

The 15.37 amble closest about the whole thing had  
made me believe in it — *Response: Apathy in The Observer*



the dark light years brian aldiss

# The Dark Light Years

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## Brian Aldiss

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark, The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant  
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters, The generous patrons of art, the statesmen  
and the rulers....

T. S. ELIOT

### CHAPTER ONE

On the ground, new blades of grass sprang up in chlorophyll coats. On the trees, tongues of green  
protruded from boughs and branches, wrapping them about - soon the place would look like a  
imbecile Earthchild's attempt to draw Christmas trees - as spring again set spur to the growing things  
in the southern hemisphere of Dapdrof.

Not that nature was more amiable on Dapdrof than elsewhere. Even as she sent the warmer winds over  
the southern hemisphere, she was sousing most of the northern in an ice-bearing monsoon.

Propped on G-crutches, old Aylmer Ainson stood at his door, scratching his scalp very leisurely and  
staring at the budding trees. Even the slenderest outmost twig shook very little, for all that a stiff  
breeze blew.

This leaden effect was caused by gravity; twigs, like everything else on Dapdrof, weighed three times  
as much as they did on Earth. Ainson was long accustomed to the phenomenon. His body had grown  
round-shouldered and hollow-chested accustoming him to it. His brain had grown a little round-  
shouldered in the process.

Fortunately he was not afflicted with the craving to re-capture the past that strikes down so many  
humans even before they reach middle age. The sight of infant green leaves woke in him only the  
vaguest nostalgia, roused in him only the faintest recollection that his childhood had been passed  
among foliage more responsive to April's zephyrs - zephyrs, moreover, a hundred light years away. He  
was free to stand in the doorway and enjoy man's richest luxury, a blank mind.

Idly, he watched Quequo, the female utod, as she trod between her salad beds and under the ammp  
trees to launch her body into the bolstering mud. The ammp trees were evergreen, unlike the rest  
the trees in Ainson's enclosure. Resting in the foliage on the crest of them were big four-winged white  
birds, which decided to take off as Ainson looked at them, fluttering up like immense butter-flies and  
splashing their shadows across the house as they passed.

But the house was already splashed with their shadows. Obeying the urge to create a work of art that  
visited them perhaps only once in a century, Ainson's friends had broken the white of his walls with  
scatterbrained scattering of silhouetted wings and bodies, urging upwards. The lively movement

this pattern seemed to make the low-eaved house rise against gravity; but that was appearance only for this spring found the neoplastic roof-tree sagging and the supporting walls considerably buckled the knees.

This was the fortieth spring Ainson had seen flow across his patch of Dapdrof. Even the ripe stench from the middenstead now savoured only of home. As he breathed it in, his grog or parasite-eater scratched his head for him; reaching up, Ainson returned the compliment and tickled the lizard-like creature's cranium. He guessed what the grog really wanted, but at that hour, with only one of the suns up, it was too chilly to join Snok Snok Karn and Quequo Kifful with their grogs for a wallow in the mire.

"I'm cold standing out here. I am going inside to lie down," he called to Snok Snok in the utodian tongue.

The young utod looked up and extended two of his limbs in a sign of understanding. That was gratifying. Even after forty years\* study, Ainson found the utodian language full of conundrums. He had not been sure that he had not said. "The stream is cold and I am going inside to cook it." Catching the right whistling inflected scream was not easy: he had only one sound orifice to Snok Snok's eight. He swung his crutches and went in.

"His speech is growing less distinct than it was," Quequo remarked. "We had difficulty enough teaching him to communicate. He is not an efficient mechanism, this man-legs. You may have noticed that he is moving more slowly than he did."

"I had noticed it, Mother. He complains about it him-self. Increasingly he mentions this phenomenon he calls pain."

"It is difficult to exchange ideas with Earthlegs because their vocabularies are so limited and their voice range minimal, but I gather from what he was trying to tell me the other night that if he were an utod he would now be almost a thousand years old."

"Then we must expect he will soon evolve into the carrion stage."

"That, I take it, is what the fungus on his skull signified by changing to white."

This conversation was carried out in the utodian language, while Snok Snok lay back against the huge symmetrical bulk of his mother and soaked in the glorious ooze. Their grogs climbed about their backs licking and pouncing. The stench, encouraged by the sun's mild shine, was gorgeous. Their droppings released in the thin mud, supplied valuable oils which seeped into their hides, making them soft.

Snok Snok Karn was already a large utod, a strapping offspring of the dominant species of the lumbering world of Dapdrof. He was in fact adult now, although still neuter: and in his mind's lazy eye he saw himself as a male for the next few decades anyhow. He could change sex when Dapdrof changed suns; for that event, the periodical entropic solar orbital disestablishment. Snok Snok was well prepared.

Most of his lengthy childhood had been taken up with disciplines preparing him for this event. Quequo had been very good on disciplines and on mindsuckle; secluded from the world as the two of the

were here with Manlegs Ainson, she had given them all of her massive and maternal concentration.

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Languidly, he deretracted a limb, scooped up a mass of slime and mud. and walloped it over his cheek. Then, re-collecting his manners, he hastily sloshed some of the mixture over his mother's back.

"Mother, do you think Manlegs is preparing for esod?" Snok Snok asked, retracting the limb into the smooth wall of his flank. Manlegs was what they called Aylmer; esod was a convenient way of squeaking about entropic solar orbital disestablishmentism.

"It's hard to tell, the language barrier being what it is," Quequo said, blinking through mud. "We have tried to talk about it, but without much success. I must try again; we must both try. It would be a serious matter for him if he were not prepared - he could be suddenly converted into the carrion stage. But they must have the same sort of thing happening on the Manlegs planet."

"It won't be long now, Mother, will it?"

When she did not bother to answer, for the grorgs were trotting actively up and down her spine, Snok Snok lay and thought about that time, not far off now, when Dapdrof would leave its present sun for Saffron Smiler, for Yellow Scowler. That would be a hard period, and he would need to be male and fierce and tough. Then eventually would come Welcome White, the happy star, the sun beneath which he had been born (and which accounted for his lazy and sunny good nature); under Welcome White, he could afford to take on the cares and joys of motherhood, and rear and train a son just like himself.

Ah. but life was wonderful when you thought deeply about it. The facts of esod might seem prosaic to some, but to Snok Snok, though he was only a simple country boy (simply reared too, without any notions about joining the priesthood and sailing out into the star-realms), there was a glory about the nature.

Even the sun's warmth, that filled his eight-hundred-and-fifty pound bulk, held a poetry incapable of paraphrase. He heaved himself to one side and excreted into the midden, as a small tribute to his mother.

Do to others as you would be dung by.

"Mother, was it because the priesthood had dared to leave the worlds of the Triple Suns that they met the Manlegs Earthmen?"

"You're in a talkative mood this morning. Why don't you go in and talk to Manlegs? You know how his version of what happens in star-realms amuses you."

"But, Mother, which version is true, his or ours?"

