

JETSAM

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WITH DECEPTIVE EASE the rocket drifted down, down, the flare of her exhaust vivid against the black sky, the long, downreaching streamer of incandescent gas stirring the fine pumice dust to a coruscating flurry, then, as she lost still more altitude, fusing the almost impalpable powder to a slag that glowed red, red beneath crusty, thickening gray, for minutes after her passing.

Auxiliary jets flared briefly, fiercely, to kill her lateral drift. Again they flared, and a third time. The rocket was all of ten feet above the almost featureless surface when, suddenly main and auxiliary jets went out like a snuffed candle. She fell—but with an odd, almost nightmarish slowness. She landed as silently as she had come, tilting heavily at first, then slightly, first one way and then the other as the powerful, fluid-damped springs, not unlike the recoil mechanism of a piece of artillery, took the weight and the shock and, after the preliminary swaying and quivering, allowed her to assume an upright position.

She stood there, then, gleaming in the harsh sunlight, a bright ovoid suspended in to tripod that was her vaned landing gear. She should, perhaps, have looked strange, alien—but she did not. She was as much part of the scheme of things as the plain of pumice dust, as the ring craters, as the serrated ridge of the distant mountain range above which hung, seeming almost to touch the jagged peaks, looming huge in the black, diamond-spangled sky, the great, cloudy opal that was Earth. She was new and bright, her shell plating barely scarred by her swift, screaming passage through the atmosphere of her mother world—but she belonged. She was new, the first of her kind—but the dream was old, old.

She was part of the dream.

Inside the rocket, inside the cramped living cabin that was also the control room, the men pulled their bulky, cumbersome spacesuits on over their thick, porous plastic underwear. The biggest of them all, the Captain, adjusted clips and zippers stolidly, did not so much as glance out of the now unscreened ports on the shadowed side of the rocket. The Pilot, the Radio Technician and the Engineers tried to follow his phlegmatic example. Only the Navigator—his slight body was still almost that of a boy and he had yet to lose his boyish enthusiasm—stood staring out at the Lunar landscape, his fingers fumbling as he stared, groping vaguely and clumsily through the routine of the airtight fastenings, making foolish mistakes that brought a frown to his commander's face.

This was all part of the dream—and he was living it.

"Sparks," said the Captain, "you'd better make sure that the Stargazer has done his suit up properly. Otherwise I don't know how we shall find our way home."

"We can do without *him*, sir," said the Radio Officer. "Earth's too big to miss—at this range."

"That's what the boys of the garrison'll be saying," laughed the Pilot. "*When* we get the launching site established."

"If *they* give us time," said the Engineer.

"Enough of that," said the Captain. "We're here, and that's all that matters just now. We have our job to do—preliminary survey, samples of soil and rock, as much exploration as we have time for. As far as our friends on the other side of the Curtain are concerned—this is no more than a scientific expedition. Understand?"

"We understand," said the men.

"Hurry up, Stargazer," said the Captain. "It'll all look better outside."

"Yes, sir," said the Navigator, clicking the last fastenings of his suit tight. Then, almost whispering—"But this is all wrong. It should have been what you said, sir—no more than a scientific expedition. . . ."

"Don't be a fool!" snapped the Captain. "You told me yourself that this had always been your dream—ever since, as a kid, you used to read those trashy books with the gaudy covers. You've got your dream. . . ."

It's been taken from me, thought the Navigator.

"You've got your dream—now quit whining. Helmets on, men. Test your radios."

There was a babble of conversation, tinny, distorted, then once again the sharp, commanding tones of the Captain.

"The first job," he told his crew, "is the marker." He turned to face the unscreened ports, pointed—his arm bloated and ungainly in the sleeve of his spacesuit. "That mound, there. About a mile away."

Two men lifted the big, square box that was the marker. Two of the others opened the hatch to the airlock, scrambled down into the little compartment, stood with outstretched arms to receive the box. They lowered it carefully to the deck.

"All right, Driver," called the Captain. "Come on out. The airlock will hold only two—and I'm being first on the Moon. The Navigator can be second—so stay where you are, Stargazer."

"I set her down, Captain," said the Pilot in a surly voice.

"Aye—and if it weren't for the fact that you can claim lack of practice I'd have your eagles for the job you made of it. One blast of the auxiliaries should have been sufficient. Thanks to the way you were throwing reaction mass around we may have to lighten ship yet. . . . Got the flag, there?"

"Coming down, Captain," called the Engineer, passing the long, cylindrical case to his commander.

"Then close the hatch!"

In the confined space of the airlock the two men, Captain and Navigator, watched the needle of the pressure gauge move jerkily towards the Zero of the scale.

