Alsdorf genially. He turned to Duluth. "How about improving your muscle tone, Joe? There's a lot of gear to be stowed in the tractor."

The village proved to be a couple of dozen two-room huts with adobe walls and thatches woven of thin branches and fronds. It stood in a small clearing by a stream in the forest, about three kilometers from the *Henri Poincaré*.

In his own way, Lukas had previously tended to romanticize the "noble savage." In discussions with Alsdorf throughout the long star voyage, he had based his arguments relating to the decadence of civilization on the assumption that primitive man had in him some heroic element—a crude innocence, perhaps—that had slowly been depraved by the development of synthetic power. By synthetic power, he meant the output of all machinery whose energy did not derive directly from man himself. Because terrestrial humanity no longer lived by the sweat of its brow, but learned to rely upon steam, petroleum, atomic energy, and solar power to take care of the donkey work, Lukas had felt that some vital, indefinable force had been irrevocably lost. Secretly Lukas despised himself as the product of a machine culture. Secretly he despised the fascination space travel had for him, because it was the ultimate in reliance upon machines. As a child he had read stories, half-legend, half-fact, of the extinct races—the North American Indians, the Eskimos, the Polynesians. Their starkly primitive existence had enthralled him. Their eventual extinction—the work of modern man—had dealt a sharp blow to his early and conventional faith in the benefits of science. Ever since, he had regarded his own aptitude and affinity for machines with a mixture of guilt and hate. And though he turned out to be a first-class pilot, he both distrusted his skill and was ashamed of it. He was still unconsciously yearning for the simple life.

The village to which the hominids led him came as a small shock. It was squalid and it stank. He knew then that he had expected something better.

The women as well as the men were entirely naked. Their slack bellies, their pendulous breasts sagged wearily as they struggled with pitchers of water from the stream or returned from the morning's forage with a basket of fruit and a couple of rickety children dancing at their heels. The overwhelming atmosphere was one of lassitude, almost of exhaustion.

He took in the scene with a feeling that perhaps Alsdorf was right, after all. Perhaps Fomalhaut Three would benefit by the commercially "civilizing" ventures of Trans-Solar Chemicals, even if all the hominids were reduced to the status of coolies. At least Trans-Solar would give them medical aid and clean living conditions,

and rectify any deficiency of vitamins.

The old hominid who had presented the platinum bowls and then offered his pathetic hospitality was called Masumo. He led Lukas into one of the adobe huts and invited him to squat on the sanded floor. Presently they were served with bowls of vegetable milk and sliced yams by an old crone. Lukas stared at the refreshment distastefully, but decided to risk it. After all, he supposed it was possible even for an apelike creature in a jungle slum to feel insulted.

Surprisingly, Masumo's main interest lay in getting Lukas to talk—not the hominid tongue, but his own language. By a complicated amalgam of signs, gestures, and sounds, he indicated his wish for Lukas to talk of his own world, of cities and spaceways. It was some time before the general idea became apparent, and Lukas obliged only with reluctance, feeling that it was going to be like talking to a blank wall.

But after a while he began to warm up to his subject. He almost forgot Masumo's presence in the queer sensation that he was talking something out of himself. He described the vast metropolitan culture that had developed on Earth, the slow convergence of East and West, the origin of the Federated World Government after the first and last atomic war, the exploration of the solar planets, and the race for the stars.

And as he talked, an obscure pattern seemed to be taking shape at the back of his mind.

It was nearly sunset by the time Lukas got back to the ship. Duluth was waiting for him, but the others were still out with the tractor.

"Hello, Mike. Been making whoopee with the village maidens? How did it go?"

Lukas told him.

The engineer stared at him incredulously. "Boy, one of us has sunstroke, and I'm feeling all right. You say you spent most of the time talking *English?*"

"That's what the old boy wanted." He scratched his head and frowned slightly. "Somehow, it seemed perfectly natural once I got started. You should see that village, Joe. It's an education. . . . Well, what have you been doing with yourself?"

Duluth grinned. "I played truant. Things were so damn quiet around here, I fixed up the monowheel and went for a run. Covered about a hundred kilometers, I guess."

"See anything of Kurt and Tony?"

"Nope. I went north. Funny thing, Mike, you'd think there'd be a hell of a lot of wild life about, wouldn't you?"

"So?"

"So there just isn't, that's all. When I'd done about fifteen kilometers, I got fed up with the sand and went for a spin in the forest. Saw a few birds, squirrels, and something that looked like a rabbit. But no big game. What do you make of that?"

"Nothing. What should I make of it?"

"I don't know. It just seems mighty peculiar. Come to think of it, this whole damn setup is mighty peculiar. . . . Too stinking quiet."

Lukas suddenly remembered the peculiar feeling he had when Masumo presented him with the platinum bowl that morning. He was about to mention it to Duluth, but was distracted by a flashing pencil beam of light over toward the forest line. "Here they come," said Lukas. "Kurt has the headlights on."

A few minutes later, Alsdorf and Chirico clambered up to the mess deck. The geophysicist's eyes were gleaming with satisfaction.

"Palladium and platinum," he said, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice. "Concentrated alluvial deposits! You can fill your pocket with nuggets without taking a dozen steps. Here, take a look at these." He passed a few small, irregular blackish stones for inspection.

"Looks to me like small slag," said Duluth, unimpressed.

"They're covered with iron oxide," explained Alsdorf impatiently. "There is more platinum to the square kilometer here than the entire output of the solar planets! We have made history. This thing is going to be so big—"

"I'll bet that fills the hominids with joy," said Lukas dryly.

Alsdorf laughed. "We found a few of their crude artifacts lying around. Fiber shovels and picks. Imagine it, they have platinum and palladium, but they don't have iron." His laughter was uproarious.

Chirico stared at Lukas intently. "You look down in the

mouth, Mike. Is something wrong?"

"Negative," said Lukas with a faint smile.

Alsdorf collected his precious nuggets and put them back into his pocket. "How did the party go, Mike? Did they try to poison you?"

"Didn't need to. That village of theirs is one unholy stinkpot."

The German shrugged. "What did you expect? In a couple of years there won't be any village. We will introduce the hominids to the concept of organized effort. They don't know it yet, but they're going to build a spaceport."

Lukas gave a wry grin. "You think they'll be enthusiastic?"

"We'll convert them." Alsdorf was full of confidence, full of the civilized man's self-assurance, secure in the knowledge that—as so often before—machines and psychological warfare would make the domination of a tribe of savages no problem at all.

The following morning, after an early meal, Alsdorf and Chirico set out in the tractor to continue their survey. Duluth stayed in the ship, doing a few small maintenance jobs. But by midday he had finished, and suggested that he and Lukas go for a spin in the monowheel.

"Not for me, Joe," said Lukas, staring moodily through a transparent panel on the navigation deck. "Among other things, I'm going to bring the log up to date. Haven't had time for it so far."

"Suit yourself," said Duluth. "I'm going to shoot me a squirrel if I can't find anything bigger. . . . Maybe I'll take a look at shantytown on the way back."

He went down the companion ladder. Presently Lukas saw the monowheel hurtling along at high speed over the smooth sand belt. He watched till it became a small speck, then turned to the chart table and reached for the star log. He began to make concise entries in a neat, steady handwriting.

He had been working for about twenty minutes when a voice said softly in his ear: "*Masumo would speak with Lukas of the sky-machine.*"

Lukas jumped as if he'd been stung. He spun around, but there was no one else on deck. Then he looked through the observation panel and saw down below a

small, naked figure in the distance. It was coming toward the *Henri Poincaré*. Puzzled, Lukas went down to meet it.

"Did you talk to me while I was in the sky-machine?" he asked abruptly.

But Masumo only smiled, raised his leathery arm in greeting, and offered the traditional salutation in his own language. Lukas returned it, and together they walked back to the ship.

Oddly enough, Lukas had already forgotten about the voice, and did not remember it until much later. Suddenly he wanted to show Masumo the interior of the ship, wanted to see his reaction to the wonders of terrestrial science.

He gestured toward the ladder. The hominid smiled and scrambled up it with incredible speed. Lukas followed and began the conducted tour.

If he expected a violent reaction—a display of superstition, dread, or near-worship—he was disappointed. Masumo looked at volatility tubes, pile drives, Kirchhausen units, refrigerators, contour berths, electronic cookers, and motion picture projectors with the same bland smile. It was as if, thought Lukas, the old hominid was on guard against something—too much on guard to remember that he ought to be suitably astounded.

Only once did Masumo forget himself. They were on the navigation deck, and Lukas had just shown him the manual telescope, pointing it toward the forest line and letting him look through. But even the glass that made things magically near did not shake Masumo. He treated it with that same unwavering smile.

Baffled, Lukas turned his attention to the small transceiver, intending to make radio contact with the tractor and see if Masumo would react to voices that he would recognize. He tried five hundred kilocycles, the agreed frequency, and called repeatedly. But as there was no answer, he concluded that Alsdorf and Chirico were out working on foot. As Lukas got up from the radio bench, he suddenly saw Masumo staring with poorly repressed excitement at a star chart. He stood still and watched for a moment, noting the quick, alert interest and the way Masumo swiftly moved his skinny finger from one constellation to another.

Then, aware that Lukas was staring at him, Masumo

seemed to withdraw once more into his role of ignorant savage. The bland smile settled over his face like a mask.

"Masumo, you know what those are, don't you?" demanded Lukas, pointing to the star charts.

But the hominid affected not to understand, and said in his own tongue, "Talk to me, man of the sky. Talk to me of your voyage across the ocean of many suns."

Certain now that Masumo was practicing some elaborate deception, Lukas wanted to shake the truth out of him. Instead, he found himself obeying the old hominid with a strange sense of emotional submission—as if his willpower had been paralyzed.

Masumo left the *Henri Poincaré* a little before sunset—long enough to give him a sufficient light to get back to the village. A few minutes after the hominid had gone, Lukas managed to rouse himself from a mental and emotional stupor. He had the sensation of awakening from some peculiar dream. He lit a cigarette, poured himself a stiff drink, and tried to consider the events of the afternoon calmly.

He was still puzzling the situation out when Duluth returned from his trip in the monowheel. The engineer found Lukas on the mess deck, looking—as Duluth remarked—like a pile of ectoplasm left over from a phony seance.

"What's eating you, Mike? Somebody been making nasty faces through the window?"

Lukas pulled himself together and gave a laconic account of Masumo's visit. Duluth pursed his lips and let out a long, low whistle.

"I had a feeling those simple-minded characters were too good to be true," he said slowly. "I got something else for us to think about as well. In case you haven't noticed it, they never talk to each other. They make plenty of gibberish for our benefit, but they don't use it among themselves. I looked in at shantytown to say hello on my way back this afternoon. I was there a couple of hours, maybe. There was plenty of noise, all right—and all of it directed at me. . . . I thought there was something mighty fishy, but it didn't dawn on me what it was until I was heading back to the ship."

Lukas sat up suddenly. "Joe, you've hit it! These

creatures have been taking us—for a ride. They're natural telepaths."

Duluth shrugged. "If they're so goddam clever, why do they look like a gorilla's next of kin? Why do they live the way they do?"

"That's what we're going to find out."

At that moment they heard sounds down below indicating that Alsdorf and Chirico had returned with the tractor. Duluth went down to meet them. A few moments later, Alsdorf hurried up the companion ladder. There was a curious, strained look on his face.

"Mike, what is your opinion of witchcraft?" he asked abruptly.

Lukas raised his eyebrows. "I haven't any. You'd better tell me the worst."

The German slumped onto a bench. His gaze fell on the newly opened bottle of whiskey. He reached for it and took a deep draught—straight from the bottle. Lukas was intrigued. This was the first time he had ever seen Alsdorf lose his smooth sangfroid.

"Palladium and platinum deposits," said Alsdorf, coughing a little. "They've completely disappeared."

"*What!*"

The geophysicist nodded emphatically. "Not a trace. They might never have existed. Nothing disturbed, no sign of interference. But not a trace of nuggets, ore, or any damn thing. . . . Acres and acres of it, Mike, and the whole lot wiped clean out of existence." The shock to his scientific soul was such that he seemed about to burst into tears.

Lukas stared at him. "But the thing is impossible. You're sure—"

Alsdorf slammed the bottle down. "Don't ask me if I'm sure it's the right place. Tony and I nearly went crazy making sure. How could it happen, Mike? It's impossible!"

"It was impossible, you mean." Lukas stood up. "It looks as if this is our big day, doesn't it?" He gazed through the observation panel at the darkening sky over the forest line and began to tell Alsdorf about Masumo's visit.

By the time he had finished, the geophysicist had regained control of himself. "Tonight," he said somberly,

"we will make our plans. Tomorrow we will take the tractor and pay these hominids a visit—with machine pistols, grenades, and gas bombs." He laughed mirthlessly. "The experiment will be conducted under scientific conditions. We will see if they are—vulnerable."

"Are you proposing to blast them to glory?" demanded Lukas quietly. "Because if so, you can think again. This is their planet, not ours."

Alsdorf gave him a sour grin. "Still the adolescent idealist, Mike. . . . Why don't you grow up?"

"Don't worry, I am," retorted Lukas. "Meanwhile, don't think I'm going to let you intimidate a bunch of defenseless savages."

"I get the impression that they are not so defenseless or so ignorant as we thought," remarked Alsdorf pleasantly. "And while I have no intention of being dramatic, I'm damn well going to find out what's happened to our platinum."

"*Our* platinum?" Lukas stared at him.

"Ours by right of conquest," amended Alsdorf dryly. "We have the superior culture, the superior tools, and the superior weapons."

Lukas suddenly laughed. "But we aren't telepaths, and we can't do vanishing tricks with large platinum deposits. Don't get overconfident, Kurt."

Chirico came up the companion ladder, preceded by a loud blast of invective.

"Those lousy stinking aboriginals! Those sons of a venereal ape! Hi, Mike. I hear you've been having fun, too. What beats me is how they could possibly—"

Duluth, who had followed him, said calmly, "I have a theory." The three men turned and stared at him.

Duluth helped himself to a cigarette and lit it. "Yeah," he said with an air of profundity, "they do it with mirrors."

After the evening meal a formal conference was held on the navigation deck. Alsdorf opened it by proposing to make a lightning swoop on the village to capture Masumo, with the logical aim of holding him as a hostage and finding out what he knew. Lukas, as captain of the ship, and therefore the person responsible for the safety of the expedition, promptly vetoed the proposal.

"Are you suggesting, Mike, that we do nothing, that we just hang around waiting to see what happens next?" Alsdorf was scathing.

"Keep your shirt on. Leaving aside the ethics of the thing, I'm merely pointing out that we can't afford to start anything unless we're sure we can finish it. If Masumo is a telepath, we'd be fools to have him in the ship. It's possible he would be able to report back on every move we made."

"Unfortunately," said Chirico with a wry smile, "Mike happens to be right. We do not know how these—these primitive poltergeists operate. . . . But hell, we have to do *something,* don't we?"

"Why not get out of here and touch down somewhere else?" asked Duluth lazily. "Anything for a quiet life."

Alsdorf withered him with a glance. "And lose the finest platinum deposits we're ever likely to see?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong," drawled Duluth, "but haven't we already lost 'em?"

Glancing quickly from face to face, Lukas could see that the expedition's morale had reached a crucial phase. While he personally would have gladly accepted Duluth's suggestion, for some reason that he could not yet fully understand, he realized that it was psychologically unsound. For the first time in history a space crew had come up against a quasi-human culture—one that was both beyond and below its terrestrial equivalent—and they could not, with self-respect, ignore its challenge. To do so would be to admit that their own sense of superiority was hollow. And Lukas was dimly aware that if human beings were to realize that they could be beaten by a different kind of creature, with a different concept of power, it would be as big a shock as the original discovery that Earth was not the fixed center of the universe.

He looked at the faces of his companions and offered the compromise he had decided upon at the beginning.

"Kurt would like to get tough with the hominids," he said slowly, "but we agree that we're not in a position to get tough. Joe suggests pulling up anchor and trying elsewhere. But that is no good, either. Sooner or later this kind of problem will occur again. We have to try and tackle it here. . . . I suggest that, tomorrow, three of us—with defensive arms, if it makes you feel better—take the

tractor and pay them a visit. The aim being to try to find a peaceful solution. One thing we do know: the hominids will understand what we are getting at—if they want to understand. If they don't feel like cooperating over the platinum, well, we'll have to think again. . . . But this is their territory, and we can't afford to create a situation that might jeopardize the next space crew to get here."

Chirico made up his mind immediately. "That's the best idea yet, Mike. If the hominids really are mindreaders, they'll know we aren't out for trouble, and they might be willing to meet us. . . . What do you say, Kurt?"

The geophysicist shrugged. "I think they will laugh at us. But I'm willing to try diplomacy—once."

"It could be interesting," remarked Duluth. "I'm for it—providing I'm not elected to stay behind and guard the ship. If they can knock off the platinum deposits, they might take it into their nuts to have a crack at vanishing the *Poincaré*."

"That's my responsibility," said Lukas. "You three had better get some sleep while I take the first watch."

It was late afternoon before the expedition started. Lukas had suggested the delay in case the hominids themselves chose to make a visit. But though a constant watch had been kept on the forest line, no movement had been observed; and it looked as if the hominids were content to rest on their achievements so far.

Alsdorf's defensive armament consisted of two machine pistols and a box of gas bombs. He stowed himself, the gas bombs, and one machine pistol in the tractor's observation turret, while Duluth took the other machine pistol below and sat with Chirico, who was the driver.

Lukas came down the ladder to see them off. He exchanged a few last-minute words with Alsdorf, who had decided to ride with the turret hatch open—in case quick action was needed.

"How is the adrenalin, Kurt?"

The geophysicist gave him a thin smile. "I'm not trigger-happy, if that's what you mean."

Lukas grinned. "If they start throwing telepathy at you, don't waste time with the sleep bombs. Get the hell out of there."

"We'll see."

Lukas went to the driver's compartment. "I'll call you on the transceiver in fifteen minutes, Joe. Don't let them pull any rabbits out of your hat."

Duluth laughed. "Maybe we'll use a little magic ourselves."

Chirico waved and switched on the engine. Presently the tractor was lumbering purposefully toward the forest in a dead straight line.

Lukas went back to the navigation deck and settled down to wait and watch. He lit a cigarette and made himself comfortable in the astrodome, thus commanding the view on all sides. There was nothing to be seen. Eventually he realized it was time for the radio check. He climbed down the short ladder and switched the transceiver on.

"Ship to tractor, ship to tractor. Have you made contact yet?"

"Tractor to ship." Lukas recognized Duluth's voice. "Tractor to ship. We hit shantytown a couple of minutes ago. Kurt is raising his blood pressure trying to make Masumo understand what he's talking about. The old son of an ape is playing stupid. Looks as if he's enjoying it, too. Any developments your end?"

"Dead quiet. I hope it stays that way. . . . I'll leave this set on receive; then you can call me any time."

"O.K., Mike. This is the picture so far. The old boy wanted to take Kurt into one of those adobe shacks—a bit bigger than the rest. It looks like some kind of council chamber. But Kurt wasn't having any. So he and Masumo are standing just in front of the tractor. The louder Kurt shouts, the more the old boy seems to like it. At the moment he's calmly drawing patterns in the sand with a pointed stick. You know, they look like star maps. . . . Jesus, they are star maps! Mike, can you believe this—he's plotted our course for a Solar deceleration. Now Kurt has really lost his temper. Any moment now he'll start tossing something. . . . Hey, Kurt! For Chrissake—"

Suddenly Duluth's voice was cut off. Lukas felt the sweat forming on his forehead. He immediately threw the switch to transmit.

