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SEEDS OF THE DUSK

by RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

A novelette of the days when Earth grows old and cold-when all Earth's folk are keening wits to survive—

It was a spore, microscopic in size. Its hard shell—resistant to the utter dryness of interplanetary space—harbored a tiny bit of plant protoplasm. That protoplasm, chilled almost to absolute zero, possessed no vital pulsation now— only a grim potentiality, a savage capacity for revival, that was a challenge to Fate itself.

For years the spore had been drifting and bobbing er-ratically between the paths of Earth and Mars, along with billions of other spores of the same kind. Now the gravity of the Sun drew it a few million miles closer to Earth's orbit, now powerful magnetic radiations from solar vortices forced it back toward the world of its origin.

It seemed entirely a plaything of chance. And, of course, up to a point it was. But back of its erratic, unconscious wanderings, there was intelligence that had done its best to take advantage of the law of averages.

The desire for rebirth and survival was the dominant urge of this intelligence. For this was during the latter days, when Earth itself was showing definite signs of senility, and Mars was near as dead as the Moon.

Strange, intricate spore-pods, conceived as a man might conceive a new invention, but put into concrete form by a process of minutely exact growth control, had burst explosively toward a black, spacial sky. In dusty clouds the spores had been hurled upwards into the vacuum thinness that had once been an extensive atmosphere. Most of them had, of course, dropped back to the red, arid soil; but a comparative few, buffeted by feeble air currents, and measured numerically in billions, had found their way from the utterly tenuous upper reaches of Mars' gaseous envelope into the empty ether of the void.

With elements of a conscious purpose added, the thing that was taking place was a demonstration of the ancient Arrhenius Spore Theory, which, countless ages ago, had explained the propagation of life from world to world. The huge, wonderful parent growths were left behind, to continue a hopeless fight for survival on a burnt-out world. During succeeding summer seasons they would hurl more spores into the interplanetary abyss. But soon they themselves would be only brown, mummied relics—one with the other relics of Mars; the gray, carven monoliths; the orange, hemispherical dwellings, dotted with openings arranged like the cells of a honeycomb. Habitations for an intelligent animal folk, long perished, who had never had use for halls or rooms, as such things are known to men on earth.

The era of utter death would come to Mars, when nothing would move on its surface except the shadows shifting across dusty deserts, and the molecules of sand and rock vibrating with a little warmth from the hot, though shrunken Sun. Death—complete death! But the growths which were the last civilized beings of Mars had not originated there. Once they had been on the satellites of Jupiter, too. And before that—well, perhaps even the race memory of their kind had lost the record of those dim, distant ages, Always they had waited their chance, and when the time came—when a world was physically suited for their development—they had acted.

A single spore was enough to supply the desired foothold on a planet. Almost inevitably—since chance is, in fundamentals, a mathematical element depending on time and numbers and repetition—that single spore reached the upper atmosphere of Earth.

For months, it bobbed erratically in tenuous, electrified gases. It might have been shot into space again. Upward and downward it wandered; but with gravity to tug at its significant mass, probability favored its ultimate descent to the harsh surface.

It found a resting place, at last, in a frozen desert gully. Around the gully were fantastic, sugar-loaf mounds. Nearby was one thin, ruined spire of blue porcelain—an empty reminder of a gentler era, long gone. The location thus given to it seemed hardly favorable in its aspect. For this was the northern hemisphere, locked now in the grip of a deadly winter. The air, depleted through the ages, as was the planet's water supply, arid and thin. The temperature, though not as rigorous and deadening as that of interplanetary space, ranged far below zero. Mars in this age was near

dead; Earth was a dying world.

But perhaps this condition, in itself, was almost favorable. The spore belonged to a kind of life developed to meet the challenge of a generally much less friendly environment than that of even this later-day Earth.

There was snow in that desert gully—maybe a quarter-inch depth of it. The rays of the Sun—white and dwarfed after so many eons of converting its substance into energy —did not melt any of that snow even at noon. But this did not matter. The life principle within the spore detected favorable conditions for its germination, just as, in spring, the vital principle of Earthly seeds had done for almost incalculable ages.