Now, the Navigator was thinking. Now. At last. Crazy, selfishly, he thought, I've only to push him aside when the door opens, and jump. . . . And that would mean, he told himself, that I should be the first man on the Moon—and that it'd be my first and only time on the Moon. Besides having twenty years or so in military prison to follow. . . .

"What's wrong, Stargazer?" asked the Captain. "You look like a sick goldfish behind that helmet of yours. . . . Open the door, now!"

The Navigator turned the controlling wheel, felt the click of released clamps through his thick, clumsy gloves. The door opened inwards. He stared out through the circular aperture at the glaring white plain, the distant ring craters, the black shadow of the ship. The Captain pushed past him, one bulky arm thrust through the carrying sling of the flag case. The big man lowered himself carefully through the opening, his feet searching for and at last finding the toe holds cut in the nearer of the vanes. Moving slowly, cautiously, he vanished from sight. He called, "Come on. The others can send the marker down."

I could still fall, thought the Navigator. Accidentally. And be the first ...

But he followed the Captain with as much caution as the big man had displayed, pausing for a moment on the ladder while he called to those in the ship, using his radio telephone, to close the outer airlock door by remote control so that the compartment could be repressurized. The last ten feet, however—the Captain was now clear of the ladder, standing arrogantly with wide-spread legs—he dropped, feeling as he slowly fell that this was a dream that he had known all his life, a dream that was at last coming true.

With The Captain he stood and watched the door open again, watched the Pilot and Sparks, identified by the colors of their spacesuits, clamber down the ladder. The airlock door had shut again behind them. The four men stood in silence until it opened again and the Engineer stood framed in the orifice.

"Don't forget the marker, Jets!" called the Captain unnecessarily.

The Engineer had not forgotten. Slowly, carefully, he lowered the square box on the end of a piece of line. After the Pilot had received it, unhitched the heavy cord, Jets slowly and carefully pulled up the light gant-line, methodically coiling it as he did so.

"Don't bother with that *now!*" called the Captain. "We're all waiting."

At last all five men were standing just clear of the shadow cast by the rocket. It was hot in the sun. The insulation and the cooling arrangements of the suits, thought the Navigator, did not seem to be so efficient as they had been led to believe. Or, perhaps, the effect of heat was psychological rather than physical. In this glaring light, with the sun intolerably bright in the black sky, the mind expected the

sensation of heat and would, unlike the instruments that had been used when the suits were tested, do its best to supply the deficiency if no such sensation were apparent.

The Captain was talking. The Navigator, still philosophizing over objectivity and subjectivity, consciously heard only disjointed phrases of the oration that crackled through his helmet speaker.

". . . take possession . . . in the name of . . ."

The leader of the expedition pulled the flag from its case, drove the sharp ferrule of the staff deep into the powdery soil. For a brief moment the folds of flimsy plastic fluttered free, for less than a second there was a glimpse of the formal, geometric pattern of blue and white and crimson. Then the flag was no more than two yards of colored material hanging limply from an upright stick, the colors seeming already to be fading in the fierce sunlight.

There should be an atmosphere for this sort of thing, thought the Navigator. *An atmosphere, and wind . . .* Abruptly he began to remember the words of the Captain's speech, the words that, like the ceremony of the flag, were symbols of ideas.

Take possession . . . he thought. *Possession. What right have we to take possession, save on behalf of the human race? We built the rocket, and we brought her here, but the ideas, the technology, behind her building and launching and navigation are the common property of all mankind. Science knows no frontiers. And neither does the dream of which we are lucky enough to be the . . . the end result?* He grinned wryly. "The dream," he whispered aloud, "is turning sour."

"What was that, Stargazer?" asked the Captain sharply. "Nothing, sir," lied the Navigator.

"Careful, now, men," warned the Captain. "No acrobatics. Shuffle—don't try to jump. You can break a leg or fracture a face plate as easily on the Moon as on Earth."

Sparks and Jets picked up the marker between them, followed the other three men as they trudged slowly and carefully across the plain to the slight mound that the leader had pointed out as the best place for the sign of their safe arrival.

The mound, when they came to it, had more of the appearance of a shallow ring crater. The slope up to its rim was so slight as to be hardly noticeable, but the depression in its center was more pronounced. It was, thought the Navigator, as though some giant had blown hard and steadily down on to the thick pumice dust. *A giant*, he amended, *with very hot breath. . .* For the dust, especially toward the center of the crater, was crusted over with a thin, brittle slag that snapped under the men's heavy boots like an ice crust on snow.

Suddenly the Navigator stopped, fell to his knees in the dust. His thick gloved hands scabbled for the obstacle that had almost tripped him. The thing, when he dragged it up into the light, was badly damaged—by his hands, his clumsy boot, by the intense heat to which it had been subjected . . . *when?*

The Captain, stooping beside him, swore bitterly. "See we're not the first! *They* have beaten us to it!" The Navigator got to his feet, holding the crushed and warped artifact gently.