"Ship to tractor! Joe! What's happened? Are you receiving me?"

There was no background noise—nothing.

Lukas stared dully at the transceiver, trying to work out l possibilities. Mechanical failure was possible, but least kely. Somebody or something had blasted the transmis- on.

Minutes went by, and nothing happened. Lukas hauled mself up into the astrodome and gazed intently on all des. The landscape was as empty as ever. He went down d tried the transceiver again, but his calls were answered. He tried to decide what to do. But all the ans he devised were blocked by the basic fact that he ust not leave the ship unguarded. That would be the al stupidity. Again he tried the transceiver, and again ere was no response. He could only wait and hope.

Meanwhile the sun moved slowly down the yellowish y until it hung over the forest. Mechanically, Lukas ung himself up into the astrodome for the twentieth ne and looked around. Then he saw something moving d grabbed the telescope.

He couldn't believe his eyes. The tractor was halfway ross the sand belt, heading straight for the *Henri Poin- ré*. Sitting crosslegged in front of its turret, rocking gently th the tractor's motion and looking like a somnolent ad, was Masumo.

Lukas jumped down from the dome. He knew simul- neously that everything had gone wrong and yet, that mehow it was all right.

Then he heard a voice speak softly in his ear: "*Be not aid, man of the sky-machine. I come in peace.*"

Against all reason—even against his will—Lukas laid wn the machine pistol he had just picked up, and felt tension drain out of him. The words had acted on him t as a command but as a compulsion. Calmly he went wn the companion ladder and out of the space ship. He od on the still warm sand, watching the tractor draw ar.

It pulled up smoothly, and at the same time Masumo od up, jumped lightly from the turret, and raised his nd in the customary greeting. On his face was a fixed, nd smile.

Lukas almost ignored him. His attention was riveted to tractor.

Chirico was sitting at the wheel, stiff as a ramrod, gaz-

ing fixedly ahead with a vacancy of expression that seemed to suggest a state of hypnosis. Duluth, his eyes open, his brain still working, had slumped on his seat in a catatonic stupor. Alsdorf lay quietly on the floor, curled up in a tight foetal ball.

With a sudden blaze of anger, Lukas turned to Masumo, raising his arm for a crushing blow. Then he saw the expression in the old hominid's eyes, and his arm dropped impotently to his side.

It was as if the landscape had darkened, as if Masumo had somehow become luminous, as if he had grown taller than the ship. As if his head had suddenly filled the yellow sky.

Lukas gazed at the eyes, fascinated. They became lakes, then whirlpools of infinite depth, drawing him down. Masumo's smile did not change, his lips did not move, but the voice spoke once more.

It was a calm, quiet voice. And yet, the voice of thunder.

"Man-of-the-sky, you came to my village, and I read your heart. I saw there the picture of your machine-made civilization, its dreams of conquest, its nightmares of fear. Your people are but children. We can allow them to play a little longer. But presently they must put away their childish toys. Presently they must learn to take their place as a single world-spirit in the star culture of immortals.

Men live and die. But the racial purpose is beyond time. We of this world had learned to surrender to that purpose, to become one with all world-spirits throughout the vast pattern of stars, before your people could stand upright on two feet.

Someday your race will find itself and freely follow the universal destiny. We, the enlightened ones, whom you have chosen to see only as ignorant savages, will await you. Until then it is our task to see that you do not plunder the stars too much.

Suspecting the reason for your visit, Man-of-the-sky, we tested you and your companions with the rare metals you desire. And thus we learned how far you have yet to travel to reach enlightenment. . . .

You will leave this planet now. When you are voyaging through the dark oceans of the sky, your companions will recover. But neither they nor you will remember these

happenings. You will know only that the journey was futile, that the planet was barren of all you sought. . . . Farewell, Man-of-the-sky. May your people reach the ultimate tranquillity in which diverse worlds—greater in number than the sands of the sea—have found their common end."

Suddenly Masumo seemed to return to his normal stature. He raised his arm once more to Lukas, lightly touched the center of his forehead, then turned and walked slowly away over the sand belt toward the dark line of the forest.

Lukas watched until the hominid was no more than a moving speck. Then, like a remotely controlled automaton, he went to the tractor.

Presently, some time after the sun had set, the *Henri Poincaré* emitted a jet of green flame from its planetary drive. Swiftly it began to climb in a blinding arc until, moving up into the reaches of sunlight again, its path was etched like a bow of burning gold.

In the few seconds before it passed beyond the visible range, it was observed from the surface of Fomalhaut Three—by eyes that were no longer dark and without luster. Eyes that radiated an incomprehensible power, that glowed like twin diamonds, that burned like bright binary stars.

JUDGMENT DAY

I am an old man now, but the memory of that September morning fifty years ago has burned into my brain so that day or night the scene is still alive for me with all the terrible reality of a nightmare. I shall not be sorry to

die, because then the memory too will die. And for me that is the only possible meaning of peace.

Sometimes I realize that it is very pleasant here on the farm in this Derbyshire valley. Especially in spring when I have finished the morning stint of weaving and can look forward to spending a long, lazy afternoon sitting in the doorway of my cottage. There is nothing to do then but watch the sunlight slanting over low blue-green hills and listen to the voices of the children at play. And wait until darkness falls. . . .

They are a strange breed, these children of the Dark Age. Their blue eyes are filled with longing and their thoughts are centered not upon the future but on what they regard as the glorious past. The age of heroes, the almost mythical age of powered machines and teeming cities, radio and television, jetcraft and fast cars.

And on clear evenings there are still satellites passing across the sky like bright stars in hurried transit. A few nights ago one of them fell out of orbit and passed through the upper atmosphere, a thin, curved shaft of radiance, until the friction made it explode into a tiny flower of light. And so, perhaps, they will all eventually come down—one by one, until there is nothing left to show that man was once at the very gateway to the stars.

The children like to hear about the satellites. But I think they do not quite believe in them. Or at least, not in the way that I do. As a survivor of the age in which satellites were fired into orbit, I can recognize them for what they are—engines of destruction, awaiting the signal to release their bombs from a button that is no longer there to be pushed. Though some of them—the first ones—are no more than tiny celestial laboratories, perhaps still sending their faint bleep-bleeps down to a deaf world. . . .

For the children, however, the satellites are simply mobile stars—impressive only because they were sent upon their lonely journeys by the Great Ones.

The Great Ones!

It is sad to think that an entire mythology can grow in the space of a single lifetime. Human beings do not seem to be able to live without myths, and perhaps, after all, the myths created from an already shadowy past are merely clouded mirror images of hope for the future. Perhaps

the children are creating for themselves some kind of challenge, an ideal that will carry them through this Dark Age into a world where progress will have a clearer objective than racial suicide.

Yet whenever I hear them talk of the Great Ones, I find it hard to suppress a surge of bitter inward laughter. Somehow I manage to keep silent, for it is unwise to disillusion the young. But I cannot help thinking that now there are probably less than ten million people on a planet that once supported nearly four thousand million. And that, to me, is a fitting epitaph for the Great Ones. . . .

I remember them as men—ordinary men in an extraordinary world of their own making. Men with fast brains and slow hearts, with the gift of creation in their dreams and the impulse of destruction in their fingers.

Most of all, I remember that bright September morning when civilization died, and the few terrible days that followed when it seemed as if the human race could no longer survive.

It was a crisp and beautiful morning, with sunlight spreading a gold patina over fields and hills and cities, and with all the strange, exhilarating scents of early autumn drifting lazily across the still air.

I had just been discharged from the hospital after a minor operation. And to me the world was doubly attractive, because after spending two weeks in the restricted cosmos of a general ward, I felt as if I were seeing it for the first time.

Justine, my wife, had come to meet me. We were both especially pleased because I had been discharged in time to celebrate her twenty-fifth birthday. She had a taxi ready to take me home, and I remember how we quarreled a little even while we were kissing each other, because I wanted to walk through the park and she was convinced that the effort would exhaust me. Eventually I won my point. The morning was too lovely for us to waste any of it riding in a taxi, and we set off arm in arm, walking very slowly because my muscles were still stiff and, although the incision had healed remarkably well, my stomach was still very tender.

After twenty minutes we reached the park. By then the exertion of being upright was beginning to tell on me, so we found a bench where I could sit down and rest for a

few minutes. We were not the only ones taking advantage of the sunshine. Here and there babies and small children were romping about, watched indulgently by their mothers, while on the other benches a few old people basked with half-closed eyes as if they had all the time in the world before them.

About two hundred yards away I noticed a small group of people standing in the middle of the carriageway. They looked as if they were gazing at something on the ground, but I didn't pay much attention until I saw a figure detach itself from the group and run quickly toward the far end of the park. Somewhere in the distance we heard the incongruously frenzied ring of an ambulance bell.

"There must have been an accident," said Justine. "Do you think I ought to . . ."

"No, darling," I said. "Stay here and look after your own invalid. There are enough people about, and I suppose they've done what's necessary."

The ambulance had already turned into the broad carriageway at the other end of the park.

"I should hate to have to go into the hospital on a morning like this," murmured Justine as she watched the ambulance heading toward the little group.

"Hear, hear," I agreed with some feeling. "Maybe it's not very serious. I expect some dear old soul has slipped on a banana skin, or something like that."

But even as I spoke the subtle ordinariness of that lazy autumn morning was crushed like a rose beneath some invisible foot. Suddenly the ambulance swerved from the carriageway and lurched drunkenly across the grass toward a large oak tree. The thud of impact rolled dully through the still air.

"My God! What the hell—" I stopped. A small child—a girl of about seven—who had been playing near our bench suddenly began to scream. But the scream was terminated abruptly by a spasm of projectile vomiting. Her whole body convulsed as the contents of her stomach were thrown up in a thin, pathetic stream.

Justine jumped to her feet and ran toward the child. But she had taken no more than half a dozen steps before the little girl crumpled at the knees and fell onto the grass, her tiny body still shaken by that terrible retching.

By the time I had managed to get to my feet and walk

gingerly to where Justine was kneeling by the child, the convulsion had subsided into a peculiar twitching. Justine was loosening the little girl's frock, which seemed to be rather tight. I tried to kneel down and help her, but there was a sudden stab of pain in my operation scar and I couldn't.

I just looked down helplessly at the now unconscious child. Mucus was trickling slowly from her nose and out of the corner of her mouth. Justine had loosened the clothing and was cradling the little girl in her arms. Occasionally there was a deep sigh and then half a moan, as if the child were simply asleep and troubled by nightmares.

"What is it, darling?" asked Justine, gazing at me anxiously. "We shall have to get some help, shan't we?"

I was about to reassure her that it was probably just a nasty spot of tummy trouble when I remembered the ambulance and glanced vaguely across the park to see what was happening. The words died on my lips.

About forty yards away an old man was being sick. The way he heaved almost made me think I could hear his gasping. A little beyond him a youngish woman had fallen from one of the park benches and lay on the ground, her limbs contorting as if she had suddenly become a victim of some kind of epileptic fit.

Farther away there was a young mother running toward a child who was trying to scream and be sick at the same time. But after eight or nine steps she too collapsed and became helpless in the grip of her own spasms.

It was happening everywhere. With terrifying abruptness, the park had begun to look like a nightmarish battleground where an invisible enemy struck quickly and at random. A few minutes ago there had been nothing more important to do than sit on a bench and bask in the warm serenity of an early autumn day. But now . . .

Now I thought that perhaps I was mad. There was a terrible sound in my ears, which for a second or two I refused to recognize. It was strangely low, yet piercing, and seemed to come not only from the park but from the entire city beyond. It was the sound of people. . . .

Justine's eyes were wide with horror. I wanted to give her some comfort or reassurance, but I had none to give.

"Oh, darling!" she cried. "*What's happening?*"

I could only look at her helplessly. The weakness I had

felt after coming out of hospital seemed to be rolling over me in waves.

Then the child stirred. She opened her eyes and glanced at Justine with a puzzled expression.

"Where is Mummy? I'm hurting. I want—" She began to sob.

"Mummy is coming," said Justine. "She won't be long now. We'll just look after you until—"

But suddenly Justine was flung over backwards as the pathetic little body became racked with convulsions. The whole frenzied attack could not have lasted more than half a minute. Then the convulsions gave way to a harsh, dry coughing. The child's fingers burrowed into the earth until she was clutching tiny handfuls of soil and grass. I could not bear to see the expression on her face.

"We've got to get away from here," I said desperately. "It's like some damned plague spot. There must be somewhere that—"

"I'm not going to leave her," said Justine flatly. She had picked herself up and was now kneeling by the child, who lay curled up on the grass like a tired baby. "I *can't* leave her." Futilely she began to stroke the small curved back and murmur meaningless soothing words.

"We can't do anything," I pointed out wearily. The effort of trying to cope with things I could not understand was becoming too much. When I left the hospital, despite all the warnings, I had not realized how weak I still was. But now I felt as if I were being put through some kind of endurance test—and I knew that I couldn't last the course.

"Darling, you look terrible," said Justine. "Sit down a few moments while I try and get to a telephone."

Somehow I knew that getting to a telephone was just a waste of time. There would be a lot of people trying to get to telephones—and a lot of telephones that would never be answered.

"We're not leaving each other," I panted as she helped me to lower myself to the grass. "Whatever happens we're not being separated for a minute." I was feeling vaguely sick, and used what little energy I had left to fight the sensation down. I tried to smile. "Maybe I have the plague, too."

At that moment the child stopped coughing and opened

her eyes. She seemed to be staring through us.

"I'm sorry," she said in a voice that was hardly more than a whisper. "Tell Mummy I'm sorry. I—I didn't—"

Her mouth fell open and a wide vacancy was suddenly frozen on her face. She was dead.

Justine began to cry. She picked the body up and shook it in her arms, as if willing life to return.

"Put her down!" I said sharply. "Put her down and stop that!"

"But—"

"Damn you, we're getting away from here!" I could feel my own hysteria rising. "We're getting out of this bloody mess if we have to crawl on our hands and knees."

It was already too late.

Justine gave me an oddly beseeching look—then suddenly she was sick. She began to retch and shake, and within seconds she couldn't even stand up.

I lay there on the grass, watching her helplessly. Every spasm that shook her seemed to be passing through me as well. Like the others, she was changing from a human being into a tormented animal; and even while the thought cut me like a knife, I was praying for her to die quickly, praying that she would not suffer long.

I pulled myself toward her and tried to hold her hands, but the strength of the convulsions was too great and I had to let go. The rest of the park became no more than a backcloth to this private tragedy. I was dimly aware of people still being struck down and going through the same terrible stages, of others running about hysterically, but none of it meant anything.

All that mattered was that Justine was dying. It was a fine autumn day, with the sun shining tranquilly through a sky flecked with cotton-wool wisps of cloud. But the world below had turned into a nightmare. The thin veil of human dignity had been torn away, and we were as wretched and helpless as a colony of ants poisoned by a gardener of whose existence they were not even aware. I was too weak, too numbed with shock to wonder why or how. All that mattered was that Justine was dying.

As I watched her, time became meaningless. The seconds hung like minutes, the minutes became days, eternity was marked in the lines of pain brought to her face by each racking cough.

There were a few moments when she was lucid, a few even when she could talk.

"Go—go away," she pleaded faintly, and then there was another grating spasm of coughing. "Please . . . please don't stay, darling. . . . Don't want you to—to see me . . . like this."

It was no use. I couldn't have moved even if I had wanted to. There was no strength in my limbs. Nothing but terror and grief.

She did not die peacefully as the child had done. She died in the middle of a convulsion, her body slackening suddenly under the strain and falling into an untidy heap like some piece of grotesque sculpture.

I looked at her face, remembering how she used to smile, how her eyes would become almost luminous with pleasure—and love. This other expression that was carved there did not belong to any human being at all.

I had seen too much. Even if I had not still been weak from the operation, I felt I had witnessed more than it is possible to endure while still keeping a grip on one's sanity. The sun was bright, but all around me there seemed to be a slowly contracting ring of darkness; and as the darkness closed in, I did not fight against it. I simply prayed that it would become absolute, bringing me the last luxury of total oblivion.

But it was a luxury that I was denied. The unconsciousness lasted for not more than nine or ten hours. The next sensation of which I was aware was a feeling of intense coldness and pain in my operation scar. I opened my eyes and blinked. The sun was low on the horizon, and shadows were slanting eerily across the park.

I could hear voices. For one delicious moment I was convinced that I was just awakening from some fantastic dream and that the world would still be sane and wholesome. But then I saw Justine, and the nightmare was real.

There were still the voices. I sat up too suddenly, and the pain danced through my legs and abdomen until I was afraid I would faint again. But when it had died down, I noticed that there was a jeep not far away. A soldier stood near to it. He seemed to be counting. We saw each other more or less at the same time. The voices I had heard

were coming from a radio in the jeep. The soldier switched it off.

I picked myself up and walked unsteadily toward him. He stared at me dumbfounded. "Jesus! You survived it then?"

"Survived what?" I demanded harshly. "I've lived through this bloody mess, if that's what you mean. I wish to God I hadn't."

He meant to be kindly. "You'll feel better in a while, I expect."

"Will I? I watched my wife die."

"Did you, mate?" came the rough answer. "Well, I've got a wife and a couple of kiddies in London, and I don't like to think about them either. . . . H-bomb there—about midday."

I gazed dully around the park at the litter of corpses. "How—how did this happen?"

"Sabotage. Happened in about thirty towns. Some bastards must have sprinkled the filthy stuff."

"What stuff?"

He gave me a twisted grin. "Germs. They call the stuff that fixed these poor devils botulinus toxin. . . . They used different bugs in different places."

I looked at him, trying to take the information in. "The war's started, then?"

There was a loud and bitter laugh. "You've been asleep, mate. The war is damn near over. As soon as we knew we were being attacked we threw the lot back at them—'most every flaming warhead we'd got. . . . Now both sides are packing it in. Shortest war in history. Here, listen to this." He turned to the jeep and switched his radio on.

". . . reports from the radar network indicating that no missiles have been launched by the enemy for almost two hours. It is assumed that the devastation suffered in their home territory is at least comparable with the damage inflicted by them, and the retaliatory use of chemical weapons by our missile groups and air forces, together with pattern bombardment by nuclear weapons, appears to have effectively neutralized their striking power. It is emphasized, however, that further attack by isolated automatic devices may be expected, though these are not

anticipated on any wide scale. Meanwhile, although casualties on both sides are estimated to exceed ninety per cent of the civil population, no reliable figures can be given until all available data has been studied. Survivors are assured that centralized military government, together with the means of reorganization, still exists. A list of survivor-concentration areas to which all healthy civilians should make their way will be given at the end of this newscast. Contaminated persons, however, are warned that—"

The soldier switched it off. Suddenly I saw that his automatic pistol was pointing at my chest. "Must be getting tired with tallying too many stiffs," he apologized. "Got any identification? Orders to check on everybody still alive."

"This is damn silly! Do I look like a saboteur?"

"Who does?" he said indifferently. "Now what about it?"

I saw that his trigger finger had taken the first pressure, and felt hastily in my pockets. "Hospital discharge certificate and driving license. Will they do?"

"Drop them on the grass and stand back."

He inspected them and seemed satisfied. "Here you are, mate." He handed them back. "What are you going to do now?"