By a process parallel to that of simple fermentation, a tiny amount of heat was generated within the spore. A few crystals of snow around it turned to moisture, a minute quantity of which the alien speck of life absorbed. Roots finer than spiderweb grew, groping into the snow. At night they were frozen solid, but during the day they resumed their brave activity.

The spore expanded, but did not burst. For its shell was a protecting armor which must be made to increase in size gradually without rupture. Within it, intricate chemical processes were taking place. Chlorophyl there was absorbing sunshine and carbon dioxide and water. Starch and cellulose and free oxygen were being produced.

So far, these processes were quite like those of common terrestrial flora. But there were differences. For one thing, the oxygen was not liberated to float in the atmosphere. It had been ages since such lavish waste had been possible on Mars, whose thin air had contained but a small quantity of oxygen in its triatomic form, ozone, even when Earth was young.

The alien thing stored its oxygen, compressing the gas into the tiny compartments in its hard, porous, outer shell. The reason was simple. Oxygen, combining with starch in a slow, fermentative combustion, could produce heat to ward off the cold that would otherwise stop growth.

The spore had become a plant now. First, it was no bigger than a pinhead. Then it increased its size to the dimensions of a small marble, its fuzzy, green-brown shape firmly anchored to the soil itself by its long, fibrous roots. Like any terrestrial growth, it was an intricate chemical laboratory, where transformations took place that were not easy to comprehend completely.

And now, perhaps, the thing was beginning to feel the first glimmerings

of a consiousness, like a human child rising out of the blurred, unremembering fog of birth. Strange, oily nodules, scattered throughouut its tissues, connected by means of a complex network of delicate, white threads, which had the functions of a nervous system, were developing and growing—giving to the spore plant from Mars the equivalent of a brain. Here was a sentient vegetable in the formative stage.

A sentient vegetable? Without intelligence it is likely that the ancestors of this nameless invader from across the void would long ago have lost their battle for survival.

What senses were given to this strange mind, by means of which it could be aware of its environment? Undoubtedly it possessed faculties of sense that could detect things in a way that was as far beyond ordinary human conception as vision is to those individuals who have been born blind. But in a more simple manner it must have been able to feel heat and cold and to hear sounds, the latter perhaps by the sensitivity of its fine cilia-like spines. And certainly it. could see in a way comparable to that of a man.

For, scattered over the round body of the plant, and imbedded deep in horny hollows in its shell, were little organs, lensed with a clear vegetable substance. These organs were eyes, developed, perhaps, from far more primitive light-sensitive cells, such as many forms of terrestrial flora possess.

But during those early months, the spore plant saw little that could be interpreted as a threat, swiftly to be fulfilled. Winter ruled, and the native life of this desolate region was at a standstill.

There was little motion except that of keen, cutting winds, shifting dust, and occasional gusts of fine, dry snow. The white, shrunken Sun rose in the east, to creep with protracted slowness across the sky, shedding but the barest trace of warmth. Night came, beautiful and purple and mysterious, yet bleak as the crystalline spirit of an easy death.

Through the ages. Earth’s rate of rotation had been much decreased by the tidal drag of Solar and Lunar gravities. The attraction of the Moon was now much increased, since the satellite was nearer to Terra than it had been in former times. Because of the decreased rate of rotation, the days and nights were correspondingly lengthened.

All the world around the spore plant was a realm of bleak, unpeopled desolation. Only once, while the winter lasted, did anything happen to

break the stark monotony. One evening, at moonrise, a slender metal car flew across the sky with the speed of a bullet. A thin propelling streamer of fire trailed in its wake, and the pale moonglow was reflected from its prow. A shrill, mechanical scream made the rarefied atmosphere vibrate, as the craft approached to a point above the desert gully, passed, and hurtled away, to leave behind it only a startling silence and an aching memory.