"They?" he asked. "*They*, Captain? Who are—or were—*they*? This is, or was, some kind of instrument. As far as I can see its case is metal—and neither we nor our friends on the other side of the Curtain can afford to use metal for anything where wood or plastic would serve. . . . Look, too, on the side here. . . . Operating instructions? In a script that to any man of Earth would be no more than a meaningless scribble."

"We should have brought along an archaeologist," suggested Sparks, half seriously.

"Can anybody here read Martian?" asked the Pilot. "Stop that!" snapped the Captain. "This is no laughing matter. It's serious. Somebody has been here before us, may be here now. It is our duty to find out who, and when, and why. You, Sparks and Jets, carry the marker another mile or so to the northward. To that solitary rock. If it *is* a rock. If it turns out to be some other damned artifact, let me know at once. The rest of us . . . dig!"

For a while they found nothing further.

They had no tools but their thick-gloved hands. There were, of course, light shovels in the ship but, somehow, nobody thought of going back for them. The odd sense of urgency that now possessed them would have made the short journey to the rocket and back seem a waste of precious and fast-running-out time. They perspired heavily in their suits, soaking the thick underwear that clad them

under the -armor. If any one of them worked with his back to the sun for more than a minute or so the transparent plastic of his helmet misted over.

Meanwhile, Sparks and Jets had reached the fresh site for the marker. Sparks' voice drifted tinnily through the helmet speakers. "All ready, Captain. Set to throw North, away from you."

"Good. Any further signs of interlopers?"

"No, sir."

"Then start the fuse and come back here."

As by common consent the three diggers straightened their aching backs, watched their two shipmates trudging towards them over the glaring plain. Behind the jerkily moving figures there was a sudden, brief flare of ruddy light—a flare of light and a dense, black cloud that seemed to spread like, but much faster than, a dribble of ink spilled on clean blotting paper. But it was disappointing, somehow, unspectacular. Against the light blue—or white—or gray-clouded sky of Earth the explosion of the container of finely divided carbon would have had something of drama. Here, with no air to support the particles, it lost most of its effect.

But it will be effective enough back home, thought the Navigator. Our astronomers will see it. And the others. And then . . .

"Back to the digging, men," ordered the Captain.

"Sparks and Jets—turn to as soon as you get here." "Sir!" cried the Pilot. "Captain! I've found something! A man!"

It was not a man, of course. It was a spacesuit, not unlike the ones that the explorers were wearing. It had been the property of one who was, by their standards, almost a giant, at least half as tall again as they were. There would have been some justification for the belief that the wearer of the suit was exceptional—but the three other suits turned up beside the first one were equally large.

"Whoever they are," said the Captain at last, "they're big bastards. But humanoid. Two legs, two arms, a head. But big."

"Martians," said the Pilot. "Like I said before."

"How do you make that out, Driver?"

"Well, sir, look at this—I suppose you could call it a crater. Take *our* ship away—and what have you got? The same sort of configuration. The down blast will fuse some of the pumice—and some of it will blow out and away. And if we do have to jettison unessential equipment to lighten ship—it'll be covered over as this was, and we can pick it up on our return."

"But why Martians?" asked the Captain.

"Well, sir, if there are men on Mars, men anything like us, they'll tend to be tall and spindly on account of the feeble gravity. And the men who wore these suits were tall. Furthermore, they'd be more inclined to land on the Moon than Earth. Perhaps their ships, like themselves, were—are—too fragile to attempt setting down on a relatively heavy-gravity planet. So they came here, and observed, and took photographs maybe—I still think that the thing that the Stargazer found is a camera of some kind—checked up their fuel and found that they couldn't quite reach escape velocity, so dumped all this stuff."

"Ingenious," said the Captain. "But if the Martians are such gangling weaklings as you imply, then these suits are far too heavy for them. Look at them. Look at the way that they've consistently used metal where a light plastic would have done at least as well."

"Perhaps they *are* too heavy," admitted the Pilot grudgingly. Then, "But, sir, they wouldn't be too heavy for them here, on the Moon!"

The Captain laughed. "Almost you convince me, Driver. Anyhow—it's not our friends from the other side of the Curtain. Unless," he laughed again, "their biologists have produced a new breed of man suitable for Lunar conditions. But I wonder how long ago it was that your Martians were here. I wonder when they are coming back."

"They aren't," said the Navigator. "This must have been a one-shot affair. Come this way, sir."

The Captain followed him to the center of the little crater, looked curiously as his subordinate fell to his knees, and stirred the pumice dust.

"What are you getting at, Stargazer?"