She hesitated before giving him her answer; it was a wretchedly difficult answer, yet only through lay an understanding of the world of affairs. She said: "Frequently there are several versions of truth."

He brushed the remark aside.

"But it was the priesthood that went beyond the Triple Suns who first met the Manlegs, wasn't it?"

"Why don't you lie still and ripen up?"

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"Didn't you tell me they met on a world called Grud-grodd, only a few years after I was born?"

"Ainson told you that in the first place."

"It was you who told me that trouble would come from the meeting.

The first encounter between utod and man occurred ten years after the birth of Snok Snok. As Snok Snok said, this encounter was staged on the planet his race called Grudgrodd. Had it happened on a different planet, had different protagonists been involved, the outcome of the whole matter might have been other than it was. Had someone ... but there is little point in embarking on conditionals. There are no "ifs" in history, only in the minds of observers reviewing it, and for all the progress we make, nobody has proved that chance is other than a statistical delusion invented by man. We can only say that events between man and utod fell out in such and such a way.

This narrative will chronicle these events with as little comment as possible, leaving the reader on his honour to remember that what Quequo said applies as much to man as to aliens: truths arrive in as many forms as lies.

Grudgrodd looked tolerable enough to the first utods who inspected it.

Autodian star-realm-ark had landed in a wide valley, inhospitable, rocky, cold, and covered with knee-high thistles for the greater part of its length, but nevertheless closely resembling some of the benighted spots one happened on in the northern hemisphere of Dapdrof. A pair of gorgs were sent out through the hatch, to return in half an hour intact and breathing heavily. Odds were, the place was habitable.

Ceremonial filth was shoveled out on to the ground and the Sacred Cosmopolitan was induced to excrete out of the hatch, in the universal gesture of fertility.

"I think it's a mistake," he said. The utodian for "a mistake" was Grudgrodd (as far as an atonal grudge can be rendered at an into terrestrial script), and from then on the planet was known as Grudgrodd.

Still inclined to protest, the Cosmopolitan stepped out, followed by his three Politans, and the planet was claimed as an appendage of the Triple Suns.

Four priestlings scurried busily about, clearing a circle in the thistles on the edge of the river. With all their six limbs deretracted, they worked swiftly, two of them scooping soil out of the circle, and the other two allowing the water to trickle in from one side, while the other two trod the resulting mud into a rebarbative treacle.

Watching the work abstractedly with his rear eyes, the Cosmopolitan stood on the edge of the growing crater and argued as strongly as ever a utod could on the rights and wrongs of landing on a planet named after the Triple Suns. As strongly as they could, the three Politans argued back.

"The Sacred Feeling is quite clear," said the Cosmopolitan. "As children of the Triple Suns, our defecations must touch no planets unlit by the Triple Suns; there are limits to all things, even fertility." He extended a limb up-wards, where a large mauve globe as big as an ammp fruit peered

coldly at them over a bank of cloud. "Is that apology for a sun Saffron Smiler? Do you take it for Welcome White? Can you even mistake it for Yellow Scowler? No, no, my friends, that mauve miser is an alien, and we waste our substance on it."

The first Politan said, "Every word you say is incontrovertible. But we are not here entirely by option."

We ran into a star-realm turbulence that carried us several thousand orbits off course. This planet just happened to be our nearest haven."

"As usual you speak only the truth," the Cosmopolitan said. "But we needn't have landed here. A month's flight would have taken us back to the Triple Suns and Dapdrof, or one of her sister planets. It does seem a bit unholy of us."

"I don't think you need worry too much about that, Cosmopolitan," said the second Politan. He had the heavy grayish green skin of one born while an esod was actually taking place, and was perhaps the easiest going of all the priesthood. "Look at it this way. The Triple Suns round which Dapdrof revolves only form three of the six stars in the Home Ouster. Those six stars possess between them eight worlds capable of supporting life as we know it. After Dapdrof, we count the other seven worlds as equally holy and fit for utodammp, though some of them - Buskey for instance - revolve round one of the three lesser stars of the cluster. So the criterion of what is utodammp-' worthy is not that it has to revolve about one of the Triple Suns. Now we ask -"

But the Cosmopolitan, who was a better speaker than a listener, as befitted a utod in his position, cut his companion short "Let us ask no more, friend. I just observed that it seemed a bit unholy of us. It didn't mean any criticism. But we are setting a precedent." He scratched his grogg judicially.

With great tolerance, the third Politan (whose name was Blue Lugug) said, "I agree with every word you say, Cosmopolitan. But we do not know if we are setting a precedent. Our history is so long that it may be that many and many a crew branched out into the star-realm and there, on some far planet, set up a new swamp to the glory of utodammp. Why, if we look around, we may even find utodammp established here.<sup>1</sup> "You persuade me utterly; in the Revolution Age, such a thing could easily have happened," said the Cosmopolitan, in relief. Stretching out all six of his limbs, he waved them ceremonially to include ground and sky. "I pronounce all this to be land belonging to the Triple Sun. Let defecation commence."

They were happy. They grew even happier. And who could not be happy? With ease and fertility at hand, they were at home.

The mauve sun disappeared in disgrace, and almost at once a snowball-bright satellite wearing a rakish halo of dust sprang out of the horizon and rose swiftly above them. Used to great changes in temperature, the eight utods did not mind the increasing cold of night. In their newly-built wallows they wallowed. Their sixteen attendant groggs wallowed with them, clinging with sucker fingers tenaciously to their hosts when the utods submerged beneath the mud.

Slowly they imbibed the feel of the new world. It lapped at their bodies, yielded up meanings incapable of translation into their terms.

In the sky overhead gleamed the Home Cluster, six stars arranged in the shape - or so the leader

intellectual of the priestling claimed - of one of the grails that swam the tempestuous seas  
Smeksmer.

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"We needn't have worried," said the Cosmopolitan happily. "The Triple Suns are still shining on us here. We needn't hurry back at all. Perhaps at the end of the week we'll plant a few ammp seeds and then move homewards."

"... Or at the end of the week after next," said the third Politan. comfortable in his mud bath.

To complete their contentment, the Cosmopolitan gave them a brief religious address. They lay and listened to the web of his discourse as it was spun out of his eight orifices. He pointed out how the ammp trees and the utods were dependent upon each other, how the yield of the one depended on the yield of the other. He dwelt on the significances of the word "yield" before going on to point out how both the trees and the utods (both being the manifestations of one spirit) depended on the light yield that poured from whichever of the Triple Suns they moved about. This light was the droppings of the suns, which made it a little absurd as well as miraculous. They should never forget, any of them, that they also partook of the absurd as well as the miraculous. They must never get exalted or puffed up for were not even their gods formed in the divine shape of a turdling?

The third Politan much enjoyed this monologue. What is most familiar is most reassuring.

He lay with only the tip of one snout showing above the bubbling surface of the mud, and spoke in his submerged voice, through his ockpu orifices. With one of his unsubmerged eyes, he gazed across the dark bulk of their star-realm-ark, beautifully bulbous and black against the sky. Ah, life was good and rich, even so far away from beloved Dapdrof. Come next esod. he'd really have to change sex and become a mother; he owed it to his line; but even that... well, as he'd often heard his mother say, to a pleasant mind all was pleasant. He thought lovingly of his mother, and leant against her. He was as fond of her as ever since she had changed sex and become a Sacred Cosmopolitan.