"I haven't given it a bloody thought."

"If I wasn't wearing a uniform," he remarked wistfully, "I know what I'd flaming well do. I'd find myself a nice big car, fill it full of grub and clothes, and get the hell out of here."

"Where to?"

"Wide open spaces where there ain't no ruddy people." He waved vaguely at the litter of dead around the park. "When this lot starts cooking, you'll need a gas mask and a flamethrower. Reckon it'll make the old Plague look like measles in the nursery. Every town's the same. Get out and stay out, that's what I'd do."

I thought about it for a moment or two. "Will you help me bury my wife first? I don't think I can manage it alone."

He gave a grim laugh. "Don't be barmy! Forty-five million dead, more to follow—and you want to bury your wife! Now hop it while the going is good. If any of my lot

sees you and they don't shoot, chances are you'll get volunteered into the army. We're a bit shorthanded, like."

I gazed at him indecisively for a few moments. Then I turned to go. The logic of events was moving faster than my tired brain could cope with it. Now, I realized, I was living in an age where to survive was considered a suspicious act. In less than a day, civilization had reverted to barbarism. Those who are not with us are against us. . . .

After I had taken a few steps I stopped and called back to him. "What did you say the name of that bug was?"

"Botulinus toxin, mate. Friendly little thing, ain't it? Better thank the Big Boy Upstairs for making you ruddy well immune. . . . But don't press your luck."

I thanked him and made my way out of the park, trying not to look at the bodies I passed.

I didn't know where I was going. I just walked. The streets of the town were also littered with the dead. In the deepening September twilight their bodies did not look quite so terrible, and at times I pretended to myself that they were just sleeping off the aftereffects of one colossal celebration.

A celebration indeed! The coronation of Botulinus Rex!

In the marketplace among a group of stricken housewives who had presumably been shopping, I saw the body of an old man sprawling in the gutter—still clutching tightly in his hand a long piece of wood to which a torn placard had been pinned.

There was still enough light for me to read its message:

Repent ye, for the Day of Judgment is at hand!

I looked down at the old man and wondered vaguely if he had been surprised at the speed with which his prediction had become stop-press news. I wondered, too, if he had expected to find himself included in such a terrible judgment.

Feeling oddly self-conscious, I eased the placard out of his stiff fingers and laid it over the top part of his body—a tattered paper shroud.

Then, feeling like an automaton, I just kept on walking—trying to shut out of my mind the bitter knowledge that there was nowhere to go. . . .

The events of the rest of that night are clouded over in my mind. But when dawn came I found that I had been

sleeping on one of the benches in a church. There were a million vacant beds in the city to choose from—including one that I knew I could never again sleep in alone—but somehow I had been drawn to the church. It was peculiar, I thought as I sat up and tried to ease the aching in my limbs, because I had never regarded myself as a religious sort of man.

However, I was now no longer alone. Others had evidently been subjected to the same strange motivation. Scattered around the pews there were three or four men, several women—some of them with babies and small children—and, huddled pathetically below the altar, a small boy of about seven who did not seem to belong to anyone present.

It was another bright morning. Sunlight streaming through the tall, narrow windows might almost have convinced us that we were at the beginning of a normal, early autumn day. But as we saw the grayness in each other's faces, the lines of tension and pain and sorrow, we knew with bitter certainty that, no matter how bright the sun, darkness would remain for a long time on the face of the earth. . . .

Looking back now over fifty years, when my morning's weaving has been done and my chair has been placed in the farmhouse doorway so that I can gaze across this lovely Derbyshire valley, I hear the voices of the children at play . . . children of the Dark Age.

I hear them talking of the Great Ones—the godlike men whose civilization once spanned continents and whose descendants now live in tribal groups scattered over a strangely quiet world. I hear them talking of the Great Ones, the men of my own generation, the lords of the powered machines, and I realize that it is no longer possible to separate myth from reality. Nor, perhaps, should I try. For children have always needed heroes—just as adults have always needed ideals.

And who knows? It may be that the men who could put satellites into orbit, explore the dark side of the moon, and dream of the conquest of space were truly great. But there is also a dark side to progress. And the greatness of our science provided such engines of destruction that we came near to racial suicide.

Light and darkness, courage and fear, greatness and madness—a perpetual conflict of elementals in the enigma of man. . . .

Perhaps this Dark Age in which we now live is only transient. Perhaps our racial spirit is such that humanity will inevitably rise again.

But I am now the last of my generation in this valley—the last to remember the Great Ones as they were. I have become, myself, their living epitaph.

THE INTRUDERS

It was as if the universe had suddenly made up its mind to turn around. Slowly, impressively, shoals of pinpoint diamonds, floating through a sea of total darkness, began to swim in orderly rhythm around the moonship. Presently the earth swung like a Halloween lantern across the starboard bow, and the moon itself came dead astern.

Six hours ago the moonship had crossed the neutral frontier in its long free fall through a quarter of a million miles of silence. Now, after five days of zero gravity, the time for action had arrived.

The stars stopped turning, and the green earth-lantern hung itself on some invisible hook. The universe was still once more; the moonship had swung into position for its stern-first landing.

Five hundred miles away, pitted lunar craters yawned menacingly at the falling ship. They expanded, displaying hidden contours, desolate rocky fangs, and all the nightmarish immobility of a petrified world.

Six anxious pairs of eyes gazed at the external visulators on the navigation deck. They saw the crater Ty-

cho, surrounded by cracked and wrinkled lava plains, rushing up as if eager to snatch the moonship clean out of existence.

In less than ten minutes six men would have fulfilled a centuries-old dream of conquest, having reached the moon alive—or else there would be another smaller crater fifty miles from Tycho, a tiny cup of steam and heat and vaporized metal in the vastness of the lunar silence.

Captain Harper gazed hypnotically at the screen in front of his contour berth and wondered if it would do any good to pray. Professor Jantz, mathematician and astronomer, attempted to stave off an elemental fear by working out the cube of 789. Doctors Jackson and Holt, geologist and chemist, exchanged whispered instructions in the impossible possibility that either would survive the other. Pegram, the navigator, stroked a rabbit's paw; and Davis, the engineer, silently recited "The Golden Journey to Samarkand," while clutching a battered photograph of the girl he might have married.

"Sixty seconds to firing point," boomed the auto-announcer. "Forty-five seconds . . . thirty seconds . . . fifteen seconds . . . ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one—zero!"

A sudden surge of power slammed the men deep into the mattresses of their contour berths. The port and starboard visulators showed a jet of yellow-green fire reaching down toward the moon from the stern of the ship.

After days of zero gravity, the sudden G-force developed a merciless pressure until it seemed as if human veins were filled with mercury, as if bone and tissue had been abruptly transmuted to lead.

On the visulator screen a long row of mountain fangs swept by, seeming to miss the ship's now extended spider-legs by inches. A smooth area of lava bed flashed into view, growing with terrifying speed until every detail, every fragment of rock, was sharply outlined.

Now the rocket motors were delivering maximum energy. There was no true sound aboard the moonship, but it seemed as if that tremendous liberation of chemical power had created a silent banshee moan that racked every girder, every metal plate, every human fiber with its high, penetrating message.

Professor Jantz was no longer working out the cube of

789: he was unconscious. His companions, with varying degrees of discomfort, stared through mists of semi-consciousness at the bright pattern of images flashing on the bulkhead visulators.

The entire cosmos seemed to be pictured on the starboard, port, and stern screens. The seconds ticked by, recorded by the thin red needle of the electrochron, hammering out their message like distant gunfire.

"Sixty seconds to zero altitude," boomed the auto-announcer.

Instinctively the men strained to look at each other, to exchange smiles of farewell or anticipatory grins of triumph.

"Forty-five seconds . . . thirty seconds . . . fifteen seconds . . . ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one—zero!"

There was silence—the loudest silence ever known. And stillness. Then relief.

As the three spider-legs contacted the lunar surface, the moonship's automatic pilot synchronized the fading of rocket motors with the vessel's fast diminishing momentum. The spindly legs bit cautiously through an inch or two of liquid rock to the hard layer below. There was no bump, no sudden lurch, no sickening wobble. Only the end of something. The end of movement, of accelerating G-forces, of flashing images on the visulator screens, of fear and discomfort. . . . The end of a brief but colossal climax of stress.

Captain Harper was the first to find his voice. "Zero altitude," he said quietly. "Only the good die young!"

Professor Jantz opened his eyes, Pegram, the navigator, surreptitiously put away his rabbit's paw, and Davis stopped reciting "The Golden Journey" to himself. They began to undo their contour-berth straps, and presently, feeling the steady, lazy tug of one-sixth gravity, everyone crowded up into the observation dome.

Twenty-four hours later the moonship stood like a three-legged skeleton with only the personnel sphere set perkily on top of its tubular backbone. At the base of this hundred-foot-high derelict that had completed its first and last journey through space, there lay a lunar tractor and trailer, a neat stack of curved metal plates, and a large

number of crates of varying shapes and sizes.

The early sunlight cast long shadows in fantastic patterns behind all the goods and chattels of the advance expedition. Large and low in a jet-black sky, the green ball of earth dominated its background of stars.

Meanwhile, on the navigation deck in the personnel sphere, Captain Harper was holding a final conference prior to abandoning ship.

"In four weeks, gentlemen," he was saying, "Number Two ship will arrive. Its cargo, as you know, will be mainly food and two more lunar tractors. If we can have the base well established by then, and if we manage to complete the preliminary survey, a great deal of time will be saved and the equatorial expedition will be able to get straight off the mark. . . . As there are only six of us, it's pretty obvious that we've got our work cut out. First thing, of course, is to get a living unit fixed up. Until that's done, there'll be no time for anything else. . . . Dr. Jackson, you're the geologist. Have you come across any likely niches where we can erect the unit safely?"

"I've found a perfect site," answered Jackson. "It's about a mile away, practically in a direct line with Tycho and the ship. There's a thirty-foot fissure with an overhanging shelf. It'll give perfect protection against meteorites. But we shall have to fix up a permanent staircase because the walls are damn near vertical all around."

"How many living units will it contain?" asked Harper.

"At least three. I see no reason why it shouldn't house three units and the laboratory. And if, eventually, they decide to increase the expedition, there are several nearby crevices where one or two extra units could be placed."

"Dr. Holt, you explored the place with Jackson. What's your verdict?" The Captain looked inquiringly at the chemist, who, being only thirty, was the youngest member of the party.

"There are plenty of ratholes around," said Holt, "but none of 'em quite so convenient. I agree with Jackson. We could do a lot worse."

"We'd better load up, then," said Captain Harper, reaching for the headpiece of his pressure suit. "The sooner we get the first unit erected, the better." He gazed through a plastiglass porthole. "Something tells me we're going to get thoroughly fed up with this dead landscape

before we're through. . . . Any questions?"

"It's time to make a radio check with Earth," said Pegram. "Do you want to send a message, sir?"

Captain Harper lifted the headpiece and smoothed back his thick gray hair. "Tell them," he said humorlessly, "that this place is so dead, if we saw a blade of grass we'd probably scream."

It took three more terrestrial days to set up the living unit in the fissure that Dr. Jackson had selected—by which time the sun had risen clear of the distant mountain ranges and hung like a blinding fireball in the black, star-pricked sky.

The lunar day, in length a terrestrial fortnight, had now reached the high flush of midmorning.

While they were erecting the first living unit, Captain Harper and his companions ate and slept in the pressurized tractor, which was large enough to accommodate the six of them comfortably. Later, when it was used for long-distance-reconnaissance work, they would have to live in it for over a week at a time. This first experience of life in its compact quarters was valuable training.

Now and again, between the endless tasks of hauling and erecting, one or another of the men would take a few minutes off just to stand and gaze and marvel at the hard, lifeless landscape under its roof of darkness.

They would become thunderstruck at their own smallness, at their colossal achievement, and at the notion that they themselves were probably the first organic life form ever to be established on the moon.

Fifty miles away, toward the lunar south pole, the crater Tycho displayed its sharp mountain ring with perfect clarity—like teeth over the faintly curved horizon. There were no atmospheric mists to soften its contours or take the edge of fire from its sunlit peaks.

Stretching away into the distance on every side of the fissure where Base One had been erected, the lava plains were covered with a two-inch layer of meteoric dust that fell as rapidly as it was disturbed and retained footprints like new snow. When the lunar tractor swayed by in eerie silence, the dust was ploughed back to leave a caterpillar-indented road. There was not much danger of wandering

away from base and getting lost on the moon when footprints left a trail that, unless it was disturbed, would remain clear for thousands of years.

By the fourth terrestrial day the expedition was established in its subterranean living unit. Most of the routine fetch-and-carry work was over. Now the real business of experiment and exploration could begin.

It was decided that Doctors Jackson and Holt, with Davis, the engineer, should take the tractor and make a survey of ten miles' radius, keeping radio contact. They were to return in six hours.

Captain Harper would have joined them, but conscience kept him tied down to a pile of routine work at base. And Professor Jantz, having sampled the lunar dust, was completely absorbed in calculations relating to meteoric bombardment. Pegram, the remaining member of the expedition, had his own work to do. Apart from maintaining radio contact with Earth, he would also keep in touch with the tractor.

After a restless three-hour duty sleep, Jackson, Holt, and Davis went into the dining room at Base One and ate a hearty breakfast.

Professor Jantz, with a finger calculator on one side of his plate and a reference book on the other, peered at them through blue-tinted glasses.

"I want small crystals," he said abruptly, "and anything metallic. Look out for me, Jackson, there's a good fellow."

Jackson swallowed a mouthful of coffee and laughed. "What do you think *I* want, Professor? If there's anything worth having, we'll bring it back."

The professor nodded, then demanded with seeming irrelevance, "Why is there no oxygen on the moon?"

Dr. Holt put down his fork, and gazed at the mathematician curiously. "You are aware of the conventional reasons, Professor?"

"Naturally—but they are not good enough."

"What makes you think that?"

Professor Jantz treated the younger man to a secretive smile. "My calculations," he said happily. "We are all going to be surprised."

"Bet you a double ration of brandy," said Dr. Jackson, "that there is definitely no trace of oxygen in any form."

Professor Jantz was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I am not only prepared to take your bet, Dr. Jackson; I am prepared to make an additional wager. I prophesy that we shall discover signs of organic life."

"A week's tobacco says we won't."

"Good. I am a heavy smoker." The professor's confidence was such that he gave the impression of already having actual confirmation.

"Since you are so dogmatic," said Dr. Holt thoughtfully, "you might help us to prove your point by suggesting the type we must look for."

"It will have been sleeping for millions of years," said the professor. "We shall find it in caves or chasms, but not, I think, near the main craters."

"Stop being enigmatic," said Jackson. "What the devil are you getting at?"

"Coal," said the professor impressively. "Beautiful carboniferous coal."

"Nuts!" retorted Jackson.

"Nuts and dust," said Jantz calmly, returning to his calculations.

They had been away from base about twenty minutes. Davis was driving, and the tractor was making a steady twelve miles an hour. Dr. Jackson sat by his side in the pressurized compartment with a sketch pad strapped to his knee. Every now and then he made a few key notes or a diagram, and when he was not doing that he talked to Pegram, back at base, over the radio.

Dr. Holt was outside the tractor, squatting in the crow's nest with a cine-camera. His only means of contact with the two occupants was his personal radio. The sun beat mercilessly down on his pressure suit and headpiece; but as yet the insulation was doing a good job, and he felt reasonably comfortable.

"Hello, Base One. Hello, Base One," said Jackson. "We are four miles south of you, heading roughly toward Tycho. The going is comparatively smooth, and the tractor handles well. Tell Professor Jantz that the dust layer gets deeper in some of the ruts and bubbleholes. Very slight evidence of a tendency to drift. Over to you."

"Hello, tractor. Hello, tractor. Professor Jantz has fixed up the seismograph. He requests an exploration when you

are about ten miles away. Please inform us before detonation. Over to you."

"Hello, Base One. We consider it a privilege to create the first synthetic moonquake. Will let you know when we are ready. Over and out."

"Personally," said Davis, "I couldn't care less. The only thing that would surprise me is if something moved."

Suddenly Holt's voice came urgently over the personal radio. "Stop the tractor and come out quick!"

Davis depressed the clutch and slipped into neutral. The motor gave a whine of relief.

"What is it?" called Jackson.

"Come out here and tell me," came the enigmatic reply. Holt had already clambered out of the crow's nest and was walking away from the tractor, peering carefully at the ground.

Davis and Jackson reached for their headpieces, screwed them down, tested oxygen and radio, then went into the airlock. A few moments later they joined Holt.

"What do you make of this?" asked Holt with suppressed excitement. He pointed down to the dust layer.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Jackson. "Man Friday himself!"

He was staring at a set of clear footprints in the telltale lunar dust. Impulsively he planted his own foot down by one of the strange prints and compared the size. His own was narrower and four inches shorter.

"Now," said Holt, "follow the line."

Jackson let his gaze run along the trail until it disappeared in the distance. There were two sets of prints: one coming and one going. They ran in dead straight parallel lines toward the crater Tycho.

"What do we do?" asked Davis. "Radio to base?"

"Don't be in such a hurry," said Jackson irritably. "The good Lord placed an ornamental bulge on the end of your neck. Try and use it."

"I'm going to give it thirty seconds of film," announced Holt, unslinging his cine-camera. "Looks like Professor Jantz was being a little conservative when he hit on coal as the only evidence of organic life."

"Something has walked from the direction of Tycho," said Jackson half to himself. "It came and apparently stood here a bit, then turned around and walked back.

Now why should it do that? It must have had a purpose."

"Exercise," suggested Holt flippantly. "The Lunarian idea of a constitutional."

"I'm not in the mood for schoolboy humor," said Jackson. "Think up something useful to say, or use less oxygen."

Davis suddenly pointed behind them. "Do you see what I see?" he asked.

They turned around and followed his gaze. Four miles away the stripped hulk of the moonship, with its personnel sphere catching the sunlight, was clearly visible—like a low-hung star.

"Holy smoke!" said Holt. "A shy welcome committee! He, she, or it must have watched us touch down."

"What shall we do?" asked Davis. "Follow the tracks?"

"I don't think so," said Jackson slowly. "This is something the bright boys didn't bargain for. I think we'd better hotfoot back to base and have a powwow."

"It wouldn't do any harm to follow the tracks for a little of the way," suggested Holt.

"What for?"

"You never know, we might pick up some more evidence that will give us a better idea of the character who made them."

"Also," said Jackson dryly, "we might bump into the aforementioned character. And he might invite us home for coffee and cream cakes. On the other hand, he might not approve of—intruders."

Captain Harper gazed at the faces of his five companions. "Well, we have heard Dr. Jackson's story and seen the film of the tracks. We now have to consider what we are going to do about the situation. As you know, nothing like this was envisaged when we left Earth. . . . Any suggestions?"

Professor Jantz stroked his jaw thoughtfully. "The track marks indicate a biped of considerable stature. There is no appreciable atmosphere on the moon; therefore the creature can do without it, or else he provides his own. It would be safe, I think, to assume that he provides his own. This seems to presuppose a somewhat complex or decidedly intelligent being. The point is, would we be correct in assuming that there are many of his kind?"

"The point is, are we going to investigate?" said Dr. Holt. "Or are we going to try to avoid it or them until the next moonship arrives?"

