

THE Interocitor

New and Classic Stories From Sci-Fi's Golden Age

Our Inaugural Issue!

Gratitude

By John Bowers

Andromeda Calling

By Charles A. Cornell

Plus Classics by:

Ray Bradbury

Frederik Pohl

Philip K. Dick



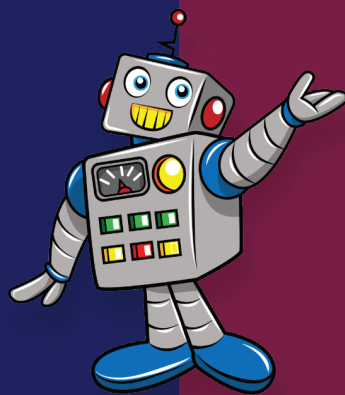


THE Interocitor

New and Classic Stories From Sci-Fi's Golden Age

IN THIS ISSUE

New,
Original
Short
Stories



Timeless
Classics
by the
Masters

GRATITUDE

By John Bowers

10 PAGES

ANDROMEDA CALLING

By Charles A Cornell

26 PAGES

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THE CALLISTO CONSPIRACY

By Frederik Pohl

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THE CREATURES THAT TIME FORGOT

by Ray Bradbury

36 PAGES

PIPER IN THE WOODS

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BECOMING RAY BRADBURY

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a Favorite Author

Lloyd Fradkin

COLUMNS

**CONTEST WINNER
ANNOUNCEMENT!**

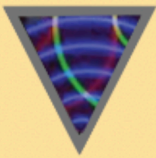
FROM THE HELM

Your Editor, on our
FIRST ISSUE

Dave Scott

Why We Exist.

There's a gold mine of fantastic science fiction in the old magazines of the mid-20th Century, but much of it can only be read by viewing "scans" of the original old magazines, with their squinty text, multiple columns, and faded pages. The Interocitor is here to bring these classics back to life in a format that's easy to read on modern, digital devices.



ICE PLANET
Carl Selwyn

A stolen secret, a mysterious woman, a person high in the government—it had all the angles. Then Senator Trexel was acquitted, Molly Borden confessed. Now she was journeying to a life sentence on the penal planet.

"Too bad she burned Adison's plans when they trapped her." It was Ricker's self-appointed traveling companion again.

EASY!

"We lost the resources of four worlds by that little trick," Bill agreed.

"The police found enough in the ashes to convince them it was the plans." He smiled to himself stightly, like someone who expected something but wasn't quite sure he could count on it. Ricker glanced up, then stiffened erect.

The Martian stood in the aisle beside the detective and the woman. He stared calmly over his shoulder at Ricker and the sourdough and in his right hand was a pistol leveled generally at them both.

"Please be very quiet," his lips moved in soft, even tones. Then without taking his snaky eyes off Ricker he spoke to the woman. "The key is in his left vest pocket," he said. "We'll take a small boat and drop out of this before the pilots can be warned."

HARD.

"We lost the resources of four worlds by that little trick." Bill

RICKER stared like he was watching

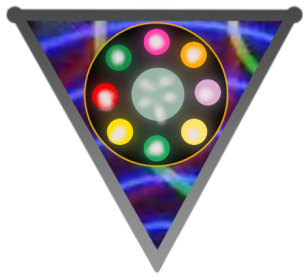
EXQUISITE *Vintage* SCI-FI



CLICK HERE TO VISIT

INVASIONWARE!





Our Subscription Contest Winner!

**Congratulations to
William H. Challans**

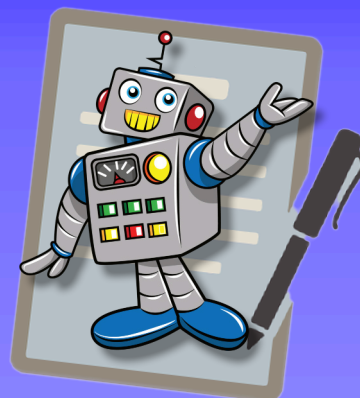
Littleton, Colorado



William's name was drawn from among over 500 other initial subscribers to *The Interocitor*. His choice of classic sci-fi figurine, "The Rhedosaurus from 20 Million Miles to Earth" will be custom made for him by our volunteer 3D artist, John Watson. Thanks to John for this wonderful contribution of his time and talent!

Thanks to This Issue's Contributing Writers

We Couldn't do it Without You!



EDITOR

Dane Scott

After 20 years in radio, Dane snipped the cord in '96 and went full time as freelance voiceover guy. He also developed a radio automation system.

Now semi-retired, Dane still does voiceovers, coaches others on voiceover, and was recently hired as the voice of "Kup" (an Autobot) for a Transformers video game. He manages and writes for Facebook groups like "Keep Watching the Skies" (classic sci-fi), "BoomTown," a group for baby boomers, and is Founder/Editor of *The Interocitor*.

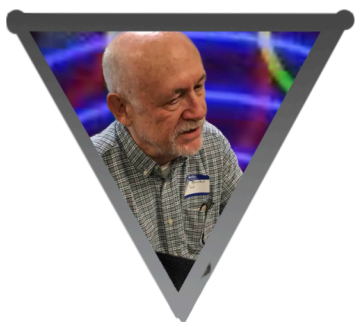


AUTHOR

Charles A. Cornell

When he's not trying to survive the chaos of everyday life, Charles is dreaming up all kinds of crazy fiction. To say he has an overactive imagination is an understatement.

Charles specializes in science fiction, science fantasy, dieselpunk, and steampunk though he's known for writing an award-winning mystery thriller too. His goal is to thrill and amaze his readers with dynamic plots, unusual twists, interesting characters, and worlds of wonder.



AUTHOR

John Bowers

John Bowers began his first “novel” at age 13. It took him nine months and was only 30,000 words, but he finished it. Before he graduated high school, he wrote four more. In middle age, he rediscovered his dream, and began writing again, including “A Vow to Sophia,” the first published book of “The Fighter Queen saga.” Bowers is married and lives in California with his wife and three adult children. He is a computer programmer by profession, but a “Born Novelist” by birth.



AUTHOR

Lloyd Fradkin

Lloyd was born in 1946 Los Angeles, met his future wife Irene when he was ten and she was nine! After High School, spent four-years during Vietnam aboard the U.S.S. Shangri-La CVA-38, stationed in Naples, Italy. Afterwards, he worked at KCBD-TV in Lubbock, Texas, spent 30 years with the United States Postal Service and now write his own movie and tv blog, *The House of Fradkin-Stein*. He and Irene have a lovely daughter and two granddaughters.



JOIN US!

You're Next

If you're a short story writer, contact us through our [volunteer page](#) and tell us about one or more stories you'd like us to consider for use in a future issue of *The Interocitor*. Remember that, for our magazine, stories should look and feel like those written in the mid-20th century, without reference to modern things like cellphones and “Starbucks.” Also in keeping with the storytelling of that era, they should not contain sexual scenes, vulgarity, or swearing.



[FLEET COMMANDER DANE] Report FROM THE HELM

Last year in my Facebook group, "Keep Watching the Skies," I began a series of articles and posts about the magazines that came out in the mid 20th Century during the "Golden Age of Science Fiction." The stories in the magazines of that era were gold mines of creativity, written in many cases by authors who would ultimately become among the most respected science fiction writers of all time.

During my exploration of the genre, I discovered impressively large collections of the old magazines, lovingly scanned and converted into PDFs for download. But reading them was challenging at best. Their yellowed pages and text were dimmed with age, and the formatting, designed for the printed page, didn't translate well to the screen.

HE had been driving over a straight, empty white highway, his headlights probing ahead, the darkness receding endlessly before him. His speedometer read seventy-five. It felt like forty. Far down the road, he saw headlights approaching, the first in hours.

Blaine was returning to New York after a week's vacation at his cabin on Chesapeake Bay. He had fished and swum and dozed in the sun on the rough planks of his dock. One day he sailed his sloop to Oxford and attended a dance at the yacht club that night. He met a silly, pert-nosed girl in a

In spite of his title, there were few yachts for Blaine to design. Old Tom Mattison took care of the conventional cruising boats. His brother Rolf, known as the Wizard of Mystic, had an international reputation for his ocean-racing sailboats and fast one-designs. So what was there for a junior yacht designer to do?

Blaine drew layouts and deck plans, and handled promotion, advertising and publicity. It was responsible work and not without its satisfactions. But it was not yacht designing.

He knew he should strike out

The "Human Interface"

To give you an example of the problems we encounter reading old printed material on a digital device, have a look at the example above. As you can see, it's in two columns, and the text is small. In order to read it, one must zoom in on one column at a time. So we zoom to the left column and follow it down to the bottom of the page, then scroll back up, slide over the right column, and start crawling down that side. Now, we move to the next page and start the process over. It becomes an open question whether the thrill of the story is worth the amount of effort involved.

It got me thinking how nice it would be if some of these sci-fi masterpieces could be reformatted in such a way that they would maintain some of the style of the originals, but with better readability.

The Interocitor displays stories in a larger font and in a single column, so there's no difficulty reading them on any device that's larger than a phone (if you want to try reading books on a phone, you have our sympathy). And, because it's distributed in PDF format, it's universally readable on desktop and laptop computers, tablets, and e-reading devices like Kindle, Kobo, and Nook.

To keep some of the flavor of the original publications, we're using an older-fashioned-looking (but still clearly readable) typeface in the stories themselves, and we're going with black and white "halftone" illustrations of the kind that were common in the classic sci-fi magazines. So the only thing you're losing here is the squinty, distracting reading experience.

As for the content, we're a "best of" digest of hand-picked public domain classics from the sci-fi magazines of the 1930s through the 1960s. To these, we're adding some newer stories by current authors who write in similar style, and who have been kind enough to grant us permission to publish their works here.

For Free and For Fun

This is a labor of love. We charge nothing for it, and we solicit no paid advertising in it. The few ads you see are just a thank-you gesture to the people who have contributed their talents to our magazine. We give them each an opportunity to advertise their work here, if they have something they'd like to promote such as books they've written, or art or other products they have for sale.

G-Rated

There are plenty of places where readers can find swearing, vulgarity, and sexy content. We've made a conscious decision to be different. So, while the original pulp sci-fi magazines had a reputation for using exploitative imagery to draw readers, we won't be doing that here, out of a sense of decency, and respect of our female readers

Why the Name, "The Interocitor?"

"Interocitor" was the name of a device first described in the Raymond F. Jones story, "The Alien Machine," in a 1949 edition of "Thrilling Wonder

Stories" magazine. The story was released in book form in 1951, then as the movie, "This Island Earth" in 1955. The triangle symbol you see throughout our magazine is a nod to the Interocitor's display terminal as it appeared in the film. To this day, I can't see that screen without hearing, in my mind, the sound it made as it began displaying the whirling lines that indicated it was coming to life.

Our "Golden Age" Focus



It may seem strange that our masthead says, "New and Classic Stories From Sci-Fi's Golden Age." After all, how can the new stories we include in our publication be considered to be from science fiction's "Golden Age?" The reasoning is that the authors whose new stories we choose to publish (alongside the classics) are required to be written in a similar style to the 1930s-1960s. So they must not contain obscenities or innuendo, and must be "era neutral;" meaning they don't use modern day catch phrases, or terms like "Internet," "cellphone," and "Starbucks." That helps to give our magazine's overall reading experience more continuity.

It's worth mentioning we fully expect many of our readers to be of a "golden age" as well, which is another good argument for the uber-easy reading experience we provide. But I genuinely hope we reach more than just the older crowd. If you love science fiction, regardless of your age, I think you'll find a lot to love in the unique and highly creative stories featured here.

Getting Around

You might notice that, unlike traditional magazines, we don't show page numbers next to the stories listed in our Table of Contents. That's because they aren't needed. Each article or story can be accessed by just clicking (or tapping) on its title.

When you've finished a story, you can jump back to the Table of Contents using the little icon you'll find at the end of the story. In addition, you can also jump back to the TOC from **any page in the magazine** by clicking or

tapping on, “The Interocitor” (footer text) at the bottom of every page.

Next to each story title in the Table of Contents, we show its length in pages. That way, you can choose whether you want to read a quickie, or something longer, depending on the mood you’re in and how much time you have.

Serialization

Occasionally, we’ll have a story that’s too long to fit comfortably in one issue. When that happens, we’ll break it into two or more segments and “serialize” it across multiple issues. This is in the best tradition of the old science fiction magazines, where story serialization was a regular occurrence. Sometimes, entire books were first published serialized in that way. There’s actually an example of that here. The story in this issue by Ray Bradbury will be presented in two parts, continued next time.

Interactivity

One benefit a digital publication like this has is its ability to provide links to resources beyond itself. That lets us tie in other resources like our [Facebook group](#), interesting articles, additional stories, and other fun stuff.

Feedback

In this little introduction to our magazine, I’ve described what we’re trying to do, why. After you’ve read this issue, tell us how we’re doing! Please feel free to [email me](#) with any feedback as to how we can make your experience even better.

YOU Are Our Circulation Department!

Every aspect of this is a volunteer effort by lovers of classic science fiction, and I’d like to enroll *you* in this effort. Please share this link far and wide, and encourage friends and members of groups to go there and subscribe to this free publication. <https://www.theinterocitor.org>

New Writers Welcome

If you have written short form sci-fi you think would be a good fit with *The Interocitor*, you can [visit this page](#) to contact us and receive updates on the goings on behind the scenes, through our “*Interocitor Insider*”

newsletter.

Nuff Said!

I hope you enjoy the new and classic stories we present here in an eyeball-friendly format that will let you immerse yourself in the adventure...rather than being distracted by the interface!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Dane Scott". The signature is stylized with a large, looping 'D' and a cursive 'Scott'.

Dane Scott, Editor

The Interocitor



Special Thanks!

Thanks to these special people

John Watson, 3D Design, Contest Prize

Alexander Smith, Technical Assistance

Jerry Fuchs, Cartoonist

Lyza Herman, Story Research

Ben Taylor, Story Research

Mark Nelson, Story Research

Jason Karpf, Proofreading

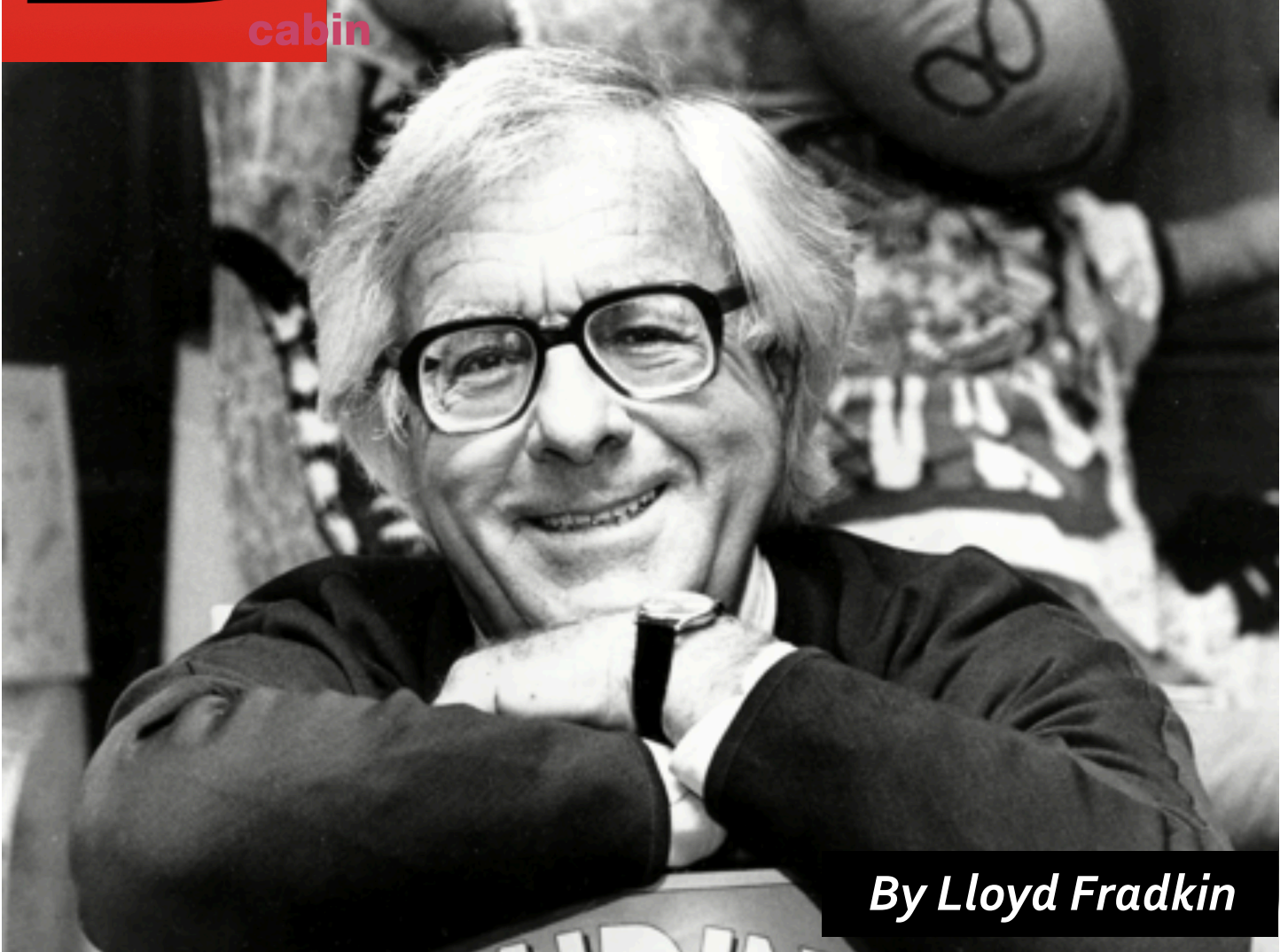
John Sachanda, Proofreading

This first issue was developed over a considerable period of time, so we could have easily forgotten to credit important people who helped to make it a reality. If we have accidentally left your name out, please let us know, and we'll be certain to include it in the next issue!

B

cabin

ECOMING RADBURY



By Lloyd Fradkin

Ray Douglas Bradbury was born on August 22, 1920, in his real “Green Town, Illinois,” Waukegan. His mother, Esther was a major fan of actor Douglas Fairbanks, and used the original on-screen “Zorro’s” first name for her son’s middle name. His father Leonard worked as a power and telephone lineman. The availability of work went up and down, and would lead the family to move twice to Tucson, Arizona and back to Waukegan.

While the family was living in Tucson for the second time, the circus-and-carnival-loving Ray saw a man billed as “Mr. Electrico”. According to Ray, the performer’s electric touch changed him. He went home and, “within days I started to write. And I’ve never stopped”.



Bradbury, Age 3

With his father again out of work, the family moved to Los Angeles in 1934. That move gave 14-year-old Ray Bradbury his first chance at professional writing, for the “George Burns and Gracie Allen Radio Program.”



Posing with George Burns

It would be another two-years before Ray became truly obsessed with science fiction stories and was being mentored by his neighbor, Bob Olsen. Bob had created the term “Space Marines,” and wrote primarily for “Amazing Stories.” This friendship led the young Bradbury to submitting his writing to different fanzines. That, in turn, led to the founding of the oldest science fiction group in the United States, “The Los Angeles Science Fiction Society,” and a lasting friendship with another young writer, Forest J. Ackerman.

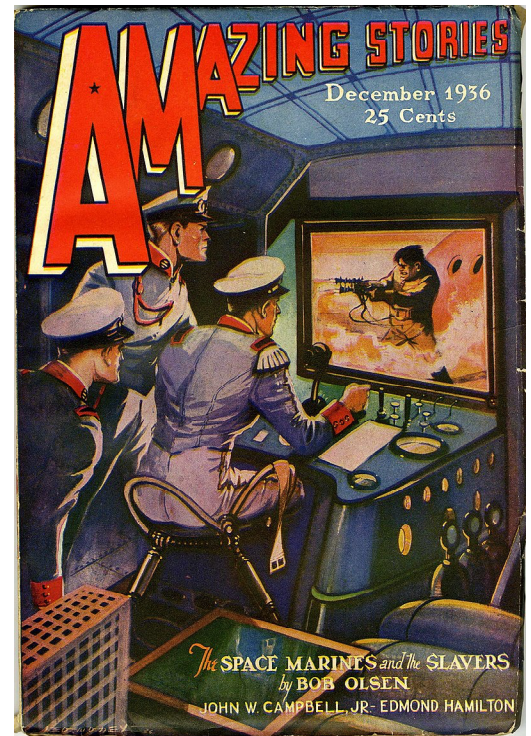
The group met on the top floor of “Clifton’s Cafeteria” in downtown Los Angeles for decades. Not only might you have found Ray and “4e” there, but the third member of their “three-musketeers,” Ray Harryhausen.

It was “4e’s” own fanzine, “Imaginations”, that in January 1938, saw the first published work of Ray Bradbury, “Hollerbochen’s Dilemma.” Inspired, the

young Ray Bradbury created his own fanzine, “FUTURIA FANTASIA”

On December 7, 1941, the naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, was attacked by the imperial Japanese navy, and the United States entered the Second World War. 21 year old Ray Douglas Bradbury reported for his physical, but his poor eyesight kept him out of military service.

However, it opened the possibility of becoming a full-time science fiction writer. Three years later, Ray’s writing took him to the cover of the same “Amazing Stories” his mentor had written for, with “Undersea Guardians”, in the December 1944 issue.



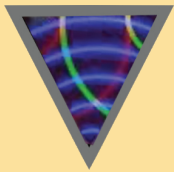
The Second World War was over and in 1947, Ray was seen prowling, or what a young clerk believed to be prowling, through the “Fowler Brother’s Bookstore” in downtown Los Angeles. Marguerite “Maggie” McClure was about to call the police about the young man she believed was about to steal a book. However, instead she wound up marrying her “prowler.”

Meeting his future wife wasn’t all that happened for Bradbury in 1947. In October 1947, August Derleth published a collection of 27-short-stories: Ray Bradbury's debut book, "Dark Carnival".

On May 4, 1950, “Dark Carnival” was followed by Ray’s “Seminal work”, “THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES.

The following quote is found on <https://raybradbury.com/>:

“The thing that makes me happy is that I know that on Mars, two hundred years from now, my books are going to be read. They’ll be up on dead Mars with no atmosphere. And late at night, with a flashlight, some little boy is going to peek under the covers and read *The Martian Chronicles* on Mars.”



GRATITUDE

By John Bowers

Even after sixty-five years, the gun was still there.

Wind and weather and salt spray had ruined it, of course. Had fused the internal mechanism as firmly as a welder's torch might have; the heavy barrel, factory-perforated for air-cooled operation, stood rusted and scarred from the elements, but no one could doubt it was once a deadly weapon.



The monument wasn't built until twenty-five years after the war. It had taken decades for the people of Rhodes to recover, rebuild, and start on the return to prosperity. Only then had someone thought it might be nice to memorialize the man who made it all possible, and so the bronze statue had been commissioned.