Then he squealed through all orifices. Behind the ark, lights were flashing. The third Politan pointed this out to his companions. They all looked where he indicated. Not lights only. A continuous growling noise.

Not only one light Four round sources of light, cutting through the dark, and a fifth light that moved about restlessly, like a fumbling limb. It came to rest on the ark.

"I suggest that a life form is approaching," said one of the priestlings.

As he spoke, they saw more clearly. Heading along the valley towards them were two chunky shapes.

From the chunky shapes came the growling noise. The chunky shapes reached the ark and stopped. The growling noise stopped.

"How interesting! They are larger than we are," said the first Politan.

Smaller shapes were climbing from the two chunky objects. Now the light that had bathed the ark turned its eye on to the wallow. In unison, to avoid being dazzled, the utods moved their vision to a more comfortable radiation band. They saw the smaller shapes - four of them there were, and this

shaped - line up on the bank.

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"If they make their own light, they must be fairly intelligent," said the Cosmopolitan. "Which do you think the life forms are - the two chunky objects with eyes, or the four thin things?"

"Perhaps the thin things are their grorgs." suggested a priestling.

"It would be only polite to get out and see," said the Cosmopolitan. He heaved his bulk up and began to move towards the four figures. His companions rose to follow him. They heard noises coming from the figures on the bank, which were now backing away.

"How delightful!" exclaimed the second Politan, hurrying to get ahead. "I do believe they are trying their primitive way to communicate!"

"What fortune that we came!" said the third Politan. but the remark was, of course, not aimed at the Cosmopolitan.

"Greetings, creatures!" bellowed two of the priestlings.

And it was at that moment that the creatures on the bank raised Earth-made weapons to their hips and opened fire.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

Captain Bargerone struck a characteristic posture. Which is to say that he stood very still with his hands hanging limply down the seams of his sky blue shorts and rendered his face without expression. It was a form of self-control he had practiced several times on this trip, particularly when confronted by his Master Explorer. "Do you wish me to take what you are saying seriously.

"Ainson?" he asked. "Or are you merely trying to delay take-off?"

Master Explorer Bruce Ainson swallowed; he was a religious man, and he silently summoned the Almighty to help him get the better of this fool who saw nothing beyond his duty.

"The two creatures we captured last night have definitely attempted to communicate with me, sir.

Under space exploration definitions, anything that attempts to communicate with a man must be regarded as at least sub-human until proved otherwise."

"That is so, Captain Bargerone," Explorer Phipps said, fluttering his eyelashes nervously as he rose to the support of his boss.

"You do not need to assure me of the truth of platitudes, Mr. Phipps." the Captain said. "I merely question what you mean by 'attempt to communicate'. No doubt when you threw the creatures cabbage the act might have been interpreted as an attempt to communicate." "The creatures did not throw me cabbage, sir," Ainson said. "They stood quietly on the other side of the bars and spoke to me."

The captain's left eyebrow arched like a foil being tested by a master fencer.

"Spoke. Mr. Ainson? In an Earth language? In Portuguese, or perhaps Swahili?\*" "In their own language, Captain Bargerone. A series of whistles, grunts, and squeaks often rising above audible level. Nevertheless, a language - possibly a language vastly more complex than ours."

"On what do you base that deduction, Mr. Ainson?"

The Master Explorer was not floored by the question, but the lines gathered more thickly about his rough-hewn and sorrowful face.

"On observation. Our men surprised eight of those creatures, sir, and promptly shot six of them. You should have read the patrol report. The other two creatures were so stunned by surprise that they were easily netted and brought back here into the Mariestopes. In the circumstances, the preoccupation of any form of life would be to seek mercy, or release if possible. In other words, it would supplicate. Unfortunately, up till now we have met no other form of intelligent life in the pocket of the galaxy near Earth; but all human races supplicate in the same way - by using gesture as well as verbal pleas. These creatures do not use gesture; their language must be so rich in nuance that they have no need for gesture, even when begging for their lives."

Captain Bargerone gave an excruciatingly civilized snort "Then you can be sure that they were not begging for their lives. Just what did they do, apart from whining as caged dogs would do?"

"I think you should come down and see them for your-self, sir. It might help you to see things differently."

"I saw the dirty creatures last night and have no need to see them again. Of course I recognize that they form a valuable discovery; I said as much to the patrol leader. They will be off-loaded at the London Exozoo, Mr. Ainson, as soon as we get back to Earth, and then you can talk to them as much as you wish. But as I said in the first place, and as you know, it is time for us to leave this planet straight away; I can allow you no further time for exploration. Kindly remember this is a private Company ship, not a Corps ship, and we have a timetable to keep to. We've wasted a whole week on this miserable globe with-out finding a living thing larger than a mouse-dropping, and I cannot allow you another twelve hours here."

Bruce Ainson drew himself up. Behind him, Phipps sketched an unnoticed pastiche of the gesture.

"Then you must leave without me, sir. And without Phipps. Unfortunately, neither of us was on the patrol last night, and it is essential that we investigate the spot where these creatures were captured. You must see that the whole point of the expedition will be lost if we have no idea of their habits. Knowledge is more important than time-tables."

"There is a war on, Mr. Ainson, and I have my orders."

"Then you will have to leave without me, sir. I don't know how the USGN will like that."

The Captain knew how to give in without appearing beaten.

"We leave in six hours, Mr. Ainson. What you and your subordinate do until then is your affair."

"Thank you, sir," said Ainson. He gave it as much edge as he dared.

~~Hurrying from the captain's office, he and Phipps caught a lift down to disembarkation deck and walked down the ramp on to the surface of the planet provisionally label-led 12B .~~

The men's canteen was still functioning. With sure instinct, the two explorers marched in to find the members of the Exploration Corps who had been involved in the events of the night before. The canteen was of pre-formed reinplast and served the synthetic foods so popular on Earth. At one table sat a stocky young American with a fresh face, a red neck, and a razor-sharp crewcut. His name was Hank Quilter, and the more perceptive of his friends had him marked down as a man who would go far. He sat over a synthwine (made from nothing so vulgar as a grape grown from the coarse soil and ripened by the un-refined elements) and argued, his surly-cheerful face animated as he scorned the viewpoint of Ginger Duffield, the ship's weedy messdeck lawyer.

Ainson broke up the conversation without ceremony. Quilter had led the patrol of the previous night.

Draining his glass, Quilter resignedly fetched a thin youth named Walthamstone who had also been on the patrol, and the four of them walked over to the motor pool - being demolished amid shouting preparatory to take-off - to collect an overlander.

Ainson signed for the vehicle, and they drove off with Walthamstone at the wheel and Phipps distributing weapons. The latter said, "Bargerone hasn't given us much time, Bruce. What do you hope to find?"