"It or they may decide to investigate us," observed Captain Harper dryly. "The main problem is, will they be dangerous and will they be hostile? . . . I pleaded with the Organization Group to let me have some offensive weapons on this trip. But they carefully pointed out that no organic life could exist here. Silly bastards! They gave me a string of figures showing how many tons of fuel it would take to lift an ultrasonic vibrator unit. And now the whole project may be in danger because some blasted animal doesn't subscribe to their cockeyed little theories."

"Don't worry about weapons, Captain," said Holt. "The lab is operating now. In twelve hours I can dream up some rocket grenades that'll take care of considerable opposition."

"Also," said Dr. Jackson, "we have enough high explosive to lay a minefield—to be detonated either by contact or radio."

Captain Harper drummed the edge of the table with his fingers for a few moments before replying. "In any case," he said finally, "we must have something with which to protect ourselves. My own opinion is that we must postpone action for a few hours until we have a supply of hand and rocket grenades and, perhaps, radio mines."

"Then what?" asked Dr. Holt.

"Then I think we must send a party to follow the tracks. It is imperative that we discover whether—whether there is any danger. Apart from our own safety, there is the rest of the expedition to consider."

"When the products of two culture patterns meet," remarked Jantz thoughtfully, "there is an inevitable conflict. I wonder which will triumph?"

There was a brief silence.

"The moon is barren," said Holt irrelevantly. "Now what could Friend X possibly have for breakfast?"

Captain Harper decided to go on the reconnaissance himself, taking Jackson and Davis with him. Holt would remain behind, making more grenades and a few radio-controlled land mines. Professor Jantz and Pegram would

alternately patrol on the surface and handle radio communications.

A double track in the lunar dust had entirely disrupted the plans of the advance expedition. Psychologically, they had already begun to feel as if they were in a stage of siege. It would not have been so bad if the tracks had been those of a four-footed creature. But a biped suggested power and high evolutionary development. If it was indigenous to the moon, there was no reason why it should not be present in great numbers. And if that was the case, it would probably resent the intruders from space—just as Earthlings would if the situation were reversed.

Harper and his companions took their load of food, water, and grenades through the airlock of their underground base. They climbed up the metal staircase and went out into the blinding sunlight.

The supplies were dumped in the tractor, and everything was checked prior to departure. Davis again took the driver's seat; and while he started the motor, Dr. Jackson established radio contact with the tiny metal world that was secreted in its deep fissure. Meanwhile, Captain Harper, with four hand grenades, took himself up to the crow's nest, directly over the driver's seat.

"Tractor to Base," said Jackson. "We are on our way. Will make routine checks every quarter of an hour. Over."

"Base to tractor," replied Pegram. "Receiving you loud and clear. Good hunting. Over and out."

The whine of the motor increased, and the tractor began to lurch slowly over the dead lunar plains, following its own previous path.

After half an hour the place where Holt had first seen the alien footprints was reached without incident. This time progress had been more cautious. At one point Captain Harper, keeping a constant watch on the crater Tycho, which lay on the port side, thought he saw movement in the distance. But he eventually put it down to imagination and the fatigue engendered by staring across the bright, arid lava plains. There was nothing—nothing but a silent wilderness. He began to think that the whole thing was some kind of illusion. Until he suddenly caught sight of the tracks. They were so alarmingly distinct that they might have been created only five minutes before.

By common consent the three men left the tractor and took a close look at the almost mathematically spaced indentations.

"Man Friday has a very precise stride, hasn't he?" said Jackson. "I wonder how far *we* could walk, in a dead straight line, keeping our footsteps evenly spaced."

"He's a big devil," said Harper. "There's damn near a yard and a half between each print. . . . Well, let's get on his tail. The sooner we clear up this mystery and find out just what we're up against, the better I'll like it."

"It may not be very funny if he's collected a few playmates to sit up and wait for us," said Jackson quietly.

"We've got to take the risk. We can't just sit down at base and wait till he leaves a visiting card. Can you get the tractor to do twenty-five, Davis?"

"Yes, sir. Providing we don't have to keep it up for more than fifty miles or so."

Captain Harper pointed to Tycho. "We won't. By the time we get there—if we get there—we'll all need a break."

"Why don't you have a spell inside, Captain? I'll take a watch in the crow's nest."

Harper grunted his approval of Jackson's suggestion, and the three men walked back to the vehicle. Presently it was lurching along the trail at twenty-five miles an hour.

They stopped the tractor about eight hundred yards away, and Jackson came down from the crow's nest for a hasty consultation. Directly ahead lay the one symmetrical feature in the whole irregular landscape. It was a smooth hemisphere, surfaced apparently with metal, lying flush against the lava beds about five miles from the foothills of Tycho. It rose abruptly from the drab landscape like a giant ostrich egg half buried in sand. It seemed about forty feet high.

"Looks like we've found Man Friday's lair," said Jackson. "He must be a clever boy to fix himself up with a nice metal hideaway. . . . Wonder if it's pressurized?"

Captain Harper stared somberly through the thick glass of the tractor's observation dome. "The more I see, the less I like it," he announced slowly. "We now have concrete evidence that our friend is pretty civilized, if not

scientific. I wonder what other pleasant surprises there are in store?"

Jackson remained silent.

"What's the plan of campaign, sir?" asked Davis. "Do we push on and investigate?"

"We've got to do something about it," said Harper. "We can't just pack up now and turn back. I suggest we approach slowly until we're a couple of hundred yards away. Then . . ." He hesitated.

"Then what?" asked Jackson.

"Then one of us will go forward alone to investigate—taking grenades, of course. The others will remain in the tractor to await developments."

"I'll go," said Davis suddenly.

"No," said Jackson. "This is my job. If Man Friday and his friends prove hostile, engineers become more important than geologists. . . . I'm damn sure *I* couldn't fix the tractor if we had a breakdown—and the tractor might make all the difference. Don't you agree, Captain Harper?"

"Unfortunately, yes. But let's hope there won't be any melodrama. Now we'd better start. And I think we all ought to wear headpieces from now on—in case they throw anything."

The tractor crawled slowly forward until it was two hundred yards from the metal hemisphere. Then it stopped. Without wasting any time Dr. Jackson climbed down from the crow's nest and walked ahead with a grenade ready in each hand.

The smooth wall of the hemisphere was broken only by an open doorway. As he advanced, Dr. Jackson could see a red glow inside. When he was ten yards away he stopped, peered through the plastiglass visor of his headpiece uncertainly, then covered the remaining distance in one quick bound. The two men in the tractor watched him disappear into the darkness.

Immediately Captain Harper spoke over the personal radio. "What's the setup? Are you all right?"

With a sigh of relief, he heard Jackson's voice loud and steady. "No one at home. Come and have a look. . . . I'm beginning to believe in fairies!"

"What have you found?"

"It's either a technician's nightmare or some kind of laboratory. Hellfire! I'll believe anything now!"

"What's happened?" asked Harper urgently.

"I've just discovered what looks like three king-size coffins!"

Three hours later the tractor had returned to base, and Captain Harper was giving an account of the trip to Professor Jantz, Pegram, and Dr. Holt, while Davis and Dr. Jackson kept watch on the surface. In view of the knowledge recently acquired, it was felt now that two men should always be on surface patrol.

"The place wasn't at all pressurized," said Harper, "which is fairly significant. Its walls were about three inches thick with—I should guess—cavity or insulation layer. The dull red glow came from some sort of activated crystal suspended over a circular bench, about five feet high, that ran all around. There were various mechanical gadgets strewn all over the bench, and some fairly large apparatus, about which we just didn't have a clue. Jackson thought there was some geological equipment, and Davis swears that a sizable box of tricks underneath the bench was a radio transmitter. But not having seen junk like that before, we could only guess vaguely at its functions."

"About these boxes you dramatically describe as coffins," said Professor Jantz. "Can you give me any more details?"

"They were ten feet long and lay horizontally. The hinged lids were open, and we took a good look inside. They were made of black metal and lined with a sort of glassy fabric. When Dr. Jackson moved to touch it, a spark shot across to his pressure suit and was earthed automatically. He didn't try again. . . . They appear to have been occupied."

"This is damn funny," said Dr. Holt with a nervous laugh. "We thought the moon was uninhabited, and now we've collected a trio of scientific zombies for next-door neighbors."

"I'm not laughing," said Harper bitterly. "At the moment my sense of humor is conspicuous by its absence. What happens if these creatures don't want to be friendly—if and when we meet 'em? They aren't going to use bows and arrows."

"The possible occupation of the—er—coffins presents an interesting train of thought," said Jantz enigmatically. "I begin to form a mental picture of an intelligent, muscular biped, about nine feet tall, who supplies his own atmosphere, conducts scientific experiments, ignores animal comfort, and is capable of walking nearly a hundred miles in high temperatures."

"A pretty unpleasant sort of enemy," commented Harper.

"If he turns out to be an enemy," added Holt.

"Were there many tracks around the place?" asked the professor.

"Dozens."

"Did you follow any of them up?"

"We thought we'd better get back with the information so far acquired before we ran into trouble. . . . Are you implying that we ought to establish contact?"

"As soon as possible," said Jantz. "At the moment we are afraid of them—yet we haven't seen them—and they, I presume, will be afraid of us. An unsatisfactory situation. . . . We must do something to allay or confirm our fears, so that we can plan a definite course of action."

"I've cooked up enough radio mines to lay a fairly close field around the base," said Holt. "We can make sure that this place is reasonably safe, anyway."

Suddenly the table shuddered and an empty coffee cup fell over. From years of experience, the men instinctively listened for the sounds of the accompanying explosion. There was nothing.

"What the devil's that?" snapped Harper.

Pegram dashed to the transmitter. "Hello, surface patrol! What's happening? Over."

There was no answer. As he tried again, Captain Harper and Dr. Holt put their headpieces on and hurried to the airlock.

"Hello, surface patrol. Hello, surface patrol. What is happening? Over."

After a few moments Jackson's voice came faintly. "For God's sake come quickly! The moonship is . . . is destroyed. I've got a leak in my pressure suit. . . ."

In three minutes Captain Harper and Dr. Holt had reached the surface. For a moment they stood paralyzed,

gazing at the tangled ruin of the moonship a mile away. Then they dashed to the lunar tractor, jumped abroad, and headed for the wreckage at full speed.

They had gone three-quarters of the way when they came across Jackson. He was lying quite still on the hard rock. Dr. Holt jumped out of the tractor, lifted him bodily, and brought him back into the pressurized compartment.

"Is he alive?" demanded Harper tersely as he started the motor.

"I think so. It's a very slow leak, and he had the sense to turn the oxygen to full pressure." He began to unscrew Jackson's headpiece.

The geologist's lips quivered. He gave a tremendous shudder and opened his eyes. "Get Davis," he mumbled weakly. "He was only about fifty yards from the moonship."

"What did it?" asked Harper, keeping his eyes on the lava plains ahead as he steered directly for the wrecked ship.

In normal atmospheric pressure Dr. Jackson was recovering quickly. The color returned to his face, and he managed to sit up. "I didn't see a thing," he said with an effort. "The ship just crumpled. Then the shock wave dropped me on a sharp rock, and I knew a leak had started. It was all I could do to switch oxygen and helium to full, and pray you'd pick me up before the pressure dropped too much."

"Look, there he is!" exclaimed Holt. He pointed to a prone figure sixty yards away. As the tractor slid toward it, the three occupants could see that Davis had no headpiece. But it was not until the tractor had stopped that they discovered that he also had no head.

"Poor devil," said Harper. "Too near the blast."

"He wouldn't even have time to feel it," said Dr. Holt in subdued voice.

"God Almighty! Look at the mess!" exclaimed Harper. He pointed to the wreck.

The moonship had been destroyed most efficiently. The long spider-legs and tubular backbone were twisted like tinfoil. The personnel sphere was nonexistent, but beads of molten metal, scattered like raindrops, gave ample testament of its utter destruction. No ordinary high ex-

plosives would have produced such tremendous heat. It could only have been achieved—by Earthlings, anyway—with the use of atomic power.

Dr. Jackson was the first to break the silence. "I wonder," he said quietly, "if Man Friday is still hanging about?"

"There's not much cover here for a character nine feet high," said Holt. "Nor for his transport, if he has any."

Captain Harper started the motor again. "Better see if we can find any tracks," he said.

The tractor began to crawl slowly around the wreck in expanding circles.

The council of war, held in the pressurized living unit below the lunar surface, was brief and to the point. The five men sat around the table, smoking and drinking coffee in quantities well above the legitimate ration.

"Well, we've had the reply from Earth," announced Harper grimly. "They're very sorry for us, but they aren't going to send any more moonships until they know what we're up against."

"I'll bet they're already planning a nice epitaph," said Holt cynically.

"It was the logical answer," remarked Jackson. "What's the point of endangering the whole expedition?"

"The ethical problem can be left till later," observed Professor Jantz with a faint smile. "The most important thing at the moment is to decide what we are going to do."

"Return the compliment," suggested Holt. "We ought to go along to their hideaway and blast it to pieces. It may serve to warn them off for a while, and it may also stop them from presenting us with another atomic shell."

"If it was atomic," said Professor Jantz.

"It certainly wasn't H.E.," returned Jackson. "The personnel sphere was half vaporized."

"I think we are, at the moment, a little too belligerent," said the professor mildly. "After all, if our absent friends have been on the moon some time, they have a right to resent intruders. Providing we remain hidden and inactive, there is no reason why they should not assume that they have already destroyed us."

"We followed their tracks," retorted Harper. "Ob-

viously they'll follow ours. For all we know, they might be preparing to drop another atomic shell right here. . . . In view of the fact that they have won the first round, I think it's up to us to make sure they don't win the next. Besides, one of our party is already dead, and Dr. Jackson only survived by about ninety seconds. The longer we stay inactive, the more chance these creatures have of picking us off."

"I think Captain Harper is right," said Jackson. "We've got to do everything we can either to destroy them or to discourage them."

"We'll put it to a vote," said the Captain. "Make a noise if you're in favor of having an all-out effort to make them lose interest."

There was an immediate response. Only Professor Jantz remained silent.

A couple of hours later, preparations were complete. A radio-controlled minefield had been placed around the entrance to the base unit, practice throws had been made with dummy grenades, and the men had been gratified to discover that the moon's weak gravity enabled them to hurl a grenade with reasonable accuracy over two hundred yards. The improvised rocket bombard could deliver fifty pounds of high explosive at targets more than a mile away.

Captain Harper's strategy was extremely simple—it had to be, for their resources were severely limited. The rocket bombard would be mounted in the crow's nest of the tractor; then three men would take the tractor on its destructive mission while the other two stayed at base.

If the tractor failed to return from its fifty-mile journey to the metal hemisphere near the foothills of Tycho, it would be the duty of the survivors to radio as much information as possible to Earth while remaining hidden.

Pegram and Professor Jantz would stay at base while the others did what they could.

Each of the five men realized with bitter clarity that the fate of man's first expedition to the moon hung precariously in the balance. If they failed now, another attempt might not be made for several decades.

Presently all the weapons and supplies were aboard the lunar tractor, and everything was ready for departure. The three men piled aboard while Pegram and Jantz stood by,

offering occasional suggestions and checking that nothing had been left behind.

"As from now," said Captain Harper over his personal radio, "we won't break radio silence unless it's a matter of life and death. Our friends may have some sort of direction-finding apparatus, and there's no point in making it easy for them."

"As a scientist I disapprove of your purpose," said Professor Jantz with irony. "But as a man—well, good luck, you people. I hope you succeed."

"It'll be just too bad if we don't," said Harper grimly.

Holt gave a dry laugh. "Tell them," he said, "that my last thoughts were of mother."

"We're fighting for the human race," remarked Dr. Jackson. "Oh, how we hate its bloody face."

Amid laughter that gave a brittle impression of being lighthearted, Captain Harper started the tractor, coaxed it into gear, and let out the clutch. Leaving behind it a quick-falling wake of lunar dust, the tractor rocked silently across the blinding lava plains.

It was the expedition's fifth terrestrial day on the moon, but already it seemed as if they had never known any other existence. The earth itself had become an illusion, a receding dream. The only realities now were the hard, dusty lava plains, the distant craters, and the ominous power of unseen creatures—the threat of those elusive and apparently tireless beings whom Jantz sarcastically referred to as "our absent friends."

Pegram and the professor watched the tractor shrink until it was no more than a tiny beetle toiling over a rippling sea of rock.

From a black, star-studded sky, the sun flung down its harsh, unfiltered radiation, creating the unbelievable surface heat of a late lunar morning.

In the distance, the mountains of Tycho rose grim and forbidding, bathed by the burning sunlight. The whole landscape, locked in its own peculiar stillness, looked like a painted desert—the backcloth of a drama of suspense and danger, as indeed it was.

Captain Harper stopped the tractor a mile away from the metal hemisphere, and after hasty confirmation of the general plan of attack, Holt and Jackson got out. Holt

took up position two hundred yards away on the right, thus preventing a direct hit knocking out the entire attacking force.

Armed with grenades, the two men would advance steadily until they were in throwing range, or encountered opposition. If they were able to demolish the building without tackling the enemy, they would do so and withdraw; if not, they would do their best to engage the defense while Captain Harper drove the tractor in as close as possible and used the rocket bombard.

As soon as they had reached their flanking positions, Harper waved his arm in the observation turret, and the two men moved forward at an ungainly, bounding trot.

They were within four hundred yards of the hemisphere before there was any sign of activity. Then suddenly a large shape, oddly human, appeared momentarily in the doorway of the strange building. It hesitated, disappeared again, reappeared almost instantaneously, and began running toward Holt at a tremendous speed.

As it came clear into the sunlight, the three men saw that it was completely encased by metal. Its arms, legs, and thick, jointed body flashed dully as the strange being rapidly advanced.

Although it was nine feet high and uncannily human in shape, the human beings who now confronted it saw with a sudden shock that the outline between its shoulders was smooth and flat. The creature had no head.

Holt's arm jerked sharply, and a grenade flashed toward his macabre adversary, who was now only a hundred and fifty yards away. The monster continued on his course without any attempt at evasion.

The explosion made no sound, but a dull shock wave carried even to the tractor, now four hundred yards to the rear.

The grenade had been aimed well, in spite of the monster's speed. It dropped about ten yards behind him. The blast would have torn a human being to bits, but that metal-covered body merely sailed through the void another half-dozen yards, picked itself up, and continued its rapid advance. Holt lifted his arm to hurl another grenade, but he was too late. Something glittered in the monster's hand. For a split second a thin pencil beam of intense radiance flashed on.

With involuntary cries of horror, Jackson and Captain Harper saw Holt fall in a heap. Even at that distance it was easy to see that his body had been cut clean in two.

Instantly the creature, seeing one enemy destroyed, turned toward Jackson. For a moment it was still—a perfect target—and Jackson did not waste the opportunity. Two grenades in rapid succession flew toward their target even as the strange being ran to attack. Realizing intuitively that the creature would run straight at him, Jackson purposely let one of the grenades fall short.

Leaving the first grenade well behind, the monster ran full into the second explosion. For a moment it seemed to hang suspended—a tableau of complete surprise—then arms and legs and body hurtled up into the void, and fell separately.

Wasting no time inspecting the damage, Dr. Jackson turned immediately toward the metal hemisphere. Two more headless monsters had appeared. They seemed to be setting up some sort of apparatus.

Meanwhile Captain Harper slammed the tractor into top speed and drove crazily toward the target. Less than three hundred yards away he stopped suddenly and, having depressurized the tractor, went straight through the airlock, knocking his headpiece heavily against the hiduminium door.

