

THE SPACE ROC

An unseen monster lurked in waiting ...

ROBERT F. YOUNG

FROST the pilot noticed the unusual topographical formation during the first orbit. He took it to be a mountain. However, it was unlike any mountain he'd ever seen: long and relatively low, and so smooth it seemed to have been sanded.

Baines, commander of the *Transstar*, also identified the formation as a mountain when, apprised of it by Frost, he observed it during the second orbit, along with Grimm the navigator and Roberts the paramed.

Whatever it was, it was a welcome relief from the rill-scarred deserts, pocked plateaus and barren sea bottoms that constituted the rest of the dead world's terrain. Baines decided it rated a closer look, and next time around he ordered Frost to bring the *Transstar* down. Frost did so, placing the vehicle neatly in the formation's postprandial shadow, a short distance from the base.

The *Transstar* was the first ship of its kind—an exploration vehicle built expressly to discover habitable worlds. The Vegan system had looked promising—ten planets all told, five of which had differentiated at some time during their careers. Four of the latter had proved incapable of supporting life. This one—the fifth—didn't even have an atmosphere.

The odd formation definitely wasn't a mountain; this became clear to the crew the moment the *Transstar* came to rest. Granted, it was more than big enough, but seen at close range it proved to be even smoother than it had seemed from in orbit. It was as though it had been buffed, not sanded. In hue, it was a sort of wan white.

Baines, Frost and Grimm suited up and went outside, leaving Roberts to guard the ship. Not that there appeared to be anything to guard it against, but regulations had to be observed. "We're seeing only the upper portion, Ernie," Frost said excitedly when the three men reached their destination. "It's half buried in sand."

Baines nodded. "Whatever it is—was—it dates back to when there were winds—an atmosphere. God knows how long ago that was. Get the EM-robots out of storage, George." This to Grimm. "We'll try a little excavating."

Grimm complied. There was no need for shovels: each of the six EM-robots was equipped with a scoop-like appendage designed expressly for digging. The commander chose three sites flush with the formation's flank and about one hundred feet apart. He supervised the middle one himself. Roberts observed the proceedings from the pilot house, uttering a word of caution now and then over the 4-way helmet-hookup. He took his job seriously.

Digging proved difficult at first because the sand kept running back into the holes. Farther down, however, it acquired greater consistency and progress became more rapid. Baines sent Frost back to the *Transstar* for a portable drill. After the pilot broke three bits without so much as scratching the formation's surface, Baines told him to desist. So much for samples.

Toward midafternoon, Grimm at the west sector of the dig electrified the helmet-hookup with the words, "Ernie—I can make out some markings!"

Baines hurried to the scene. Grimm's excavation was considerably deeper than his own. The two EM-robots rapidly widened it till all of the markings were visible and the commander climbed down into the hole and examined them. They comprised five horizontal rows of impressed symbols—unquestionably a communication of some kind, and just as unquestionably, considering the odds involved, one of many similar, if not identical communications.

"Photograph it, George," the commander told Grimm, who had climbed down beside him, "and go see if the *Transstar's* cyber-system can come up with a translation. Idiomatic, if possible."

Ten minutes later, Grimm read the translation over the helmet-hookup:

"This great sealed city will enable its builders, through maximum utilization of fuel residues and maximum implementation of biochemical recycling, to stave off the extinction of their species for another thousand years. It stands as a fitting monument to our technological resourcefulness in time of crisis, and will when the end comes—as inevitably it must—provide us a fitting tomb."

MORE PHOTOGRAPHS were taken of the markings, a large number of the sealed city; measurements were made, samples of sand and rocks gathered. Then the *Transstar* lifted. Baines had Frost make a final orbit for a series of aerial shots. The commander felt depressed. He underwent a brief siege of disorientation. Looking down at the rills crisscrossing the deserts, all he could think of were scratches made by some gigantic bird in a desperate search for food. The deep pocks covering the plateaus brought peck-marks to his mind. He shook his head to clear it—I must be getting senile, he thought. If anything made those scars, the way of life adopted by those poor bastards molding in their self-built tomb did. "De-orbit, Tim," he said to Frost. "Let's go home."

The Space Roc waited till the visitors left the system, then it flew down from its perch in the black branches of the Tree of Space and followed in the *Transstar's* wake, immune because of its intangibility to the ship's detectors. The Space Roc was ravenous, and it yearned to lay another egg. After the *Transstar* reached its home-world and disappeared into the atmosphere, the Space Roc circled the planet at a great height for a long time. Then it dropped down low for a closer look. Instantly another Space Roc soared up and attacked the interloper. "This is *my* planet!" it screamed. "Go away! Lay your eggs some place else!" The first Space Roc saw then that the planet's crust was half devoured and realized that in assuming prodigality to be synonymous with plenty it had erred. It soared up and out of the atmosphere and headed toward the Lesser Magellanic Cloud. Maybe there was food there. The second Space Roc dropped back down and resumed feeding. Presently it found a petroleum deposit it had missed and it plunged its bill deep into the crust and began to drink. The deposit had the mellow quality of rare wine. The second Space Roc savored it to the last drop.

—ROBERT F. YOUNG