"I want to examine the site where the creatures were captured. Of course I would like to find something that would make Bargerone eat humble pie." He caught Phipps' warning glance at the moment and said sharply, "Quilter, you were in charge last night. Your trigger-finger was a bit itchy, wasn't it? Did you think you were in the Wild West?"

Quilter turned round to give his superior a look.

"Captain complimented me this morning," was all he said.

Dropping that line of approach, Ainson said, "These beasts may not look intelligent, but if one sensitive one can feel a certain something about them. They show no panic, nor fear of any kind."

"Could be as much a sign of stupidity as intelligence." Phipps said.

"Mm, possible, I suppose. All the same. ... Another thing, Gussie, that seems worth pursuing.

Whatever the standing of these creatures may be. they don't fit with the larger animals we've discovered on other planets so far. Oh, I know we've only found a couple of dozen planets harboring any sort of life - dash it, star travel isn't thirty years old yet. But it does seem as if light gravity planets breed light spindly beings and heavy planets breed bulky compact beings. And these critters are exceptions to the rule."

"I see what you mean. This world has not much more mass than Mars, yet our bags are built like rhinoceroses."

"They were all wallowing in the mud like rhinos when we found them," Quilter offered. "How could

they have any intelligence?"

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"You shouldn't have shot them down like that. They must be rare, or we'd have spotted some elsewhere on 12B before this."

"You don't stop to think when you're on the receiving end of a rhino charge," Quilter sulked.

"So I see."

They rumbled over an unkempt plain in silence. Ainson tried to recapture the happiness he had experienced on first walking across this untrod planet. New planets always renewed his pleasure in life; but such pleasures had been spoiled this voyage - spoiled as usual by other people. He had been mistaken to ship on a Company boat; life on Space Corps boats was more rigid and simpler. Unfortunately, the Anglo-Brazilian war engaged all Corps ships, keeping them too busy with solar system maneuvers for such peaceful enterprises as exploration. Nevertheless, he did not deserve a captain like Edgar Bargerone.

Pity Bargerone did not blast-off and leave him here by himself, Ainson thought. Away from people communing - he recollected his father's phrase - communing with nature!

The people would come to 12B. Soon enough it would have, like Earth, its over-population problems.

That was why it was explored: with a view to colonization. Sites for the first communities had been marked out on the other side of the world. In a couple of years, the poor wretches forced by economic necessity to leave all they held dear on Earth would be trans-shipped to 12B (but they would have a pretty and tempting colonial name for it by then: Clementine, or something equally obnoxious and innocuous).

Yes, they'd tackle this unkempt plain with all the pluck of their species, turning it into a heaven of dirt-farming and semi-detacheds. Fertility was the curse of the human race, Ainson thought. Too much procreation went on; Earth's teeming loins had to ejaculate once again, ejaculate its unwanted progeny on to the virgin planets that lay awaiting - well, awaiting what else?

Christ, what else? There must be something else, or we should all have stayed in the nice green and harmless Pleistocene.

Ainson's rancid thoughts were broken by Walthamstone's saying, "There's the river. Just round the corner, and then we're there."

They rounded low banks of gravel from which thorn trees grew. Overhead, a mauve sun gleamed damply through haze at them. It raised a shimmer of reflection from the leaves of a million million thistles, growing silently all the way to the river and on the other side of it as far as the eye wanted to see. Only one landmark: a big blunt odd-shaped thing straight ahead.

"It - " said Phipps and Ainson together. They stared at each other. " - looks like one of the creatures."

"The mudhole where we caught them is just the other side," Walthamstone said. He bumped the overlander across the thistle bed, braking in the shadow of the looming object, forlorn and strange as a chunk of Liberian carving lying on an Aberdeen mantelshelf.

~~Toting their rifles, they jumped out and moved forward.~~

They stood on the edge of the mudhole and surveyed it. One side of the circle was sucked by the gullets of the river. The mud itself was brown and pasty green, streaked liberally with red where five bodies had taken their last wallow in the carefree postures of death. The sixth body gave a heave and turned a head in their direction.

A cloud of flies rose in anger at this disturbance. Quilter brought up his rifle, turning a grim face toward Ainson when the latter caught his arm.

"Don't kill it," Ainson said. "It's wounded. It can't harm us."

"We can't assume that. Let me finish it off."

"I said not. Quilter. We'll get it into the back of the overlander and take it to the ship; we'd better collect the dead ones too. Then they can be cut up and their anatomy studied. They'd never forgive me on Earth if we lost such an opportunity. You and Walthamstone get the nets out of the lockers and haul the bodies up."

Quilter looked challengingly at his watch and at Ainson.

"Get moving," Ainson ordered.

Reluctantly. Walthamstone slouched forward to do as he was told; unlike Quilter, he was not of the stuff from which rebels are made. Quilter curled his lip and followed. They hauled the nets out and went to stand on the edge of the mud pool, gazing across it at the half-submerged evidence of last night's activities before they got down to work. The sight of the carnage mollified Quilter.

"We sure stopped them!" he said. He was a muscular young man, with his fair hair neatly cropped and a dear old white-haired mother back home in Miami who pulled in an annual fortune in alimony.

"Yeah. They'd have got us otherwise." Walthamstone said. "Two of them I shot myself. Must have been those two nearest to us."

"I killed two of them, too." Quilter said. "They were all wallowing in the mud like rhinos. Boy, do they come at us!"

"Dirty things when you come to look at them. Ugly. Worse than anything we've got on Earth. Aren't you half glad we plugged them, aren't you, Quil?"

"It was us or them. We didn't have any choice."

"You're right there." Walthamstone cuddled his chin and looked admiringly at his friend. You had to admit Quilter was quite a lad. He repeated Quilter's phrase, "We didn't have any choice."

"What the hell good are they, I'd like to know."

"So'd I. We really stopped them, though, didn't we?"

"It was us or them." repeated Quilter. The flies rose again as he paddled into the mud towards the wounded rhinoman.

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While this philosophical skirmish was in progress, Bruce Ainson stalked over to the object that marked the scene of the slaughter. It loomed above him. He was impressed. This shape, like the shape of the creatures it appeared to imitate, had more than its size to impress him; there was something about it that affected him aesthetically. It might be a hundred light years high and it'd still be - don't say beauty doesn't exist! - beautiful.

He climbed into the beautiful object. It stank to high heaven; and that was where it had been intended for. Five minutes' inspection left him in no doubt: this was a ... well, it looked like an overgrown seedpod.

and it had the feel of an overgrown seedpod. but it was - Captain Bargerone had to see this: this was a space ship.

A space ship loaded high with shit.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

Much happened during the year 1999 on Earth. Quins were born to a twenty-year-old mother in Kennedyville, Mars. A robot team was admitted for the first time into the World series. New Zealand launched its own system-ship. The first Spanish nuclear submarine was launched by a Spanish princess.