One well-timed leap brought him up into the crow's nest beside the rocket bombard. Hastily aligning the rough sights, he pressed the detonator button.

His aim was too high. Fifty pounds of high explosive sailed harmlessly over the objective. But even as he feverishly reloaded, he saw Jackson moving forward out of the corner of his eye.

The geologist ran quickly to within throwing range, hurled two more grenades, and fell flat on his face. The first one didn't explode, but it would have made no difference, since it was about thirty yards short. The second, however, fell only eight or nine yards away from the two beings. Even as one of them raised the strange, glittering weapon in his hand, the grenade exploded, blowing him and his companion over backwards and flattening their apparatus.

Far from being mortally wounded, the two creatures picked themselves up with astonishing speed. One of them

ran for his hand weapon, which was lying on the lava bed a few yards away, while the other quickly tried to reconstruct his small tripod and its ominous-looking cylinder.

But by this time Harper had not only reloaded, but forced himself by supreme act of will to take slow and measured aim—realizing, perhaps, that the issue depended entirely on his next shot.

The heavy rocket grenade sped straight toward the hemisphere. For a terrible moment it seemed as if the charge would not detonate. Then there was a silent flash, and the lunar tractor shuddered violently. The sudden cloud of dust fell almost as rapidly as it had risen.

When it cleared, Captain Harper saw that the metal hemisphere and its strange occupants were utterly destroyed. All that remained was a jagged, smoking debris of twisted metal.

For a moment the two survivors remained perfectly still. Then Dr. Jackson picked himself up and began to walk unsteadily toward what had once been Dr. Holt. With slow, jerky movements, Captain Harper climbed down from the rocket bombard and made as if to join him. Suddenly he collapsed. Dr. Jackson turned and ran to him.

"I . . . think it's a . . . slow leak," gasped Harper over his personal radio. "Pressurize . . . pressurize tractor . . . for God's sake!"

Jackson picked him up and staggered to the tractor. He pushed Harper through the airlock, climbed in himself, slammed the sealing door, and turned on the air cylinders to full.

The leak must have been infinitesimal, for the Captain recovered almost immediately.

"Thanks," he said shakily. "It's a bloody awful feeling, isn't it?"

"They haven't yet invented the words to describe it," remarked Jackson grimly. "You'll have to stay in the tractor till we get back."

"Blast! We ought to do something about Holt, but my brain isn't working clearly. Any suggestions?"

"None worth having. . . . You saw what happened?"

Harper nodded. "Our headless friend gave him some-

thing that makes h/v bullets seem like baby toys. . . . We ought to take a look at him, though."

"Would that be wise?" asked Jackson slowly.

"You mean because of radio activity?"

"Among other things."

"What about the remains of their outpost, then? I'll drive the tractor in close. I shouldn't think the H.E. will have left anything in a sufficiently dangerous concentration. What do you think?"

"It's worth the risk. We might learn something useful about them."

Harper started the tractor and let it move slowly forward toward the area of devastation. He switched off the motor about twenty yards from the wreckage.

"You know something?" said Jackson as he prepared to go through the airlock. "In a way, we're lucky. This is the second little bit of history we've been privileged to make."

"How do you mean?"

"That character who dropped Holt then charged at me," said Jackson, "was quite peculiar. I was nearer to him than you were. I saw him fall apart."

"What are you getting at?"

"Only that he wasn't made of frogs and snails and puppydogs' tails," replied Jackson with irony. "You know, Captain, I think we must be the first human beings to do battle with a bunch of lethal robots. The fact that we took those three apart is quite significant, really."

"Good God!" exclaimed Harper.

Dr. Jackson turned and went through the airlock. Presently he was poking about among the glaring, sunlit wreckage.

The crisis was over, but at Base One it took some time for the atmosphere of high tension to die down. Two men of the first expedition had died, and the whole moon project had been on the edge of failure. Only a slow and intensive search of the entire base area and the foothills of Tycho convinced the four survivors that at least there was no more immediate danger. Eventually they felt justified in returning to normal routine.

It was several terrestrial days later that Professor Jantz took the opportunity afforded by Dr. Jackson's absence

on a survey expedition to do some work of his own in the small underground laboratory. He was absorbed in the spectroscopic analysis of quantities of fine black dust.

When Captain Harper found him, the professor was engaged in electronically heating a minute pile to incandescence.

"Which sample are you working on now?" asked Harper conversationally.

Professor Jantz displayed the pleasure of a child who has discovered something altogether wonderful in his Christmas stocking. "The third sample from cavern fourteen," he explained happily.

"How's it going?"

"My dear Harper, this is a perfect specimen of bituminous carboniferous coal of the type known as fusain. There is a wonderful abundance of microspores and macrospores. My theories, I may say, are confirmed up to the hilt. When I get back to Earth, I shall read a paper to—"

"What does it mean in plain language?" interrupted Harper.

"It means quite simply that the moon was once teeming with estuarine swamps. It means that billions of years ago the moon was a riot of evolving life forms. In short, we have accumulated enough evidence to shake modern astrophysical theory right to its foundations."

"Why isn't there any surface evidence of all this?"

"Because as the moon began to lose its atmosphere, the intensifying sunlight generated spontaneous combustion. Half the so-called meteoric dust is the ashes from what must once have been tremendous smoldering graveyards."

Harper grinned. "So now you'll be able to blast the armchair astronomers."

"I most certainly shall. I have enough data to make most of my illustrious colleagues feel that the time has come for them to enter mental institutions."

Captain Harper took a couple of folded typewritten sheets from his pocket. "I really hunted you out to show you the message I intend to transmit back to Organization Headquarters. If there's anything you wish to add, you'd better say so. I shall have to send it in the next hour or so."

Professor Jantz took the sheets and read them quickly:

DISPATCH SEVEN

From: Harper, Captain of Advance Expedition, Lunar Base One.

To: Executive Council, Expedition H.Q., Earth

Since the destruction of the robot-manned outpost, Jackson and Pegram have made an extensive survey of the ground within a radius of one hundred miles of base. They have discovered no more alien tracks, other than those originating from the hemisphere, and no further signs of independent activity. We are confident, then, that it is safe for the second moonship to depart on schedule, and feel that the equatorial expedition may be undertaken in face of environmental hazards only.

We have examined the debris of the robot outpost, and have drawn the following conclusions:

1) The robots are not indigenous to the moon, since their construction would demand resources and a highly developed life form of which there is no evidence.

2) Their construction is beyond the present developments of human science.

3) Since their outpost was exposed and unpressurized, the three so-called coffins appear to have been the "hibernation" chambers and electrical charging-beds of the robots during the lunar night. Evidence of their electrical potential was obtained before the outpost was destroyed.

4) Assuming that the three previous hypotheses are substantially correct, we believe that at some time the moon received an extraterrestrial expedition which left the robots for observational purposes and scientific investigation.

5) Since the robots took the initiative in attacking us, it is probable that their creators conditioned the machines to react aggressively to any phenomena that might be interpreted as interference.

6) Bearing in mind that the robots were apparently equipped with space radio, it is probable that they originated within our own solar system.

The full arguments in support of these views will be submitted in Dispatch Eight. It remains for me to add

our unanimous belief that the extraterrestrial expedition will ultimately return to discover the fate of its mechanical outpost. It is hoped that by that time human beings and equipment will be present on the moon in sufficient force to fulfill our aims irrespective of interference or cooperation.

Professor Jantz looked up from the typewritten sheets. "I think you've given our main conclusions admirably," he said. "The rest can wait until we have time to prepare a full report. As soon as I've finished with these samples, I'll put my own notes in order for you."

"It's about time Jackson and Pegram were back," remarked Harper, stuffing the sheets back in his pocket. "I'll give them a call on the transceiver."

He went out, leaving the professor to continue his work. For another two hours, Jantz was able to go on with his analysis of the samples from cavern fourteen without being disturbed.

Then Captain Harper returned. "They got back safely," he announced.

"Good, good. Now we can relax for a few hours."

"They want us to go up to the surface," said Harper. "They say there's something worth seeing."

"More samples!" exclaimed the professor delightedly. "Where the devil did I put my headpiece?"

Presently the two men made their way through the airlock and clambered up the metal ladder set against the walls of the fissure. They reached the surface to see Jackson and Pegram standing by the lunar tractor.

"Have you found something interesting?" called Jantz hopefully over his personal radio.

"Yes," replied Jackson, raising his arm. "Look around."

Everywhere the shadows were stretched to unimaginable lengths, and the rolling lava plains, softened now in oblique sunlight, were beginning to assume the dark contours of a lunar twilight. The scene was desolate, grotesque, and in its own fashion altogether beautiful.

Slowly, infinitely slowly, the sun began to sink over distant fire-tipped mountains. Slowly the great ball of Earth loomed against a star-strewn backcloth of total darkness.

Captain Harper and his three companions stood silently

in a deepening green glow, watching the inexorable course of the sun over a ragged horizon.

It was a scene to be remembered as long as they lived—the subtle change stealing over a petrified landscape, the slow, impressive end of their first lunar day.

THE BUTTERFLIES

The survey ship *Prometheus* dropped into orbit four hundred miles above the surface of Planet Five. Altogether there were seven planets in the system. They belonged to the Companion of Sirius, a "white dwarf" which had the distinction of being the first star to be recognized by terrestrial astronomers before it could be seen.

Planet Five was twenty-two million miles from the mother sun. Sirius itself lay far beyond the confines of the tiny system, being another eighteen hundred million miles away. To the crew of the *Prometheus,* it presented a bright, blinding disc, no less impressive than that of its now relatively near Companion. Eventually the *Prometheus* would voyage closer to the great star to survey her single red planet. But meanwhile, the Companion's system seemed infinitely more attractive—an explorer's paradise.

When the orbit maneuver had been successfully completed, the crew of four took themselves to the mess deck for a celebration. They had something to celebrate, for, so far as they knew, the *Prometheus* was the first ship to navigate satisfactorily under what was called the relativity drive—in memory of a very great man and a very imperfect theory.

As soon as they took their places at table, the electronic

cooker disgorged roast chicken and a wealth of elegant trimmings, and the refrigerator surrendered a magnum of champagne. Only three of the crew, however, were able to savor the luxury of drinking wine eight and a half light-years away from the vineyard that produced it, for the fourth, a positronic robot, preferred to dine infrequently on a large helping of amperes.

Presently Captain Trenoy, physicist, astronomer, and Master of the *Prometheus,* gave a formal toast while Whizbang, the robot, watched with red, expressionless eyes.

"May our explorations be fruitful," said Captain Trenoy, raising his glass. "May our return be safe, and may the Time Drag not be too heavy on us."

"Amen," said Dr. Blane.

He and Dr. Luiss regarded each other gravely as they lifted their glasses in response. They were both thinking about the same thing. The journey of eight and a half light-years had taken the *Prometheus* eighteen kinetic months, but the ship had left the solar system fifteen earth-years before. By the time it returned, more than thirty-five earth-years would have gone by, though the crew would have aged a mere three and a half years.

Blane, who combined the duties of psychologist, surgeon, and physician, was contemplating the spiritual effect of being cut off from one's time and generation. Fortunately or otherwise, it was a problem that would have no reality until the *Prometheus* touched down on earth once more.

Luiss, who held the departments of biochemistry and geology, stared at his champagne and wondered just how long it would take him to go mad.

But such disturbing thoughts slid rapidly into the background as Captain Trenoy, refilling the three glasses, turned the conversation to the immediate problem of touching down on Planet Five. After eighteen months of montonous starflight, during which there was little to do but make routine checks, routine researches, routine conversation, it was pleasant if unnerving to be faced with the necessity for action.

"Here endeth the first lesson," said the Captain with obscure irony. "And now we'd better fix up some orderly

procedure. I am assuming, of course, that you feel we ought to explore as soon as possible." He gazed at his companions inquiringly.

"No reason why we shouldn't," said Dr. Luiss. "I've checked Whizbang's preliminary findings. It doesn't seem as if there will be much difficulty."

"I haven't any objections," agreed Blane. Then he added with a dry smile, "But in view of our experience of the unusual effects of starsickness, it might be advisable if we sent Whizbang by himself on the first trip."

"I was about to suggest that myself," said Trenoy. "It would be an elementary safety procedure. I think, too, that we should fix it so that we can control the landing rocket from here—just in case Whizbang comes to grief. It would be disastrous if we lost a ferry rocket on the first landing."

"What makes you think I might come to grief, Captain?" boomed the robot. "The findings indicate that it's going to be a smooth job."

Trenoy laughed. "You're as logical as they come, Whizbang," he said. "But we poor mortals, lacking your mental equipment, tend to be just a little superstitious. To us, as to the primeval savages, the unknown is always a little magical—in spite of science, in spite of reason, and in spite of infallible robots."

Whizbang made strange noises, which his companions had long since learned to interpret as robotic laughter.

"So I noticed," he retorted, "when we changed down to planetary drive out of R.D. Dr. Blane, our eminent psychologist, was, I recall, furiously stroking a rabbit's paw."

Blane smiled. "No need to feel superior, Whizbang. I saw you playing with a new set of logarithmic notations. It was the first time I've ever seen a robot doodling."

"All right, doodler," said Captain Trenoy. "Tell us what you've discovered about Planet Five, and we'll decide if there is likely to be difficulty."

Whizbang recited his information with monotonous efficiency. "Size equates approximately with terrestrial moon. Mass: one over eighty-three point two. Density: three point seven nine. Orbital period: ninety-eight days. Surface: three-fifths solid. Atmosphere: oxygen, helium —forty-five, fifty. Vegetation: low-type scrub with unusual

predominance of blue. No evidence yet of animal life."

"Suppose we put you down," said Luiss. "What would you do?"

"Take out Radiac and test at ground level," answered Whizbang promptly. "Collect samples and explore to a radius of one hundred yards. Radio verbal report to Captain Trenoy and await instructions."

"Fair enough," said Trenoy. "Down you go."

"I've already checked the ferry rocket," announced Whizbang. "Radiac and sample jars are aboard." He stood up and stretched his nine feet of steel and duralumin. "Shall I make ready, sir?" he asked formally.

"No time like the present," said Trenoy. "Go ahead. Come back and tell us five minutes before point of exit."

The three men stood on the navigation deck of the *Prometheus,* watching the small ferry rocket drift out of the orbit. As it receded in slow motion, Whizbang waved a metal arm cheerily to them from inside his plastiglass dome.

"Are we going to stabilize position over his landing area?" asked Dr. Blane.

"Might as well," said the Captain. "There's no reason for playing safe on fuel. Thank God those days are over."

The ferry rocket, gathering negative speed, dropped like a silver bullet to the vast brown and crimson stretch of lava plains below.

"The atmosphere is a piece of cake," said Dr. Luiss happily. "It looks as if we shall be able to throw off our pressure suits and jump about freely at one-sixth gravity."

"It may be my natural pessimism," observed Dr. Blane, "but I have an odd notion that Planet Five is altogether too obliging. Something tells me that we are in for a few surprises."

"I think you're right," agreed Trenoy. "There always are surprises in this kind of work. It would be somewhat surprising if there weren't." He turned his attention to the two-way radio. "*Prometheus* to Whizbang. *Prometheus* to Whizbang. How are you doing? Over."

He turned a switch, and Whizbang's voice came loud and clear. "Whizbang to Captain Trenoy. I'm skating cautiously through the boundaries of the stratosphere at a hundred thousand feet. Velocity five thousand. Fin tem-

perature fifteen hundred. Internal temperature one hundred and three. It's easy going. Over."

"What does the surface look like?" asked Trenoy.

"As expected, Captain. Blue vegetation areas change shade slightly, purple to crimson. But this may be due to invisible cloud. Over."

"Are you using the auto-pilot? Over." asked the Captain. He heard the robot laugh.

"I am more efficient, sir. The auto-pilot would take three minutes longer. Over."

"Watch that fin temperature!" snapped Trenoy. "It's more important than trying to beat the auto-pilot. Over and out."

"Yes, sir. Over and out." Whizbang did his best to sound metallically aggrieved.

Seven minutes later he touched the ferry rocket down to a perfect landing.

"Whizbang to *Prometheus*. I have touched down on the agreed area on Planet Five. Landing normal. Fuel consumption subnormal. What are your orders? Over."

Back on the *Prometheus*, Captain Trenoy gripped the mike, glancing at the two men with controlled excitement. He flicked the switch and spoke to Whizbang.

"Do not move. Describe the landscape. Over."

"Sunlight strength four," said Whizbang. "Sky purple to deep blue. Horizon bounded by mountain range. Estimated height of highest peak nine thousand feet. Distance twelve miles. Planetary surface rock; color crimson, brown, black. Nearest vegetation three hundred yards away. Pampas-type grass, four to six feet high; color blue to crimson. Occasional bushes with tendril-type leaves, rising to ten feet; color, yellow to gold. Animal life butterfly type, wing span nine to fifteen inches, multicolored, present in large numbers. Estimated cloud of twenty to thirty circling ferry rocket. Large clouds in constant motion above pampas. Over."

On the navigation deck of the survey ship the atmosphere of excitement intensified.

"Butterflies!" exclaimed Dr. Luiss. "This is going to be interesting. They're quite a reasonably developed evolutionary structure. Obviously there will be other examples of animal life—even if they're only vestigial species relating to the butterflies' development."

Dr. Blane laughed. "Maybe we'll have to take nets with us and dash around like three bug-collecting schoolboys. At one-sixth G, we ought to be able to chase 'em on the wing."

"Not so fast," said Trenoy. "Let's see how they react to Whizbang, and he to them." He flicked the radio switch and spoke once more to the robot, who sat patiently in the pilot's seat of the ferry rocket four hundred miles below.

"*Prometheus* to Whizbang. Take out your Radiac, your atmospherometer, and the cine-camera. Make five tests for radioactivity—one general and four specific. Find out the pressure and bulk gases, and bring samples back for lab work. Then take your camera and use fifteen minutes of film. Spread it out—panoramic stuff, telephoto, microphoto, and general interest. Also get a butterfly if possible—without harming it. . . . Over."

"Yes, sir," answered Whizbang. "When shall I report? Over."

"Don't be lazy," said Trenoy. "Clip the transceiver on your chest. We'll want a record while you're operating. Over."

"As you say, Captain. Would you like a commentary or question and answer? Over."

"Commentary will do. If I want to ask questions, I'll break in. Over and out."

The men on the navigation deck waited for the robot's monologue to begin. Dr. Luiss went to the manual telescope and began to search the landing area with it. After a moment or two, fancying a shiny dot that he'd picked out was the ferry rocket, he called Captain Trenoy to take a look. Then Whizbang launched into his commentary.

"Transceiver clipped on. I am now descending through oubliette with Radiac. . . . Pressure equalized at nine point nine. . . . Ladder down and entry-port released. I am going down the ladder. . . . General radioactivity normal for oxygen helium at nine point nine. Will now proceed fifty yards from rocket for four radial tests. . . ."

Trenoy switched across. "How are the butterflies reacting to your presence?"

"They don't appear to have noticed me yet. . . . Am now making first of radial tests. . . . The butterflies have just begun to notice me. The ones circling above the rocket aren't being tempted, but another cloud of about

fifty has risen from the pampas. They're heading straight for me. . . . Now they're circling overhead. . . ."

"See if you can get one, but don't alarm them if it can be helped," said Trenoy.

"They're fast on the wing, Captain, and they seem to be able to estimate my range. They're concentrating about twenty feet above my headpiece. . . ."