A sculptor, someone with grace and imagination, was located, and he produced a masterpiece. The actual gun itself had been incorporated into the piece—the statue's right hand held the gun grip, as if in the act of firing; his left arm hung useless, as it had toward the end of the battle. Bleeding, all but shot away. Empty shell casings littered the base of the

sculpture and to the gunner's left sat the little boy, his name still a mystery sixty-five years later. The boy, perhaps a war orphan, had lifted the ammunition packs and inserted them into the side of the gun to keep it firing; in the sculpture, he sat on his knees with both arms stretched upward, ammo pack in hand.

The gunner's name was Artillo Grande; he had given his life to save his country from the Spooks and every citizen knew his name. Books were written, movies made, and songs sung.

It was enough to bring tears to one's eyes.

Every year, the City of Rhodos held a celebration of the Final Battle, as it came to be known. Every year the mayor, the city fathers, and sometimes the governor, gave speeches about the heroism of the man and boy depicted in the sculpture.

Every year, for nearly half a century.

But this year was special. This was a landmark anniversary, sixty-five years since the battle. Bands had arrived from all over the planet to perform; the celebration would last all day, with fireworks after dark.

Snappy music, martial in nature, drifted on the breeze. It was a gorgeous day at the Promontory. The sun was bright and warm, but an ocean breeze gusted across the crest, keeping the temperature down. Four hundred feet below, the water in the bay glittered with sun-diamonds, dotted almost to the horizon with sailboats.

The bandstand had been set up fifty yards back from the Promontory's edge. Facing it were hundreds of chairs, temporary seating for visitors; the speeches, the bands, everything happened on the bandstand. Only those with tickets could get into one of the chairs, but the sound system was

superb and even those on the perimeter could see and hear everything.

An old man, his clothing worn and thin, sat just inside the main gate as the crowds streamed in, tickets in hand. He knew he looked out of place. In spite of the mild climate he wore a heavy coat, threadbare though it was, and dirty cloth shoes. He hadn't bathed in a while because he rarely had access to the facilities down the hill, and even then had to pay for the privilege...and every coin he managed to beg was precious...

...so he didn't smell too good, either.

Sitting in the shade of an umbrella table, he tried to stay out of the way, but children stumbled over him from time to time as their parents dragged them along. He didn't mind—it was good to see children again, even though the parents scowled down at him as if his very existence somehow ruined their holiday.

The breeze felt good. The music made him happy. The mouth-watering aromas of roast meat and seashell soup set his stomach juices to flowing. Later he would check the garbage cans—big crowds always wasted a lot of food—and if he could raid the bins before the cleanup crews emptied them, he would eat well tonight.

But that was for later. The old man knew this might be the last time he would be able to witness the celebration. He didn't want to miss a minute of it. He wasn't getting any younger.

To this day, no one knew where the Spooks had originated, or exactly who they were. Certainly they had advanced technology (Rhodos hadn't even developed space travel), but their previous conquests must have been easy ones, because in spite of the horrible destruction they wrought, they were unable to conquer the planet.

Space flight or no, one thing Rhodos did have was superior weapons.

And the men to use them.

Even so, it had been a close thing. The Spooks attacked on fifty fronts, dropping armies all over the planet. Cities were bombed and many laid to waste; millions were killed. The fighting was intense, brutal, and barbaric. The Spooks took no prisoners. Neither did the Rhodians. Scattered armies fought to the death on both sides, leaving few survivors to tell the tales. Only the documentary footage shot on the battlefield, streamed in real-time to secure video vaults, told the stories of those desperate fights.

The most famous was the Battle of the Promontory. The Final Battle.

It had been a last-ditch effort by the Spooks to break the stalemate. With their armies tied down on fifty fronts, they committed their final reserves in what was supposed to be an end-run—a direct assault on the capital city. Had it succeeded, the armies in the field would have become redundant, leading to a Spook victory.

Powerful batteries mounted on the peaks and promontories surrounding the city were its only defense.

And the Spooks had attacked with everything they had left.

Fighting lasted more than thirty hours. High-speed space fighters hammered the gun- and missile batteries, taking them out one by one, but with heavy losses. When the fighters were finally expended, only one battery remained, and most of its crew had been killed. For years afterward, historians conjectured whether the Spooks realized the gun was still active, but no one alive could know for sure. What was certain was that, when the Spooks tried to bring their transports in to unload troops, that single defensive position had saved the planet.

Celebration began at noon. The entertainment came first and lasted until the sun had dropped low over the bay. Sixteen different bands from all over the globe: girls; four comedians; two jugglers; six acrobats; and for the children, actors dressed as cartoon characters romped through the crowd to the delight of giggling toddlers. Above it all, supported by a stiff breeze, sixty-five Rhodian flags snapped taut and colorful, patriotic symbols that celebrated the victory so many years ago.

As the sun began to set, speeches were delivered. The mayor. The city fathers. The governor. The general of the Rhodian Army.

And finally, the Guest of Honor.

Her name was Estrella Grande, age twenty-five. Young and blond and stunning, she had been repeatedly named the Most Beautiful Woman on the planet, her shining smile plastered across every fashion publication for over a decade. Some people wondered why she was so popular—she didn't sing or dance or strip, didn't act, performed no magic tricks, didn't really do anything...yet she was more recognizable than any woman in history.

And she was rich.

Her only claim to fame was her direct lineage from the soldier in the sculpture. She was Artillo Grande's great-granddaughter.

She did have one talent, however—scandal. From her early teens she had managed to capture headlines for a series of misadventures: shoplifting, drunk in public, civil disobedience, consorting with married men...the list went on. It was a rare week that she didn't steal a headline for yet more questionable behavior.

Oddly, the public adored her.

Many of those in the crowd had come not for the patriotic celebration, but to see the great hero's descendant in the flesh. And she didn't disappoint.

Accompanied by four burly bodyguards, she swept onto the bandstand in a shiny sequined dress, her long yellow hair brushed and gleaming almost to her waist. When she waved at the crowd, men cheered and young girls screamed. The adoration that washed over her was almost physical, and she ate it up with a smile, blowing kisses with both hands.

When the crowd finally quieted and settled back into their seats, Estrella stepped up to the microphones and, letting her smile relax into a more somber expression, began to speak.

It was a beautiful night on the Promontory—or had been, until the first wave of Spook attacks. The sky was black, moonless, glittering with stars; a stiff ocean breeze gusted over the cliffs and washed away the heat of the day. Artillo Grande—Artie to his friends—slumped beside his gun emplacement, his left arm shattered and bleeding. Evacuation was impossible at the moment, so a medical officer had stemmed the blood flow somewhat and bound his arm to his torso to keep it immobile. Even the bodies of his gun crew couldn't be removed yet.

Artie was on his own.

Almost.

On paper, the gun required four men—one to load, one to target, one to fire, and one to operate the ammunition conveyer that ran from the underground magazine five hundred yards away. Only Artie remained alive...except for the refugee kid who'd been hanging around for the past few days. Artie still had no idea where he'd come from, and the kid was evasive, but right now it didn't matter. The kid's constant chatter kept him alert, kept him from passing out.

A dozen impact craters surrounded the position, love notes left by the

Spooks, but the gun itself was untouched. Even with one arm, Artie could target and fire all by himself, but loading the weapon was another matter. The ammo boxes were heavy, unwieldy, and required two good arms to lift.

The kid was young, maybe ten or twelve, but he was strong and willing.

“You really should get out of here, kid,” Artie grunted through the waves of pain that still radiated through his body from the shattered arm.

“They’re coming back. They won’t stop until they’ve taken us out.”

But the kid was stubborn. He shook his head.

“You can get them, Artie! You’ve already shot down twenty-three. You can kill them all.”

Artie managed a weak laugh.

“You don’t get it, kid. They have thousands more. And we’re the only gun left in action. Just look around.”

The kid did look around. In every direction, fires raged. More than a hundred defensive positions scattered across the hills and promontories surrounding the bay had been obliterated, many still burning. Two underground magazines had exploded as well. But equally impressive were the wrecks of Spook fighters that burned even brighter. Hundreds of them, maybe thousands. Most of the guns, before they were knocked out, had brought down enemy ships. The Spooks had badly underestimated Rhodian firepower and the determination of the men who wielded it.

“I got nowhere to go, Artie,” the kid said. “I got nobody left. The Spooks killed them all.”

Artie sighed, weak from blood loss and weary beyond belief. He lowered his head for a moment, then looked up to continue scanning the sky.

“Okay, then. I guess it’s you and me, huh? It’s up to us.”

The kid grinned and laid a hand on Artie’s back. “We can do it, Artie. You and me.”

“You know how to load?”

“Yep. I watched the others do it.”

“Okay. Stack up as many ammo boxes as you can. When they come back, try to keep the gun from running dry. I’ll conserve ammunition as much as I can to give you loading time.”

“Okay.” The kid turned and started to crawl away.

“One more thing.”

“Yeah?”

Artie lowered his head and leaned forward until his military ID dangled free of his neck.

“Take my ID tag. If I don’t survive this, I want you to give it to my family. I have a baby son and I want him to have it. Deliver it personally. Don’t trust anyone else with it.”

The kid reached for the thin chain and lifted it over Artie’s head. He stared at the ID for a moment, then slipped it into his pocket.

“Okay, Artie. I’ll take care of it. You can count on me.”

Artie grinned. “I never doubted it.”

Twenty minutes later, the kid paused to get his breath. He had retrieved fifty ammo boxes from the conveyer and stacked them next to the gun position. The boxes lay open with the magazine cannisters ready to be inserted into the weapon.

“That’s all I can find right now,” he said to Artie. “Will it be enough?”

Artie nodded. “It’ll have to be. Take a break. You’ve earned it.”

Just ten minutes later, the next wave of enemy ships streaked out of the sky. This time they seemed bigger, slower... transports. Maybe the Spooks believed all the guns had been silenced, maybe they were just out of fighters. Either way...

“You ready, kid?” Artie gripped the gun control with his one good hand.

“Ready, Artie. We can do this!”

“Okay. Here we go.”

I want to thank all of you for coming,” Estrella Grande told the crowd in her husky, sultry voice. “I’m only sorry my great-grandfather can’t be here to witness your love and devotion for his heroism.”

A brief cheer erupted, then faded to respectful silence. As she spoke, Estrella turned slowly to address the entire crowd, ignoring no one. Her beautiful trademark smile was gone now, earnestness beamed out of her eyes.

“I never met my great-grandfather,” she continued. “Artillo Grande was born in the Distant Hills region of Rhodos, the son of tree-berry farmers. He grew up poor, almost in poverty. His family worked hard to provide the most basic necessities. He never got to attend school, but he learned the values of hard work, honesty, loyalty, and most important of all, love for his fellow citizens. These values sustained him as he grew into a young man, and when he was old enough, he joined the Army in the hopes of getting an education and improving not only his life, but his family’s lives as well.

“And then...”

Estrella faltered for the first time. She lowered her head, a hand over her mouth. For just a moment she stood silent, then bit back a sob (which the sound system picked up anyway), and caught her breath. When she looked up, tears beaded her lashes; the waning sunlight reflected off them like glittering diamonds.

“And then the war came. The Spooks attacked. By then my great-grandfather had a baby son, just five weeks old. He fought not only to protect Rhodos, but his wife and child as well. And sixty-five years ago tonight, he gave his life in the most heroic battle in our history.”

Estrella wiped her eyes and hundreds of onlookers, moved by her passion, wept with her.

“This promontory, where we all stand right now, was devastated by enemy fire. Hundreds of men were killed, many more injured, but Great-Grandfather stayed at his gun, fighting off repeated attempts by the Spooks to land an invasion force. Sometime during the night he lost his left arm, leaving him badly wounded, barely alive, yet still he fought on.”

She wiped her eyes again, then swept the crowd with her gaze.

“You’ve all seen the sculpture. You’ve seen the little boy who loaded his gun for him. To this day we don’t know the identity of that little boy; after the battle ended, he was gone, but we know he was there because of the auto-camera footage. Some people think he was a refugee who happened to end up in the middle of a battle. Others believe he might have been an angel who came to help out in a time of crisis.

“Whoever he was, I want to thank him. If I could meet him, I would throw my arms around him, hug him, hold him, and express my gratitude for his selfless service, for not abandoning my great-grandfather.

Unfortunately, I will probably never know who he was, or if he is even alive today.

“But if he is, whoever he is—and I hope he can hear my voice—I love him!”

When the last Spook ship had plummeted into the bay, the kid sat shivering, panting with adrenaline. The ocean breeze dried his sweat and filled his lungs with fresh oxygen. The sky had grown dark again, except for the stars. No more flaming streaks of burning Spook ships, no more concussive explosions. The cool night breeze was the only sound, but his ears rang from all the gunfire and he couldn't hear it.

“We did it, Artie! You did it!”

Artie slumped at the gun control, weak and dizzy. He managed a grin.

“You did it, kid. Without you...” The kid crawled closer and laid a hand on Artie's good shoulder. The ground around them was pooled with blood.

“Artie, you okay? Hang on! I'll go find help.”

But Artie shook his head. “You need to get out of here. Don't let them find you.”

“But—”

“I'll be okay. Just go. You're not authorized to be here, and the officers won't understand.”

“Why not?”

“It's just the way the army works. No civilians in a combat zone. Trust me, you don't want them to find you.”

The kid sat in indecision for several minutes, until he realized Artie had

stopped breathing. He tried to rouse him, but Artie had lost too much blood.

His heart had stopped.

So the kid left. Over the years he made several attempts to contact Artie's family and deliver the ID tag, but the family had moved and the kid had no means to find them. His own fortunes waxed and waned, and eventually he lost everything. He ended up homeless.

But not hopeless.

Someday...

Maybe.

Patriotic music swelled and the massive crowd came to its feet with a cheer. Estrella Grande's smile returned and she strutted across the bandstand, waving and blowing kisses to her admirers. The sun had set and the sky blossomed with colorful fireworks, reminding those of a certain age how that same sky had looked during the Spook attack. Chemical smoke drifted on the evening breeze.

When it was over and the crowd began to disperse, Estrella Grande spoke quietly to her bodyguards. "Get me out of here, and don't let anybody touch me!"

The four burly men formed a box around her and began pushing people aside as they made for the exit. As they reached the outer gate, an elderly man in shabby clothing approached. The bodyguards were sweeping the crowd with their eyes, and as the first two passed him, the old man grabbed Estrella by the arm.

"Excuse me... I need to—"

Startled, Estrella Grande screamed.

“Ew! Ew! Stinky old man! Stinky old man! Get away!!”

One of the bodyguards gave him a shove.

“Out of the way, jerk! Don’t touch the lady!”

“But I—”

The guard shoved him again.

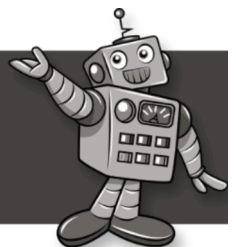
“Get lost! Or I’ll have you arrested!”

“You don’t understand. I have something—”

The guard slugged him in the face, driving him backward where he fell, smashing his head against a stone bench. The old man fell unconscious, and moments later breathed his last. As the air rattled out of him, his right hand relaxed and the fingers opened, revealing the metal ID tag he was holding.

It had been a glorious day of celebration, a celebration of gratitude. Though it made her skin crawl, Estrella Grande had fulfilled her contract with the city and now she could get on with her life. She and her bodyguards made it safely back to her luxury vehicle.

*"Let's go back
up and read
another one!"*



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RULE**

IN

**BOOM!
TOWN**

**Fun & Fashion
For Boomers & Xers**

**CLICK NOW
TO GET
"SWAGGED!"**

I'M BUSY
*Minding
my Own*
RETIREMENT

AGED



*TO
Perfection*

I AM A
SENIOR

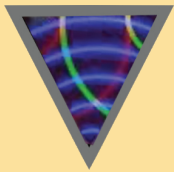


MY AGE IS MY
SUPERPOWER

Sēnager

LIKE A TEENAGER, EXCEPT

- I can afford the stuff I wanted then.
- No curfew.
- No homework
- Guaranteed allowance.
- And...no acne!



THE CALLISTO CONSPIRACY

Frederik Pohl

Revolt was flaring on Callisto, and Peter Duane held the secret that would make the uprising a success or failure. Yet he could make no move, could favor no side, his memory was gone, he didn't know for whom he fought.

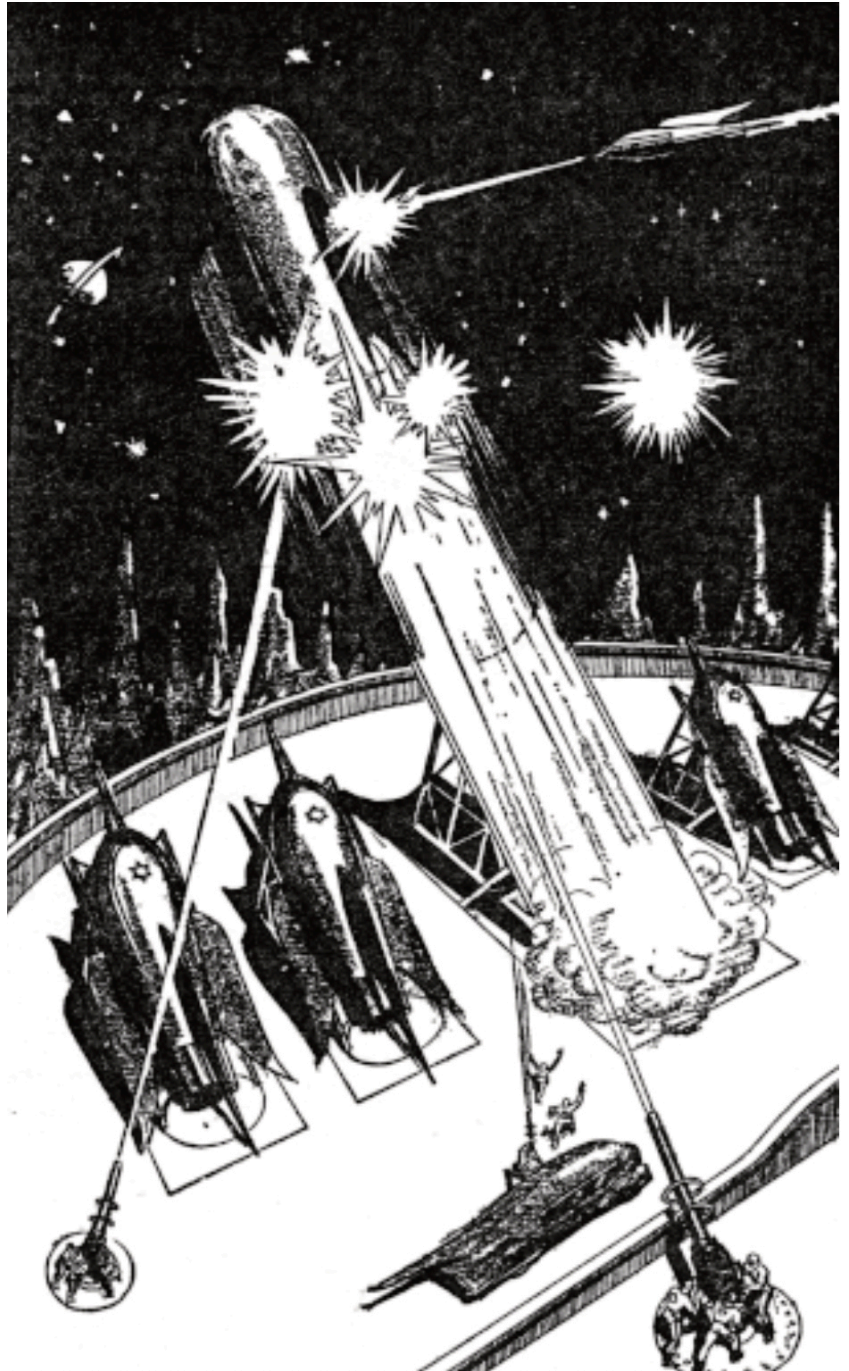
Duane's hand flicked to his waist and hung there, poised. His dis-gun remained undrawn.

The tall, white-haired man, Stevens, smiled.

"You're right, Duane," he said. "I could blast you, too. Nobody would win that way, so let's leave the guns where they are."

The muscles twitched in Peter Duane's cheeks, but his voice, when it came, was controlled. "Don't think we're going to let this go," he said. "We'll take it up with Andrias tonight. We'll see whether you can cut me out!"

The white-haired man's smile faded. He stepped forward, one hand



bracing him against the thrust of the rocket engines underneath, holding to the guide rail at the side of the ship's corridor.

He said, "Duane, Andrias is your boss, not mine. I'm a free lance; I work for myself. When we land on Callisto tonight I'll be with you when you turn over, shall I say, our `cargo`, over to him. And I'll collect my fair share of the proceeds. That's as far as it goes. I take no orders from him."

A heavy-set man in blue appeared at the end of the connecting corridor. He was moving fast, but stopped short when he saw the two men.

"Hey!" he said. "Change of course, get to your cabins." He seemed about to walk up to them, then reconsidered and hurried off. Neither man paid any attention.

Duane said, "Do I have to kill you?" It was only a question as he asked it, without threatening.

A muted alarm bell sounded through the P.A. speakers, signaling a one-minute warning. The white-haired man cocked his eyebrow.

"Not at all," he said. He took the measure of his slim, red-headed opponent. Taller, heavier, older, he was still no more uncompromisingly belligerent than Duane, standing there. "Not at all," he repeated. "Just take your ten thousand and let it go at that. Don't make trouble. Leave Andrias out of our private argument."

"Confound you!" Duane flared. "I was promised fifty thousand. I need that money. Do you think, "

"Forget what I think," Stevens said, his voice clipped and angry. "I don't care about fairness, Duane, except to myself. I've done all the work on this, I've supplied the goods. My price is set, a hundred thousand Earth dollars. What Andrias promised you is no concern of mine. The fact is that, after I've taken my share, there's only ten thousand left. That's all you get!"

Duane stared at him a long second, then nodded abruptly. "I was right the first time," he said. "I'll 'have' to kill you!"

* * * * *

Already his hand was streaking toward the grip of his dis-gun, touching it, drawing it forth. But the white-haired man was faster. His arms swept up and pinioned Duane, holding him impotent.

"Don't be a fool," he grated. "Duane, "

The P.A. speaker rattled, blared something unintelligible. Neither man heard it. Duane lunged forward into the taller man's grip, sliding down to the floor. The white-haired man grappled furiously to keep his hold on Peter's gun arm, but Peter was slipping away. Belatedly, Stevens went for his own gun.

He was too late. Duane's was out and leveled at him.

"Now` will you listen to reason?" Duane panted. But he halted, and the muzzle of his weapon wavered. The floor swooped and surged beneath him as the thrust of the mighty jets was cut off. Suddenly there was no gravity. The two men, locked together, floated weightlessly out to the center of the corridor.

"Course change!" gasped white-haired Stevens. "Good God!"