There were two one-day revolutions in Java, six in Sumatra, and seven in South America. Brazil declared war on Great Britain. Common Europe beat the U.S.S.R. at football. A Japanese screen star married the Shah of Persia. The gallant All-Texan expedition attempting to cross the bright side of Mercury in exotanks perished to a man. All-Africa set up its first radio-control-led whale farm. And a little grizzled Australian mathematician called Buzzard rushed into his mistress's room at three o'clock of a May morning shrieking. "Got it. got it! Transponential flight!"

Within two years, the first unmanned and experimental transponential drive had been built into a rocket, launched, and proved successful. They never got that one back.

This is not the place for an explanation of TP formulae; the printer, in any case, refuses to set three pages of math symbols. Suffice it to say that a favorite science fiction gimmick - to the dismay and subsequent bankruptcy of all science fiction writers - was suddenly translated into actuality. Thanks to Buzzard, the gulfs of space became not barriers between but doorways to the planets. By 2010, you could get from New York to Procyon more comfortably and quickly than it had taken, a century before, to get from New York to Paris.

That is what's so tedious about progress. Nobody seems able to jog it out of that dreary exponential curve.

All of which goes to show that while the trip between B12 and Earth took less than a fortnight by the year 2035, that still left plenty of time for letter writing.

Or - in Captain Bargerone's case, as he composed a TP cable to their lordships in the Admiralty - for cable writing.

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In the first week he cabled: TP POSITION: 355073x 6915 (B12). YOUR CABLE EX 9774730 REFERS. YOUR ORDER COMPLIED WITH. HENCEFORTH CREATURES CAPTIVE ABOARD KNOWN AS EXTRATERRESTIAL ALIENS (SHORTENED TO ETAS).

SITUATION REGARDING ETAS AS FOLLOWS: TWO ALIVE AND WELL IN NUMBER THREE HOLD. OTHER CARCASSES BEING DISSECTED TO STUDY THEIR ANATOMY. AT FIRST DID NOT REALIZE THEY WERE MORE THAN ANIMALS. DIRECTLY MASTER EXPLORE AINSON EXPLAINED SITUATION TO ME, I ORDERED HIM TO PROCEED WITH PARTY TO SCENE OF CAPTURE OF ETAS.

THERE WE FOUND EVIDENCE THAT ETAS HAVE INTELLIGENCE. SPACE SHIP OF STRANGE MANUFACTURE WAS TAKEN INTO CUSTODY. IT IS NOW IN MAIN CARGO HOLD AFTER RE-DISTRIBUTION OF CARGO. SMALL SHIP CAPABLE OF HOLDING ONLY FIGURE ETAS. NO DOUBT SHIP BELONGS ETAS. SAME FILTH OVER EVERYTHING. SAME OFFENSIVE SMELL. EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT ETAS ALSO EXPLORING B12.

HAVE ORDERED AINSON AND HIS STAFF TO COMMUNICATE WITH ETAS SOONEST HOPE TO HAVE LANGUAGE PROBLEM CRACKED BEFORE LANDING.

EDGAR BARGERONE.

CAPT. MARIESTOPES.

GMT 1750:6.7.2035.

Other prosodists were busy aboard the Mariestopes.

Walthamstone wrote laboriously to an aunt in a far-flung western suburb of London called Windsor. My dear old aunt Flo - We are now coming home to see you again, how is your rheumatism, looking up I hope. I have not been space sick this voyage. When the ship goes into TP drive if you know what this is you feel a bit sick for a couple of hours. My pal Quilt says that's because all your molecules go negative.

But then you're all right.

When we stopped at one planet which hasn't got no name because we were the first, Quilt and me had a chance to go hunting. The place is swarming with big fierce dirty animals as big as the ship. It lives in mudholes. We shot dozens. We got two alive ones on board this old tub, we call them rhmomen their names are Gertie and Mush. They are filthy. I have to clean out their cage but they don't bite. They make a lot of rude noises.

As usual the food is bad. Not only poison but small helpings. Give my love to cousin Madge, I wonder if her education is completed yet. Whose winning the war with Brazil, us I hope!!!!

Hoping this leaves you as it finds me at present, your loving nephew, Rodney.

Augustus Phipps was composing a love letter to a Sino-Portuguese girl; above his bunk was a phobe  
her looking extremely sinuous. Phipps regarded it frequently as he wrote: Ah CM darling.

This brave old bus is now pointing towards Macao. My heart as you know is permanently oriented (a  
pun intended) towards that fair place when you are holidaying there, but how good to know we shall  
soon be together in more than spirit I'm hoping this trip will bring us fame and fortune. For we have  
found a sort of strange life out here in this neck of the galaxy, and are bringing two live samples of  
home. When I think of you, so slender, sweet, and immaculate in your cheongsam, I wonder why we  
need such dirty ugly beasts on the same planet - but science must be served.

Wonder of wonders! - They're supposed to be intelligent according to my superior, and we are  
presently engaged in trying to talk to them. No, don't laugh, pretty though I remember your laughter  
be. How I long for the moment I can talk to you, my sweet and passionate Ah Chi; and of course not  
only talk! You must let me [Ed. -two pages omitted].

Until we can do the same sort of thing again.

Your devoted adoring admiring pulsating Augustus.

Meanwhile, down on the messdeck of the Mariestopes, Quilter also was wrestling with the problem  
communicating with a girl: Hi honey!

Right now as I write I am heading straight back to Dodge City as fast as the light waves will carry me.  
Got the captain and the boys along with me too, but I'll be shedding them before I drop in at 147  
Rainbow.

Beneath a brave exterior, your lover boy is feeling sour way up to here. These beasts, the rhinomen  
was telling you about, they are the filthiest things you ever saw, and I can't tell you about it in the  
mails. Guess it's because you like me I know have always taken a pride in being modern and hygienic  
but these things they're worse than animals.

This has finished me for the Exploration Corps. At trip's end, I quit and shall remuster in the Space  
Corps. You can go places in the Space Corps. As witness our Captain Bargerone, jumped up from  
nowhere. His father is caretaker or something at a block of flats Amsterdam way. Well, that's  
democracy - guess I'll try some myself, maybe wind up captain myself. Why not?

This seems to be written all around me, honey. When I get home you bet I'll be all around you.

Your lovingest chewingest Hank.

In his cabin on B deck. Master Explorer Bruce Ainson wrote soberly to his wife: My dearest Enid  
How often I pray that your ordeal with Aylmer may now be over. You have done all you could for the  
boy, never reproach yourself on that score. He is a disgrace to our name. Heaven alone knows what  
will become of him. I fear he is as dirty-minded as he is dirty in his personal habits.

My regret is that I have to be away so long, particularly when a son of ours is causing so much trouble.  
But a consolation is that at last this trip has become rewarding. We have located a major life form.  
Under my supervision, two live individuals of this form have been brought aboard this ship. ETA's w

call them.

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You will be considerably more surprised when I tell you that these individuals, despite their strange appearance and habits, appear to manifest intelligence. More than that, they seem to be a space-faring race. We captured a space ship that undoubtedly is connected with them, though whether they actually control the craft is at present un-decided. I am attempting to communicate with them, but as yet without success.