There was a long pause, then: "Flutter by, butterfly! Flutter, flutter, butterfly. . . . Well, well, well! Cut off my coordinators and call me a computer. . . . I think that I shall never see a robot beautiful as me. . . ." For the first time in his existence, Whizbang sounded as if he were trying to sing. It was an unmelodious robotic howl. To the men on the *Prometheus* it sounded midway between ecstasy and insanity.

With a startled oath, Captain Trenoy switched in. "Whizbang! What the devil's happening?"

There was no answer for several seconds, then a slurred voice mumbled, "Steel, steel, glorious steel! You'll never know how metallic I feel. . . ."

"Whizbang! Answer my question!" Trenoy put every ounce of authority into his command. The response was not encouraging.

"With nuts on his fingers and bolts on his toes, Whizbang needs oiling wherever he goes. . . ." The voice trailed away to a crooning whisper. Then silence.

The three men stared at each other in consternation.

"He's off his head," snapped Luiss. "Some damn silly short circuit has given him DT's."

Dr. Blane looked thoughtful. "He was perfectly all right until those butterflies began to concentrate. I wonder . . ."

"What are you thinking of—radiation?" asked Captain Trenoy.

"Something like that," agreed Blane. "It doesn't sound like a mechanical breakdown. I've never heard of a robot getting lightheaded because of a short circuit. It's as if something—some force—had disturbed his equilibrium."

"The ST-EX robots were proofed against every known type of radiation before we left Earth," objected the Captain.

"I know," said Blane. "But obviously this is something they weren't proofed against."

"The simple solution is usually correct," said Luiss.

"He's had a breakdown in the language areas. He was all right while he was in the rocket."

"I'll try him again," said Trenoy. He switched over. "Whizbang! Can you hear me? Over."

Silence!

"Whizbang! What's happening? Over."

Silence.

"Whizbang! I order you back to the rocket. Make ready to return to ship! Over."

Still silence.

"Where do we go from here?" asked Captain Trenoy at length. "Any suggestions, gentlemen?"

"Somebody will have to go down in the reserve rocket," said Dr. Luiss. "That somebody had better be me."

"Control your curiosity and be rational," reproved Dr. Blane. "What's the point of hazarding our only other rocket *and* a human being? Have another think."

"Total control!" exclaimed the Captain. "The servo-mechanisms for the oubliette and entry-port were synchronized with the auto-pilot before Whizbang went down. Even if we can't get him back to the ferry rocket, we can bring the rocket back here. Then someone might go down and see what's happened to him."

Before Captain Trenoy settled down at the remote control panel, he made a further effort to contact the enigmatic robot, but met with no success. While he was bringing the rocket back to the four-hundred-mile orbit, Drs. Blane and Luiss developed a quiet and friendly argument concerning the probable cause of Whizbang's failure to respond. Then, as Whizbang still presumably had the transceiver on his chest, Dr. Blane tried to break down his problematic silence by a series of commands, exhortations, trick statements, and desperate pleas for help. He met with no result.

"You see," said Luiss triumphantly. "It's a mechanical breakdown. If he won't even let out a bleat when you tell him it's a matter of life and death, it means only one thing: somewhere the circuit is wrecked."

Dr. Blane still shook his head. "Robots have certain powers of volition," he said slowly. "Weaker, of course, than human volition. . . . Now let us suppose, for the purpose of hypothesis, that something with greater-than-human volition was able to establish contact with him.

Suppose it *willed* him to disobey orders."

"Moonshine," pronounced Dr. Luiss skeptically. "Are you suggesting that Whizbang got himself hypnotized? Because if so, you're getting unnecessarily melodramatic."

"One has to consider possibilities," said Dr. Blane evenly.

"But that's an impossibility! You might just as well consider the possibility of the ground opening up and swallowing him."

"It can't be ruled out," said Blane without humor. "Who are we to assume that the life forms on Planet Five behave conventionally? Those butterflies, for example, might—"

"Might lay duck eggs," grinned Luiss. "Go take a sedative, Doctor. Your imagination is slightly fantastic."

"So, very often, is the truth," retorted Blane.

While he had been talking, Dr. Blane had watched the progress of the ferry rocket by radar screen and visulator. He saw now that it was within ordinary visual range and, not wishing to prolong a useless discussion, climbed into the astrodome to watch it dock alongside the *Prometheus.*

"I still think only one man should go, and that he should not leave the rocket—unless, of course, he finds a reasonable explanation for Whizbang's silence." Watching the Captain closely. Dr. Blane could see, even before he replied, that Trenoy was unconvinced.

"Perhaps you are letting superstition take precedence over scientific caution," said Captain Trenoy with the faintest of smiles. "I think our arrangements will be quite adequate. We shall take ultrasonic vibrators and H.F.C. beam apparatus. Unless there is an emergency, one of us will remain in the rocket all the time."

"You may encounter something against which the vibrators and H.F.C. weapon will be useless."

"In that case, it certainly won't be physical," observed Dr. Luiss with irony.

"Exactly," said Blane. He wanted to add something else, but couldn't find the right words.

"We'd better get moving," remarked Trenoy. "We may have a small search on our hands before we find Whizbang."

Dr. Blane accepted defeat gracefully. "Good hunting,"

he said. "I'll be glued to the transceiver."

"We'll bring you back a couple of tame butterflies to play with," promised Luiss gaily as he fixed the headpiece on his pressure suit.

When they had checked their pressure and personal radios, the two men left the navigation deck and made their way to the starboard airlock and entry-port. From the astrodome, Dr. Blane watched the small ferry rocket fall out of the orbit as it gathered negative speed. Twenty minutes later he heard Luiss's voice telling him that they had touched down safely at the landing area.

"We can see Whizbang," said Luiss excitedly. "He's about a couple of hundred yards away, balancing on one foot like a heavyweight ballerina. The butterflies are still circling over him." He chuckled. "Bet they're thinking that if he's a specimen of alien culture, they did well to remain butterflies. . . . He looks, though, almost as if he belongs to the landscape."

"Any other signs of life—apart from the butterflies?" asked Dr. Blane.

"No, not yet. I'm going out to have a look at our petrified robot, so I'll hand over to Captain Trenoy."

Dr. Blane's hands were trembling, his face was white. He paced the navigation deck rapidly, casting suspicious glances now and again at the nine-foot robot, who stood waiting patiently.

"Tell me your story again," he commanded. "We will consider the inaccuracy in relation to the whole." It was no good calling the robot a liar, because Whizbang was mechanically incapable of lying. He was, however, quite capable of being inaccurate.

Responding to the order, he again related his story in a voice that faltered only very slightly when he came to the part that Dr. Blane was able to disprove.

"The first thing I remember, sir," said Whizbang, "was Dr. Luiss bawling at me for being what he called a broken-down cretin. Previous to that, my only recollection is of reporting back to ship as I began the first radial test and the butterflies came."

"Where were the butterflies when Dr. Luiss spoke to you?"

"They were circling the rocket again, sir, but there were

none near me or Dr. Luiss. The clouds skimming over the pampas seemed bigger than before, but that was probably because Dr. Luiss had disturbed them. He told me he'd given the group circling above my head half a second of ultrasonic vibration, and that it had scared them away."

"Did he tell you his further intentions?"

"He said he was going to look around within a hundred-yard radius and collect samples. Then he ordered me back to the rocket."

"What did Captain Trenoy do?"

"He questioned me and then spoke to you, sir, describing the landscape in detail and giving you a commentary on Dr. Luiss's activities."

"Why did Captain Trenoy leave the rocket?"

"Dr. Luiss called to him over the personal wavelength in a very excited voice. He said that he'd found the skeleton of a large quadruped with a cranial capacity of approximately one cubic foot. He said that the animals on Planet Five must have reached a very high evolutionary stage. Finally he suggested that Captain Trenoy come and have a look for himself, leaving me in the rocket. The Captain said it didn't seem a very intelligent procedure, but Dr. Luiss replied that there were no living animals in sight, that the pampas were far enough away to give a reasonable safety margin, and that if the butterflies came near they could certainly be dispersed by ultrasonics."

Dr. Blane nodded. "That's true. I heard snatches of their conversation over the transceiver. Did Captain Trenoy give you any instructions before he left?"

"He put me through a simple test to make sure that my memory and reasoning ability were not damaged. Then he told me to stay in the rocket and not leave it under any circumstances."

"At which point," said Dr. Blane thoughtfully, "you took over the commentary."

"That is so," agreed Whizbang with a trace of hesitation. "I continued with the commentary until you gave me instructions to return to the *Prometheus*."

"But since I did not radio those instructions," said Blane, staring hard at the robot, "we are left with two possibilities. Name them!"

The robot was silent for a moment. Then he spoke slowly. "One: that my circuits are damaged. Two: that

some other entity caused me to receive the message."

"Which do you think it is?" snapped Blane.

"If you would like to test me, sir . . ." began Whizbang.

"To hell with tests! Which is it?"

"I think my circuits are intact."

"Then you think the message originated elsewhere?"

"Yes, sir—if you are sure you did not send it."

Blane controlled himself with difficulty. "We'll leave that for the moment. Repeat verbatim your commentary to the point where I apparently ordered you to return."

"Whizbang to *Prometheus*," said the robot. "Captain Trenoy is now descending through the oubliette to join Dr. Luiss. Dr. Luiss is examining the skeleton of the quadruped. The nearest butterflies are about two hundred yards away. There is a small cloud of them rising from the pampas. They appear to be circling aimlessly at an altitude of a hundred and fifty feet. . . . Captain Trenoy has now joined Dr. Luiss. They are digging together by the side of the skeleton. . . . The butterflies are drifting slightly. Captain Trenoy glances at them every few seconds while continuing his work. Now the cloud is almost above the skeleton at about two hundred feet. . . . Suddenly the two men stand up. They stare at the butterflies. Dr. Luiss remarks over his personal radio that it is the most incredible thing he ever heard. Suddenly the butterflies drop fifty feet. At the same time Captain Trenoy and Dr. Luiss begin to unscrew their headpieces very slowly. . . ." Whizbang stopped.

"Go on! Go on!" urged Dr. Blane.

"Then, sir," said Whizbang, "I heard your voice through the transceiver. You said: '*Prometheus* to Whizbang. Return to orbit immediately. Urgent! Return to orbit immediately. Over and out.' "

"What happened next?" asked Blane.

"I informed Captain Trenoy over the ground radio. He said: 'You must obey, Whizbang. You must always obey.' So I sealed the rocket and took off as rapidly as possible. By the time I had equalized gravity and was beginning to release power, the butterflies had dropped another fifty feet. Captain Trenoy and Dr. Luiss were standing motionless. They had taken off their headpieces. . . . Then I had to let in power, and the rocket climbed."

"Was Captain Trenoy's voice normal?"

"No, sir. He spoke slowly and very quietly."

"Are you sure it was his voice?"

"Yes, sir."

For two or three minutes Dr. Blane strode nervously up and down, tortured by indecision. Finally he made up his mind.

"I am going down, Whizbang."

"Yes, sir."

"You will remain on duty here."

Dr. Blane set the rocket down gently. He unstrapped himself, stood up, and gazed through the plastiglass dome. A quarter of a mile away, he saw two motionless figures standing erect on a stretch of brown and crimson rock. Focusing the binoculars, Dr. Blane made out a cloud of butterflies hovering about ten feet above the men. The heads of his two companions were strangely obscured, but dull sunlight glinted on the surface of a headpiece lying at the feet of one of them.

Grimly, Dr. Blane reached for the two ultrasonic vibrators. Placing them carefully in the pockets of his pressure suit, he descended through the oubliette. A few seconds later he stood on the strange surface of Planet Five.

Gripping a vibrator in each hand, he looked cautiously around him, and then up at the sky. Apart from the cloud above the two men a quarter of a mile away, and the endless activity on the pampas, there did not seem to be any immediate danger.

Slowly Dr. Blane walked toward his companions. At one hundred yards he stopped, stood quite still, took careful aim. He gave the cloud of butterflies a two-second dose of vibration. They scattered with much violent flapping, and a few dropped crazily down to the rocky surface. As they fell, another small cloud rose, and Dr. Blane knew then what had been obscuring the heads of Trenoy and Luiss. He fought back a sharp, involuntary sickness and marched on.

At fifty yards he thought it was an illusion, but at twenty-five yards it became inescapable fact. Dr. Blane was approaching two men in pressure suits who were dead but still standing. Their clean-picked skulls were fixed in two barren grins.

In his own pressure suit, Blane was sweating with panic. A sixth sense warned him to turn around and run. But it was already too late. For to Dr. Blane's heightened perception there came the first faint strains of a vast, compelling music. It was the pattern, the experience, the mobility, the sheer harmony of a thousand symphonies condensed into a single chord.

Turning with a tremendous effort, he saw the butterflies rising from the pampas, and knew—in the instant before that colossal theme of ecstasy blocked all thought—that presently the butterflies would begin to circle lower and lower.

There were tears in Dr. Blane's eyes. But they were not tears for his own approaching death. They were the only way in which he, and his companions before him, could react to an experience that was profound beyond any known to man, that was compelling and final, tearing its way past the flimsy threshold of human consciousness.

The vibrators dropped from his impatient fingers. Slowly, hypnotically, Dr. Blane fumbled for the release clips of his headpiece. And the music swelled like sacramental thunder, the soundless music of thousands of multicolored butterflies, thousands of insect carnivores closing in upon their selected prey. And across the pampas, across the brown and crimson rocks, myriads of flapping wings proclaimed their centralization of power—submergence of the individual in a tremendous group identity.

Dr. Blane stood there, unable to think, unable to see, unable to move—waiting for the butterflies to descend. Waiting for the crunch of small but powerful mandibles. . . .

The nine-hour day on Planet Five drew quietly to a close. Then the sun, known to Earthlings as the Companion of Sirius, began to slip smoothly over a blue and purple horizon. Presently the butterflies rose, winging across the pampas to their nocturnal, batlike roosts. Presently there was only the solitude of night, the remote mystery of stars. . . .

The survey ship *Prometheus* remained in orbit for ten more days. Whizbang, the robot, kept a steady vigil by the transceiver on the navigation deck, in accordance with

instructions. But the lack of response to his repeated signals forced him to the obvious conclusion.

He satisfied himself that there was one very sound reason why there could be no survivors: men, unlike robots, cannot exist without water. Unfortunately, the water on Planet Five was different from its terrestrial counterpart, belonging to a different geological cycle. Its chemical symbol was infinitely more complex than mere H_2O.

So Whizbang brought in an open verdict, secure in the conviction that his masters could no longer be alive.

He had, however, no knowledge of the manner of their deaths. When he too had been a victim of the butterfly-mind, he had not heard the compelling music, for it was reaching to something far deeper than a synthetic brain. He had merely been positronically disturbed. He had merely been, for the first time in his robotic existence, asleep while his batteries were still powered. Nor could he know that, with a superior act of volition, the butterfly-mind had simply willed him to go away. Being metallic, he was not a possible source of food; and not being a source of food, he was only irrelevant.

But even a robot must rationalize when forced to act without human command. So Whizbang had found it necessary to "invent" Dr. Blane's instructions to return to the *Prometheus*.

Standing now on the navigation deck, he stared with red, expressionless eyes at the surface of Planet Five.

At last he reached a decision. The information would have to be given to other human beings, who would then assume responsibility.

Whizbang jerked himself up into the astrodome and began to take bearings. As he worked, he knew neither happiness nor anxiety, neither hope nor despair, neither regret nor relief.

He knew only that he could handle the relativity drive more efficiently than men.

THE LIZARD OF WOZ

Ynkwysytyv dropped his flying saucer down to ten thousand feet and allowed it to amble through the sky at a thousand miles an hour. Below him lay the United States of America, which he found very boring to look at.

His telescope had revealed no signs at all of intelligent lizard life—only a host of odd-looking bipeds who lived in peculiar-shaped hives and used primitive land carriages to get from one place to another. True, they had flying machines—but of a somewhat amateurish design.

As a matter of fact, Ynkwysytyv had whiled away the last few minutes by playing leapfrog with two ridiculously flimsy jet aircraft. But when they began to pump rockets at him, he lost his temper and neatly burned off their wings with a heat ray—which made life interesting for a couple of incredulous Air Force pilots. Fortunately their ejector seats and parachutes were in working order.

If the truth be known, Ynkwysytyv—or Ynky, as his colleagues in the United Planets Organization called him—was not only bored but definitely unhappy. He had to admit, however, that the assignment to this remote and backward area of the galaxy was largely his own doing. If he had not allowed his tail to be turned by the irresistible scales and the seductive yellow streak of the Senior Administrator's only daughter, he would still be at U.P.O. headquarters on Woz.

He sighed nostalgically as he thought of his home planet, five hundred light-years away. He sighed as he remembered the clear green skies, the deep blue grass, the pink rain forests, and the boiling crimson oceans. Then he

snorted with disgust as he looked down at the miserable world he had come to survey.

The colors were wrong, the inhabitants were backward and ugly, and the whole place would probably have to be fumigated to make it fit for colonization. Possibly a few of the more intelligent natives could be retained for slave labor. But their rudimentary technology seemed to indicate that this was hardly worthwhile. Robots would be far more efficient.

However, his instructions were to survey the planet, establish friendly contact with the inhabitants, and prepare a detailed report on their culture—if any. All of which was a complete waste of time, since the report would be filed away and forgotten for a couple of centuries. Then some junior official would stumble across it and sign an order for total demolition under the slum-clearance program.

Ynky had every justification for taking a cynical view of life. His journey to the Solar System had lasted more than ten years, and his hibernation clock had accidentally woken him up eighteen months before planetfall—thus giving him ample opportunity for reflection on lizard's inlizardity to lizard. It was downright vindictive of the Senior Administrator to pack him off to this hole—and all because his sex band had turned purple at the wrong moment.

Being a mere two hundred years old, Ynky regarded it as the worst possible beginning for the best century of his youth. By the time he got back to Woz all the females in his egg group would have mated, and he would be condemned to a bachelor existence for at least another seventy-five years.

During his hibernation in the flying saucer, Ynky had naturally been programmed to fluency in all major terrestrial languages, for he was not the first Woz lizard to visit Earth. Some years previously, a blue-tailed language specialist had touched down to do research on elementary methods of communication. He had managed to beam back to Woz the basic language patterns of English, French, Russian, and Chinese before being converted into a nourishing soup by the uncultured inhabitants of New Guinea.

Ynky gazed distastefully down at the planetary surface

and shrugged. Might as well make a start somewhere. He reluctantly eased the saucer Earthwards.

Below was a deserted highway and an equally deserted roadside café. Ynky hovered indecisively for a moment, wondering whether he should press on to a more promising location. But what was the use? The whole civilization was monotonously primitive.

He touched down about a hundred yards from the café. He got out of the saucer, sniffed the air cautiously—too much poisonous oxygen and not enough nitrogen—and began to walk along the highway. Then, realizing he had forgotten something, he went back and rendered the saucer invisible as a precaution against any curious bipeds who happened along.

As lizards go, Ynky was an impressive specimen. Poised erect on his hind legs, he was four feet tall, excluding an extra three feet of red and purple tail that waved proudly behind him like an animated battle standard. However, in accordance with what the late blue-tailed language specialist had observed of diplomatic procedure, he also wore a top hat and morning coat.

His entrance, therefore, at the Shady Nook Café introduced an element of novelty into the otherwise quiet existence of its proprietor, one Sam Goodwin. Sam, whose favorite relaxation was to read all about bug-eyed monsters, behaved with commendable fortitude when one actually appeared.