The ship had reached the mid point of its flight. The bells had sounded, warning every soul on it to take shelter, to strap themselves in their pressure bunks against the deadly stress of acceleration as the ship reversed itself and began to slow its headlong plunge into Callisto. But the two men had not heeded.

The small steering rockets flashed briefly. The men were thrust bruisingly against the side of the corridor as the rocket spun lazily on its axis. The side jets flared once more to halt the spin, when the one-eighty turn was completed, and the men were battered against the opposite wall, still weightless, still clinging to each other, still struggling.

Then the main-drive bellowed into life again, and the ship began to battle against its own built-up acceleration. The corridor floor rose up with blinking speed to smite them,

And the lights went out in a burst of crashing pain for Peter Duane.

* * * * *

Someone was talking to him. Duane tried to force an eye open to see who it was, and failed. Something damp and clinging was all about his face, obscuring his vision. But the voice filtered in.

"Open your mouth," it said. "Please, Peter, open your mouth. You're all right. Just swallow this."

It was a girl's voice. Duane was suddenly conscious that a girl's light hand was on his shoulder. He shook his head feebly.

The voice became more insistent. "Swallow this," it said. "It's only a stimulant, to help you throw off the shock of your, accident. You're all right, otherwise."

Obediently he opened his mouth, and choked on a warm, tingly liquid. He managed to swallow it, and lay quiet as deft feminine hands did something to his face. Suddenly light filtered through his closed eyelids, and cool air stirred against his damp face.

He opened his eyes. A slight red-headed girl in white nurse's uniform was standing there. She stepped back a pace, a web of wet gauze bandage in her hands, looking at him.

"Hello," he whispered. "You, where am I?"

"In the sick bay," she said. "You got caught out when the ship changed course. Lucky you weren't hurt, Peter. The man you were with, the old, white-haired one, Stevens, wasn't so lucky. He was underneath when the jets went on. Three ribs broken, his lung was punctured. He died in the other room an hour ago."

Duane screwed his eyes tight together and grimaced. When he opened them again there was alertness and clarity in them, but there was also bafflement.

"Girl," he said, "who are you? Where am I?"

"Peter!" There was shock and hurt in the tone of her voice. "I'm, don't you know me, Peter?"

Duane shook his head confusedly. "I don't know anything," he said. "I, I

don't even know my own name."

"Duane, Duane," a man's heavy voice said. "That won't wash. Don't play dumb on me."

"Duane?" he said. "Duane...." He swiveled his head and saw a dark, squat man frowning at him. "Who are you?" Peter asked.

The dark man laughed. "Take your time, Duane," he said easily. "You'll remember me. My name's Andrias. I've been waiting here for you to wake up. We have some business matters to discuss."

The nurse, still eyeing Duane with an odd bewilderment, said: "I'll leave you alone for a moment. Don't talk too much to him, Mr. Andrias. He's still suffering from shock."

"I won't," Andrias promised, grinning. Then, as the girl left the room, the smile dropped from his face.

"You play rough, Duane," he observed. "I thought you'd have trouble with Stevens. I didn't think you'd find it necessary to put him out of the way so permanently. Well, no matter. If you had to kill him, it's no skin off my nose. Give me a release on the merchandise. I've got your money here."

* * * * *

Duane waved a hand and pushed himself dizzily erect, swinging his legs over the side of the high cot. A sheet had been thrown over him, but he was fully dressed. He examined his clothing with interest, gray tunic, gray leather spaceman's boots. It was unfamiliar.

He shook his head in further confusion, and the motion burst within his skull, throbbing hotly. He closed his eyes until it subsided, trying to force his brain to operate, to explain to him where and what he was.

He looked at the man named Andrias.

"Nobody seems to believe me," he said, "but I really don't know what's going on. Things are moving too fast for me. Really, I, why, I don't even know my own name! My head, it hurts. I can't think clearly."

Andrias straightened, turned a darkly-suspicious look on Duane. "Don't play tricks on me," he said savagely. "I haven't time for them. I won't mince words with you. Give me a release on the cargo now, before I have to get rough. This is a lot more important to me than your life is."

"Go to the blazes," Duane said shortly. "I'm playing no tricks."

There was an instant's doubt in Andrias' eyes, then it flashed away. He bent closer, peered at Duane. "I almost think," he began.

Then he shook his head. "No," he said. "You're lying all right. You killed Stevens to get his share, and now you're trying to hold me up. That's your last chance that just went by, Duane. From now on, I'm running this show!"

He spun around and strode to the door, thrust it open. "Dakin!" he bellowed. "Reed!"

Two large, ugly men in field-gray uniforms, emblazoned with the shooting-star insignia of Callisto's League police, came in, looking to Andrias for instructions.

"Duane here is resisting arrest," Andrias said. "Take him along. We'll fix up the charges later."

"You can't do that," Duane said wearily. "I'm sick. If you've got something against me, save it. Wait till my head clears. I'm sure I can explain, "

"Explain, indeed." The dark man laughed. "If I wait, this ship will be blasting off for Ganymede within two hours. I'll wait, but so will the ship. It's not going anywhere till I give it clearance. I run Callisto; I'll give the orders here!"

II

Whoever this man Andrias was, thought Duane, he was certainly a man of importance on Callisto. As he had said, 'he' gave the orders.

The crew of the rocket made no objection when Andrias and his men took Duane off without a word. Duane had thought the nurse, who seemed a good enough sort, might have said something on his behalf. But she was out of sight as they left. A curt sentence to a gray-clad official on the blast field where the rocket lay, and the man nodded and hurried off, to tell the rocket's captain that the ship was being refused clearance indefinitely.

A long, powerful ground car slid up before them. Andrias got in front, while the two uniformed men shoved Duane into the back of the car, climbed in beside him. Andrias gave a curt order, and the car shot forward.

The driver, sitting beside Andrias, leaned forward and readied a hand under the dashboard. The high wail of a siren came instantly from the

car's roof, and what traffic was on the broad, straight highway into which they had turned pulled aside to let them race through.

Ahead lay the tall spires of a city. Graceful, hundreds of feet high, they seemed dreamlike yet somehow oddly familiar to Duane. Somewhere he had seen them before. He dragged deep into his mind, plumbing the cloudy, impenetrable haze that had settled on it, trying to bring forth the memories that he should have had. Amnesia, they called it; complete forgetting of the happenings of a lifetime. He'd heard of it, but never dreamed it could happen to him!

'My name, it seems, is Peter Duane', he thought. 'And they tell me that I killed a man!'

The thought was starkly incredible to him. A white-haired man, it had been; someone named Stevens. He tried to remember.

Yes, there had been a white-haired man. And there had been an argument. Something to do with money, with a shipment of goods that Stevens had supplied to Duane. There has even been talk of killing....

But, murder! Duane looked at his hands helplessly.

Andrias, up ahead, was turning around. He looked sharply at Duane, for a long second. An uncertainty clouded his eyes, and abruptly he looked forward again without speaking.

"Who's this man Andrias?" Duane whispered to the nearest guard.

The man stared at him. "Governor Andrias," he said, "is the League's deputy on Callisto. You know, the Earth-Mars League. They put Governor Andrias here to, well, to govern for them."

"League?" Duane asked, wrinkling his brow. He had heard something about a League once, yes. But it was all so nebulous....

The other guard stirred, leaned over. "Shut up," he said heavily. "You'll have plenty of chance for talking later."

* * * * *

But the chance was a long time in coming. Duane found himself, an hour later, still in the barred room into which he'd been thrust. The guards had brought him there, at Andrias' order, and left him. That had been all.

This was not a regular jail, Duane realized. It was more like a palace, something out of Earth's Roman Empire days, all white stone and frescoed walls. Duane wished for human companionship, particularly that of the nurse. Of all the people he'd met since awakening in that hospital bed, only she seemed warm and human. The others were brutal, deadly. It was too bad, Duane reflected, that he'd failed to remember her. She'd seemed hurt, and she had certainly known him by first name. But perhaps she would understand.

Duane sat down on a lumpy, sagging bed and buried his head in his hands. Dim ghosts of memory were wandering in his mind. He tried to conjure them into stronger relief, or to exorcise them entirely.

Somewhere, some time, a man had said to him, "Andrias is secretly arming the Callistan cutthroats for revolt against the League. He wants personal power, he's prepared to pay any price for it. He needs guns, Earth guns smuggled in through the League patrol. If he can wipe out the League police garrison, those who are loyal to the League, still,

instead of to Andrias, he can sit back and laugh at any fleet Earth and Mars can send. Rockets are clumsy in an atmosphere. They're helpless. And if he can arm enough of Callisto's rabble, he can't be stopped. That's why he'll pay for electron rifles with their weight in gold."

Duane could remember the scene clearly. Could almost see the sharp, aquiline face of the man who had spoken to him. But there memory stopped.

A fugitive recollection raced through his mind. He halted it, dragged it back, pinned it down....

They had stopped in Darkside, the spaceport on the side of Luna that keeps perpetually averted from Earth, as if the moon knows shame and wants to hide the rough and roaring dome city that nestles in one of the great craters. Duane remembered sitting in a low-ceilinged, smoke-heavy room, across the table from a tall man with white hair. Stevens!

"Four thousand electron rifles'," the man had said. "Latest government issue. Never mind how I got them; they're perfect. You know my price. Take it or leave it. And it's payable the minute we touch ground on Callisto."

There had been a few minutes of haggling over terms, then a handshake and a drink from a thin-necked flagon of pale-yellow liquid fire.

He and the white-haired man had gone out then, made their way by unfrequented side streets to a great windowless building. Duane remembered the white-hot stars overhead, shining piercingly through the great transparent dome that kept the air in the sealed city of Darkside, as they stood at the entrance of the warehouse and spoke in low tones to the man who answered their summons.

Then, inside. And they were looking at a huge chamber full of stacked fiber boxes, containing nothing but dehydrated dairy products and mining tools, by the stencils they bore. Duane had turned to the white-haired man with a puzzled question, and the man had laughed aloud.

He dragged one of the boxes down, ripped it open with the sharp point of a handling hook. Short-barreled, flare-mouthed guns rolled out, tumbling over the floor. Eight of them were in that one box, and hundreds of boxes all about. Duane picked one up, broke it, peered into the chamber where the tiny capsule of U-235 would explode with infinite violence when the trigger was pulled, spraying radiant death three thousand yards in the direction the gun was aimed....

And that memory ended.

Duane got up, stared at his haggard face in the cracked mirror over the bed. "They say I'm a killer," he thought. "Apparently I'm a gun-runner as well. Good lord, what am I not?"

His reflection, white, drawn face made all the more pallid by the red hair that blazed over it, stared back at him. There was no answer there. If only he could remember,

"All right, Duane." The deep voice of a guard came to him as the door swung open. "Stop making eyes at yourself."

Duane looked around. The guard beckoned. "Governor Andrias wants to speak to you, now. Let's not keep the governor waiting."

* * * * *

A long, narrow room, with a long carpet leading from the entrance up to a great heavy desk, that was Andrias' office. Duane felt a click in his memory as he entered. One of the ancient Earth dictators had employed just such a psychological trick to overawe those who came to beg favors of him. Muslini, or some such name.

The trick failed to work. Duane had other things on his mind; he walked the thirty-foot length of the room, designed to imbue him with a sense of his own unimportance, as steadily as he'd ever walked in the open air of his home planet.

Whichever planet that was.

The guard had remained just inside the door, at attention. Andrias waved him out.

"Here I am," said Duane. "What do you want?"

Andrias said, "I've had the ship inspected and what I want is on it. That saves your life, for now. But the cargo is in your name. I could take it by force, if I had to. I prefer not to." He picked up a paper, handed it to Duane. "In spite of your behavior, you can keep alive. You can even collect the money for the guns, Stevens' share as well as your own. This is a release form, authorizing my men to take four hundred and twenty cases of dehydrated foods and drilling supplies from the hold of the `Cameroon`, the ship you came on. Sign it, and we'll forget our argument. Only, sign it now and get it over with. I'm losing patience, Duane."

Duane said, without expression, "No."

Dark red flooded into Andrias' sallow face. His jaws bunched angrily and there was a ragged thread of incomplete control to his voice as he

spoke.

"I'll have your neck for this, Duane," he said softly.

Duane looked at the man's eyes. Death was behind them, peeping out. Mentally he shrugged. What difference did it make?

"Give me the pen," he said shortly.

Andrias exhaled a deep breath. You could see the tension leave him, the mottled anger fade from his face and leave it without expression. He handed the paper to Duane without a word. He gave him a pen, watched him scrawl his name.

"That," he said, "is better." He paused a moment ruminatively. "It would have been better still if you'd not stalled me so long. I find that hard to forgive in my associates."

"The money," Peter said. If he were playing a , pretending he knew what he was doing, he might as well play it to the hilt. "When do I get it?"

Andrias picked up the paper and looked carefully at the signature. He creased it thoughtfully, stowed it in a pocket before answering.

"Naturally," he said, "there will have to be a revision of terms. I offered a hundred and ten thousand Earth-dollars. I would have paid it, but you made me angry. You'll have to pay for that."

* * * * *

Duane said, "I've paid already. I've been dragged from pillar to post by

you. That's enough. Pay me what you owe me, if you want any more of the same goods!"

That was a shot in the dark, and it missed the mark.

Andrias' eyes widened. "You amaze me, Duane," he said. He rose and stepped around the desk, confronting Duane. "I almost think you really have lost your memory, Duane," he said. "Otherwise, surely you would know that this is all the rifles I need. With them I'll 'take' whatever else I want!"

Duane said, "You're ready, then...."

He took time to think it over, but he knew that no thought was required. Already the hands that he had locked behind him were clenched, taut. Already the muscles of his legs were tensing.

"You're ready," he repeated. "You've armed the Callistan exiles, the worst gutter scum on nine planets. You're set to betray the League that gave you power here.... Well, that changes things. I can't let you do it!"

He hurled himself at Andrias, hands sweeping around to grapple for the dark man's throat. Andrias, off-balance, staggered backward. But his own hands were diving for the twin heat guns that hung at his waist.

Duane saw his danger, and reacted. His foot twisted around Andrias' ankle; his hands at the other's throat gripped tighter. He lunged forward, slamming the hard top of his head into the other's face, feeling flesh and cartilage give as Andrias' nose mashed flat. His own head pinwheeled dizzily, agonizingly, as the jar revived the pain of his earlier accident.

But Andrias, unconscious already, tumbled back with Duane on top of him. His head made an audible, spine-chilling thud as it hit the carpeted floor.

Duane got up, retrieving the two heat guns, and stared at him.

"They tell me I killed Stevens the same way," he thought. "I'm getting in a rut!"

But Andrias was not dead, though he was out as cold as the void beyond Pluto. The thick carpeting had saved him from a broken head.

Duane stepped over the unconscious man and looked around the room. It was furnished severely, to the point of barrenness. Two chairs before Andrias' ornate, bare-topped desk and one luxurious chair behind it; a tasseled bell cord within easy reach of Andrias' chair; the long carpet. That was all it contained.

The problem of getting out was serious, he saw. How could one,

III

Methodically he ransacked the drawers of Andrias' desk. Papers, a whole arsenal of hand guns, Callistan money by the bale, ominously black-covered notebooks with cryptic figures littering their pages, those were the contents. A coldly impersonal desk, without the familiar trivia most men accumulate. There was nothing, certainly, that would get him out of a building that so closely resembled a fortress.

He tumbled the things back into the drawers helter-skelter, turned Andrias over and searched his pockets. More money, the man must have had a fortune within reach at all times, and a few meaningless papers.

Duane took the release he had signed and tore it to shreds. But that was only a gesture. When Andrias came to, unless Duane had managed to get away and accomplish something, the mere lack of written permission would not keep him from the rocket's lethal cargo!

When Andrias came to....

An idea bloomed in Duane's brain. He looked, then, at unconscious Andrias, and the idea withered again.

He had thought of forcing Andrias himself to front for him, at gun's point, in the conventional manner of escaping prisoners. But fist fights, fiction to the contrary notwithstanding, leave marks on the men who lose them. Andrias' throat was speckled with the livid marks of Duane's fingers; Duane's head, butting Andrias in the face, had drawn a thick stream of crimson from his nostrils, turned his sharp nose askew.

No guard of Andrias' would have been deceived for an instant, looking at that face, even assuming that Andrias could have been forced to cooperate by the threat of a gun. Which, considering the stake Andrias had in this play, was doubtful....

He stood up and looked around. He had to act quickly. Already Andrias' breath was audible; he saw the man grimace and an arm flopped spasmodically on the floor. Consciousness was on its way back.

Duane touched the heat gun he'd thrust into his belt; drew it and held it poised, while he sought to discover what was in his own mind. He'd killed a man already, they said. Was he then a killer, could he shoot Andrias now, in cold blood, with so much to gain and nothing to lose?

He stood there a moment. Then, abruptly, he reversed the weapon and

chopped it down on Andrias' skull.

There was a sharp grunt from the still unconscious man, but no other sign. Only, the first tremors of movement that had shown on him halted, and did not reappear.

"No'," Duane thought. "Whatever they say, I'm not a killer!"

But still he had to get out. How?

Once more he stared around the room, catalogued its contents. The guard would be getting impatient. Perhaps any minute he would tap the door, first timorously, then with heavier strokes.

The guard! There was a way!

* * * * *

Duane eyed the length of the room. Thirty feet, it would take him a couple of seconds to run it at full speed. Was that fast enough?

There was only one way to find out.

He walked around the desk to the bell cord. He took a deep breath, tugged it savagely, and at once was in speedy motion, racing toward the door, his footsteps muffled in the deep, springy carpet. Almost as he reached it, he saw it begin to open. He quickly sidestepped and was out of the guard's sight, behind the door, as the man looked in.

Quick suspicion flared in his eyes, then certainty as he saw Andrias huddled on the floor. He opened his mouth to cry out,

But Duane's arm was around his throat, and he had no breath to spare. Duane's foot lashed out and the door slammed shut; Duane's balled left fist came up and connected with the guard's chin. Abruptly the man slumped.

Duane took a deep breath and let the man drop to the floor. But he paused only a second; now he had two unconscious men on his hands and he dared let neither revive until he was prepared.

He grasped the guard's arm and dragged him roughly the length of the room. He leaped on top of the desk, brutally scarring its gleaming top with the hard spikes of his boots. His agile fingers unfastened the long bell cord without causing it to ring and, bearing it, he dropped again to the floor.

Tugging and straining, he got the limp form of Andrias into his own chair, bound him with the bell cord, gagged him with the priceless Venus-wool scarf Andrias wore knotted about his throat. He tested his bindings with full strength, and smiled. Those would hold, let Andrias struggle as he would.

The guard he stripped of clothing, bound and gagged with his own belt and spaceman's kerchief. He dragged him around behind the desk, thrust him under it out of sight. Andrias' chair he turned so that the unconscious face was averted from the door. Should anyone look in, then, the fact of Andrias' unconsciousness might not be noticed.

Then he took off his own clothes, quickly assumed the field-gray uniform of the guard. It fit like the skin of a fruit. He felt himself bulging out of it in a dozen places. The long cape the guard wore would conceal that, perhaps. In any case, there was nothing better.

Trying to make his stride as martial as possible, he walked down the long carpet to the door, opened it and stepped outside.

* * * * *

His luck couldn't hold out forever. It was next to miraculous that he got as far as he did, out of the anteroom before Andrias' office, past the two guards there, who eyed him absently but said nothing, down the great entrance hall, straight out the front door.

Going through the city had been easier, of course. There were many men in uniforms like his. Duane thought, then, that Andrias' power could not have been too strong, even over the League police whom he nominally commanded. The police could not all have been corrupt. There were too many of them; had they been turncoats, aiding Andrias in his revolt against the League, there would have been no need to smuggle rifles in for an unruly mass of civilians.

Duane cursed the lack of foresight of the early Earth governments. They'd made a prison planet of Callisto; had filled it with the worst scum of Earth. Then, when the damage had been done, when Callisto had become a pest-hole among the planets; its iniquities a stench that rose to the stars, they had belatedly found that they had created a problem worse than the one they'd tried to solve. One like a hydra-beast.

Criminality was not a thing of heredity. The children of the transported convicts, most of them, were honest and wanted to be respectable. And they could not be.

Earth's crime rate, too, had not been lowered materially by exiling its gangsters and murderers to Callisto. When it was long past time, the

League had stepped in, and set a governor of its own over Callisto.

If the governor had been an honest man a satisfactory solution might have been worked out. The first governor had been honest. Under him great strides had been made. The bribe-proof, gun-handey League police had stamped out the wide-open plague spots of the planet; public works had been begun on a large scale. The beginnings of representative government had been established.

But the first governor had died. And the second governor had been, Andrias.

"You can see the results!" Duane thought grimly as he swung into the airfield in his rented ground car. Foreboding was stamped on the faces of half the Callistans he'd seen, and dark treachery on the others. Some of those men had been among the actual exiled criminals, the last convict ship had landed only a dozen years before. All of those whom Andrias planned to arm were either of the original transportation-men, or their weaker descendants.

What was holding Andrias back? Why the need for smuggling guns in?

The answer to that, Duane thought, was encouraging but not conclusive. Clearly, then, Andrias did not have complete control over the League police. But how much control he did have, what officers he had won over to treachery, Duane could not begin to guess.

Duane slid the car into a parking slot, switched off the ignition and left it. It was night, but the short Callistan dark period was nearly over. A pearly glow at the horizon showed where the sun would come bulging over in a few minutes; while at the opposite rim of the planet he could still see the blood-red disc of mighty Jupiter lingering for a moment,

casting a crimson hue over the landscape, before it made the final plunge. The field was not flood-lighted. Traffic was scarce on Callisto.

Duane, almost invisible in the uncertain light, stepped boldly out across the jet-blasted tarmac toward the huge bulk of the 'Cameroon', the rocket transport which had brought him. Two other ships lay on the same seared pavement, but they were smaller. They were fighting ships, small, speedy ones, in Callisto for refueling before returning to the League's ceaseless patrol of the System's starlanes.

Duane hesitated briefly, wondering whether he ought to go to one of those ships and tell his story to its League commander. He decided against it. There was too little certainty for him there; too much risk that the commander, even, might be a tool of Andrias'.

Duane shook his head angrily. If only his memory were clear, if only he could be sure what he was doing!

* * * * *

He reached the portal of the ship. A gray-clad League officer was there standing guard, to prevent the ship taking off.

"Official business," Duane said curtly, and swept by the startled man before he could object. He hurried along the corridor toward the captain's office and control room. A purser he passed looked at him curiously, and Duane averted his face. If the man recognized him there might be questions.

For the thousandth time he cursed the gray cloud that overhung his memory. He didn't know, even, who among the crew might know him and spread the alarm.

Then he was at the door marked, 'Crew only, do not enter!' He tapped on it, then grasped the knob and swung it open.

A squat, open-featured man in blue, the bronze eagles of the Mercantile Service resting lightly on his powerful shoulders, looked at him. Recognition flared in his eyes.

"Duane!" he whispered. "Peter Duane, what're you doing in the clothes of Andrias' household guard?"