Let me describe the ETA's to you - rhinomen, the crew call them, and until a better designation is arrived at, that will do. The rhinomen walk on six limbs. The six limbs each terminate in very capable hands, widespread, but each bearing six digits, of which the first and last are opposed and may be regarded as thumbs. The rhinomen are omnidextrous. When not in use, the limbs are retracted into the body to hide rather like a tortoise's legs, and are then barely noticeable.

With its limbs retracted, a rhinoman is symmetrical and shaped roughly like the two segments of an orange adhering together, the shallow curve representing the creature's spine, the fuller curve its belly, and the two apices its two heads. Yes, our captives appear to be two-headed; the heads come to a point and are neckless, though they can swivel through several degrees. In each head are set two eyes, small and dark in color with lower lids that slide upward to cover the eyes during sleep. Beneath the eyes are two orifices which look alike; one is the rhinoman's mouth, one his anus. There are also several other orifices punctuating the expanse of body; these may be breathing tubes. The exobiologists are dissecting some of the corpses we have aboard with us. When I get their report, several things should be clearer.

Our captives encompass a wide range of sounds, ranging through whistles and screams to grunts and smacking noises. I fear that all orifices are able to contribute to this gamut of sound, some of which, I am convinced, goes above man's auditory threshold. As yet neither of our specimens is particularly communicative, though all the sounds they make to each other are automatically recorded on tape; but I am sure this is merely due to the shock of capture, and that on Earth, with more time, and in a more congenial environment where we can keep them more hygienically, we shall soon begin to obtain positive results.

As ever, these long voyages are tedious. I avoid the captain as much as I can; an unpleasant man, with a public school and Cambridge written all over him. I immerse myself in our two ETA's.

For all their unpleasant habits, they have a fascination my human companions lack.

There will be much to talk about on my return.

Your dutiful husband, Bruce.

Down in the main cargo hold, safely away from all the letter-writing, a mixed bag of men of all trades was strip-ping the ETA space ship and pulling it to pieces splinter by splinter. For the strange craft was made of wood, wood of an unknown toughness, wood of an unknown resilience, wood as tough and durable as steel - yet wood which on the inside, for it was shaped like a great pod, sprouted a variety of branches like horns. On these branches grew a lowly type of parasitic plant. One of the triumphs of the botanical team was the discovery that this parasite was not the natural foliage of the horn-branches but an alien growing thereon.

They also discover that the parasite was a glutton for absorbing carbon dioxide from the air and exuding oxygen. They scraped bits of the parasite from the horn-branches and attempted to grow it in more favorable conditions; the plant died. At the current one hundred and thirty-fourth attempt, it was still dying, but the men in Bot were noted for stubbornness. The interior of the ship was caked with filth of a certain rich consistency made up chiefly of mud and excrement. When comparing this dirty little wooden coracle with the gleamingly clean Mariestopes, it would have been impossible for a rational individual - and rational individuals exist even amid the incarcerations of space travel - to imagine that both craft were constructed for the same purpose.

Indeed, many of the crew, and notably those who prided themselves on their rationality, were loud in their laughter as they refused to concede that the alien artifact was anything but a well-frequent joke.

Discovering the drive quenched about 98 per cent of the laughter. Under the mire the motor lay, a strange distorted thing no bigger than a rhinoceros. It was snugged into the wooden hull without visible welding and bolting; it was made of a substance outwardly resembling porcelain; it had no moving parts; and a ceramicist followed it weeping with a wild surmise into the engineering labs when the unit was finally drilled and grinded from the hull. The next discovery was a bunch of great nuts that clung to the two peaks of the roof with a tenacity that defied the best flame-cutters. At least, some said they were nuts, for a fibrous husk covering them suggested the fruits of the coconut palm. But when it was perceived that the ribs running down from the nuts which had hitherto been regarded as wall strengtheners connected with the drive, several sages declared the nuts to be fuel tanks.

The next discovery put an end to discoveries for a time. An artisan chipping at a hardened bank of dirt discovered, entombed within it, a dead ETA. Thereupon the men gathered together and made emotional noises.

"How much longer are we going to stand for this, fellows?" cried Interior Rating Ginger Duffield, jumping on to a tool box and showing them white teeth and black fists. "This is a company ship, not a Corps ship, and we don't have to put up with just any old treatment they care to give us.

There's nothing down in regulations says we have to clean out alien tombs and bogs. I'm downing tools till we get Dirty Pay. and I demand you lot join me."

His words drew forth a babble of response.

"Yes, make the company pay!"

"Who do they think they are?"

"Let 'em clean out their own stink holes!"

"More pay! Time and a half, boys!"

"Get knotted, Duffield, you ruddy trouble-maker."

"What does the sergeant say?"

Sergeant Warrick elbowed his way through the bunch of men. He stood looking up at Ginger Duffield

whose lean and peppery figure did not wilt under the gaze.

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"Duffield, I know your sort. You ought to be out on the Deep Freeze Planet, helping to win the war.

We don't want none of your factory tactics here. Climb down off that box and let's all get back to work.

A bit of dirt won't harm your lily white hands."

Duffield spoke very quietly and nicely.

"I'm not looking for any trouble, sarge. Why should we do it, that's all I say. Don't know what dangerous disease is lurking in this little cesspit. We want danger money for working in it. Why should we risk our necks for the company? What's the company ever done for us?" A rumble of approval greeted this question, but Duffield affected to take no notice of it. "What're they going to do when we get home?"

Why, they're going to put this stinking alien box on show, and everyone's going to come and have a look and a sniff at ten tubbies a tune. They're going to make their fortune out of this and out of those animals that lived in it. So why shouldn't we have our little bite now? You just push along to C Deck and bring the Union man to see us, hey, sarge, and keep that nose of yours out of trouble, hey?"

"You're nothing but a flaming trouble-maker, Duffield, that's your trouble," the sergeant said angrily.

He pushed through the men, heading for C Deck. Mocking cheers followed him into the corridor.

Two watches later, Quilter, armed with hose and brush, entered the cage containing the two ETA's.

They sprouted their limbs and moved to the far end of the confined space, watching him hopefully.

"This is the last clean-out you guys are going to get from me," Quilter told them. "At the end of this watch, I'm joining the walk-out, just to demonstrate my solidarity with the Space Corps. After this, as far as I'm concerned, you can sleep in crap as deep as the Pacific."

With the fun-loving ebullience of youth, he turned the hose on to them.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

The news editor of the Windsor Circuit struck the pedal bar of his technivision and scowled at the representation of his chief reporter's face as it appeared on the screen.

"Where the hell are you, Adrian? Get down to the bloody spaceport as you were told. The Mariestop is due within half an hour."

The left half of Adrian Bucker's countenance screwed itself into a wince. He leant nearer to his screen until his nose opaqued and the vision misted and said, "Don't be like that, Ralph. I've got a local angle on the trip that you'll fairly lap up."

"I don't want a local angle, I want you down at that ruddy spaceport right away, my lad."

Bucker winced the right side of his face and began talking fast.