"Howdy," said Sam, scratching his gray hair and trying to look as if the top hat hadn't shaken him at all. "How are things in the galaxy?"

Ynky was pleasantly surprised by this first contact with *Homo sapiens*. He had anticipated some initial difficulty.

"We try to keep the constellations burning," he said modestly, "but you know how it is."

"Sure," agreed Sam confidentially. "What'll you eat? Steak, fried chicken, burger?"

Ynky shuddered, remembering the blue-tailed lizard's repeated warnings about the standard of terrestrial cooking. "I'll take fruit," he said. "A dozen apples, a dozen oranges, and a dozen bananas."

"Drink?" said Sam, filling the counter with fruit.

"Milk," decided Ynky. "About six quarts."

He disposed of the lot simultaneously, to Sam's intense

interest. Ten seconds later. Ynky dexterously slipped an arm down his throat and extracted empty milk cartons, banana skins, and orange peel all neatly tied up in a plastic wrapper for disposal.

"Cute trick," observed Sam. "Is that normal, or just for the benefit of the natives?"

"Normal," said Ynky. "We have somewhat delicate table manners on Woz."

"Come again?"

"Woz is my home planet. I have been given the task of reporting to the United Planets Organization on the state of your world. . . . I may add that, though I find you as a biped less repulsive than I had expected, I shall probably have to recommend fumigation."

"You have my interest," said Sam. "What is fumigation, and why?"

Ynky leaned on the counter, removed his top hat, and expounded. "Fumigation is a means of rendering a planet sterile by the introduction of an interesting gas that our chemists have developed. It is a breeder gas. That is to say, if a small quantity is introduced into any atmosphere it will quickly make the whole atmosphere lethal. A fine achievement, don't you think? Well beyond your own elementary science, of course."

Sam had read about this sort of situation in the pulp magazines. He was not sure he approved of it.

"Permit me to inquire," he said courteously, "why this little old planet should be fumigated?"

Ynky smiled. "We have made the mistake of trying to civilize bipeds before. Too intractable. There were some rather promising apes on Sirius Five—intelligent enough to train as technicians, or so we thought. Unfortunately, they developed a mania for political independence and blew three of our battle squadrons out of space before we demonstrated to them the error of their ways. . . . So you see, it is not wise to educate inferior creatures beyond their natural ability. It will be rather a pity about *Homo sapiens*. In some ways you are a definite improvement on the apes of Sirius."

"Thank you," said Sam. "That's nice to know."

"Don't mention it," said Ynky. "There is the possibility of retaining a few slaves, of course. If you are interested, I'll gladly recommend you."

"Thank you," repeated Sam. "That's real considerate. . . . I guess you must have a pretty big team investigating earth right now."

Ynky gave him a patronizing smile. "No," he said. "Only me. One lizard was considered adequate for such a simple assignment."

"Interesting!" Sam removed his spectacles and polished them carefully. "Now just supposing you failed to turn in a report?"

Ynky was surprised at human stupidity. "But I *shall* turn in a report. That is what I am here for. Needless to say, it will be entirely impartial and thoroughly scientific."

"Naturally," agreed Sam. "But just assuming—for the sake of argument—that your report didn't reach headquarters?"

"A ridiculous assumption." Ynky yawned. "But in that case, someone would discover the omission eventually, and another lizard would be sent. In a couple of centuries or so. After all, from our point of view the problem is not terribly urgent."

Sam Goodwin smiled. "Excuse me a moment." He disappeared through a door at the back of the café. A few seconds later he returned. There was a double-barreled shotgun in his hands. It was pointed at Ynky.

"Nothing personal," said Sam. "But as *Homo sapiens*—of which fraternity I have the honor to be a life member—is a trifle busy just now, it occurs to me that fumigation might inconvenience us a little."

Ynky had no experience of the antique weapons of earth. He had, however, grasped the fact that Sam Goodwin seemed a shade antisocial. At the same time that superior sixth sense, which had enabled lizards of Woz to thrive as a species for twenty million strenuous years, rang an alarm bell in the depths of his reptilian brain. Ynky dropped on all fours just as Sam squeezed the trigger.

The first blast ventilated his top hat in a most alarming manner. And the second blast, which came as he scuttled at speed through the main doorway of the Shady Nook Café, gave him the doubtful distinction of being the first lizard of Woz to sport a perforated tail complete with ornamental lead inlay. But he did not stop to admire the result. For Sam had followed him onto the highway, and

was inserting fresh shells in his shotgun.

Ynky scuttled back to his saucer in nothing flat. He rendered it visible once more, and jumped in as Sam's third blast rattled harmlessly against the hull. Ynky kicked the controls. With a great whoosh, the saucer did a vertical takeoff and shot up to fifty thousand feet at a velocity which did not improve the digestive state of a dozen bananas, oranges, and apples—also six quarts of milk. They seemed to be conspiring toward a minor rebellion in his third stomach.

Presently the hiccups subsided, and Ynky was able to consider the condition of his tail. Besides being somewhat painful, it was also tattered, the red and purple hues assuming a distinctly unhealthy tonal value. He wiggled it experimentally. A new stab of pain leapfrogged along his spinal cord, but the tail responded. No permanent damage: merely a few embedded souvenirs of American hospitality.

As an attempt to establish friendly contact with the natives, Ynky's recent experience—though yielding valuable information concerning the instability of the species—was hardly an unqualified success. He relieved his feelings by stepping savagely on the accelerator, at the same time expressing his opinion of Sam Goodwin and his Shady Nook Café in the singularly poetic lizard tongue of Woz.

By the time he had run out of suitable adjectives, his flying saucer had crossed the rest of the United States, the Pacific Ocean, the Sea of Okhotsk, and was already halfway across the steppes of Central Asia. Pausing for a while to inspect the somewhat different terrain, Ynky was gratified to discover vast tracts of wilderness as yet relatively unspoiled by the hand of *Homo sapiens*.

In fact, the only evidence of human stupidity was a symbolic metal snake that rippled lugubriously across the continent for hundreds of miles. Ynky realized, of course, that although mankind had partly emerged from the Stone Age, it had not yet discarded the archaic system of rail transport. But for a lizard whose home planet had developed the more efficient methods of time travel and teleportation, the Trans-Siberian Railway was not without a certain mild historical fascination.

Somewere between Omsk and Tomsk, Ynky—whose

tail had now ceased throbbing—decided to drop down and investigate. At a point where an apparently disused road intersected the railway, there was a single stone hive, obviously the dwelling of a biped. Here would be an excellent opportunity to reëstablish friendly contact for the purpose of culture analysis, while at the same time watching the trains go by.

Ynky touched his flying saucer down about fifty yards from the house of one Ivan Sergeyevitch Poushov, who had had the honor of being a Stakhanovite crossing keeper of the Soviet Union ever since the nineteen-thirty-six purge had accounted for his predecessor. This time Ynky did not bother to render the saucer invisible. It would be easier to locate if he should again need to depart rapidly.

Ivan Sergeyevitch had observed the saucer's arrival with some apprehension. It had not come from the direction of Moscow, but then the ways of the political police are inscrutable. Hastily he polished his shoes, combed his beard, and went out to greet his visitor—at the same time mentally preparing himself to deny everything.

"Greetings, Comrade," said Ivan Sergeyevitch, gazing at Ynky and privately marveling at the lengths to which the political police will go in the matter of disguise.

"Greetings," responded Ynky cautiously. "I am Ynkwysytyv of Woz."

"And I, Excellency, am Poushov of Slobovanutsky Crossing." Ivan Sergeyevitch hesitated, then added tentatively, "I trust, Comrade, that you will do me the honor of taking a glass of vodka at my unworthy table? We will drink to the health of our heroic collective leadership."

"I have no doubt," retorted Ynky, "that your heroic collective leadership would be much improved by fumigation. Incidentally, we lizards of Woz do not approve of alcohol—except for medical purposes."

At which point it began to dawn upon Ivan Sergeyevitch that Ynky might possibly not be a secret agent after all. He was forced to admit that the lizard skin looked genuine enough, and Ynky's tail possessed an independence of movement that was slightly suggestive of western decadence. But clearly, an error of judgment in this delicate matter might well prove fatal.

"Excellency," said Ivan Sergeyevitch, "pardon the stupidity of a politically enlightened though culturally con-

fused crossing keeper, but where is Woz?"

"In a more select residential area of the galaxy."

"Permit me to ask," continued Ivan Sergeyevitch, surprised at his own temerity, "how one gets there?"

Ynky gave him a superior lizard smile. "One turns sharp left after the Pole Star and continues straight ahead for five hundred light-years."

"It is, perhaps, a satellite?"

"Certainly not!" exclaimed Ynky with indignation. "It is a world of the first magnitude."

"No doubt recently liberated by the glorious Red Army?" pursued Ivan Sergeyevitch.

Ynky shook his head scornfully. "Your mother was an idiot, your father was an imbecile, and you are in a state of intellectual delirium. Fumigation will be an act of mercy."

By this time Ivan Sergeyevitch had reached a definite conclusion. This strange visitor could not possibly be a member of the secret police. No M.V.D. agent would ever stoop to wearing a morning hat. His self-confidence returned.

"Woz is not, then, a Communist state?" he asked.

"Blockhead! Why should intelligent lizards descend to Communism?"

"If it is not a Communist state," reasoned Ivan Sergeyevitch grimly, "it is therefore a reactionary capitalist fascist democracy. I trust the proletariat is organized?"

"We have no proletariat."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Ivan Sergeyevitch. "You would not liquidate *all* the workers!"

"My friend," said Ynky gently, "there were no workers to liquidate. We use robots."

Ivan Sergeyevitch thrust his beard out aggressively. "Barbaric! How long have these unfortunate robots been exploited?"

"About twenty thousand years."

"What sublime endurance!" breathed Ivan Sergeyevitch in awe. "I expect the revolution will be unusually bloody."

Ynky yawned. "Poushov, you bore me. Fumigation of the planet seems to be inevitable. . . . Incidentally, when is the next train due?"

"Tomorrow, Excellency—or is it the day after? Perhaps

you would care to wait. I cannot guarantee that it will stop, you understand."

"But I," said Ynky with a bland smile, "can guarantee that presently everything will stop. Meanwhile, I will pursue my investigations elsewhere. Good morning."

"One moment, Excellency. Permit me to present you with a small souvenir of this historic meeting." Ivan Sergeyevitch ran back into his cottage and returned a couple of minutes later with a small metal box to which a key was fixed. "It is a machine designed to cure fatigue and sleeplessness," he explained. "Especially for intellectuals such as yourself, Excellency. Many of our prominent party members have given similar models to their closest friends. The results proved highly satisfactory." Ivan Sergeyevitch gave the key a few turns, then handed the box to Ynky.

The lizard examined it carefully. "A most interesting example of peasant craftsmanship," he announced. "I presume it develops psychostatic induction?"

"Undoubtedly," agreed Ivan Sergeyevitch. "I trust your honor will have a pleasant journey."

"Thank you," said Ynky. "I am almost inclined to change my mind and recommend you for slave labor."

With these expressions of mutual regard, Ivan Sergeyevitch returned to his cottage, and Ynky to his saucer. The crossing keeper watched Ynky's vertical takeoff with a crafty smile. The mysterious flying machine was impressive, but definitely not to be compared with the wonderful MIGs that Ivan Sergeyevitch had read about. Besides, was not the saucer the product of a capitalistic economy?

Ivan Sergeyevitch was pleased with his morning's work on three counts. First, by a process of brilliant deduction, he had eliminated the possibility of Ynky being a member of the secret police. Second, he had unmasked the visitor as a capitalist spy. Third, he had struck a blow for the martyred robots of Woz. For his present to Ynky was an ingenious relic of the scorched-earth program devised by the military genius of the late Comrade Stalin. It had been originally intended for the benefit of occupation forces.

Ivan Sergeyevitch arrived at an intelligent decision. He would write a report about the incident. This, perhaps,

would facilitate his promotion to the coveted post of assistant ticket collector at Tomsk.

Meanwhile, Ynky had climbed to thirty thousand feet and was proceeding southward in a leisurely fashion at three times the speed of sound. After the desolate stretches of Siberia, he was of a mind to sample terrestrial life in a tropical area. Possibly there would be a more amusing local variation.

He had crossed Sinkiang, Tibet, Burma, and Siam, and was cruising slowly around the Malay Archipelago to choose an island suitable for investigation. Unfortunately, just as he was over the middle of the South China Sea, Ivan Sergeyevitch's time bomb—one of the few serviceable ones to be manufactured—blew the flying saucer's turret off in a most abrupt fashion.

For Ynky in his confined cabin, the sound effect was like a hundred cymbals being clashed together. But eventually the vibrations died down, and he discovered much to his surprise that although his morning coat was now reduced to a few strands of tattered fiber, he personally was intact. Except for the fact that his tail had turned white with shock.

It was then that the resourcefulness for which lizards of Woz are justly renowned came to his aid. Ynky saw that the South China Sea was coming up toward him more rapidly than he would have wished, and that presently he would be a very wet lizard. He promptly switched on the antigravity beam and the emergency superheated steam rockets. The antigravity beam, being quite disorientated, tipped the saucer upside down, but Ynky hung on by his tail, and with the aid of the steam rockets gained a certain rudimentary control. He promptly headed for the nearest piece of land, which, as it happened, was the tiny jungle island of Komodo.

By a superb feat of saucer balancing, Ynky managed to crash land in a grove of palm trees. By the time it had stopped raining coconuts, he had recovered from the ordeal sufficiently to wriggle out of the saucer and inspect the damage. Despondently he concluded that the repairs would take at least three days. At the end of which, he promised himself grimly, he would return to Slobovanutsky Crossing and deal with Ivan Sergeyevitch in

such a way that he would yearn for the blissful release of fumigation.

Absorbed as he was in contemplating the damage to the saucer's turret and the prospect of a just vengeance, Ynky was unaware that he was no longer alone. Finally a discreet breathing on the back of his neck caused him to turn around.

He was confronted with the most wonderful, the most sylphlike, the most radiantly beautiful female he had ever seen. Her eyes were wide with innocence and deep with mystery. Her lovely sinuous body was a poem in plastic art. She wore a dazzling smile, and the air of one whose gentle form somehow concealed hot, unquenchable fires. Which in a way was true, since she happened to be a carnivorous Komodo dragon.

"I—I—I . . ." began Ynky in the lizard tongue which is conveniently universal. But then words failed him. He had never seen anything like this on Woz.

"Are you in trouble?" she asked in a voice that was at once as sweet as a siren and husky with a strange longing.

"No, dear lady," said Ynky, pulling himself together. "I am in paradise. . . . Never have I seen such perfection of form! I feel that I have journeyed five hundred light-years just for this moment."

The Komodo dragon's five-foot tail shivered slightly, and she blushed. "I bet you say that to all the lizards."

"Angel," confessed Ynky, remembering the Senior Administrator's daughter, "it is true that there were others. But they meant nothing. Until now, I have never lived. . . . Incidentally, my name is Ynkwysytyv. But you may call me Ynky."

She held out her hand, and Ynky was entranced by the razor-sharp talons. "I am a Komodo dragon," she murmured softly. "But just call me Kanna-Belle."

"Kanna-Belle!" exclaimed Ynky in rapture. "What a perfect name."

The Komodo dragon blushed once again. "It is unusual, isn't it?"

"So tender, so appropriate," said Ynky.

The Komodo dragon smiled, displaying rows of flawless teeth. "Oh, well, if you say so." She turned toward the flying saucer. "Tell me, dear Ynky, what is *that* peculiar thing?"

Ynky puffed out his chest and explained his mission.

"Theoretically," he concluded, "I should repair the saucer and take my report back to Woz. But, beloved, I can't possibly recommend fumigation of the planet where we first set eyes on each other."

"I should think not," said the Komodo dragon indignantly. "Especially as I have no desire to emigrate. I am perfectly well adjusted to my present environment, thank you."

"But there is my duty to consider," said Ynky sadly. "Although you may not be aware of it, Kanna-Belle, the lizards of Woz are the most enlightened in the galaxy. Destiny has chosen us for the creation of a galactic empire which will be a monument to the indomitability of the lizard spirit for all time."

"How terribly aggressive you are," said the Komodo dragon demurely. "It frightens me."

Ynky, who had completely lost his heart to this adorable creature, threw himself at her feet and said, "Kanna-Belle, I cannot bear to make you unhappy. If only it were possible for me to stay with you in this delicious paradise."

The Komodo dragon looked thoughtful. "Perhaps that can be arranged," she whispered. And her voice held such promise that Ynky forgot all about fumigation and galactic empires.

He leaped up exultantly. "My darling, why not? We will be inseparable."

"Forever," agreed the Komodo dragon with a faraway look in her eyes.

"The perfect partnership," said Ynky. "My brains and your beauty."

"Indissolubly united," smiled Kanna-Belle, coiling her long and magnificent tail. "In life, and also in death. . . . Forgive me for mentioning it, my love, but I am really quite famished."

Whereupon two hundred pounds of muscle uncoiled with the speed of a whiplash and the function of a blackjack. Ynky was permitted one moment of horrified disbelief before his confused brain was efficiently homogenized. He hit the ground with a reproachful sigh.

The Komodo dragon measured his corpse critically and

shook her head. Ynky was just a trifle undernourished by Komodo standards.

"Much better, my love," she soliloquized sadly, "than a broken heart. . . . And how noble to perish for an ideal!"

Then she sat down and systematically ate him.

And this, my friends, is the true reason why Earth will not be fumigated for at least a couple of centuries, why Sam Goodwin's Shady Nook Café has been remodeled as The Flying Saucer Roadhouse, why Ivan Sergeyevitch Poushov is an assistant ticket collector at Tomsk, and why Kanna-Belle, the Komodo dragon, has a snug circular apartment in the jungle—with atomic air conditioning!

WELCOME HOME

The United Nations ship swooped low like a kingfisher over the vast desert, then rose suddenly in a bright arc of ascent as if she had decided that Mars was not worth exploring anyway. But at ten thousand meters the swift climb died into a moment of motionless beauty; and she sat lightly on a tail of green flame, suspended between stars and destination, until imperceptibly the flame shortened and she sank gently toward the arid waste.

Touch-down was smooth and undramatic. So smooth that it might have been the hundredth touch-down of a regular interplanetary ship handled by a bored and seasoned crew. As it happened, however, this was an occasion—one that would eventually become a date in a history book to plague the memory of small boys—for neither the United Nations ship nor any other terrestrial vehicle had visited the Red Planet before. And her crew

were the first human beings to venture farther than the moon.

They were, however, all fairly experienced space travelers. Colonel Maxim Krenin, the director of the expedition and pilot of the *Pax Mundi,* had made the Earth-moon shoot five times. He had also made more than a score of lunar test shoots. So had Commander Howard Thrace, the navigator. And besides providing a very notable example of Russo-American technical cooperation, these two were firm personal friends.

The remaining three members of the expedition, Professor Bernard Thompson, representing Britain, Professor Yves Frontenac, representing France, and Dr. Chan S. Chee, representing China, had each logged at least three major shoots and an impressive number of satellite-orbit hours. During the long fall to Mars, they had had ample time to shake down as a team and to work out their exploration strategy in detail.

And now here they were in their slender titanium hull, poised like a classic monument on the equatorial Martian desert. Radiac tests had been made, the ground-level atmosphere had been analyzed, and the first Earthmen were about to set foot on the sands of Mars—symbolically, perhaps, at high noon.