Duane felt the tenseness ebb out of his throat. Here was a friend.

"Captain," he said, "you seem to be a friend of mine. If you are, I need you. You see, I've lost my memory."

"Lost your memory?" the captain echoed. "You mean that blow on your head? The ship's surgeon said something ... yes, that was it. I hardly believed him, though."

"But were we friends?"

"Why, yes, Peter."

"Then help me now," said Duane. "I have a cargo stowed in your hold, Captain. Do you know what it is?"

"Why, yes. The rifles, you mean?"

Duane blinked. He nodded, then looked dizzily for a chair. The captain was a friend of his, all right, a fellow gun-runner!

"Good God," he said aloud. "What a mess!"

"What's happened?" the captain asked. "I saw you in the corridor, arguing with Stevens. You looked like trouble, and I should have come up to you then. But the course was to be changed, and I had to be there.... And the next I hear, Stevens is dead, and you've maybe killed him. Then I heard you've lost your memory, and are in a jam with Andrias."

He paused and speculation came into his eyes, almost hostility.

"Peter Duane," he said softly, "it strikes me that you may have lost more than your memory. Which side are you on. What happened between you and Andrias? Tell me now if you've changed sides on me, man. For friendship's sake I won't be too hard on you. But there's too much at stake here, "

"Oh, heck," said Peter, and the heat gun was suddenly in his hand, leveled at the squat man in blue. "I wish you were on my side, but there's no way I can tell. I can trust myself, I think, but that's all. Put up your hands!"

And that was when his luck ran out.

"Peter, " the captain began.

IV

But a sound from outside halted him. Together the two men stared at the viewplates. A siren had begun to shriek in the distance, the siren of a racing ground car. Through the gates it plunged, scattering the light wooden barrier. It spun crazily around on two wheels and came roaring

for the ship.

Andrias was in it.

Peter turned on the captain, and the gun was rigidly outthrust in his hand.

"Close your ports!" he snarled. "Up rockets, in a hurry!"

"Listen, Peter," the captain began.

"I said, hurry!" The car's brakes shrieked outside, and it disappeared from the view of the men. There was an abrupt babble of voices.

"Close your ports!" Peter shouted savagely. "Now!"

The captain opened his mouth to speak, then snapped it shut. He touched the stud of a communications set, said into it, "Close ports. Snap to it. Engine room, up rockets in ten seconds. All crew, stand by for lift!"

The ship's own take-off siren howled shrilly, drowning out the angry voices from below. Peter felt the whine of the electrics that dogged shut the heavy pressure doors. He stepped to the pilot's chair, slid into it, buckled the compression straps around him.

The instruments, he recognized them all, knew how to use them! Had he been a rocket pilot before his mind had blanked, before embarking on the more lucrative profession of gun smuggler? He wondered....

But it was the captain who took the ship off. "Ten seconds," Peter said. "Get moving!"

The captain hesitated the barest fraction, but his eyes were on the heat gun and he knew that Duane was capable of using it. "The men, " he said. "If they're underneath when the jets go, they'll burn!"

"That's the chance they take," said Duane. "They heard the siren!"

The captain turned his head quickly, and his fingers flashed out. He was in his own acceleration seat too, laced down by heavy canvas webbing. His hands reached out to the controls before him, and his fingers took on a life of their own as they wove dexterously across the keys, setting up fire-patterns, charting a course of take-off. Then the heel of his hand settled on the firing stop....

* * * * *

The acceleration was worse than Peter's clouded mind had expected, but no more than he could stand. In his frame of mind, he could stand almost anything, he thought, short of instant annihilation!

The thin air of Callisto howled past them, forming a high obligato to the thunder of the jets. Then the air-howl faded sharply to silence, and the booming of the rockets became less a thing of sound than a rumble in the framework of the 'Cameroon'. They were in space.

The captain's foot kicked the pedal that shut off the over-drive jets, reducing the thrust to a mere one-gravity acceleration. He turned to Duane.

"What now?" he asked.

Duane, busy unstrapping himself from the restraining belts, shook his

head without answering. What now? "A very good question!" he thought.

The captain, with the ease of long practice, was already out of his own pressure straps. He stood there by his chair, watching Duane closely. But the gun was still in Duane's hand, despite his preoccupation.

Duane cocked an ear as he threw off the last strap. Did he hear voices in the corridor, a distance away but coming.

The captain, looking out the port with considerable interest, interrupted his train of thought. "What," he asked, "for instance, are you going to do about, those?"

His arm was outstretched, pointing outward and down. Duane looked in that direction,

The two patrol rockets were streaking up after his commandeered ship. Fairy-like in their pastel shades, with the delicate tracery of girders over their fighting noses, they nevertheless represented grim menace to Duane!

He swore under his breath. The 'Cameroon', huge and lumbering, was helpless as a sitting bird before those lithe hawks of prey. If only he knew which side the ships were on. If only he knew, anything!

He couldn't afford to take a chance. "Stand back!" he ordered the captain. The man in blue gave ground before him, staring wonderingly as Duane advanced. Duane took a quick look at the control set-up, tried to remember how to work it.

It was so tantalizingly close to his memory! He cursed again; then

stabbed down on a dozen keys at random, heeled the main control down, jumped back, even as the ship careened madly about in its flight, and blasted the delicate controls to shattered ashes with a bolt from his heat gun. Now the ship was crippled, for the time being at least. Short of a nigh-impossible boarding in space, the two patrol cruisers could do nothing with it till the controls were repaired. The 'Cameroon', and its cargo of political dynamite, would circle through space for hours or days.

It wasn't much, but it was the best he could do. At least it would give him time to think things over.

No. He heard the voices of the men in the corridor again, tumbled about by the abrupt course change, luckily, it had been only a mild thing compared to the one that had killed Stevens and caused his own present dilemma, but regaining their feet and coming on. And one of the voices, loud and harsh, was Andrias! Somehow, before the ports closed, he'd managed to board the 'Cameroon'!

* * * * *

Duane stood erect, whirled to face the door. The captain stood by it. Duane thrust his heat gun at him.

"The door!" he commanded. "Lock it!"

Urged by the menace of the heat gun, the captain hurriedly put out a hand to the lock of the door,

And jerked it back, nursing smashed knuckles, as Andrias and four men burst in, hurling the door open before them. They came to a sliding, tumbling halt, though, as they faced grim Duane and his ready heat

pistol.

"Hold it!" he ordered. "That's right.... Stay that way while I figure things out. The first man that moves, dies for it."

Dark blood flooded into Andrias' face, but he said no word, only stood there glaring hatred. The smear of crimson had been brushed from his face, but his nose was still awry and a huge purplish bruise was spreading over it and across one cheek. The three men with him were guards. All were armed, the police with hand weapons as lethal as Duane's own, Andrias with an old-style projective-type weapon, an ancient pistol, snatched from some bewildered spaceman as they burst into the 'Cameroon'.

Duane braced himself with one arm against the pilot's chair and stared at them. The crazy circular course the blasted controls had given the ship had a strong lateral component; around and around the ship went, in a screaming circle, chasing its own tail. There was a sudden change in the light from the port outside; Duane involuntarily looked up for a moment. Dulled and purplish was the gleam from the brilliant stars all about; the 'Cameroon', in its locked orbit, had completed a circle and was plunging through its own wake of expelled jet-gases. He saw the two patrol rockets streak past; then saw the flood of rocket-flares from their side jets as they spun and braked, trying to match course and speed with the crazy orbit of the 'Cameroon'.

He'd looked away for only a second; abruptly he looked back.

"Easy!" he snapped. Andrias' arm, which had begun to lift, straightened out, and the scowl on the governor's face darkened even more.

'Clackety-clack.' There was the sound of a girl's high heels running

along the corridor, followed by heavier thumps from the space boots of men. Duane jerked his gun at Andrias and his police.

"Out of the way!" he said. "Let's see who's coming now."

It was the girl. Red hair fluttering in the wake of her running, face alight with anxiety, she burst into the room.

"Peter!" she cried. "Andrias and his men, "

She stopped short and took in the tableau. Duane's eyes were on her, and he was about to speak. Then he became conscious of something in her own eyes, a sudden spark that flared even before her lips opened and a thin cry came from them; even before she leaped to one side, at Andrias.

Peter cursed and tried to turn, to dodge; tried to bring his heat gun around. But a thunder louder than the bellowing jets outside filled the room, and a streak of livid fire crossed the fringe of Peter's brain. Sudden blackness closed in around him. He fell, and his closing eyes saw new figures running into the room, saw the counterplay of lashing heat beams.

'This is it', he thought grimly, and then thought no more.

IV

Duane was in the sickbay again, on the same bed. His head was spinning agonizedly. He forced his eyes open, and the girl was there; the same girl. She was watching him. A cloud on her face lifted as she saw his lids flicker open; then it descended again. Her lips quivered.

"Darn you, Peter," she whispered. "Who are you now?"

"Why, why, I'm Peter Duane, of course," he said.

"Well, thank God you know that!" It was the captain. He'd changed since the last time Peter had seen him. One arm was slung in bandages that bore the yellow seeping tint of burn salve.

Peter shook his head to try to clear it. "Where, where am I?" he asked. "Andrias, "

"Andrias is where he won't bother you," the captain said. "Locked up below. So are two of his men. The other one's dead. How's your memory, Peter?"

Duane touched it experimentally with a questing mental finger. It seemed all right, though he felt still dazed.

"Coming along," he said. "But where am I? The controls, I blasted them."

The captain laughed. "I know," he said briefly. "Well, I guess you had to, in a way. You didn't trust anyone; couldn't trust anyone. You had to make sure the rifles wouldn't get back to Callisto too soon. But they're working on installing duplicates now, Peter. In an hour we'll be back on Callisto. We shut the jets off already; we're in an orbit."

Duane sank back. "Listen," he said. "I think, I think my memory's clearing, somehow. But how, I mean, were you on my side? All along?"

The captain nodded soberly. "On your side, yes, Peter," he said. "The League's side, that is. You and I, you know, both work for the League."

When they got word of Andrias' plans, they had to work fast. To move in by force would have meant bloodshed, would have forced his hand. That would have been utterly bad. It was too dangerous. Callisto is politically a powder-keg already. The whole thing might have exploded."

Peter's eyes flared with sudden hope and enlightenment. "And you and I, " he began.

"You and I, and a couple of other undercover workers were put on the job," the captain nodded. "We had to find out who Andrias' supporters were, and to keep him from getting more electron rifles while the commanders of the Callisto garrison were quietly checked, to see who was on which side. They've found Andrias' Earth backers, a group of wealthy malcontents who thought Callisto should be exploited for their gain, had made secret deals with him for concessions. You, of course, slowed down the delivery of the rifles as long as you could. They lay in the Lunar warehouses a precious extra week while you haggled over terms. That's what you were doing with Stevens, I think, when the course change caught you both."

"You've had him long enough," the nurse broke in. "I have a few words to say."

"No, wait, " Duane protested. But the captain was grinning broadly. He moved toward the door.

"Later," he said over his shoulder. "There'll be plenty of time." The door closed behind him. Duane turned to the girl.

* * * * *

He shook his head again. The cloud was lifting. He could almost remember everything again; things were beginning to come into focus. This girl, for instance,

She noticed his motion. "How's your head, Peter?" she asked solicitously. "Andrias hit you with that awful old bullet-gun. I tried to stop him, but all I could do was jar his arm. Oh, Peter, I was so afraid when I saw you fall!"

"You probably saved my life," Peter said soberly. "Andrias struck me as a pretty good shot." He tried to grin.

The girl frowned. "Peter," she said, "I'm sorry if I seemed rude, before, the last time you were here. It was just that I.... Well, you didn't remember me. I couldn't understand."

Peter stared at her. Yes, he `should` remember her. He did, only,

"Perhaps this will help you," the girl said. She rummaged in a pocket of her uniform, brought something out that was tiny and glittering. "I don't wear it on duty, Peter. But I guess this is an exception...."

Peter pushed himself up on one elbow, trying to make out what she was doing. She was slipping the small thing on a finger....

A ring. An engagement ring!

"Oh, " said Peter. And suddenly everything clicked; he remembered; he could recall ... everything. That second blow on his head had undone the harm of the first one.

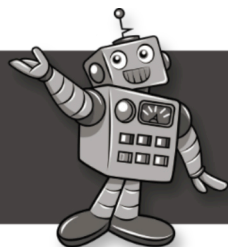
He swung his legs over the side of the bed, stood up, reached out

hungry arms for the girl.

"Of course I remember," he said as she came into the circle of his arms.
"The ring on your finger. I ought to remember, 'I put it there!'"

And for a long time after there was no need for words.

*"Let's go back
up and read
another one!"*



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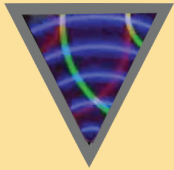
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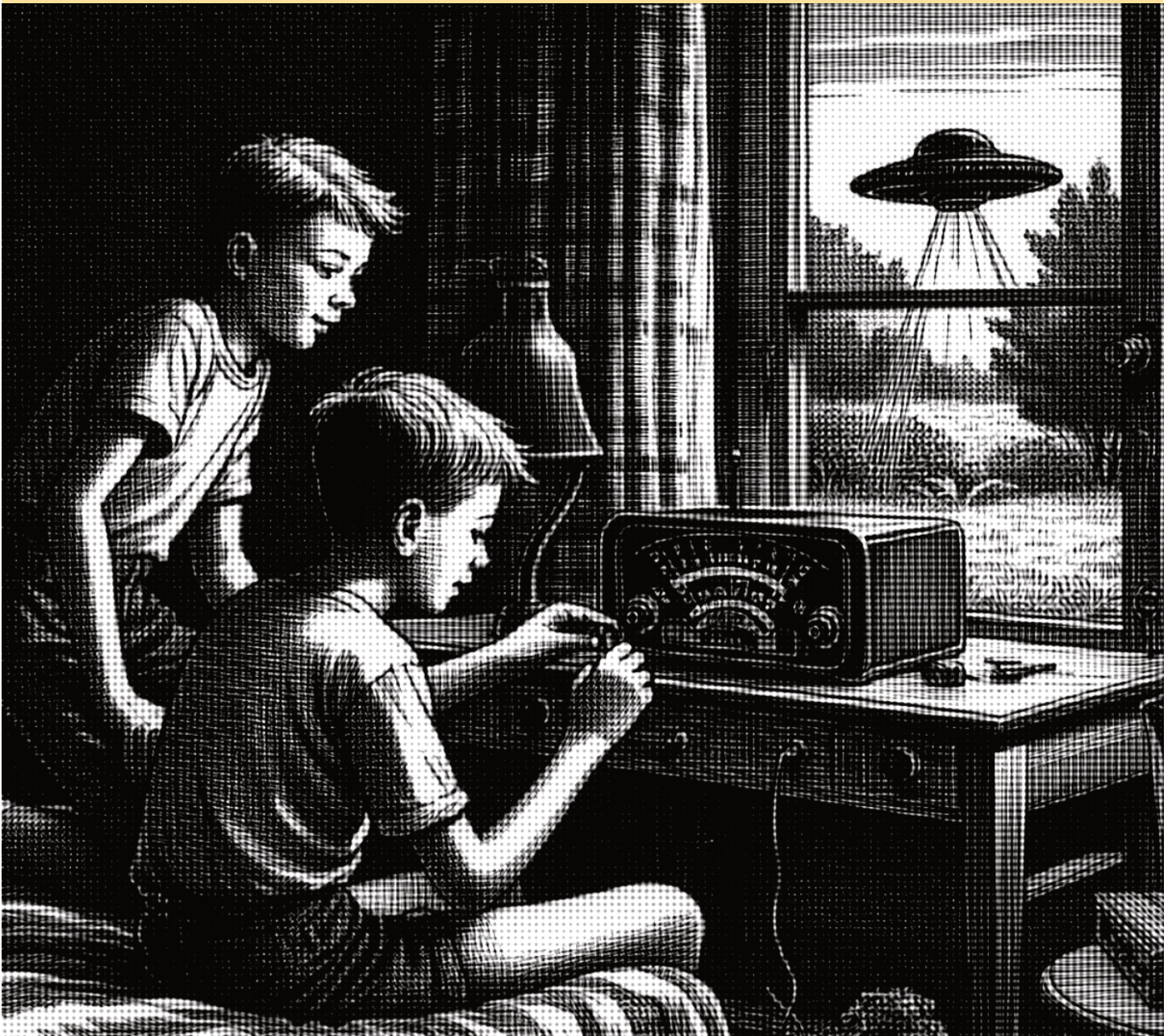
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ANDROMEDA CALLING

Charles A. Cornell



The City of Angels sprawled in front of Peter Piggott's dangling, shoeless feet. The evening air was fresh with a light breeze as the fall sunset painted an amber glow across the orange groves and billboards below the cliff. In his wonderment over the setting sun and its beauty, the ten-year-old boy had almost forgotten how Tommy Brant managed to hang

him from the tree in the first place.

Peter had hung by his suspenders over the cliff like a rag doll on a store peg for hours, his feet barely reaching the branch below him, his only means of support. At the bottom of the ravine, thirty feet down, lurked patches of thorny scrubs eager for that creaky branch to break, which seemed imminent. But the view was spectacular nonetheless.

A sparrow flew onto Peter's foot, tickling toes he daren't scratch even if he could reach them. Peter wasn't sure how long his suspenders were going to hold out. The man in the television advertisement that inspired his mother's purchase claimed a horse could pull a wagon with them. So far—fingers crossed—that claim appeared to be the indisputable truth. *Thank goodness*, he thought.

A turquoise '57 Chevy pickup pulled off the road onto the shoulder beside the tree. Doors opened and shut with a loud bang.

"Peter!" Dexter Johnson yelled; hands cupped. "Hold on. We've come to rescue you."

Peter looked down at his friend and sniffled. "Tommy took my runners. And my baseball cap."

"Oh, no! Not again."

Marty, Dexter's older brother, arrived with a step-ladder. "How on earth did he get you up there?"

"Dunno. I was just riding my bike. He and his friends corralled me, put a potato sack over my head, and tied my hands. I think they used a rope to haul me up. Then Tommy put my suspenders on this branch."

Marty climbed up, carefully unhooked Peter's suspenders, and then slung the relieved boy over his shoulder and brought him down.

Peter looked around the dried grass at the dusty base of the tree. "Where's my bike?"

"It's over there." Dexter pointed to the other side of the road. "In those bushes. "

"You kids stay by the truck" Marty said. "I'll get it."

Peter stood on wobbly legs, his circulation returning, and leaned against the pickup's tailgate. He felt light-headed and woozy. "I've been in that tree so long I can barely feel my toes."

"Principal McHenry would have a cow if your mom and dad told him," Dexter said. "Tommy's a jerk, he needs to get what's coming to him."

"No, that won't work," Peter sighed. "Tommy's mom is a teacher at our school, remember? The last time I went to the principal's office to tell them what Tommy had done to me only made it worse. The next day Tommy snatched my *Fantastic Four* comic, went into the bathroom and when he gave it back... ew, yuck!"

"He can't keep doing stuff like this to you," Dexter said, kicking the truck's tire as his brother loaded Peter's bike and the stepladder into the pickup bed. "You need to have a plan."

"My plan is simple. I'm hoping Tommy Brant doesn't graduate into fifth grade. That way, we won't be in the same class next year."

"That doesn't sound like much of a plan to me."

"It's the best one I've got."

"You're lucky we found you first," Marty said. "If someone had called your parents, your mom would have phoned the police. But your Dad? He would have gone over to Tommy Brant's house and slugged that crotchety geezer of a grandpa he lives with. The Brant family's been a thorn in everybody's side for years. It's gotten worse now his parents are divorced."

"My dad wouldn't do that. Besides he can't. He's out of town. He might be getting a new job and maybe we'll have to move away," Peter said.

"Well, that'd be awful. But at least I won't have any more trouble with

Tommy Brant.”

“Move away?” Dexter whined. “You can’t move away, Peter. You’re my best friend. I mean who would I play marbles with? And trade comics with?”

“I hope we’re not moving away. I just wish I could sometimes, that’s all.”

“Hey, kids,” Dexter’s brother said. “How about I treat you to an ice cream cone? Let’s stop by Stony Creek Dairy on the way home.”

“Great!” they said in unison.

Marty got in the truck and started the engine. The two boys scrambled inside the cab.

Peter smiled and said, “See, Dexter, sometimes things have a way of turning out okay in the end.”

The pickup’s tires spun dust as it pulled out onto the road. “Hey,” Dexter said to his big brother. “You have dad’s truck for the weekend. Can we go to a drive-in movie tonight?”

“Ooh, yeah,” Peter added, his spirits lifted, cliff tops forgotten as they left the canyon behind. “There’s a double feature at the drive-in.”

Dexter’s eyes lit up. “What’s on?”

“*Journey to the Seventh Planet* and *The Cosmic Man*.”

“Aliens? That would be cool! Can we go, Marty? Please?”

Marty scowled. “Mission Boulevard? That’s way too far. Besides, I have a date with Suzie tonight.”

“That’s okay,” Dexter said. “We can take her with us.”

“With you two clowns? We wouldn’t all fit in the truck. And you’re a bit too young to understand this, but me and Suzie want to be *alone*.”

“He kisses her,” Dexter said to Peter, giggling. “On the lips!”

A few miles later, Marty turned the truck into the parking lot of Stony

Creek Dairy. It was a typical Saturday night, the lot full of hotrods and souped-up pickups— slick fat tires, shiny chrome wheels, monster exhausts, and foam dice dangling from rearview mirrors. Marty rolled his window down, put the truck in neutral, glided by some friends ogling Jimmy's Deuce Coupe, and gassed the Chevrolet's small block V8. The truck growled with a throaty rumble. Jimmy's new set of chromed intake pipes bellowed back with a *vroom, vroom*. The Deuce Coupe shifted into gear, jerked out of its parking spot and burned a layer of rubber on the freshly paved lot to the delight of the crowd of teenagers and the anger of old Mr. Connor, Stony Creek's owner.

A cute girl wearing a white vee-neck pullover and white sneakers, ran over to Marty's truck, her blond ponytail swaying back and forth. She leaned through the window and gave Marty a lingering kiss.

"See," Dexter said to Peter, sticking his tongue out in a mock-barf gesture. "I told you."

Suzie blushed. "Sorry, Marty. I didn't see the kids in there."

Marty shrugged.

Dexter grabbed the steering wheel, pulled himself across his brother's lap, and poked his head out the window. "We're going to the drive-in tonight, Suzie. Wanna come?"

"Dexter, didn't I say no?" Marty pushed him away. "Suzie doesn't want to go, do you?"

"It's a double feature," Peter chimed in. "With aliens and spaceships and everything!"

"I *love* science fiction," she said, her teen-angel face erupting in a huge smile.

"You do?" Marty frowned. "I didn't know that."

"See?" Dexter said. "You'll come with us, won't you Suzie? What time

do you want to be picked up?"

"Hey, pipsqueak," Marty said. "This is my date and you're not coming. I told you there's not enough room for four."