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"Listen, Ralph. I'm in 'The Angel's Head' - the pub right on the Thames. I've got an old girl here called Florence Walthamstone. She's lived in Windsor all her life, remembers when the Great Park was park, all that sort of stuff. She's got a nephew called Rodney Walthamstone who's a rating on the Mariestopes.

She's just been showing me a letter from him in which he describes these alien animals they're bringing home, and I thought that if we ran a picture of her, with a quote from the letter - you know 'Local Lad Helps Capture Those Monsters' - it would look -"

"That's enough, I've heard enough. This thing's the biggest news of the decade and you imagine you need a local angle to put it over? Give the old girl her letter back, thank her very much for the offer, pay for her drink, pat her dear wrinkled cheeks, and then get down to that bloody spaceport and interview Bargerone or I'll have your skin for flypaper."

"Okay, okay, Ralph, have it the way you want it. There was a time when you were open to suggestions." Having cut the circuit, Bucker added, "And I've got one I could make right now."

He pushed out of the booth, and jostled his way through a heavy-bodied, heavy-drinking mass of men and women to a tall old woman crushed into the corner of the bar. She was lifting a glass of dark brown to her lips, her little finger genteelly cocked at an angle.

"Was your editor excited?" she asked, splashing slightly.

"Stood on his head. Look, Miss Walthamstone, I'm sorry about this, but I've got to get down to the spaceport. Perhaps we can do a special interview with you later. Now I've got your number; don't bother to ring us, we'll ring you, right, eh? Very nice to meet you."

As he gulped the last of his drink down, she said, "Oh, but you ought to let me pay for that one, Mr. -"

"Very kind of you, if you insist, very kind, Miss Walthamstone. 'Bye then."

He flung himself among the filling stomachs. She called his name. He looked back furiously from the middle of the fray.

"Have a word with Rodney if you see him. He'd be ever so glad to tell you anything. He's a very nice boy."

He fought his way to the door, muttering, "Excuse me, excuse me," over and over, like a curse.

The reception bays at the spaceport were crowded. Ordinary and extraordinary citizens packed every roof and window. In a roped-off section of the tarmac stood representatives of various government departments, including the Minister for Martian Affairs, and of various services, including the Director of the London Exozoo. Beyond the enclosure, the band of a well-known regiment, uniformed in anachronistically bright colors, marched about playing Suppers Light Cavalry Overture and selections of Irish melodies. Ice cream was hawked, newspapers were sold, pockets were picked. The Mariestopes slid through a layer of nimbostratus and settled on its haunches in a distant part of the field.

It began to rain.

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The band embarked on a lively rendering of the twentieth-century air "Sentimental Journey" without adding much luster to the proceedings. As such occasions usually are, this occasion was dull, and interest diffused. The spraying of the entire hull of the ship with germicidal sprays took some while. A hatch opened, a little overalled figure appeared in the opening, was cheered, and disappeared again. A thousand children asked if that was Captain Bargerone and were told not to be silly.

At length a ramp came out like a reluctant tongue and lolled against the ground. Transport - three small buses, two trucks, an ambulance, various luggage tenders, a private car, and several military vehicles - converged on to the great ship from different parts of the port. And finally a line of human beings began to move hastily down the ramp with bowed heads and dived into the shelter of the vehicles. The crowd cheered; it had come to cheer.

In a reception hall, the gentlemen of the press had made the air blue with the smoke of their mescahales before Captain Bargerone was thrust in upon them. Flashes sizzled and danced as he smiled defensively at them.

With some of his officers standing behind him, he stood and spoke quietly and unsensationally in a very English way (Bargerone was French) about how much space there was out there and how many worlds there were and how devoted his crew had been except for an unfortunate strike on the way home for which someone, he hoped, was going to get it hot; and he finished by saying that on a very pleasant planet which the USGN had graciously decided should be known as Clementina they had captured or killed some large animals with interesting characteristics. Some of these characteristics he described. The animals had two heads, each of which held a brain. The two brains together weighed 2,000 grammes - a quarter more than man's. These animals, ETA's or rhinomen, as the crew called them, had six limbs which ended in undoubted equivalents of hands. Unfortunately the strike had hindered the study of the remarkable creatures, but there seemed a fair reason to suppose that they had a language of their own and must therefore, despite their ugliness and dirty habits, be regarded more or less - but of course nobody could be certain as yet, and it might take many months of patient research before we could be certain - as an intelligent form of life on a par with man and capable of having a civilization of their own, on a planet as yet unknown to man. Two of them were preserved in captivity and would go to the Exozoo for study.

When the speech was over, reporters closed round Bargerone.

"You're saying these rhinos don't live on Clementina?"

"We have reason to suppose not."

"What reason?"

("Smile for the Subud Times, please, Captain.") "We think they were on a visit there, just as we were"

"You mean they travelled in a spaceship?"

"In a sense, yes. But they may just have been taken along on the trip as experimental animals -"

dumped there, like Captain Cook's pigs dumped on Tahiti or wherever it was.”

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("More profile, Captain, if you please.") "Well, did you see their spaceship?"

"Er well, we think we actually have ... er, their space-ship in our hold."

"Give, then, Captain, this is big! Why the secrecy? Have you captured their spaceship or have you not?"

("And over this way. sir.") "We think we have. That is, it has the properties of a spaceship, but it, er, has no TP drive naturally, but an interesting drive, and, well, it sounds silly but you see the hull is made of wood. A very high-density wood." Captain Bargerone wiped his face clear of expression.

"Oh now look. Captain, you're joking... ."

In the mob of photographers, phototects, and reporters, Adrian Bucker could get nowhere near the captain. He elbowed his way across to a tall nervous man who stood behind Bargerone, scowling out of one of the long windows at the crowds milling about in the light rain.

"Would you tell me how you feel about these aliens you brought back to Earth, sir?" Bucker asked.

"Are they animals or are they people?"

Hardly hearing, Bruce Ainson sent his gaze probing over the crowds outside. He thought he had caught a glimpse of his good-for-nothing son, Aylmer, wearing his usual hangdog expression as he plunged through the mob.

"Swine," he said.

"You mean they look like swine or they act like swine?"

The explorer turned to stare at the reporter.

"I'm Bucker of the Windsor Circuit, sir. My paper would be interested in anything you could tell me about these creatures. You think they are animals, am I right in saying?"

"What would you say mankind is, Mr. Bucker, civilized beings or animals? Have we ever met a new race without corrupting it or destroying it? Look at the Polynesians, the Guanches, the American Indians, the Tasmanians “

"Yes, sir, I get your point, but would you say these aliens...."

"Oh, they have intelligence, as has any mammal; these are mammals. But their behavior or lack of behavior is baffling because we must not think anthropomorphically about them. Have they ethics? Have they consciences? Are they capable of being corrupted as the Eskimos and Indians were? Are they perhaps capable of corrupting us? We have to ask ourselves a lot of searching questions before we are capable of seeing these rhinomen clearly. That is my feeling on the matter."

"That is very interesting. What you are saying is that we have to develop a new way of thinking, is that

it?"