Even before they stepped outside the ship, they already knew enough about Mars to be slightly humiliated by their own previous theories and the general opinion of scientists on Earth.

For decades, terrestrial astronomers had assured everyone that Mars was virtually inimical to life—despite an insistent popular belief in grotesque and complex life forms and even Martian intelligence.

Mars, claimed the astronomers with all the authority of men capable of making powerful deductions on the most slender evidence, was a planet almost without oxygen, water, or warmth. The so-called canals were not canals at all but a series of flux fissures entirely geological in origin. And they went on to predict that, because of the climate, the most highly developed forms of life that could be expected would be similar to lichen, perhaps, or simple cacti.

These, roughly, had been the general views of the U.N. expedition—until their arrival. But even before touch-

down, while they were orbiting at a hundred thousand meters, they were able to discern among other things that the canals were, in fact—or had been—canals, and that the atmosphere contained enough oxygen to support human life if not comfortably, at least bearably.

Then, when they went into low-level orbit, they made a discovery that seemed to eclipse everything else—except perhaps the canals—in significance.

They saw pyramids: ten tremendous Martian pyramids spaced at great distances from each other over the comparatively featureless plains and naked deserts. The discovery was more than a discovery, it was a revelation. And the revelation had more significance, more far-reaching implications, than any other discovery in the entire history of man.

More than four centuries previously an obscure Polish astronomer, Nicolaus Copernicus, had shocked the world by his assertion that Earth was not uniquely fixed at the center of the cosmos. But eventually both theology and pride had recovered from the blow. For though Earth itself could no longer be regarded as unique in size, position, or significance, its master race, *Homo sapiens,* was still the chosen of God. Nowhere else, it was held, could there be creatures of such intelligence and inventiveness, able to be used as divine instruments in the eternal battle between good and evil. So said the priests and the philosophers and all who contributed to the cult of human significance.

And for four hundred years the proposition of the uniqueness of man was not seriously challenged.

But now?

The news of the Martian pyramids had already been beamed to Lunar City and Earth before the U.N. ship touched down. And back had come a definitive order to abandon for the time being the orderly sequence of scientific exploration and concentrate upon the pyramids. The expedition to Mars was, in financial terms, an extremely costly venture; and as, in the end, it would be the ordinary citizens who would have to foot the bill, here was a chance to give them something truly spectacular for their money.

The order did not cause any disappointment at all among the U.N. team. The mystery of the pyramids was

hypnotic in a way that no previous space discovery had ever been. Somehow the existence of structures designed and built by intelligent beings established an atmosphere of contact and communication which considerably diminished the heavy mood of loneliness that had built up on the long shoot to Mars. It was as if Mars had expected the *Pax Mundi*, as if the pyramids were a kind of gigantic planetary greeting.

The nearest one now lay some three kilometers to the north of the U.N. ship, its smooth black symmetry rising almost half a kilometer from the desert. As Colonel Krenin came out of the airlock, glanced momentarily at the impressive shape, and then made his way down the nylon ladder, his feeling of awe seemed to expand like a great inward bubble.

Then suddenly the historic moment was over before he was aware of it. He had already set foot on the sands of Mars. After him came Commander Thrace and the rest. None of them said anything for nearly three minutes. They just stood and stared.

Presently the honor of uttering the first terrestrial words on the planet fell to Professor Thompson. He gazed at the pyramid, sighed deeply, and in modern Lingua Franca said, "At this very moment, more than anything, I want a cigarette."

"Why not?" remarked Dr. Chee blandly. "The oxygen content of the air is rich enough. But I do not think your cigarette will taste quite the same."

"Have a Gauloise," said Professor Frontenac.

"Have a Stuyvesant," said Commander Thrace.

The Englishman frowned slightly, felt in his own pocket, then accepted a French cigarette.

"You're right," he remarked after a few moments. "They taste quite different."

"Gentlemen," said Colonel Krenin, "a formal speech will be required for transmission to Earth, and since my Lingua Franca is less proficient than it might be. . . ." He took a miniature recorder from his shoulder bag and looked at his companions hopefully.

Professor Frontenac smiled. "The pyramids are probably the remains of a civilization that was ancient even when terrestrial man was still a creature of the caves and forests. Among us, Dr. Chee represents one of the oldest

terrestrial civilizations. I think perhaps it is fitting . . ."

Dr. Chee bowed, then made a brief speech for the benefit of Krenin's recorder, the waiting millions on Earth, and perhaps a solar posterity. He spoke of the wonder of the journey, the even greater wonder of discovery, and the solemnity of touch-down. But even Dr. Chee's restrained language and abstract nouns could not avoid contamination by the boyish excitement and impatience that suddenly gripped the U.N. team.

While he was still talking, Commander Thrace ran back up the nylon ladder and swung the light electric derrick out from the ship's lower entry-port. Then he and Professor Frontenac began to lower sections of the six-seater hiduminium monowheel they had brought. Soon the others were assembling it, and in less than half an hour the twenty-foot-diameter transport wheel was operational with its gyrostabilizer purring evenly.

Professor Thompson shaded his eyes and gazed at the pyramid, massive and somber under the bright Martian sun. "Perhaps we should eat something before we venture on any exploration," he suggested without much conviction.

"Do you feel like eating?" inquired Dr. Chee.

"No, but I thought—"

"I will bring some emergency packs," called Colonel Krenin from the ship's open airlock. "If necessary, we can dine at the pyramid."

Commander Thrace had been staring fixedly at what appeared to be a large, rounded boulder, some fifty centimeters high, which lay a few meters from the base of the ship.

"Anybody notice this before?" he asked.

No one could remember seeing it.

"Look," said the Commander. "Look closely."

The boulder was moving very slowly over the dull red sand. They watched it move across what looked like a tiny patch of moss; but when the boulder had passed, the plant was no longer to be seen.

Frontenac went up to the boulder and touched it. Then he tapped it. There was a look of ecstatic mystification on his face.

"Let's turn it over," suggested Thrace.

They did so. The face of the underside was soft. It

seemed like a compound of sponge and snail. Very slowly it began to withdraw into the security of its thick protective shell.

"Marvelous, superb, exquisite!" exclaimed Frontenac, lapsing into his native French. "What a beautiful animal!"

"Or plant," added Thompson dryly.

"Animal," insisted the Frenchman. "By all the laws—"

"On Mars," interrupted Thompson, "the definitions we have been accustomed to use may not necessarily apply."

Gently they replaced the "boulder" face down on the sand.

"Now we must go to the pyramid," said Colonel Krenin. "Earth will want our first report quickly. I have put the still, cine-, and telecameras in the monowheel. Do each of you carry crew radios and personal recorders?"

They nodded.

"What of my specimen?" said Frontenac. "I wish to observe it."

"Then you will also observe the ship," said Krenin, smiling. "Someone should stay."

The Frenchman wore the look of one who wished mightily to be in two places at once.

After a final checkover, the rest of the expedition climbed aboard the monowheel, with Commander Thrace taking the control stick. As they set off toward the pyramid, they saw Professor Frontenac kneel down and put his head close to the sand. He was trying to see how his pet "boulder" managed to move.

The desert was, for the most part, surprisingly smooth, and the journey to the pyramid took barely ten minutes. On the way they passed several small varieties of plant and one curious patch of tall grass that contrived to strike with whiplike force at the monowheel as it went by. They also passed several of the "boulder" creatures, which Professor Thompson temporarily called Frontenac's Friends.

As they neared the base of the great pyramid, their sense of excitement became so intense that it seemed to fuse into an unnatural calm. They were drunk with wonder. They felt like sleepwalkers who were yet wide awake.

The structure not only dominated the landscape; it seemed to reach the very zenith of the sky. Compared to this, the pyramids of Egypt were as the toys of a child.

First of all they drove slowly around the whole edifice

in the monowheel, just gazing at it, unable to find either adequate comment or adequate explanation. It seemed quite beyond explanation—beyond possibility even. Yet there it stood: the greatest monument ever presented to the sight of man.

Its face appeared to be constructed of layer upon layer of a kind of black basalt, each single slab of which, though worn perhaps by sandstorm and blizzard, was still flawless in its dimensions. The layers rose inward like a triangulated giant's stairway, reaching toward the shimmering apex that was itself a steppingstone to the sky.

But in the center of each of the massive steps, there was a shiny whitish slab veined with gold and crimson and green and silver—iridescent as a crystal mirror, more beautiful than any known marble of Earth.

The first of these slabs, like the layer of basalt in which it was set, lay half-covered by the dull red Martian sand. The four men climbed out of the monowheel and gazed at it; and as they did so, the slab immediately above swung noiselessly back, revealing a faintly luminous passage. Out of this a long, light metal gangway extended itself with equal silence, its protruding end being lowered slowly to the level of the sand more than two meters below.

The end of the gangway came to rest almost at Colonel Krenin's feet.

"By all the saints!" murmured Professor Thompson hoarsely. "It knows we're here!"

Commander Thrace was the first to recover himself. "Photo-electric equipment," he suggested helpfully. "Or maybe vibration sensors."

"The point is," said the Colonel, "do we accept the invitation or not?"

Dr. Chee smiled. "At least it has been put to us very gracefully."

"It could be some kind of trap," remarked Commander Thrace.

Krenin frowned. "Too elaborate. We could have been dealt with more efficiently and economically."

Professor Thompson smiled. "Will you walk into my parlor, said the spider to the fly."

"Some parlor," said Thrace.

"It could be an intelligent spider," retorted the Englishman.

Dr. Chee raised his eyebrows slightly. "One can hardly appreciate the psychology of a race capable of constructing pyramids to trap space travelers," he ventured dryly.

Colonel Krenin became practical. "Two of us will accept the invitation," he said, "and two will remain here."

"We'll draw lots," said the Commander. He took four cigarettes from his pack, tore the filter tips from two of them and put them behind his back. When he displayed his hand once more, four smooth cigarette ends were showing. "The two short ones stay."

Colonel Krenin drew first and got a full cigarette. Both Thompson and Chee drew short ones.

"We will limit ourselves to a maximum of one hour," said the Colonel. "We will make radio contact only in an emergency. On no account are you to follow." He tested the gangway with his foot.

"Good luck," said Professor Thompson.

"You already have too much of it," grumbled Dr. Chee.

With Krenin leading, the two men went cautiously up the gangway. At the top they turned to look at their companions for a moment, then entered the passage.

The inside walls were faced with the same kind of stone as the slab that had swung back to reveal the entrance. It glowed greenly, providing a pleasant and restful light by which the two men were able to see their way ahead. After a brief hesitation they walked forward.

The passage proceeded in a straight line, sloping slightly downwards, and looked as if it must lead to the center of the pyramid's base. If that were so, Krenin and Thrace were in for quite a long walk.

At first they advanced slowly and in silence as if they half expected a pit to open suddenly at their feet, or some other equally noxious trick. But there were no tricks, and after a few minutes they gained enough confidence to walk forward at a brisk pace. After a time, they turned around and looked back. The opening was still visible as a tiny point of light, but it already seemed several kilometers away.

"The plot thickens," said Commander Thrace softly to himself in English.

"I beg your pardon?" said Colonel Krenin in Lingua Franca.

"Sorry. The situation is absolutely baffling."

"Not absolutely," remarked Krenin with a thin smile. "There is much to indicate order, intelligence, and purpose."

Suddenly Thrace grabbed his companion's arm and pointed to the wall just ahead. A rectangular slab of black stone had been let into it, and on the stone a diagram had been engraved.

It was a symbolic representation of the solar system. All the planets but two were shown simply as circles on lines indicating their orbital paths. But the third planet, Earth, was represented by a brilliant green stone; and the fourth planet, Mars, by an even more brilliant red one.

Krenin and Thrace were more than amazed: they were dumbfounded.

After a few moments, Commander Thrace broke the spell. "We'd better press on," he said. "We have only forty-five minutes left, and I have a feeling there are more and bigger surprises waiting for us."

He was right.

After a few more steps they discovered another black slab let into the opposite wall. This one showed the symbols for an atom of hydrogen, one of oxygen, and one of carbon. The two men stared at it in silence and then passed on. Words seemed totally inadequate.

The next slab they encountered showed what seemed to be a representation of a simple protein molecule. After that came what looked like the molecular pattern of deoxyribonucleic acid. And after that came the greatest shock of all.

There were two parallel slabs, one on each side of the passage. They showed with brilliant anatomical detail two human beings—a man and a woman. Both were represented, however, without any hair.

"I will now believe anything," said Commander Thrace in a shaky voice. "Anything at all."

"Then—then man is not a unique product of Earth!" exclaimed the Colonel. "Or perhaps . . ." The thought was too fantastic to be expressed.

With an effort, Thrace managed to rouse himself from the subtle state of hypnosis into which the diagrams seemed to be drawing him. "We ought to keep moving," he said reluctantly.

Krenin glanced at his own wristwatch and sighed.

"There is so much—so much to observe, to consider."

They continued on their way along the greenly glowing passage, feeling like children trapped in a mysterious dream world that was somehow confused with reality. Presently they came to a sharp turn in the passage, and as they negotiated it they were presented with the most fantastic sight of all.

Suddenly they found themselves in a vault large enough to contain any of the great cathedrals of Earth. It was suffused with the same green glow as the passage, but deeper now, so that for— a moment the two men felt as if they were walking across the floor of a great subterranean ocean.

Then the oceanic feeling gave way to lofty revelation—a feeling of infinite space and infinite beauty. It was as if they were engulfed by a cloud of soundless music blown all about them by dark draughts of light.

For a bright suspended moment, the two men felt as if they were dying. And then as if they were instantly reborn.

The walls of the vault were alive with solid pictures, fading and merging and blooming in a magnificent visual symphony. Here, for a moment, they glimpsed in all its awful grandeur the birth of the solar system. The fiery wisps of planets were flung out from a ravaged solar womb, out into the dark immensities of space. The wisps condensed into burning droplets, the droplets into solid spheres. And then the vision dissolved into a pattern of lifeless oceans, of monstrous volcanoes and blinding rivers of rock, of explosion and cataclysm and deluge, of floating continental islands and desperate aeons of scalding rain.

Again the patterned pictures changed. . . .

They peered deep into the heart of the angry seas, witnessing the emergence of life itself. They saw the life and death of a myriad lowly creatures, the fantastic centuries of slaughter caused by the receding waters, the inevitable, blind, courageous conquest of the land.

They saw forest and desert, ice cap and tundra. They saw the great reptiles locked in titanic combat through their flickering sovereignty. They glimpsed monstrous leathery wings that seemed to sprout brilliant features in a single moment, transforming saw-toothed killers into veritable birds of paradise. They saw shaggy and ravenous beasts of the trees miraculously walking upright, seeking

the tools and tribal unity that would lift their restless minds above and beyond the hungry, all-consuming darkness of prehistory.

They saw the birth of civilization, cities blossoming like strange stone flowers on plains and in valleys. They saw death and discovery, warfare and worship, plague, fire, flood, and famine. They witnessed the endless conflict of man against nature, the vital tragedy of man against man. The age of glory and the age of machines. And also the age of destruction, when darkness fell from the air. . . .

Then suddenly the walls of the vault clouded and became clear. The visual saga of creation dissolved into the depths of a green eternity.

And then there was a voice. The voice came from nowhere and yet it was everywhere, rolling through the vault like thunder, whispering like the wind through summer grass. It was neither the voice of a man nor that of a woman. It was simply a voice.

"*To the living of the third planet from the dead of the fourth planet, greetings,*" said the voice. "*To the star children from the star children, greetings.*

"*This, our salute to you, bridges fifty thousand planetary journeys round the star that is our sun. But let these words be to you more than the echo of distant ghosts, for there is that which binds the third and fourth planets inseparably.*

"*In the pyramids we have built we bequeath to you the only possible gift—the story of our race. Once we of the fourth planet lived on a green and pleasant world. We were a race of leisure and wealth and power, having tamed for our needs the energies of the elements and the fantastic energies of the sun. We have even probed the secrets of life itself, so that immortality was ours. But you have seen the ultimate achievement of our greatness: it is nothing more than the barren desert and the pyramids in which our memory yet endures.*

"*It is true that we gained immortality; but the price we paid was too high, for in the end we became almost totally sterile. It is true also that we had at our command unlimited physical power. But our spiritual power was unequal to the challenge; and in quarrel over philosophies whose very defense by force indicated their weakness, we*

succeeded eventually in destroying both our race and the living richness of our planetary home. We had conquered the forces of nature, but we were defeated by the forces in our own hearts.

"Before all was lost, however, and in a brief period of sanity, we gathered together the few young and fertile people remaining to us. Determining that our race should not perish entirely in vain, we built transports to bridge the gap between the planets. And then our most precious possessions—our children—were carried to your world, their minds cleansed of the bleak wisdom and sophistication that had been our downfall.

"There, in the forests of the third planet, we left them to endure all the slow anguish and adventure of a new spiritual and physical development in a new unsullied world.

"You who hear these words are their and our descendants. You have made yourselves the masters of unlimited physical power once more. We pray that, this time, your racial spirit, reforged in the fires of evolution, will prove equal to the challenge.

"We pray, also, that you will take this, the fourth planet, and in harmony of effort and unity of purpose, use your skills and energies to restore to it the green fertility that flourished long ago. You are truly our children and our future. . . . Welcome Home."

There was silence and stillness. The two men looked at each other. The thoughts and feelings that possessed them were far beyond the scope of words. Presently they knelt down for a few moments as if the vault itself had become a temple, as if their quiet thanksgiving would somehow be heard. Then at last they turned back to the passage, slowly retracing their steps. . . .

Colonel Krenin and Commander Thrace were ten minutes overdue when they emerged from the pyramid.

Dr. Chee and Professor Thompson were set to explode their recent anxiety and present curiosity in a great blast of questions; but when they saw the expressions on the faces of the two silent men, all the questions died.

"We found the Answer," said Commander Thrace at length.

"What answer?" asked Dr. Chee gently. His companions were so abnormally calm that they seemed to be suffering from shock.

"There is only one Answer," said Colonel Krenin. "It is your turn now. Go, and you too will find it."

"There is no hazard?" asked Professor Thompson.

Colonel Krenin smiled. He seemed to be gazing at something many millions of miles away or—perhaps—many thousands of years ago. "Only to our pride," he answered softly.

Thompson and Chee could make nothing of that; and as there was only one obvious thing to do, they too entered the passage, leaving the Colonel and the Commander to wait for them.

Presently, Commander Thrace said, "I have just remembered something. How could you pssibly understand the Voice? He—It—was speaking in English."

The Colonel shook his head. "No, Russian."

The Commander thought for a moment. "Neither Russian nor English," he said. Then he added, "After that, I think we shall never be quite the same men again."

Colonel Krenin gazed out over the bleak Martian desert. "No, never the same," he agreed. "Soon it will be Professor Frontenac's turn, and after that we must set up the cameras and television relays. Then all the different peoples of Earth will never be the same again."

Commander Thrace idly stirred the dry red sand with his feet. He made miniature mountains and valleys, and absently began to visualize a tiny network of roads.

At length he said, "Do you think we shall ever manage to reclaim this wilderness?"

"We have to," said Colonel Krenin simply. "This is home."

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ELSEWHERE

where a group of "superior" scientists from Earth are unwittingly the playthings of THE ENLIGHTENED ONES...

where, on JUDGMENT DAY, selected millions of people begin to drop off like flies...

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