"We can watch from the back. That would be fun. We can bring sleeping bags and pillows and—"

"You're not getting the hint, are you?"

"Why can't they come, Marty?" Suzie asked, hands on hips, cherry lips pouting. "It's going to be a warm night. They'll be fine."

"Please? Pretty please?" Dexter pleaded. "And kids under twelve get in free."

Marty swung a playful whack at Dexter and knocked his baseball cap off. "Darn kid. But first we have to get permission from Peter's mom."

"I'm sure she won't mind," Peter said. "There's no school tomorrow."

"You two rascals better bring some money. I'm not buying you popcorn." Marty turned to Suzie. "Pick you up at six?"

* * *

Peter and Dexter sat on the picnic table at the foot of the towering movie screen eating cotton candy. Laughter erupted from the playground's spinner. Several kids had jumped off, walked away as if they were drunk, and toppled over on the grass.

The moonless sky was clear and the air crisp. Stars sparkled. "We'd better get back to the truck," Peter said. "It's getting dark. The show will be starting soon."

They wandered between the rows of parked cars, boxy metal speakers hanging from their windows. Dexter spotted his brother's pickup and pulled Peter by the collar. "This way, dummy."

Peter stumbled, trying to eat his cotton candy as he walked. He was munching its sugary fluffiness when he felt a sharp knock against his ankle that sent him tumbling forward. He hit the ground; his face planted in the sticky pink wool of the candy.

“Enjoy the movie, loser!” he heard Tommy Brant say. “Candy-ass!”

The gaggle of laughter faded between the row of cars as Tommy and his friends left the scene of the crime. Peter rose slowly to his feet and tried to wiped the sugary concoction from his face. He rubbed his eyes and blinked away his tears. His black-rimmed glasses remained stuck in a gooey mixture of whipped sugar and gravel.

“Are you okay?”

Peter looked down at the hole in the knee of his jeans and sobbed, “My mother’s going to kill me.”

The pre-show cartoon flashed on the screen and a collective cheer emerged from the parked cars. Kids scurried back from the playground like scared rabbits, not wanting to miss a single second.

Peter delicately pried his glasses from the gooey floss. “I think they’re cracked.” Tears streamed down his face. The more he picked the floss off his glasses, the stickier his fingers became. “Oh, no,” he sniffled. “What am I going to do?”

“We gotta clean you up before the movie starts,” Dexter said. He looked around and found the neon sign hanging over the washroom at the back of the lot. He steered his friend inside.

Peter washed the candy from his face and lifted his glasses to the light. A big crack ran across one of the lenses. “Oh boy,” he moaned. “I’m dead.”

“Your mom’s not going to kill you. I’ll just tell her what Tommy did.”

“And then what? She’ll just call me a crybaby. Or call the school. And then Tommy will do something else to me. It’s never going to end.”

“Cheer up, Peter. Forget about Tommy. C’mon, let’s go. The movie’s about to start.”

The pair walked out of the washroom as the opening credits for *Journey to the Seventh Planet* rolled on the big screen.

“Do you think aliens are real?” Peter asked as they walked back to his brother’s pickup truck.

“My dad says they’re just something made up. For the movies.”

“My dad says that too. But I think both our dads are wrong. Have you read the newspapers? People are seeing flying saucers all over the place. They’re in Washington. And New York City. They’ll come to Los Angeles soon. Just you wait and see.”

“I hope so. That would be so cool. My mom says they’re real. She and dad argue about aliens all the time.”

“Oh, no,” Peter said pulling Dexter aside. “It’s Tommy Brant again!”

Tommy and his posse of friends pushed another kid to the ground. A bag of popcorn spilled across the gravel. Tommy doubled up with laughter as he led the gang toward the washroom, ignoring calls from people in nearby cars to be quiet.

Peter ducked around the corner of the building. “Quick, Dexter. We’ve got to hide.”

“I know. But where?”

The drive-in theater was built in the middle of a large acreage of orange trees. A tall wooden fence separated the drive-in from the groves. Peter and Dexter ran from the washroom and stumbled along the fence-line until they found some loose boards. “We can hide in the orchard until they’re gone,” Dexter said, prying away the wood until the opening was wide enough for two small boys to fit through. He scurried to the other side. Peter followed and closed the fence-boards behind them.

The pair peered through the crack. “We’re going to miss the movie,” Dexter whispered.

“It’s better than getting a wedgie. Or worse. Tommy Brant always finds a way to make a bad thing worse.” A chirping sound coming from the grove startled them. The two boys stared into the darkened orange grove, and then at one another.

“What was that noise?” Peter said. “A ghost?”

The sound repeated, “*Chirp, chirp, z-z-zip. Chirp, chirp, z-z-zip.*”

“An electric ghost? Naw, that’s crazy.” Dexter crawled through the grass toward the sound.

“Hey, wait up. Don’t leave me here.”

The pair scurried forward a few yards when Peter’s foot clipped an object in the grass, sending him sprawling. He got to his knees and crawled back to see what he’d tripped over.

“Look what I found!” Peter said, lifting up a globular object the size of a football. The intermittent light from the movie screen bounced off its surface.

“Neato. What is that thing?” Dexter replied. The smooth object hummed and glowed, casting shadows around the base of the nearby orange tree. “Don’t touch it! Maybe, it’s a bomb. It might go off. Drop it, and let’s get outta here.”

“I don’t think it’s a bomb. Maybe it’s something that fell off a tractor.” Peter turned the spherical object in his hands. “It’s not heavy. It’s as light as a balloon. And it’s *warm.*”

He passed it to Dexter. “You’re right,” he said, turning it in his hands.

“Let’s take it home.”

“My mom says we shouldn’t take anything that isn’t ours. Even if we find

it,” Dexter replied.

“I left my *Mister Ed* lunchbox on the playground once and Tommy Brant found it. I tried to get it back and he said ‘finders, keepers’. I didn’t tell my mom he stole it. I said I left it on the school bus. I had to buy a new one with my allowance. Tommy Brant stole that one too. Now I just use a paper bag.”

The chirping sound returned. Peter dropped the globe in the grass. “This is the thing that made that sound.” A series of lights flickered on and off, revolving in a circular band around the object’s circumference.

“But what if the farmer needs that? For his tractor?”

“I don’t think it’s from a tractor, Dexter. Have you ever seen anything on a tractor that squeaks? Or has lights like this? It doesn’t look like a toy either.” Peter looked up into the sky. “I wonder—”

“You think it fell from outer space?”

“My mom says the Air Force is always finding things that have crashed. But they won’t say where they came from. My dad says they’re just bits of weather balloons and says my mom should have her head checked for thinking the gov’mint would lie to us.”

“This is so cool, Peter. We found something from outer space!”

“We gotta get back to your brother’s truck without Tommy Brant seeing this. Can you imagine what kind of superpowers he might get if he stole it? Hey, that’s it!” Peter exclaimed. “Maybe I can get superpowers. And zap Tommy. Oh, boy!”

The object spun quietly in Peter’s hands as the two boys squeezed back through the fence into the grounds of the drive-in theater. They stepped carefully out of the shadows, looking left and right. Tommy Brant was nowhere to be seen. Peter tucked the object under his shirt, and they ran to Marty’s truck and scrambled into the back. They huddled under warm

blankets and pillows, bathed in light from the big screen.

“My dad has a ham radio in the workshop behind the garage,” Peter whispered, peering under the blanket at his hidden prize. “He told Mom I can use it whenever he’s out of town. Maybe we could contact the aliens, Dexter? And see if they want this thing back. Or maybe they would tell us what it does.”

“Contact aliens?”

“Why not? If we could prove flying saucers were real then I could ask the aliens to take care of Tommy Brant for me.”

The next night, Dexter peeked through the screen-door of the workshop located behind the Piggott’s garage and found Peter sitting in the middle of a bundle of wires piled on the floor. A box of electrical connectors lay in front of him. Some of the wires ran from the floor up to an old TV on a stand.

“Have you seen today’s newspaper?” Dexter asked as he opened the door and bounced into the room.

“No, I’ve been too busy.”

“They’re everywhere!”

“What are everywhere?”

“Flying saucers. They saw some in San Bernardino last night. And in Palm Springs. And there’s been sightings in Texas, and Nevada... and Arizona too!”

Peter looked up from his tinkering. “Oh shoot this didn’t work either.” His dad’s ham radio crackled on top of the work bench. “No matter what dial I turn it to, I can’t hear them,” Peter moaned. “Just Mr. Barnard from Spokane chatting with the King of Jordan. I’m sure the king isn’t an alien.

But I'm not sure about Mr. Barnard."

"So watcha doing with those wires and that beat-up TV?"

"I figured maybe aliens came here because they watch our TV from outer space. So, I attached our TV antenna to my dad's radio. I thought if I could somehow send a message from the radio into the old TV, they might hear me and talk back."

The TV picture on the old set emitted a fuzzy blur of jagged lines that scrolled up and down. Peter whacked the top of the TV cabinet and the picture came into focus.

"Oh cool," Dexter said. "It's *Leave It to Beaver*. I love that show."

A cardboard box sat on the linoleum floor. Peter opened the top, lifted out the sphere he found in the orange grove and put it on the work bench. This time the opaque object glowed from the inside; a glow that pulsed with a dull light that ran through the colors of the spectrum, illuminating the outer shell of the sphere. Both boys took a moment to stare at it.

"That's so cool," Dexter said.

"I wanted to connect the aliens' *thingy* to the radio in case that would help me contact them. But it's too smooth," Peter said. He moved his hand across the sphere. "There's nowhere to stick a wire into it. Or clamp anything onto it. I know, maybe I can crack it open!" He picked up a wrench and banged on the sphere but the wrench just bounced off.

Peter rubbed his wrist. "Ouch!"

A moment later, a sound like the wobbling of a sheet of tin-metal echoed around the room.

"Whoa, what was that!" Dexter exclaimed. "Be careful, Peter. It might explode."

"You should see what it does when I drop it. It rolled off the bench earlier. Watch this." Peter picked up the sphere and let it drop to the

floor. It didn't bounce. The underside of the sphere absorbed the impact, the point of contact with the floor flattening out like jelly. Then the object slowly rebounded to its original, perfectly spherical shape. Spinning lights emerged, their color increasing in intensity then settling down into a pulsing rhythm as they circumnavigated the sphere's surface.

"Oh, cool. Way cool."

"Now watch this," Peter said, excited to show off what he'd learned.

Peter picked up the sphere and dropped it next to the TV. The object flattened as before and emitted its wobbly noise again. The TV responded in kind, letting off a loud electrical hum, a throbbing sound that faded in tune with the lights of the sphere as the lights rose in brightness and then settled down.

"Maybe that's not a good idea, Peter. Maybe the aliens won't like you messin' with their gizmo. They could zap this whole place. I saw it in the movies. They can do that kind of stuff and turn people into smoke."

"Nah, the aliens just want to talk to us," Peter said, wiggling the TV antenna as *Leave It to Beaver* drifted into the fuzzy ether. "I just know they do."

The TV signal zigged and zagged as Peter moved the antenna back and forth. A man's face appeared. He was sitting behind a desk. "*Good evening, my fellow citizens...*"

"Hey, I know who that is," Dexter said. "He's not an alien. He's President Kennedy."

"Wow," Peter replied. "I didn't know he had his own TV show!"

"*This Government, as promised, has maintained the closest surveillance of the Soviet military buildup...*"

"My dad says he's the best President there's ever been," Dexter said with authority. "And my mom says his wife has the best clothes. She's making a

dress just like Jackie's to go to Marty's graduation, and— “

“...a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation...”

“Quiet, Dexter! It's the President. And this sounds important. Maybe it's about the flying saucers.”

“...the purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere.”

“What's a hemisphere? Is that a kind of spaceship?” Dexter asked.

“No, you clown. That means *us*. America.”

“...intermediate range ballistic missiles...”

The TV screen returned again to a zig-zag of moving lines. Peter wiggled the antenna and banged on the top of the cabinet. “C'mon, you darned contraption! How will the aliens be able to hear us if you don't work?”

“That's why the TV's in the workshop I guess. It's broken.”

“Naw, I see my dad in here all the time watching baseball on it and drinking beer. It's just that I moved it closer to the ham radio. My dad always says bad things to our TVs when he has to move them. But when I say the same things when the chain comes off my bike, he says I have to wash my mouth out with soap. I guess it's okay for him to say those bad words 'cos he's an adult.”

“My dad says the same thing. I don't understand it.”

“Me neither.”

Peter banged on the top of the cabinet again. The President came into focus. *“...in addition, jet bombers, capable of carrying nuclear weapons, are now being uncrated...”*

“I saw this movie a few months ago,” Dexter said as Peter wrestled to keep the signal from fading into lines. “Called *Panic in the Year Zero*. It's

about a bomb that falls on Los Angeles and it's so big it destroys the whole city. It's one of those atomic bombs. Like the ones Principal McHenry says might get dropped on the school so we have to practice getting under our desks. In the movie, this family has to escape to the hills and live in a cave."

The TV signal bounced, settled for just a moment, then the image on the screen rolled from top to bottom. "Oh drat," Peter said. "You're right. This TV is totally broken. Darn." The picture stopped rolling. "Oh, it's back!"

"...this sudden, clandestine decision to station strategic weapons for the first time outside of Soviet soil," the President continued, *"is a deliberately provocative and unjustified change in the status quo which cannot be accepted by this country..."*

"What's a Soviet? Are they aliens?"

"No, dummy," Peter replied. "They're Russkies. Commie pinkos, my dad calls them. He thinks Principal McHenry is a commie pinko."

"What's that?"

"I don't know. But my dad is really mad whenever he talks about Principal McHenry being a commie pinko. So, it must be a really bad thing."

"Sounds like an alien to me. I always thought Principal McHenry was an alien."

"...a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated. All ships of any kind bound for Cuba from whatever nation or port will, if found to contain cargoes of offensive weapons, be turned back."

"Where's Cuba? Is that a planet? Are we going to war with aliens?"

"Dexter, don't you know *anything*? Cuba's a country. An island. On Earth."

"Okay Peter, if you're so smart, why has there been so much stuff in the papers about flying saucers? I asked my mom and she thinks it's all because

of this Cuba thing. She says the aliens have been watching us and don't like what we've been doing with atomic bombs. But I thought she meant the aliens were watching us from a planet called Cuba. I'm totally confused."

"Well, *my* mom says it's best just to take a pill and forget about everything. I think that's what she's done today 'cos she's been sleeping on the sofa all afternoon. I even had to feed the cat and let it out. I wish my dad was back. Mom is better when he's home. And then we get to eat out a lot."

"I call upon Chairman Khrushchev to halt and eliminate this clandestine, reckless, and provocative threat to world peace... to abandon this course of world domination... to end the perilous arms race... to move the world back from the abyss of destruction..."

"Destruction? See, Peter, I told you! This must be a movie. It sounds just like that movie I saw." Dexter looked up at the Coca-Cola clock on the workshop wall. "I have to go now. I have to deliver the evening papers. Maybe there's more news about flying saucers. I'll come back tomorrow and see if you've got this TV working."

"Okay, but don't tell your mom about what we found. You haven't told her, have you?"

"Nah. Even my older sister doesn't know. She blabs about everything. So, wadcha say, can I have it at my house for a while?"

"Where would you hide it?"

"The basement. My mom's afraid of spiders. She doesn't go down there much."

"Umm, maybe. But not until I get this thing to work first. And then only for one night."

"Okay, cool."

Peter wiggled the wire connecting the TV antenna to the ham radio. The

picture turned fuzzy. He sighed, "President Kennedy says we should go to the moon. But I think we should make better TVs first."

The hoot of an owl woke Peter from his sleep. A strange hum buzzed in his ear. He lifted his head from the work bench. The clock said it was ten minutes to three in the morning. "Huh? That late? Oh no," he moaned, sleepily. "Guess Mom must be super zonked out, as usual. Forgets to put me to bed me all the time," he said to himself as he rubbed his eyes.

The humming noise grew louder. Peter turned toward it. The spherical object had floated four feet off the ground, dead in the center of the room. As Peter watched, a beam of light projected an image from the object onto the blank wall below the clock. "Holy cow!" Peter cried out. "It's working!"

The projected image was as clear as a bell: the black and white TV broadcast of President John F. Kennedy saying, "*It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union.*"

As the president's speech ended, the projected image reset itself to the beginning of the short clip and repeated the broadcast from, "*It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba...*"

Peter looked back at the sphere; his head cocked, trying to see where the beam was coming from. The projection on the wall continued. President Kennedy repeated, "*It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba...*"

A flash of light from the old TV drew Peter's attention. A single bright line pulsed across the TV screen from left to right. The rest of the screen was black. The pulse changed color as it moved, beaming all the colors of

the spectrum across the TV in a never-ending repetition, eerily in synch with the projected broadcast coming out of the nearby sphere. A light on the ham radio, its ever-present crackling strangely silent, flashed on and off.

The radio was receiving a signal.

Peter picked up the ham set's microphone, turned the mic switch to 'on', and said in a half-asleep voice, "This is Earth calling. This is Earth calling. Is anyone there?"

Someone...or some *thing*...on the radio answered back.

Dexter stood at the base of their classroom's portable building and stared up at Peter. It was getting dark. The school was deserted. "What are you doing up there on the roof?" Dexter asked. "Mrs. Prendergast will be mad if you damage anything. Like she gets mad when the fan stops working and she has to call the janitor."

Peter held a can in one hand and a paint brush stained with bright red pigment in the other. "I'm painting."

"I know that. But *why*?"

"You'll see."

"If Principal McHenry catches you up there, you'll get expelled."

"I hope so," Peter replied. "Then maybe I'll be sent to a different school. Away from Tommy Brant."

"Hey, is that a new ball cap?" Dexter asked, squinting in the dim light.

"Yeah. My Dad got it for me. It's a Yankees cap. He's back from his trip."

"You'd better hide it from Tommy Brant before he steals it."

"What's the point in having a new baseball cap if you can't wear it? I've decided I'm tired of worrying about what Tommy Brant is going to do to

me. No more. I'm going to do something about it. I have a plan."

The sound of a hammer echoed off the roof.

"Now what are you doing?"

"Hammering."

"I know that. But why? And don't tell me, I'll see, because I can't see from down here."

"I'm nailing a pulley to the roof," Peter said.

"But why?"

"You'll see."

Dexter threw up his hands. "Oh, gee. I'm going home. You're impossivble."

"That's what my mom says."

"Well, she's right," Dexter replied as he slippedv into the darkness.

"**H**e loves his dog, Dexter. And his dog loves me."

The air in the workshop hung like a hot towel over their faces. Dexter downed his Coca-Cola, burped and said, "What the heck does that mean, Peter?"

"We're going to kidnap his dog. Tonight."

"*What?* Are you *crazy*?"

"I've got a brilliant plan. And you have to help me."

"I'm not helping you kidnap Tommy's dog. We'd go to jail."

"We're not really kidnapping his dog. We're borrowing him. Besides, they're very interested in our dogs."

"*Who* are interested in them?"

"*They* are." Peter pointed to the old TV and the glowing sphere.

“*Aliens?* Aliens are interested in our dogs? How do you know?”

“They told me.”

“They *told* you? You’ve been talking to them?”

“Every night since I got them hooked into Dad’s radio.”

“Oh, wow! What did they say?”

“You’ll see.”

“Not that again. C’mon, I can keep a secret.”

“It’ll be more fun this way.”

“Did they tell you what planet they come from?”

“Not exactly.”

“Do they have mind rays and robots? Is it just one big guy like *The Day the Earth Stood Still*? I love that movie. What was his name? Cat-something.”

“Klaatu.”

“So, what did he say?”

“You’ll see.”

“*You’ll see, you’ll see.* That’s all you ever say. Stop being a brat! No wonder you get bullied!” Dexter walked past the buzzing TV with its zigzag signal and stopped at the workshop door. “I have to get my papers and start my deliveries before it gets too dark. And I’m not helping you kidnap Tommy’s dog and that’s final.”

“You’re a sissy. Never mind. I don’t need you to catch him. That dog will follow me anywhere. I just thought you’d be interested in seeing the aliens.”

Dexter took his hand off the screen-door’s latch. “*What?* See the aliens? *Where?* *When?*”

“Tonight. They’re coming tonight.”

“*Tonight?*”

“They’re all leaving tomorrow. They said we were about to blow the planet up and they didn’t want to be here when we did. They said we had a chance to become friends, but it was too late. They’re going to another planet instead. Where it’s safer. And friendlier. But they said if I wanted to come with them, I could. They wanted me to bring my dog as well.”

“You don’t have a dog.”

“That’s why I need to borrow Tommy’s dog, dummy.”

“Wait.” Dexter walked back to Peter as he fiddled with the TV. “Are you and Tommy’s dog going to get on an alien spaceship?”

“Something like that.”

“Tonight?”

“Come to the school before midnight. Hide in the woods by Mrs. Prendergast’s portable and watch. Don’t be late or you’ll miss everything. Just you. Nobody else.”

“Okay,” Dexter muttered, looking puzzled. “Okay, I’ll be there.”

“**D**exter? Dexter?” Mrs. Johnson prodded her son’s shoulder as he slept curled up on the sofa. The broadcasting day had ended and the dull circular test pattern with its Indian chief icon was all that was left. She went over to the TV and switched it off.

Dexter rubbed his eyes and groaned, “What time is it?”

“It’s eleven thirty, Dexter. You should be in bed.”

“Oh no,” he gasped. “Eleven thirty! Oh no, I’ll be late!”

“Late for what?”

"I mean, yes mom, I know I'm late for bed. I'm very sorry." Dexter bounced off the sofa and scrambled up the stairs, faster than his mother had ever seen him do before, even when he'd forgotten his homework and had to come back in the house.

"Good night, mom," Dexter said at the top of the stairs.

"What was that all about?" his father asked.

"I'm not sure," she replied. "He's been acting very strange lately."

"I blame his friend, Peter. Odd little boy. He's a bad influence. I wish Dexter would find someone else to be friends with. Someone with a little more... um, well, *gumption* I suppose you could call it. Peter lets the other boys push him around. Never fights back."

"That's not a bad thing, dear. Turning the other cheek."

"Well, he just needs to stick up for himself. That's all I'm saying."

Dexter tucked a pillow under his blankets and arranged his stuffed toys around the 'sleeping boy'. He opened his bedroom window and peered down at the backyard. He'd leant his bike against the fence and had left the gate unlocked. He climbed out of the window onto the roof of the sun-room, tiptoed carefully to the far edge and climbed down the trellis. He looked back into the house and waited. The kitchen light went off. He paused a moment longer to make sure his parents were on their way to bed. The upstairs light went off. Then their bedroom light. Dexter bolted for the gate, pushed it open, and jumped on his bike.

The school was a fifteen-minute bike ride away. *I hope I'm not late*, he thought, pedaling as fast as he could, taking every shortcut he knew. He winced as his legs burned with energy, and wheezed as his lungs tried to keep up with them.