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"No, no, no, I hardly think this is a problem I can discuss with a newspaper representative, but man places too much trust in his intellect; what we need is a new way of feeling, a more reverent.... I was getting somewhere with those two unhappy creatures we have captive - establishing trust, you know after we had slaughtered their companions and taken them prisoner, and what is happening to them now?"

"They're going to be a sideshow at the Exozoo. The Director, Sir Mihaly Pasztor, is an old friend of mine; I shall complain to him."

"Heck, people want to see the beasts! How do we know they have feelings like ours?"

"Your view, Mr. Bucker, is probably the view of the damn fool majority. Excuse me, I have technical! to make."

Ainson hurried from the building, where the wedge of people instantly closed in and held him tight. He stood helpless there while a lorry moved slowly by, buoyed along with cheers, cries and exclamations from the onlookers. Through the bars at the back of the lorry, the two ETA's stared down on the onlookers. They made no sound. They were large and grey, beings at once forlorn and formidable.

Their gaze rested on Bruce Ainson. They gave no sign of recognition. Suddenly chilled, he turned and began to worm his way through the press of wet mackintoshes.

The ship was emptying and being emptied. Cranes dipped their great beaks into the ship's vital coming up with nets full of cartons, boxes, crates, and canisters. Sewage lighters swarmed, sucking out the waste from the metal creature's alimentary canal. The hull bled men in little gouts. The great whale Mariestopes was stranded and powerless, beached far from its starry native deeps.

Walthamstone and Ginger Duffield followed Quilter to one of the exit ducts. Quilter was loaded with kit and due to catch an ionosphere jet from another corner of the port to the U.S.A. in half an hour's time. They paused on the lip of the ship and looked out quizzically, inhaling the strange-tasting air.

"Look at it, worst weather in the universe," Waltham-stone complained. "I'm staying in here till it stops, I tell you straight."

"Catch a taxi." Duffield suggested.

"'Tisn't worth it. My aunt's place is only half a mile away. My bike's over there in the P.T.O.'s office."

"I'll cycle when the rain clears - if it does."

"Does the P.T.O. let you leave your bike there free between flights?" Duffield asked with interest.

Anxious not to get involved in what promised to become a rather English conversation, Quilter shrugged a duffel bag more comfortably on to his shoulders and said, "Say, you men, come on over to the flight canteen and have a nice warm British synthbeer with me before I go."

"We ought to celebrate the fact that you have just left the Exploration Corps," Walthamstone said.

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"Shall we go along, Ginger?"

"Did they stamp your paybook 'Discharged' and sign you off officially?" Duffield asked.

"I only signed on a Flight-by-flight basis," Quilter explained. "All perfectly legal, Duffield, you or your barrack-room lawyer, you. Don't you ever relax?"

"You know my motto, Hank. Observe it and you won't go wrong: 'They'll twist you if they can.'" Duffield knew a bloke a bit ago who forgot to get his 535 cleared by the Quarter-master before he was demobbed, and they had him back. They did, they caught him for another five years. He's serving out his term in Charon now, helping to win the war."

"Are you coming for this beer or aren't you?"

"I'd better come," Walthamstone said. "We may never see you again after this bird in Dodge City gets away from you, from what you've told me about her. I'd run a mile from that sort of girl, myself."

He moved tentatively out into the fine drizzle; Quilter followed, glancing back over his shoulder at Duffield.

"Are you coming, Ginger, or aren't you?"

Duffield looked crafty.

"I'm not leaving this ship till I get my strike pay, mate," he said.

Explorer Phipps was home. He had embraced his parents and was hanging his coat in the hall. The mother stood behind him, managing to look discontented even while they smiled. Shabby, round-shouldered, they gave him the grumbling welcome he knew so well. They spoke in turn, two monologues that never made a dialogue.

"Come along in the sitting-room, Gussie. It's warmer in there," his mother said. "You'll be cold after leaving the ship. I'll get a cup of tea in a minute."

"Had a bit of trouble with the central heating. Shouldn't need it now we're into June, but it has been unusually chilly for the time of year. It's such a job to get anyone to come and look at anything. I don't know what's happening to people. They don't seem to want your custom nowadays."

"Tell him about the new doctor, Henry. Terribly rude man, absolutely no education or manners at all."

"And dirty finger-nails - fancy expecting to examine anyone with dirty finger-nails."

"Of course, it's the war that's to blame. It's brought an entirely different type of man to the surface."

"Brazil shows no sign of weakening, and meanwhile the government -"

"The poor boy doesn't want to hear about the war directly he gets home, Henry. They've even started

rationing some foodstuffs! All we hear is propaganda, propaganda, on the techni. And the quality of things has deteriorated too. I had to buy a new saucepan last week -"

"Settle yourself down here, Gussie. Of course it's the war that's to blame. I don't know what's become of us all. The news from Sector 160 is so depressing, isn't it?"

Phipps said, "Out in the galaxy, nobody takes any interest in the war. I must say it all sounds a bit of a shower to me."

"Haven't lost your patriotism, have you, Gussie?" his father asked.

"What's patriotism but an extension of egotism?" Phipps asked, and was glad to see his father's cheeks momentarily puffed, shrink again.

His mother broke a tense silence by saying, "Anyhow, dear, you'll see a difference in England when you're on leave. How long have you got, by the way?"

Little as the parental chatter enthralled Phipps, this sudden question discomfited him, as mother and father waited eagerly for his answer. He knew that stifling feeling of old. They wanted nothing of him but only that he was there to be spoken to. They wanted nothing from him but his life.

"I shall only be staying here for a week. That charming part-Chinese girl that I met last leave, Ah Ching is in the Far East on a painting holiday. Next Thursday I fly to Macao to stay with her."

Familiarity again. He knew his father's would-be piteous shake of the head, that particular pursing of his mother's lips as if she nursed a lemon pip there. Before they could speak, he rose to his feet.

"I'll just go upstairs and unpack my grip, if you'll both excuse me."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Pasztor, Director of the London Exozoo, was a fine willowy man without a grey hair on his head despite his fifty-two years. A Hungarian by birth, he had led an expedition into the subarctic Antarctic by the time he was twenty-five, had gone on to set up the Tellus Zoological Dome on the asteroid Apollo in 2005, and had written the most viewed technidrama of 2014, *An Iceberg for Icarus*. Several years later he went on the First Charon Expedition, which charted and landed upon that the newly-discovered planet of the solar system; Charon refrigerates so unloveably some three thousand million miles beyond the orbit of Pluto that it earned itself the name of Deep Freeze Planet, Pasztor had given it that nickname.

After which triumph, Sir Mihaly Pasztor was appointed Director of the London Exozoo and was presently employed in offering Bruce Ainson a drink.

"You know I don't, Mihaly," Bruce said, shaking his long head in reproof.

"From now on you are a famous man; you should toast your own success, as we toast it. The drinks are all pure synthetics, you know - a de-alcoholized sinker will surely never hurt you."

"You know me of old, Mihaly. I wish only to do my duty."

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