"Just this, sir. The dust. Look at it. Touch it."

"But what . . . ?"

"Under the dust there's a sort of slag—just the same sort of slag that you'll find directly under our jets. It's thick, solid—not like the thin crust out towards the rim. And there's at least half an inch of dust on top of it. On a world with no air, no wind. Just the slow, slow seepage of microscopic particles from the crater slopes over the ... centuries? No, not centuries. Millennia, perhaps. Or longer."

"A pity," said the Captain. "I was rather looking forward to meeting the Driver's Martians. But who *were* these people?"

The Navigator moved his head inside his helmet until he found the tube of his little fresh-water tank with his lips, took a short, unsatisfying sip before replying. Something—some suspicion, some fear—had made his mouth suddenly dry.

"I don't know, Captain," he said. "I don't *know*."

"But you think."

"Yes, I think. I have a . . . feeling about all this. But I'd sooner keep it to myself until we have more evidence."

"As you say. But we must return to the ship soon. I'm just about dehydrated. Ah, here are Sparks and Jets to bear a hand."

Slowly the pile of salvaged equipment grew. Another, smaller camera, less badly damaged than the first one, metal oxygen—or so the explorers assumed—cylinders, two glass bottles, their labels still intact, still displaying with clarity the queer, unreadable script of those who had left them there. A pair of binoculars, a pile of clothing that crumbled to fine powder when handled, three sheath knives still encased in a dry, brittle integument that had once been leather, a metal case full of wiring.

It was the Navigator who found the book. A magazine it was, rather a flimsy affair of paper that had once been glossy, of pictures that still retained some faint traces of color. When uncovered it was open—flung down carelessly, perhaps, or, it could be, left that way by the long-dead astronaut who had thumbed with clumsy, gloved hands through its pages.

It was open at the picture of a girl, naked, reclining on what could have been a grassy lawn. There were trees in the background. There was a dog beside his mistress. Under the picture were words in the unknown script.

"Look," said the Navigator. "Here's the proof. No freak of parallel evolution could have produced that woman. Or that dog. Or those trees."

"Proof of *what*, Stargazer?"

"That the people who had to lighten ship before they could return came from the Earth, *our* Earth."

"Hogwash!" exploded the Captain.

"No, sir, it's not. It was, of course, a long time ago."

"So they had rockets, and photography, and printing in the Middle Ages? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

"No, sir. Not the Middle Ages. Before the Flood."

"Come off it, Stargazer. This *is* too much, even from you."

"Then how else do you account for all this? Look at it this way, sir. All mythologies—all—have a legend of the Deluge, of the Flood that destroyed all life save for a chosen few. Those few may have been favored by the gods, they may have been just lucky. Whatever the way of it was—they were our forebears. And the Flood itself—was it a flood as we know it? A mere abnormally high tide, a mere bursting by some river of its bounds? Remember, sir, that all people, North and South, East and West, have the Flood in their mythologies. The Flood—and the legend of lost continents...."

"Go on."

"There was a Flood, and there *were* continents—populous, highly civilized—that are now lost. It's all part of the same story. A violent, seismic upheaval, as a result of which great land masses went down with all hands, as a result of which new lands rose from the ocean beds."

"These people, if there ever were such people," said the Captain, "were scientists. They had reached

at least the same level as we ourselves. One would think that they could have coped with such a disaster."

"Not if they, themselves, caused it. It *is* reasonable to suppose, Captain, that a certain level of technology produces both the spaceship and the atom bomb. Imagine the effect of say, twenty hydrogen bombs exploded along geological fault lines."

"But it's rather strange," said the Pilot, "that they never came back here. It's odd that this upheaval of yours should have occurred just after the first successful Lunar flight."

"Is it so odd? Perhaps they, like us, had a Curtain with two sides to it. Perhaps they, like us, intended using this world for military purposes—and the radio signal announcing their safe and successful landing on the Moon was detonator for the Big Bang. . . ."

There was silence as all five men stared at the low-hanging Earth.

"All theories," said the Captain at last, heavily. "Pick up what you can of this . . . junk, men, and carry it back to the ship. We're only serving officers of the Empress-Mother doing a job of work—we'll leave the fabrication of fairy stories to the scientists when we get back to Earth."

As he stooped to pick up the pair of binoculars he found one more trifle half buried in the pumice dust. He scooped it up carefully in his gloved hand. It was fragile, mere rubbish, a discarded container that had held something and which was now empty. There was a flimsy, inner box of metal foil, an even flimsier outer box of paper with an external layer of some transparent substance which had preserved the script and the picture of the familiar animals that had once symbolized—*something*.

The Captain stared at it.

"A camel," he said at last, wonderingly. "A camel. I'd like to know what used to be in this packet. . . ."