The main building of Eisenhower Elementary, set back from the road far

away from the last streetlight, stood in the darkness like a black monolith of stone. Dexter slowed down, out of breath. Mrs. Prendergast's portable was behind the main building not far from the baseball diamond and next to the woods where Peter said he should hide. Dexter rounded the ill-lit street corner and rode across the playground. A full moon cast a ghostly light across the schoolyard. Dust and dry leaves flew up into his face. Up until that point, the night had been calm and still, the sky bright with stars. Another sudden, swirling gust sent leaves chattering across the empty asphalt.

He stopped his bike near the portable and shivered in the wind. "Peter?" he whispered. His mouth felt tacky like it had been jammed with cotton balls. "Peter? Are you there?"

A dog barked loudly, and he jumped. The barking came from the top of the portable and echoed across the empty schoolyard. Dexter gazed into a star-filled sky and saw a strange object descending. The dull black circle blotted out the twinkling starlight as it drew closer. The dog on the roof snarled. Its bark became feverish then turned into a whimper.

As Dexter dismounted from his bike, the wind increased around him. Leaves and twigs, bits of gravel and lumps of loose asphalt, floated upwards in tiny swirling tornadoes. The debris stung his face. Dexter dropped his bike to the ground just as the frame started to shake. He watched the streamers hanging from the handlebars fly up toward the sky, along with the entire bike. Defying gravity, his Schwinn hung suspended in the air five feet above the pavement. The bike's pedals and chain began turning like an invisible rider had mounted it.

"Holy geez—"

A bright cone of white light punched through the darkness from above, surrounding the portable on all sides. Dexter fell back on the hard tarmac and shielded his eyes. He saw a silhouette on top of the portable's roof

standing underneath the blinding light: a boy in a baseball cap holding a dog in his arms. The dog's barking wobbled through the night air as if the sound waves had slowed to a crawl. A band of many colors encircled the dark shape that hovered in silence high above the portable. Lights pulsed around it in a slow rhythm, whipping around the circumference of the floating object.

"A f-flying s-saucer!" Dexter gulped, standing up. "They *are* real!"

A thumping vibration boomed from the spaceship, rippling across the schoolyard. It shook Dexter off his feet. He fell to the pavement again. A blue beam emerged at an angle from the underside of the spaceship and slid across the roof of the portable. Another boom shook the ground. The beam of blue light went out. The bright cone of white light remained but the boy and the dog on the roof were gone.

"Peter?" Tears trickled down Dexter's cheeks. "Oh no... *Peter!*" he yelled.

The cone of white light went out as suddenly as it had appeared. The circling multi-colored band stopped rotating around the saucer's edge; the colored lights throbbed briefly then dimmed until total darkness returned. The craft rose upwards into the sky. Twinkles of starlight re-emerged once the giant saucer-like shadow had shrunk into nothingness.

Pebbles, sharp gravel, lumps of asphalt and several lost marbles fell to the pavement like hail. "Ouch," Dexter yelled, covering his head. His bike dropped to the ground, bounced on its tires, and fell over with a clatter.

Dexter dusted himself off. A piercing whistle from the woods startled him. Shaking with fright, he mounted the bike to pedal back home when he heard a shout, "Wait! Wait!"

"Peter?" Dexter strained in the darkness but saw nothing. "Peter, is that you?"

Sirens wailed down the street. Numerous sets of red flashing lights

approached the school at great speed. Dexter looked toward the advancing vehicles and their oncoming headlights, his stomach in knots, his legs frozen in place.

A hand touched his shoulder from behind. "Oh!" he cried out. "Don't scare me like that! Ever again."

"Sorry, Dexter. Pretty neat, huh?"

"Peter? But... but, I thought... I mean, you and Tommy's dog. You were—"

"I hope they like him. He'd better behave."

"Tommy's dog?" Dexter asked.

"No, you goober. Tommy."

"*Tommy?* Tommy Brant, you mean?"

Peter shrugged. "Yup. I'm sure they won't put up with his bullying. If that thingy still works with my dad's radio maybe they'll tell us how he's doing."

"I thought *you* were leaving with the aliens?"

"Well, I would have liked to. They seemed pretty friendly. But in the end, I couldn't really leave home. Dad came back from New York and he and Mom have patched things up. And we're not moving. Isn't that great?"

"But Tommy Brant? *How?* I mean, what happened?"

More sirens blared all across the city, up and down every street in the neighborhood. Several police cars and a fire engine turned off the road into the boulevard that led up to Eisenhower Elementary's front entrance.

"Quick, Dexter. I need your help. I have to find the rope I took from my dad's workshop before he finds out it's missing. It's on the other side of the portable. I'll explain everything."

Peter jumped on the back of Dexter's bike and they rode across the

playground. The earth immediately surrounding the portable was sizzling. Red embers glowed where dry grass used to be. “Oh drat,” Peter said picking up the rope that lay in a disorganized coil beside the portable. “It got burnt too.”

“C’mon Peter, are you going to tell me or not? How did you get Tommy to agree to go with the aliens instead of you?”

“Oh, he didn’t agree to go.”

“Huh?”

“Well, I left a note on his porch that said if he wanted his dog back, he had to meet me by the portable at midnight. Getting the dog on the roof was going to be the hardest . But I remembered how Tommy hoisted me into that tree. So, I did the same with the dog. But I used a pulley because even though I’m not as strong as Tommy Brant, I’m way smarter. And that’s how I got down too. After Tommy climbed up to get his dog back.”

“But I still don’t understand how the aliens knew where to come and why Tommy agreed to go with them?”

“Getting the aliens here was easy. I told them where the school was and told them I would paint a big red X on the portable roof so it would be easy to find me. Then I told them I would be waiting for them on the roof wearing a baseball cap. And of course, I would bring my dog.”

“But you’re not wearing a baseball cap.”

“Well, yes I was. Until Tommy Brant stole it from me just before I climbed down the rope.”

Another bright light flashed in their eyes.

“It’s just kids,” the policeman said to his buddy as they searched the woods. “Why are you out so late? You should be at home in bed.”

“Um, we saw strange lights,” Peter replied.

“Yeah, people are seeing them all over the city. Someone reported lights hovering over the school. Was it you?”

Peter shook his head, ‘no’.

Firemen hosed down the smoking grass.

“And there’s fires like this everywhere. Do you know who did this? What did you see? Anything?”

“We sure did, mister! A flying sauc— “

Peter poked Dexter in the ribs before he could say anything more. “He was going to say a weather balloon. That’s what my dad says they are.”

The policeman scratched his chin. “A weather balloon?”

“You mean they aren’t weather balloons?” Peter said. “Have the police seen *real* flying saucers? Then the papers must be right. Have *you* seen a real honest-to-goodness flying saucer, officer? And aliens? What about aliens? Are they real too?”

“Ah, well. But, um... Yeah, no. No such thing.” The officer picked up Dexter’s bike. “Hey, Charlie,” the policeman yelled. “I’m gonna put the kids’ bike in the trunk and give them a lift home. Meet you back at the station.”

The officer in the woods wiggled his flashlight and replied, “Okay, Joe.”

“Weather balloons,” the policeman muttered as he loaded the bike into the patrol car’s trunk. “Yeah, that’s what they were, kids. Just weather balloons.”

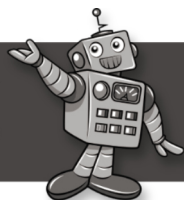
“I told you, Dexter,” Peter smirked. “Flying saucers aren’t really *real*. They’re just something made up. Like in the movies.”

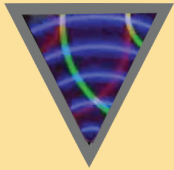
“Tell that to Tommy Brant.”

“Well, one thing’s for sure,” Peter said, smiling.

“I’m sure going to miss his dog.”

“Let’s go back
up and read
another one!”





THE CREATURES THAT TIME FORGOT

Ray Bradbury

Mad, impossible world! Sun-blasted by day,
cold-wracked by night, and life condensed by
radiation into eight days! Sim eyed the
Ship, if he only dared reach it and
escape! ... but it was more than half an
hour distant, the limit of life itself!

During the night, Sim was born. He lay wailing upon the cold cave
stones. His blood beat through him a thousand pulses each minute.
He grew, steadily.

Into his mouth his mother with feverish hands put the food. The
nightmare of living was begun. Almost instantly at birth his eyes grew
alert, and then, without half understanding why, filled with bright,
insistent terror. He gagged upon the food, choked and wailed. He looked
about, blindly.

There was a thick fog. It cleared. The outlines of the cave appeared.
And a man loomed up, insane and wild and terrible. A man with a dying

face. Old, withered by winds, baked like adobe in the heat. The man was crouched in a far corner of the cave, his eyes whitening to one side of his face, listening to the far wind trumpeting up above on the frozen night planet.

Sim's mother, trembling, now and again, staring at the man, fed Sim pebble-fruits, valley-grasses and ice-nipples broken from the cavern entrances, and eating, eliminating, eating again, he grew larger, larger.

The man in the corner of the cave was his father! The man's eyes were all that was alive in his face. He held a crude stone dagger in his withered hands and his jaw hung loose and senseless.

Then, with a widening focus, Sim saw the old people sitting in the tunnel beyond this living quarter. And as he watched, they began to die.

Their agonies filled the cave. They melted like waxen images, their faces collapsed inward on their sharp bones, their teeth protruded. One minute their faces were mature, fairly smooth, alive, electric. The next minute a desiccation and burning away of their flesh occurred.

Sim thrashed in his mother's grasp. She held him. "No, no," she soothed

him, quietly, earnestly, looking to see if this, too, would cause her husband to rise again.

With a soft swift padding of naked feet, Sim's father ran across the cave. Sim's mother screamed. Sim felt himself torn loose from her grasp. He fell upon the stones, rolling, shrieking with his new, moist lungs!

The webbed face of his father jerked over him, the knife was poised. It was like one of those prenatal nightmares he'd had while still in his mother's flesh. In the next few blazing, impossible instants questions flicked through his brain. The knife was high, suspended, ready to destroy him. But the whole question of life in this cave, the dying people, the withering and the insanity, surged through Sim's new, small head. How was it that he understood? A newborn child? Can a newborn child think, see, understand, interpret? No. It was wrong! It was impossible. Yet it was happening! To him. He had been alive an hour now. And in the next instant perhaps dead!

His mother flung herself upon the back of his father, and beat down the weapon. Sim caught the terrific backwash of emotion from both their conflicting minds. "Let me kill him!" shouted the father, breathing harshly, sobbingly. "What has he to live for?"

"No, no!" insisted the mother, and her body, frail and old as it was, stretched across the huge body of the father, tearing at his weapon. "He must live! There may be a future for him! He may live longer than us, and be young!"

The father fell back against a stone crib. Lying there, staring, eyes glittering, Sim saw another figure inside that stone crib. A girl-child, quietly feeding itself, moving its delicate hands to procure food. His sister.

The mother wrenched the dagger from her husband's grasp, stood up, weeping and pushing back her cloud of stiffening gray hair. Her mouth trembled and jerked. "I'll kill you!" she said, glaring down at her husband. "Leave my children alone."

The old man spat tiredly, bitterly, and looked vacantly into the stone crib, at the little girl. "One-eighth of `her` life's over, already," he gasped. "And she doesn't know it. What's the use?"

As Sim watched, his own mother seemed to shift and take a tortured, smoke-like form. The thin bony face broke out into a maze of wrinkles. She was shaken with pain and had to sit by him, shuddering and cuddling

the knife to her shriveled breasts. She, like the old people in the tunnel, was aging, dying.

Sim cried steadily. Everywhere he looked was horror. A mind came to meet his own. Instinctively he glanced toward the stone crib. Dark, his sister, returned his glance. Their minds brushed like straying fingers. He relaxed somewhat. He began to learn.

The father sighed, shut his lids down over his green eyes. "Feed the child," he said, exhaustedly. "Hurry. It is almost dawn and it is our last day of living, woman. Feed him. Make him grow."

Sim quieted, and images, out of the terror, floated to him.

This was a planet next to the sun. The nights burned with cold, the days were like torches of fire. It was a violent, impossible world. The people lived in the cliffs to escape the incredible ice and the day of flame. Only at dawn and sunset was the air breath-sweet, flower-strong, and then the cave peoples brought their children out into a stony, barren valley. At dawn the ice thawed into creeks and rivers, at sunset the day-fires died and cooled. In the intervals of even, livable temperature the people lived, ran, played, loved, free of the caverns; all life on the planet jumped, burst into life. Plants grew instantly,

birds were flung like pellets across the sky. Smaller, legged animal life rushed frantically through the rocks; everything tried to get its living down in the brief hour of respite.

It was an unbearable planet. Sim understood this, a matter of hours after birth. Racial memory bloomed in him. He would live his entire life in the caves, with two hours a day outside. Here, in stone channels of air he would talk, talk incessantly with his people, sleep never, think, think and lie upon his back, dreaming; but never sleeping.

`And he would live exactly eight days.'

* * * * *

The violence of this thought evacuated his bowels. Eight days. Eight `short` days. It was wrong, impossible, but a fact. Even while in his mother's flesh some racial knowledge had told him he was being formed rapidly, shaped and propelled out swiftly.

Birth was quick as a knife. Childhood was over in a flash. Adolescence was a sheet of lightning. Manhood was a dream, maturity a myth, old age an inescapably quick reality, death a swift certainty.

Eight days from now he'd stand half-blind, withering, dying, as his father now stood, staring uselessly at his own wife and child.

This day was an eighth of his total life! He must enjoy every second of it. He must search his parents' thoughts for knowledge.

'Because in a few hours they'd be dead.'

This was so impossibly unfair. Was this all of life? In his prenatal state hadn't he dreamed of 'long' lives, valleys not of blasted stone but green foliage and temperate clime? Yes! And if he'd dreamed then there must be truth in the visions. How could he seek and find the long life? Where? And how could he accomplish a life mission that huge and depressing in eight short, vanishing days?

How had his people gotten into such a condition?

As if at a button pressed, he saw an image. Metal seeds, blown across space from a distant green world, fighting with long flames, crashing on this bleak planet. From their shattered hulls tumble men and women.

When? Long ago. Ten thousand days. The crash victims hid in the cliffs from the sun. Fire, ice and floods washed away the wreckage of the

huge metal seeds. The victims were shaped and beaten like iron upon a forge. Solar radiations drenched them. Their pulses quickened, two hundred, five hundred, a thousand beats a minute. Their skins thickened, their blood changed. Old age came rushing. Children were born in the caves. Swifter, swifter, swifter the process. Like all this world's wild life, the men and women from the crash lived and died in a week, leaving children to do likewise.

So this is life, thought Sim. It was not spoken in his mind, for he knew no words, he knew only images, old memory, an awareness, a telepathy that could penetrate flesh, rock, metal. So I'm the five thousandth in a long line of futile sons? What can I do to save myself from dying eight days from now? Is there escape?

His eyes widened, another image came to focus.

Beyond this valley of cliffs, on a low mountain lay a perfect, unscarred metal seed. A metal ship, not rusted or touched by the avalanches. The ship was deserted, whole, intact. It was the only ship of all these that had crashed that was still a unit, still usable. But it was so far away. There was no one in it to help. This ship, then, on the far mountain, was the destiny toward which he would grow. There was his only hope of escape.

His mind flexed.

In this cliff, deep down in a confinement of solitude, worked a handful of scientists. To these men, when he was old enough and wise enough, he must go. They, too, dreamed of escape, of long life, of green valleys and temperate weathers. They, too, stared longingly at that distant ship upon its high mountain, its metal so perfect it did not rust or age.

The cliff groaned.

Sim's father lifted his eroded, lifeless face.

"Dawn's coming," he said.

II

Morning relaxed the mighty granite cliff muscles. It was the time of the Avalanche.

The tunnels echoed to running bare feet. Adults, children pushed with eager, hungry eyes toward the outside dawn. From far out, Sim heard

a rumble of rock, a scream, a silence. Avalanches fell into valley. Stones that had been biding their time, not quite ready to fall, for a million years let go their bulks, and where they had begun their journey as single boulders they smashed upon the valley floor in a thousand shrapnels and friction-heated nuggets.

Every morning at least one person was caught in the downpour.

The cliff people dared the avalanches. It added one more excitement to their lives, already too short, too headlong, too dangerous.

Sim felt himself seized up by his father. He was carried brusquely down the tunnel for a thousand yards, to where the daylight appeared. There was a shining insane light in his father's eyes. Sim could not move. He sensed what was going to happen. Behind his father, his mother hurried, bringing with her the little sister, Dark. "Wait! Be careful!" she cried to her husband.

Sim felt his father crouch, listening.

High in the cliff was a tremor, a shivering.

"Now!" bellowed his father, and leaped out.

An avalanche fell down at them!

Sim had accelerated impressions of plunging walls, dust, confusion. His mother screamed! There was a jolting, a plunging.

With one last step, Sim's father hurried him forward into the day. The avalanche thundered behind him. The mouth of the cave, where mother and

Dark stood back out of the way, was choked with rubble and two boulders that weighed a hundred pounds each.

The storm thunder of the avalanche passed away to a trickle of sand. Sim's father burst out into laughter. "Made it! By the Gods! Made it alive!" And he looked scornfully at the cliff and spat. "Pagh!"

Mother and sister Dark struggled through the rubble. She cursed her husband. "Fool! You might have killed Sim!"

"I may yet," retorted the father.

Sim was not listening. He was fascinated with the remains of an avalanche afront of the next tunnel. A blood stain trickled out from under a rise of boulders, soaking into the ground. There was nothing

else to be seen. Someone else had lost the game.

Dark ran ahead on lithe, supple feet, naked and certain.

The valley air was like a wine filtered between mountains. The heaven was a restive blue; not the pale scorched atmosphere of full day, nor the bloated, bruised black-purple of night, a-riot with sickly shining stars.

This was a tide pool. A place where waves of varying and violent temperatures struck, receded. Now the tide pool was quiet, cool, and its life moved abroad.

Laughter! Far away, Sim heard it. Why laughter? How could any of his people find time for laughing? Perhaps later he would discover why.

The valley suddenly blushed with impulsive color. Plant-life, thawing in the precipitant dawn, shoved out from most unexpected sources. It flowered as you watched. Pale green tendrils appeared on scoured rocks. Seconds later, ripe globes of fruit twitched upon the blade-tips. Father gave Sim over to mother and harvested the momentary, volatile crop, thrust scarlet, blue, yellow fruits into a fur sack which hung at his waist. Mother tugged at the moist new grasses, laid them on Sim's

tongue.

His senses were being honed to a fine edge. He stored knowledge thirstily. He understood love, marriage, customs, anger, pity, rage, selfishness, shadings and subtleties, realities and reflections. One thing suggested another. The sight of green plant life whirled his mind like a gyroscope, seeking balance in a world where lack of time for explanations made a mind seek and interpret on its own. The soft burden of food gave him knowledge of his system, of energy, of movement. Like a bird newly cracking its way from a shell, he was almost a unit, complete, all-knowing. Heredity had done all this for him. He grew excited with his ability.

* * * * *

They walked, mother, father and the two children, smelling the smells, watching the birds bounce from wall to wall of the valley like scurrying pebbles and suddenly the father said a strange thing:

"Remember?"

Remember what? Sim lay cradled. Was it any effort for them to remember when they'd lived only seven days!

The husband and wife looked at each other.

"Was it only three days ago?" said the woman, her body shaking, her eyes closing to think. "I can't believe it. It is so unfair." She sobbed, then drew her hand across her face and bit her parched lips. The wind played at her gray hair. "Now is my turn to cry. An hour ago it was you!"

"An hour is half a life."

"Come," she took her husband's arm. "Let us look at everything, because it will be our last looking."

"The sun'll be up in a few minutes," said the old man. "We must turn back now."

"Just one more moment," pleaded the woman.

"The sun will catch us."

"Let it catch me then!"

"You don't mean that."

"I mean nothing, nothing at all," cried the woman.

The sun was coming fast. The green in the valley burnt away. Searing wind blasted from over the cliffs. Far away where sun bolts hammered battlements of cliff, the huge stone faces shook their contents; those avalanches not already powdered down, were now released and fell like mantles.

"Dark!" shouted the father. The girl sprang over the warm floor of the valley, answering, her hair a black flag behind her. Hands full of green fruits, she joined them.

The sun rimmed the horizon with flame, the air convulsed dangerously with it, and whistled.

The cave people bolted, shouting, picking up their fallen children, bearing vast loads of fruit and grass with them back to their deep hideouts. In moments the valley was bare. Except for one small child someone had forgotten. He was running far out on the flatness, but he was not strong enough, and the engulfing heat was drifting down from the cliffs even as he was half across the valley.

Flowers were burnt into effigies, grasses sucked back into rocks like singed snakes, flower seeds whirled and fell in the sudden furnace blast of wind, sown far into gullies and crannies, ready to blossom at sunset tonight, and then go to seed and die again.

Sim's father watched that child running, alone, out on the floor of the valley. He and his wife and Dark and Sim were safe in the mouth of their tunnel.

"He'll never make it," said father. "Do not watch him, woman. It's not a good thing to watch."

They turned away. All except Sim, whose eyes had caught a glint of metal far away. His heart hammered in him, and his eyes blurred. Far away, atop a low mountain, one of those metal seeds from space reflected a dazzling ripple of light! It was like one of his intra-embryo dreams fulfilled! A metal space seed, intact, undamaged, lying on a mountain! There was his future! There was his hope for survival! There was where he would go in a few days, when he was, strange thought, a grown man!

The sun plunged into the valley like molten lava.

The little running child screamed, the sun burned, and the screaming stopped.

Sim's mother walked painfully, with sudden age, down the tunnel, paused, reached up, broke off two last icicles that had formed during the night. She handed one to her husband, kept the other. "We will drink one last toast. To you, to the children."

"To `you`," he nodded to her. "To the children." They lifted the icicles. The warmth melted the ice down into their thirsty mouths.

* * * * *

All day the sun seemed to blaze and erupt into the valley. Sim could not see it, but the vivid pictorials in his parents' minds were sufficient evidence of the nature of the day fire. The light ran like mercury, sizzling and roasting the caves, poking inward, but never penetrating deeply enough. It lighted the caves. It made the hollows of the cliff comfortably warm.

Sim fought to keep his parents young. But no matter how hard he fought with mind and image, they became like mummies before him. His father

seemed to dissolve from one stage of oldness to another. This is what will happen to me soon, though Sim in terror.

Sim grew upon himself. He felt the digestive-eliminary movements of his body. He was fed every minute, he was continually swallowing, feeding. He began to fit words to images and processes. Such a word was love. It was not an abstraction, but a process, a stir of breath, a smell of morning air, a flutter of heart, the curve of arm holding him, the look in the suspended face of his mother. He saw the processes, then searched behind her suspended face and there was the word, in her brain, ready to use. His throat prepared to speak. Life was pushing him, rushing him along toward oblivion.

He sensed the expansion of his fingernails, the adjustments of his cells, the profusion of his hair, the multiplication of his bones and sinew, the grooving of the soft pale wax of his brain. His brain at birth as clear as a circle of ice, innocent, unmarked, was, an instant later, as if hit with a thrown rock, cracked and marked and patterned in a million crevices of thought and discovery.

His sister, Dark, ran in and out with other little hothouse children, forever eating. His mother trembled over him, not eating, she had no appetite, her eyes were webbed shut.

"Sunset," said his father, at last.

The day was over. The light faded, a wind sounded.

His mother arose. "I want to see the outside world once more ... just once more...." She stared blindly, shivering.

His father's eyes were shut, he lay against the wall.

"I cannot rise," he whispered faintly. "I cannot."

"Dark!" The mother croaked, the girl came running. "Here," and Sim was handed to the girl. "Hold to Sim, Dark, feed him, care for him." She gave Sim one last fondling touch.

Dark said not a word, holding Sim, her great green eyes shining wetly.

"Go now," said the mother. "Take him out into the sunset time. Enjoy yourselves. Pick foods, eat. Play."

Dark walked away without looking back. Sim twisted in her grasp, looking over her shoulder with unbelieving, tragic eyes. He cried out

and somehow summoned from his lips the first word of his existence.

"Why...?"

He saw his mother stiffen. "The child spoke!"

"Aye," said his father. "Did you hear what he said?"

"I heard," said the mother quietly.

The last thing Sim saw of his living parents was his mother weakly, swayingly, slowly moving across the floor to lie beside her silent husband. That was the last time he ever saw them move.

IV

The night came and passed and then started the second day.

The bodies of all those who had died during the night were carried in a funeral procession to the top of a small hill. The procession was long, the bodies numerous.

Dark walked in the procession, holding the newly walking Sim by one

hand. Only an hour before dawn Sim had learned to walk.

At the top of the hill, Sim saw once again the far off metal seed.

Nobody ever looked at it, or spoke of it. Why? Was there some reason?

Was it a mirage? Why did they not run toward it? Worship it? Try to get to it and fly away into space?

The funeral words were spoken. The bodies were placed upon the ground where the sun, in a few minutes, would cremate them.

The procession then turned and ran down the hill, eager to have their few minutes of free time running and playing and laughing in the sweet air.

Dark and Sim, chattering like birds, feeding among the rocks, exchanged what they knew of life. He was in his second day, she in her third.

They were driven, as always, by the mercurial speed of their lives.

Another piece of his life opened wide.

Fifty young men ran down from the cliffs, holding sharp stones and rock daggers in their thick hands. Shouting, they ran off toward distant black, low lines of small rock cliffs.

"War!"

The thought stood in Sim's brain. It shocked and beat at him. These men were running to fight, to kill, over there in those small black cliffs where other people lived.

But why? Wasn't life short enough without fighting, killing?

From a great distance he heard the sound of conflict, and it made his stomach cold. "Why, Dark, why?"

Dark didn't know. Perhaps they would understand tomorrow. Now, there was the business of eating to sustain and support their lives. Watching Dark was like seeing a lizard forever flickering its pink tongue, forever hungry.

Pale children ran on all sides of them. One beetle-like boy scuttled up the rocks, knocking Sim aside, to take from him a icularly luscious red berry he had found growing under an outcrop.

The child ate hastily of the fruit before Sim could gain his feet. Then Sim hurled himself unsteadily, the two of them fell in a ridiculous jumble, rolling, until Dark pried them, squalling, apart.

Sim bled. A part of him stood off, like a god, and said, "This should not be. Children should not be this way. It is wrong!"

Dark slapped the little intruding boy away. "Get on!" she cried.

"What's your name, bad one?"

"Chion!" laughed the boy. "Chion, Chion, Chion!"

Sim glared at him with all the ferocity in his small, unskilled features. He choked. This was his enemy. It was as if he'd waited for an enemy of person as well as scene. He had already understood the avalanches, the heat, the cold, the shortness of life, but these were things of places, of scene, mute, extravagant manifestations of unthinking nature, not motivated save by gravity and radiation. Here, now, in this strident Chion he recognized a thinking enemy!

Chion darted off, turned at a distance, tauntingly crying:

"Tomorrow I will be big enough to kill you!"

And he vanished around a rock.

More children ran, giggling, by Sim. Which of them would be friends, enemies? How could friends and enemies come about in this impossible,

quick life time? There was no time to make either, was there?

Dark, as if knowing his thoughts, drew him away. As they searched for desired foods, she whispered fiercely in his ear. "Enemies are made over things like stolen foods; gifts of long grasses make friends. Enemies come, too, from opinions and thoughts. In five seconds you've made an enemy for life. Life's so short enemies must be made quickly." And she laughed with an irony strange for one so young, who was growing older before her rightful time. "You must fight to protect yourself. Others, superstitious ones, will try killing you. There is a belief, a ridiculous belief, that if one kills another, the murderer takes of the life energy of the slain, and therefore will live an extra day. You see? As long as that is believed, you're in danger."

But Sim was not listening. Bursting from a flock of delicate girls who tomorrow would be tall, quieter, and who day after that would gain breasts and the next day take husbands, Sim caught sight of one small girl whose hair was a violet blue flame.

She ran past, brushed Sim, their bodies touched. Her eyes, white as silver coins, shone at him. He knew then that he'd found a friend, a love, a wife, one who'd a week from now lie with him atop the funeral pyre as sunlight undressed their flesh from bone.

Only the glance, but it held them in mid-motion, one instant.

"Your name?" he shouted after her.

"Lyte!" she called laughingly back.

"I'm Sim," he answered, confused and bewildered.

"Sim!" she repeated it, flashing on. "I'll remember!"

Dark nudged his ribs. "Here, `eat`," she said to the distracted boy.

"Eat or you'll never get big enough to catch her."

From nowhere, Chion appeared, running by. "Lyte!" he mocked, dancing malevolently along and away. "Lyte! I'll remember Lyte, too!"

Dark stood tall and reed slender, shaking her dark ebony clouds of hair, sadly. "I see your life before you, little Sim. You'll need weapons soon to fight for this Lyte one. Now, hurry, the sun's coming!"

They ran back to the caves.

One-fourth of his life was over! Babyhood was gone. He was now a young boy! Wild rains lashed the valley at nightfall. He watched new river channels cut in the valley, out past the mountain of the metal seed. He stored the knowledge for later use. Each night there was a new river, a bed newly cut.

"What's beyond the valley?" wondered Sim.

"No one's ever been beyond it," explained Dark. "All who tried to reach the plain were frozen to death or burnt. The only land we know's within half an hour's run. Half an hour out and half an hour back."

"No one has ever reached the metal seed, then?"

Dark scoffed. "The Scientists, they try. Silly fools. They don't know enough to stop. It's no use. It's too far."

The Scientists. The word stirred him. He had almost forgotten the vision he had short hours after birth. His voice was eager. "Where are the Scientists?" he demanded.

Dark looked away from him, "I wouldn't tell you if I knew. They'd kill you, experimenting! I don't want you joining them! Live your life, don't cut it in half trying to reach that silly metal thing on the mountain."

"I'll find out where they are from someone else, then!"

"No one'll tell you! They hate the Scientists. You'll have to find them on your own. And then what? Will you save us? Yes, save us, little boy!" Her face was sullen; already half her life was gone. Tomorrow she must divine how best to live

her youth, her love, and she knew no way to fully plumb the depths of passion in so short a space.

"We can't sit and talk and eat," he protested. "And `nothing` else."

"There's always love," she retorted acidly. "It helps one forget. Gods, yes," she spat it out. "Love!"

* * * * *

Sim ran through the tunnels, seeking. Sometimes he half imagined where the Scientists were. But then a flood of angry thought from those around him, when he asked the direction to the Scientists' cave, washed

over him in confusion and resentment. After all, it was the Scientists' fault that they had been placed upon this terrible world! Sim flinched under the bombardment of oaths and curses.

Quietly he took his seat in a central chamber with the children to listen to the grown men talk. This was the time of education, the Time of Talking. No matter how he chafed at delay, or how great his impatience, even though life slipped fast from him and death approached like a black meteor, he knew his mind needed knowledge. Tonight, then, was the night of school. But he sat uneasily. Only 'five' more days of life.

Chion sat across from Sim, his thin-mouthed face arrogant.

Lyte appeared between the two. The last few hours had made her firmer footed, gentler, taller. Her hair shone brighter. She smiled as she sat beside Sim, ignoring Chion. And Chion became rigid at this and ceased eating.

The dialogue crackled, filled the room. Swift as heart beats, one thousand, two thousand words a minute. Sim learned, his head filled. He did not shut his eyes, but lapsed into a kind of dreaming that was almost intra-embryonic in lassitude and drowsy vividness. In the faint

background the words were spoken, and they wove a tapestry of knowledge
in his head.

* * * * *

He dreamed of green meadows free of stones, all grass, round and rolling and rushing easily toward a dawn with no taint of freezing, merciless cold or smell of boiled rock or scorched monument. He walked across the green meadow. Overhead the metal seeds flew by in a heaven that was a steady, even temperature. Things were slow, slow, slow.

Birds lingered upon gigantic trees that took a hundred, two hundred, five thousand days to grow. Everything remained in its place, the birds did not flicker nervously at a hint of sun, nor did the trees suck back frightenedly when a ray of sunlight poured over them.

In this dream people strolled, they rarely ran, the heart rhythm of them was evenly languid, not jerking and insane. Their kisses were long and lingering, not the parched mouthings and twitchings of lovers who had eight days to live. The grass remained, and did not burn away in torches. The dream people talked always of tomorrow and living and not tomorrow and dying. It all seemed so familiar that when Sim felt someone take his hand he thought it simply another of the dream.

Lyte's hand lay inside his own. "Dreaming?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Things are balanced. Our minds, to even things, to balance the unfairness of our living, go back in on ourselves, to find what there is that is good to see."

He beat his hand against the stone floor again and again. "It does not make things fair! I hate it! It reminds me that there is something better, something I have missed! Why can't we be ignorant! Why can't we live and die without knowing that this is an abnormal living?" And his breath rushed harshly from his half-open, constricted mouth.

"There is purpose in everything," said Lyte. "This gives us purpose, makes us work, plan, try to find a way."

His eyes were hot emeralds in his face. "I walked up a hill of grass, very slowly," he said.

"The same hill of grass I walked an hour ago?" asked Lyte.

"Perhaps. Close enough to it. The dream is better than the reality." He flexed his eyes, narrowed them. "I watched people and they did not eat."

"Or talk?"

"Or talk, either. And we always are eating, always talking. Sometimes those people in the dream sprawled with their eyes shut, not moving a muscle."

As Lyte stared down into his face a terrible thing happened. He imagined her face blackening, wrinkling, twisting into knots of agedness. The hair blew out like snow about her ears, the eyes were like discolored coins caught in a web of lashes. Her teeth sank away from her lips, the delicate fingers hung like charred twigs from her atrophied wrists. Her beauty was consumed and wasted even as he watched, and when he seized her, in terror, he cried out, for he imagined his own hand corroded, and he choked back a cry.

"Sim, what's wrong?"

The saliva in his mouth dried at the taste of the words.

"Five more days...."

"The Scientists."

Sim started. Who'd spoken? In the dim light a tall man talked. "The Scientists crashed us on this world, and now have wasted thousands of lives and time. It's no use. It's no use. Tolerate them but give them none of your time. You only live once, remember."

Where were these hated Scientists? Now, after the Learning, the Time of Talking, he was ready to find them. Now, at least, he knew enough to begin his fight for freedom, for the ship!

"Sim, where're you going?"

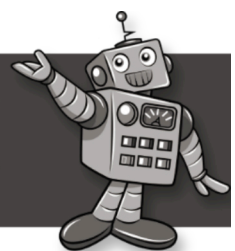
But Sim was gone. The echo of his running feet died away down a shaft of polished stone.

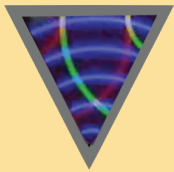
It seemed that half the night was wasted. He blundered into a dozen dead ends. Many times he was attacked by the insane young men who wanted his life energy. Their superstitious ravings echoed after him. The gashes of their hungry fingernails covered his body.

END OF PART ONE.

Continued in our next issue!

*"Let's go back
up and read
another one!"*





PIPER IN THE WOODS

Philip K. Dick

Earth maintained an important garrison on Asteroid Y-3. Now suddenly it was imperiled with a biological impossibility—men becoming plants!

"WELL, Corporal Westerburg," Doctor Henry Harris said gently, "just why do you think you're a plant?"

As he spoke, Harris glanced down again at the card on his desk. It was from the Base

Commander himself, made out in Cox's heavy scrawl: Doc, this is the lad I told you about. Talk to him and try to find out how he got this delusion. He's from the new Garrison, the new check-station on Asteroid Y-3, and we don't want anything to go wrong there. Especially a silly thing like this!

Harris pushed the card aside and stared back up at the youth across the desk from him. The young man seemed ill at ease and appeared to be avoiding answering the question Harris had put to him. Harris frowned. Westerburg was a good-looking chap, actually handsome in his Patrol uniform, a shock of blond hair over one eye. He was tall, almost six feet, a fine healthy lad, just two years out of Training, according to the card. Born in Detroit. Had measles when he was nine. Interested in jet engines, tennis. Twenty-six years old.



"Well, Corporal Westerburg," Doctor Harris said again. "Why do you think you're a plant?"

The Corporal looked up shyly. He cleared his throat. "Sir, I am a plant, I don't just think so. I've been a plant for several days, now."

"I see." The Doctor nodded. "You mean that you weren't always a plant?"

"No, sir. I just became a plant recently."

"And what were you before you became a plant?"

"Well, sir, I was just like the rest of you."

There was silence. Doctor Harris took up his pen and scratched a few lines, but nothing of importance came. A plant? And such a healthy-looking lad! Harris removed his steel-rimmed glasses and polished them with his handkerchief. He put them on again and leaned back in his chair. "Care for a cigarette, Corporal?"

"No, sir."

The Doctor lit one himself, resting his arm on the edge of the chair. "Corporal, you must realize that there are very few men who become plants, especially on such short notice. I have to admit you are the first person who has ever told me such a thing."

"Yes, sir, I realize it's quite rare."

"You can understand why I'm interested, then. When you say you're a plant, you mean you're not capable of mobility? Or do you mean you're a vegetable, as opposed to an animal? Or just what?"

The Corporal looked away. "I can't tell you any more," he murmured. "I'm

sorry, sir."

"Well, would you mind telling me how you became a plant?"

Corporal Westerburg hesitated. He stared down at the floor, then out the window at the spaceport, then at a fly on the desk. At last he stood up, getting slowly to his feet. "I can't even tell you that, sir," he said.

"You can't? Why not?"

"Because—because I promised not to."

THE room was silent. Doctor Harris rose, too, and they both stood facing each other. Harris frowned, rubbing his jaw. "Corporal, just who did you promise?"

"I can't even tell you that, sir. I'm sorry."

The Doctor considered this. At last he went to the door and opened it. "All right, Corporal. You may go now. And thanks for your time."

"I'm sorry I'm not more helpful." The Corporal went slowly out and Harris closed the door after him. Then he went across his office to the vidphone. He rang Commander Cox's letter. A moment later the beefy good-natured face of the Base Commander appeared.

"Cox, this is Harris. I talked to him, all right. All I could get is the statement that he's a plant. What else is there? What kind of behavior pattern?"

"Well," Cox said, "the first thing they noticed was that he wouldn't do any work. The Garrison Chief reported that this Westerburg would wander off outside the Garrison and just sit, all day long. Just sit."

"In the sun?"

"Yes. Just sit in the sun. Then at nightfall he would come back in. When they asked why he wasn't working in the jet repair building he told them he had to be out in the sun. Then he said—" Cox hesitated.

"Yes? Said what?"

"He said that work was unnatural. That it was a waste of time. That the only worthwhile thing was to sit and contemplate—outside."

"What then?"

"Then they asked him how he got that idea, and then he revealed to them that he had become a plant."

"I'm going to have to talk to him again, I can see," Harris said. "And he's applied for a permanent discharge from the Patrol? What reason did he give?"

"The same, that he's a plant now, and has no more interest in being a Patrolman. All he wants to do is sit in the sun. It's the darndest thing I ever heard."

"All right. I think I'll visit him in his quarters." Harris looked at his watch. "I'll go over after dinner."

"Good luck," Cox said gloomily. "But who ever heard of a man turning into a plant? We told him it wasn't possible, but he just smiled at us."

"I'll let you know how I make out," Harris said.

HARRIS walked slowly down the hall. It was after six; the evening meal was over. A dim concept was coming into his mind, but it was much too

soon to be sure. He increased his pace, turning right at the end of the hall. Two nurses passed, hurrying by. Westerburg was quartered with a buddy, a man who had been injured in a jet blast and who was now almost recovered. Harris came to the dorm wing and stopped, checking the numbers on the doors.

"Can I help you, sir?" the robot attendant said, gliding up.

"I'm looking for Corporal Westerburg's room."

"Three doors to the right."

Harris went on. Asteroid Y-3 had only recently been garrisoned and staffed. It had become the primary check-point to halt and examine ships entering the system from outer space. The Garrison made sure that no dangerous bacteria, fungus, or what-not arrived to infect the system. A nice asteroid it was, warm, well-watered, with trees and lakes and lots of sunlight. And the most modern Garrison in the nine planets. He shook his head, coming to the third door. He stopped, raising his hand and knocking.

"Who's there?" sounded through the door.

"I want to see Corporal Westerburg."

The door opened. A bovine youth with horn-rimmed glasses looked out, a book in his hand. "Who are you?"

"Doctor Harris."

"I'm sorry, sir. Corporal Westerburg is asleep."

"Would he mind if I woke him up? I want very much to talk to him." Harris peered inside. He could see a neat room, with a desk, a rug and

lamp, and two bunks. On one of the bunks was Westerburg, lying face up, his arms folded across his chest, his eyes tightly closed.

"Sir," the bovine youth said, "I'm afraid I can't wake him up for you, much as I'd like to."

"You can't? Why not?"

"Sir, Corporal Westerburg won't wake up, not after the sun sets. He just won't. He can't be wakened."

"Cataleptic? Really?"

"But in the morning, as soon as the sun comes up, he leaps out of bed and goes outside. Stays the whole day."

"I see," the Doctor said. "Well, thanks anyhow." He went back out into the hall and the door shut after him. "There's more to this than I realized," he murmured. He went on back the way he had come.

IT was a warm sunny day. The sky was almost free of clouds and a gentle wind moved through the cedars along the bank of the stream. There was a path leading from the hospital building down the slope to the stream. At the stream a small bridge led over to the other side, and a few patients were standing on the bridge, wrapped in their bathrobes, looking aimlessly down at the water.

It took Harris several minutes to find Westerburg. The youth was not with the other patients, near or around the bridge. He had gone farther down, past the cedar trees and out onto a strip of bright meadow, where poppies and grass grew everywhere. He was sitting on the stream bank, on a flat grey stone, leaning back and staring up, his mouth open a little. He did not notice the Doctor until Harris was almost beside him.

"Hello," Harris said softly.

Westerburg opened his eyes, looking up. He smiled and got slowly to his feet, a graceful, flowing motion that was rather surprising for a man of his size. "Hello, Doctor. What brings you out here?"

"Nothing. Thought I'd get some sun."

"Here, you can share my rock." Westerburg moved over and Harris sat down gingerly, being careful not to catch his trousers on the sharp edges of the rock. He lit a cigarette and gazed silently down at the water. Beside him, Westerburg had resumed his strange position, leaning back, resting on his hands, staring up with his eyes shut tight.

"Nice day," the Doctor said.

"Yes."

"Do you come here every day?"

"Yes."

"You like it better out here than inside."

"I can't stay inside," Westerburg said.

"You can't? How do you mean, 'can't'?"

"You would die without air, wouldn't you?" the Corporal said.

"And you'd die without sunlight?"

Westerburg nodded.

"Corporal, may I ask you something? Do you plan to do this the rest of your life, sit out in the sun on a flat rock? Nothing else?"

Westerburg nodded.

"How about your job? You went to school for years to become a Patrolman. You wanted to enter the Patrol very badly. You were given a fine rating and a first-class position. How do you feel, giving all that up? You know, it won't be easy to get back in again. Do you realize that?"

"I realize it."

"And you're really going to give it all up?"

"That's right."

HARRIS was silent for a while. At last he put his cigarette out and turned toward the youth. "All right, let's say you give up your job and sit in the sun. Well, what happens, then? Someone else has to do the job instead of you. Isn't that true? The job has to be done, your job has to be done. And if you don't do it someone else has to."

"I suppose so."

"Westerburg, suppose everyone felt the way you do? Suppose everyone wanted to sit in the sun all day? What would happen? No one would check ships coming from outer space. Bacteria and toxic crystals would enter the system and cause mass death and suffering. Isn't that right?"

"If everyone felt the way I do they wouldn't be going into outer space."

"But they have to. They have to trade, they have to get minerals and products and new plants."

"Why?"

"To keep society going."

"Why?"

"Well—" Harris gestured. "People couldn't live without society."

Westerburg said nothing to that. Harris watched him, but the youth did not answer.

"Isn't that right?" Harris said.

"Perhaps. It's a peculiar business, Doctor. You know, I struggled for years to get through Training. I had to work and pay my own way. Washed dishes, worked in kitchens. Studied at night, learned, crammed, worked on and on. And you know what I think, now?"

"What?"

"I wish I'd become a plant earlier."

Doctor Harris stood up. "Westerburg, when you come inside, will you stop off at my office? I want to give you a few tests, if you don't mind."

"The shock box?" Westerburg smiled. "I knew that would be coming around. Sure, I don't mind."

Nettled, Harris left the rock, walking back up the bank a short distance. "About three, Corporal?"

The Corporal nodded.

Harris made his way up the hill, to the path, toward the hospital building.

The whole thing was beginning to become more clear to him. A boy who had struggled all his life. Financial insecurity. Idealized goal, getting a Patrol assignment. Finally reached it, found the load too great. And on Asteroid Y-3 there was too much vegetation to look at all day. Primitive identification and projection on the flora of the asteroid. Concept of security involved in immobility and permanence. Unchanging forest.

He entered the building. A robot orderly stopped him almost at once. "Sir, Commander Cox wants you urgently, on the vidphone."

"Thanks." Harris strode to his office. He dialed Cox's letter and the Commander's face came presently into focus. "Cox? This is Harris. I've been out talking to the boy. I'm beginning to get this lined up, now. I can see the pattern, too much load too long. Finally gets what he wants and the idealization shatters under the—"

"Harris!" Cox barked. "Shut up and listen. I just got a report from Y-3. They're sending an express rocket here. It's on the way."

"An express rocket?"

"Five more cases like Westerburg. All say they're plants! The Garrison Chief is worried. Says we must find out what it is or the Garrison will fall a, right away. Do you get me, Harris? Find out what it is!"

"Yes, sir," Harris murmured. "Yes, sir."

BY the end of the week there were twenty cases, and all, of course, were from Asteroid Y-3.

Commander Cox and Harris stood together at the top of the hill, looking gloomily down at the stream below. Sixteen men and four women sat in the sun along the bank, none of them moving, none speaking. An hour had gone by since Cox and Harris appeared, and in all that time the twenty

people below had not stirred.

"I don't get it," Cox said, shaking his head. "I just absolutely don't get it. Harris, is this the beginning of the end? Is everything going to start cracking around us? It gives me a strange feeling to see those people down there, basking away in the sun, just sitting and basking."

"Who's that man there with the red hair?"

"That's Ulrich Deutsch. He was Second in Command at the Garrison. Now look at him! Sits and dozes with his mouth open and his eyes shut. A week ago that man was climbing, going right up to the top. When the Garrison Chief retires he was supposed to take over. Maybe another year, at the most. All his life he's been climbing to get up there."

"And now he sits in the sun," Harris finished.

"That woman. The brunette, with the short hair. Career woman. Head of the entire office staff of the Garrison. And the man beside her. Janitor. And that cute little gal there, with the bosom. Secretary, just out of school. All kinds. And I got a note this morning, three more coming in sometime today."

Harris nodded. "The strange thing is—they really want to sit down there. They're completely rational; they could do something else, but they just don't care to."

"Well?" Cox said. "What are you going to do? Have you found anything? We're counting on you. Let's hear it."

"I couldn't get anything out of them directly," Harris said, "but I've had some interesting results with the shock box. Let's go inside and I'll show you."

"Fine," Cox turned and started toward the hospital. "Show me anything you've got. This is serious. Now I know how Tiberius felt when Christianity showed up in high places."

HARRIS snapped off the light. The room was pitch black. "I'll run this first reel for you. The subject is one of the best biologists stationed at the Garrison. Robert Bradshaw. He came in yesterday. I got a good run from the shock box because Bradshaw's mind is so highly differentiated. There's a lot of repressed material of a non-rational nature, more than usual."

He pressed a switch. The projector whirled, and on the far wall a three-dimensional image appeared in color, so real that it might have been the man himself. Robert Bradshaw was a man of fifty, heavy-set, with iron grey hair and a square jaw. He sat in the chair calmly, his hands resting on the arms, oblivious to the electrodes attached to his neck and wrist. "There I go," Harris said. "Watch."

His film-image appeared, approaching Bradshaw. "Now, Mr. Bradshaw," his image said, "this won't hurt you at all, and it'll help us a lot." The image rotated the controls on the shock box. Bradshaw stiffened, and his jaw set, but otherwise he gave no sign. The image of Harris regarded him for a time and then stepped away from the controls.

"Can you hear me, Mr. Bradshaw?" the image asked.

"Yes."

"What is your name?"

"Robert C. Bradshaw."

"What is your position?"

"Chief Biologist at the check-station on Y-3."

"Are you there now?"

"No, I'm back on Terra. In a hospital."

"Why?"

"Because I admitted to the Garrison Chief that I had become a plant."

"Is that true? That you are a plant."

"Yes, in a non-biological sense. I retain the physiology of a human being, of course."

"What do you mean, then, that you're a plant?"

"The reference is to attitudinal response, to Weltanschauung."

"Go on."

"It is possible for a warm-blooded animal, an upper primate, to adopt the psychology of a plant, to some extent."

"Yes?"

"I refer to this."

"And the others? They refer to this also?"

"Yes."

"How did this occur, your adopting this attitude?"

Bradshaw's image hesitated, the lips twisting. "See?" Harris said to Cox.

"Strong conflict. He wouldn't have gone on, if he had been fully conscious."

"I—"

"Yes?"

"I was taught to become a plant."

The image of Harris showed surprise and interest. "What do you mean, you were taught to become a plant?"

"They realized my problems and taught me to become a plant. Now I'm free from them, the problems."

"Who? Who taught you?"

"The Pipers."

"Who? The Pipers? Who are the Pipers?"

There was no answer.

"Mr. Bradshaw, who are the Pipers?"

After a long, agonized pause, the heavy lips ed. "They live in the woods...
."

Harris snapped off the projector, and the lights came on. He and Cox blinked. "That was all I could get," Harris said. "But I was lucky to get that. He wasn't supposed to tell, not at all. That was the thing they all promised not to do, tell who taught them to become plants. The Pipers who live in the woods, on Asteroid Y-3."

"You got this story from all twenty?"

"No." Harris grimaced. "Most of them put up too much fight. I couldn't even get this much from them."

Cox reflected. "The Pipers. Well? What do you propose to do? Just wait around until you can get the full story? Is that your program?"

"No," Harris said. "Not at all. I'm going to Y-3 and find out who the Pipers are, myself."

THE small patrol ship made its landing with care and precision, its jets choking into final silence. The hatch slid back and Doctor Henry Harris found himself staring out at a field, a brown, sun-baked landing field. At the end of the field was a tall signal tower. Around the field on all sides were long grey buildings, the Garrison check-station itself. Not far off a huge Venusian cruiser was parked, a vast green hulk, like an enormous lime. The technicians from the station were swarming all over it, checking and examining each inch of it for lethal life-forms and poisons that might have attached themselves to the hull.

"All out, sir," the pilot said.

Harris nodded. He took hold of his two suitcases and stepped carefully down. The ground was hot underfoot, and he blinked in the bright sunlight. Jupiter was in the sky, and the vast planet reflected considerable sunlight down onto the asteroid.

Harris started across the field, carrying his suitcases. A field attendant was already busy opening the storage compartment of the patrol ship, extracting his trunk. The attendant lowered the trunk into a waiting dolly and came after him, manipulating the little truck with bored skill.

As Harris came to the entrance of the signal tower the gate slid back and a man came forward, an older man, large and robust, with white hair and a

steady walk.

"How are you, Doctor?" he said, holding his hand out. "I'm Lawrence Watts, the Garrison Chief."

They shook hands. Watts smiled down at Harris. He was a huge old man, still regal and straight in his dark blue uniform, with his gold epaulets sparkling on his shoulders.

"Have a good trip?" Watts asked. "Come on inside and I'll have a drink fixed for you. It gets hot around here, with the Big Mirror up there."

"Jupiter?" Harris followed him inside the building. The signal tower was cool and dark, a welcome relief. "Why is the gravity so near Terra's? I expected to go flying off like a kangaroo. Is it artificial?"

"No. There's a dense core of some kind to the asteroid, some kind of metallic deposit. That's why we picked this asteroid out of all the others. It made the construction problem much simpler, and it also explains why the asteroid has natural air and water. Did you see the hills?"

"The hills?"

"When we get up higher in the tower we'll be able to see over the buildings. There's quite a natural park here, a regular little forest, complete with everything you'd want. Come in here, Harris. This is my office." The old man strode at quite a clip, around the corner and into a large, well-furnished ament. "Isn't this pleasant? I intend to make my last year here as amiable as possible." He frowned. "Of course, with Deutsch gone, I may be here forever. Oh, well." He shrugged. "Sit down, Harris."

"Thanks." Harris took a chair, stretching his legs out. He watched Watts as he closed the door to the hall. "By the way, any more cases come up?"

"Two more today," Watts was grim. "Makes almost thirty, in all. We have three hundred men in this station. At the rate it's going—"

"Chief, you spoke about a forest on the asteroid. Do you allow the crew to go into the forest at will? Or do you restrict them to the buildings and grounds?"

WATTS rubbed his jaw. "Well, it's a difficult situation, Harris. I have to let the men leave the grounds sometimes. They can see the forest from the buildings, and as long as you can see a nice place to stretch out and relax that does it. Once every ten days they have a full period of rest. Then they go out and fool around."

"And then it happens?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But as long as they can see the forest they'll want to go. I can't help it."

"I know. I'm not censuring you. Well, what's your theory? What happens to them out there? What do they do?"

"What happens? Once they get out there and take it easy for a while they don't want to come back and work. It's boondoggling. Playing hookey. They don't want to work, so off they go."

"How about this business of their delusions?"

Watts laughed good-naturedly. "Listen, Harris. You know as well as I do that's a lot of poppycock. They're no more plants than you or I. They just don't want to work, that's all. When I was a cadet we had a few ways to make people work. I wish we could lay a few on their backs, like we used to."

"You think this is simple goldbricking, then?"

"Don't you think it is?"

"No," Harris said. "They really believe they're plants. I put them through the high-frequency shock treatment, the shock box. The whole nervous system is paralyzed, all inhibitions stopped cold. They tell the truth, then. And they said the same thing—and more."

Watts paced back and forth, his hands clasped behind his back. "Harris, you're a doctor, and I suppose you know what you're talking about. But look at the situation here. We have a garrison, a good modern garrison. We're probably the most modern outfit in the system. Every new device and gadget is here that science can produce. Harris, this garrison is one vast machine. Each man has his job, the Maintenance Crew, the Biologists, the Office Crew, the Managerial Staff.

"Look what happens when one person steps away from his job. Everything else begins to creak. We can't service the bugs if no one services the machines. We can't order food to feed the crews if no one makes out reports, takes inventories. We can't direct any kind of activity if the Second in Command decides to go out and sit in the sun all day.

"Thirty people, one tenth of the Garrison. But we can't run without them. The Garrison is built that way. If you take the supports out the whole building falls. No one can leave. We're all tied here, and these people know it. They know they have no right to do that, run off on their own. No one has that right anymore. We're all too tightly interwoven to suddenly start doing what we want. It's unfair to the rest, the majority."

HARRIS nodded. "Chief, can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Are there any inhabitants on the asteroid? Any natives?"

"Natives?" Watts considered. "Yes, there's some kind of aborigines living out there." He waved vaguely toward the window.

"What are they like? Have you seen them?"

"Yes, I've seen them. At least, I saw them when we first came here. They hung around for a while, watching us, then after a time they disappeared."

"Did they die off? Diseases of some kind?"

"No. They just—just disappeared. Into their forest. They're still there, someplace."

"What kind of people are they?"

"Well, the story is that they're originally from Mars. They don't look much like Martians, though. They're dark, a kind of coppery color. Thin. Very agile, in their own way. They hunt and fish. No written language. We don't pay much attention to them."

"I see." Harris paused. "Chief, have you ever heard of anything called—The Pipers?"

"The Pipers?" Watts frowned. "No. Why?"

"The patients mentioned something called The Pipers. According to Bradshaw, the Pipers taught him to become a plant. He learned it from them, a kind of teaching."

"The Pipers. What are they?"

"I don't know," Harris admitted. "I thought maybe you might know. My first assumption, of course, was that they're the natives. But now I'm not so

sure, not after hearing your description of them."

"The natives are primitive savages. They don't have anything to teach anybody, especially a top-flight biologist."

Harris hesitated. "Chief, I'd like to go into the woods and look around. Is that possible?"

"Certainly. I can arrange it for you. I'll give you one of the men to show you around."

"I'd rather go alone. Is there any danger?"

"No, none that I know of. Except—"

"Except the Pipers," Harris finished. "I know. Well, there's only one way to find them, and that's it. I'll have to take my chances."

"If you walk in a straight line," Chief Watts said, "you'll find yourself back at the Garrison in about six hours. It's a small asteroid. There's a couple of streams and lakes, so don't fall in."

"How about snakes or poisonous insects?"

"Nothing like that reported. We did a lot of tramping around at first, but it's grown back now, the way it was. We never encountered anything dangerous."

"Thanks, Chief," Harris said. They shook hands. "I'll see you before nightfall."

"Good luck." The Chief and his two armed escorts turned and went back across the rise, down the other side toward the Garrison. Harris watched them go until they disappeared inside the building. Then he turned and

started into the grove of trees.

The woods were very silent around him as he walked. Trees towered up on all sides of him, huge dark-green trees like eucalyptus. The ground underfoot was soft with endless leaves that had fallen and rotted into soil. After a while the grove of high trees fell behind and he found himself crossing a dry meadow, the grass and weeds burned brown in the sun. Insects buzzed around him, rising up from the dry weed-stalks. Something scuttled ahead, hurrying through the undergrowth. He caught sight of a grey ball with many legs, scampering furiously, its antennae weaving.

The meadow ended at the bottom of a hill. He was going up, now, going higher and higher. Ahead of him an endless expanse of green rose, acres of wild growth. He scrambled to the top finally, blowing and panting, catching his breath.

He went on. Now he was going down again, plunging into a deep gully. Tall ferns grew, as large as trees. He was entering a living Jurassic forest, ferns that stretched out endlessly ahead of him. Down he went, walking carefully. The air began to turn cold around him. The floor of the gully was damp and silent; underfoot the ground was almost wet.

He came out on a level table. It was dark, with the ferns growing up on all sides, dense growths of ferns, silent and unmoving. He came upon a natural path, an old stream bed, rough and rocky, but easy to follow. The air was thick and oppressive. Beyond the ferns he could see the side of the next hill, a green field rising up.

Something grey was ahead. Rocks, piled-up boulders, scattered and stacked here and there. The stream bed led directly to them. Apparently this had been a pool of some kind, a stream emptying from it. He climbed the first of the boulders awkwardly, feeling his way up. At the top he paused, resting again.

As yet he had had no luck. So far he had not met any of the natives. It would be through them that he would find the mysterious Pipers that were stealing the men away, if such really existed. If he could find the natives, talk to them, perhaps he could find out something. But as yet he had been unsuccessful. He looked around. The woods were very silent. A slight breeze moved through the ferns, rustling them, but that was all. Where were the natives? Probably they had a settlement of some sort, huts, a clearing. The asteroid was small; he should be able to find them by nightfall.

HE started down the rocks. More rocks rose up ahead and he climbed them. Suddenly he stopped, listening. Far off, he could hear a sound, the sound of water. Was he approaching a pool of some kind? He went on again, trying to locate the sound. He scrambled down rocks and up rocks, and all around him there was silence, except for the splashing of distant water. Maybe a waterfall, water in motion. A stream. If he found the stream he might find the natives.

The rocks ended and the stream bed began again, but this time it was wet, the bottom muddy and overgrown with moss. He was on the right track; not too long ago this stream had flowed, probably during the rainy season. He went up on the side of the stream, pushing through the ferns and vines. A golden snake slid expertly out of his path. Something glinted ahead, something sparkling through the ferns. Water. A pool. He hurried, pushing the vines aside and stepping out, leaving them behind.

He was standing on the edge of a pool, a deep pool sunk in a hollow of grey rocks, surrounded by ferns and vines. The water was clear and bright, and in motion, flowing in a waterfall at the far end. It was beautiful, and he stood watching, marveling at it, the undisturbed quality of it. Untouched, it was. Just as it had always been, probably. As long as the asteroid existed. Was he the first to see it? Perhaps. It was so hidden, so concealed by the ferns. It gave him a strange feeling, a feeling almost of ownership. He stepped down a little toward the water.

And it was then he noticed her.

The girl was sitting on the far edge of the pool, staring down into the water, resting her head on one drawn-up knee. She had been bathing; he could see that at once. Her coppery body was still wet and glistening with moisture, sparkling in the sun. She had not seen him. He stopped, holding his breath, watching her.

She was lovely, very lovely, with long dark hair that wound around her shoulders and arms. Her body was slim, very slender, with a supple grace to it that made him stare, accustomed as he was to various forms of anatomy. How silent she was! Silent and unmoving, staring down at the water. Time passed, strange, unchanging time, as he watched the girl. Time might even have ceased, with the girl sitting on the rock staring into the water, and the rows of great ferns behind her, as rigid as if they had been painted there.

All at once the girl looked up. Harris shifted, suddenly conscious of himself as an intruder. He stepped back. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "I'm from the Garrison. I didn't mean to come poking around."

She nodded without speaking.

"You don't mind?" Harris asked presently.

"No."

So she spoke Terran! He moved a little toward her, around the side of the pool. "I hope you don't mind my bothering you. I won't be on the asteroid very long. This is my first day here. I just arrived from Terra."

She smiled faintly.

"I'm a doctor. Henry Harris." He looked down at her, at the slim coppery body, gleaming in the sunlight, a faint sheen of moisture on her arms and thighs. "You might be interested in why I'm here." He paused. "Maybe you can even help me."

She looked up a little. "Oh?"

"Would you like to help me?"

She smiled. "Yes. Of course."

"That's good. Mind if I sit down?" He looked around and found himself a flat rock. He sat down slowly, facing her. "Cigarette?"

"No."

"Well, I'll have one." He lit up, taking a deep breath. "You see, we have a problem at the Garrison. Something has been happening to some of the men, and it seems to be spreading. We have to find out what causes it or we won't be able to run the Garrison."

HE waited for a moment. She nodded slightly. How silent she was! Silent and unmoving. Like the ferns.

"Well, I've been able to find out a few things from them, and one very interesting fact stands out. They keep saying that something called—called The Pipers are responsible for their condition. They say the Pipers taught them—" He stopped. A strange look had flitted across her dark, small face. "Do you know the Pipers?"

She nodded.

Acute satisfaction flooded over Harris. "You do? I was sure the natives would know." He stood up again. "I was sure they would, if the Pipers

really existed. Then they do exist, do they?"

"They exist."

Harris frowned. "And they're here, in the woods?"

"Yes."

"I see." He ground his cigarette out impatiently. "You don't suppose there's any chance you could take me to them, do you?"

"Take you?"

"Yes. I have this problem and I have to solve it. You see, the Base Commander on Terra has assigned this to me, this business about the Pipers. It has to be solved. And I'm the one assigned to the job. So it's important to me to find them. Do you see? Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"Well, will you take me to them?"

The girl was silent. For a long time she sat, staring down into the water, resting her head against her knee. Harris began to become impatient. He fidgeted back and forth, resting first on one leg and then on the other.

"Well, will you?" he said again. "It's important to the whole Garrison. What do you say?" He felt around in his pockets. "Maybe I could give you something. What do I have...." He brought out his lighter. "I could give you my lighter."

The girl stood up, rising slowly, gracefully, without motion or effort. Harris' mouth fell open. How supple she was, gliding to her feet in a single motion! He blinked. Without effort she had stood, seemingly without

change. All at once she was standing instead of sitting, standing and looking calmly at him, her small face expressionless.

"Will you?" he said.

"Yes. Come along." She turned away, moving toward the row of ferns.

Harris followed quickly, stumbling across the rocks. "Fine," he said.

"Thanks a lot. I'm very interested to meet these Pipers. Where are you taking me, to your village? How much time do we have before nightfall?"

The girl did not answer. She had entered the ferns already, and Harris quickened his pace to keep from losing her. How silently she glided!

"Wait," he called. "Wait for me."

The girl paused, waiting for him, slim and lovely, looking silently back.

He entered the ferns, hurrying after her.

"WELL, I'll be darned!" Commander Cox said. "It sure didn't take you long." He leaped down the steps two at a time. "Let me give you a hand."

Harris grinned, lugging his heavy suitcases. He set them down and breathed a sigh of relief. "It isn't worth it," he said. "I'm going to give up taking so much."

"Come on inside. Soldier, give him a hand." A Patrolman hurried over and took one of the suitcases. The three men went inside and down the corridor to Harris' quarters. Harris unlocked the door and the Patrolman deposited his suitcase inside.

"Thanks," Harris said. He set the other down beside it. "It's good to be back, even for a little while."

"A little while?"

"I just came back to settle my affairs. I have to return to Y-3 tomorrow morning."

"Then you didn't solve the problem?"

"I solved it, but I haven't cured it. I'm going back and get to work right away. There's a lot to be done."

"But you found out what it is?"

"Yes. It was just what the men said. The Pipers."

"The Pipers do exist?"

"Yes." Harris nodded. "They do exist." He removed his coat and put it over the back of the chair. Then he went to the window and let it down. Warm spring air rushed into the room. He settled himself on the bed, leaning back.

"The Pipers exist, all right—in the minds of the Garrison crew! To the crew, the Pipers are real. The crew created them. It's a mass hypnosis, a group projection, and all the men there have it, to some degree."

"How did it start?"

"Those men on Y-3 were sent there because they were skilled, highly-trained men with exceptional ability. All their lives they've been schooled by complex modern society, fast tempo and high integration between people. Constant pressure toward some goal, some job to be done.

"Those men are put down suddenly on an asteroid where there are natives

living the most primitive of existence, completely vegetable lives. No concept of goal, no concept of purpose, and hence no ability to plan. The natives live the way the animals live, from day to day, sleeping, picking food from the trees. A kind of Garden-of-Eden existence, without struggle or conflict."

"So? But—"

"Each of the Garrison crew sees the natives and unconsciously thinks of his own early life, when he was a child, when he had no worries, no responsibilities, before he joined modern society. A baby lying in the sun.

"But he can't admit this to himself! He can't admit that he might want to live like the natives, to lie and sleep all day. So he invents The Pipers, the idea of a mysterious group living in the woods who trap him, lead him into their kind of life. Then he can blame them, not himself. They 'teach' him to become a of the woods."

"What are you going to do? Have the woods burned?"

"No." Harris shook his head. "That's not the answer; the woods are harmless. The answer is psychotherapy for the men. That's why I'm going right back, so I can begin work. They've got to be made to see that the Pipers are inside them, their own unconscious voices calling to them to give up their responsibilities. They've got to be made to realize that there are no Pipers, at least, not outside themselves. The woods are harmless and the natives have nothing to teach anyone. They're primitive savages, without even a written language. We're seeing a psychological projection by a whole Garrison of men who want to lay down their work and take it easy for a while."

The room was silent.

"I see," Cox said presently. "Well, it makes sense." He got to his feet. "I

hope you can do something with the men when you get back."

"I hope so, too," Harris agreed. "And I think I can. After all, it's just a question of increasing their self-awareness. When they have that the Pipers will vanish."

Cox nodded. "Well, you go ahead with your unpacking, Doc. I'll see you at dinner. And maybe before you leave, tomorrow."

"Fine."

HARRIS opened the door and the Commander went out into the hall. Harris closed the door after him and then went back across the room. He looked out the window for a moment, his hands in his pockets.

It was becoming evening, the air was turning cool. The sun was just setting as he watched, disappearing behind the buildings of the city surrounding the hospital. He watched it go down.

Then he went over to his two suitcases. He was tired, very tired from his trip. A great weariness was beginning to descend over him. There were so many things to do, so terribly many. How could he hope to do them all? Back to the asteroid. And then what?

He yawned, his eyes closing. How sleepy he was! He looked over at the bed. Then he sat down on the edge of it and took his shoes off. So much to do, the next day.

He put his shoes in the corner of the room. Then he bent over, unsnapping one of the suitcases. He opened the suitcase. From it he took a bulging gunnysack. Carefully, he emptied the contents of the sack out on the floor. Dirt, rich soft dirt. Dirt he had collected during his last hours there, dirt he had carefully gathered up.

When the dirt was spread out on the floor he sat down in the middle of it. He stretched himself out, leaning back. When he was fully comfortable he folded his hands across his chest and closed his eyes. So much work to do—But later on, of course. Tomorrow. How warm the dirt was....

He was sound asleep in a moment.

END

*"Let's go back
up and read
another one!"*