For the spore plant did remember. Doubtless there was a touch of fear in that memory, for fear is a universal emotion, closely connected with the law of self-preservation, which is engrained in the texture of all life, regardless of its nature or origin.

Men. Or rather, the cold, cruel, cunning little beings who were the children of men. The Itorloo, they called themselves. The invader could not have known their form as yet, or the name of the creatures from which they were descended. But it could guess something of their powers from the flying machine they had built. Inherited memory must have played a part in giving the queer thing from across the void this dim comprehension. On other worlds its ancestors had encountered animal folk possessing a similar science. And the spore plant was surely aware that here on Earth the builders of this speeding craft were its most deadly enemies.

The Itorloo, however, inhabiting their vast underground cities, had no knowledge that their planet had received an alien visitation—one which might have deadly potentialities. And in this failure to know, the little spore plant, hidden in a gully where no Itorloo foot had been set in a thousand years, was safe.

Now there was nothing for it to do but grow and prepare to reproduce its kind, to be watchful for lesser enemies, and to develop its own peculiar powers.

It is not to be supposed that it must always lack, by its very nature, an understanding of physics and chemistry and biological science. It possessed no test tubes, or delicate instruments, as such things were understood by men. But it was gifted with something—call it an introspective sense—which enabled it to study in minute detail every single chemical and physical process that went on within its own substance. It could feel not only the juices coursing sluggishly through its tissues, but it could feel, too, in a kind of atomic pattern, the change of water and carbon dioxide into starch and free oxygen.

Gift a man with the same power that the invader's kind had acquired, perhaps by eons of practice and directed will —that of feeling vividly even the division of cells, and the nature of the protoplasm in his own tissues—and it is not hard to believe that he would soon delve out even the ultimate secret of life. And in the secret of life there must be involved almost every conceivable phase of practical science.

The spore plant proceeded with its marvelous self-education, part of which must have been only recalling to mind the intricate impressions of inherited memories.

Meanwhile it studied carefully its bleak surroundings, prompted not only by fear, but by curiosity as well. To work effectively, it needed understanding of its environment. Intelligence it possessed beyond question; still it was hampered by many limitations. It was a plant, and plants have not an animal's capacity for quick action, either of offense or defense. Here, forever, the entity from across the void was at a vast disadvantage, in this place of pitiless competition. In spite of all its powers, it might now have easily been destroyed.

The delicate, ruined tower of blue porcelain, looming up from the brink of the gully— The invader, scrutinizing it carefully for hours and days, soon knew every chink and crack and fanciful arabesque on its visible side. It was only a ruin, beautiful and mysterious alike by sunshine and moonlight, and when adorned with a fine sifting of snow. But the invader, lost on a strange world, could not be sure of its harmlessness.

Close to the tower were those rude, high, sugar-loaf mounds, betraying a sinister cast. They were of hard-packed Earth, dotted with many tiny openings. But in the cold, arid winter, there was no sign of life about them now.

All through those long, arctic months, the spore plant continued to develop, and to grow toward the reproductive stage. And it was making preparations too—combining the knowledge acquired by its observations with keen guesswork, and with a science apart from the manual fabrication of metal and other substances.

II

A milder season came at last. The Sun's rays were a little warmer now. Some of the snow melted, moistening the ground enough to germinate Earthly seeds. Shoots sprang up, soon to develop leaves and grotesque, devilish-looking flowers.

In the mounds beside the blue tower a slow awakening took place. Millions of little, hard, reddish bodies became animated once more, ready to battle grim Nature for sustenance. The ages had done little to the ants, except to increase their fierceness and cunning. Almost any organic substances could serve them as food, and their tastes showed but little discrimination between one dainty and another. And it was inevitable, of course, but presently they should find the spore plant.

Nor were they the latter's only enemies, even in this desert region. Of the others, Kaw and his black-feathered brood were the most potent makers of trouble. Not because they would attempt active offense themselves, but because they were able to spread news far and wide.

Kaw wheeled alone now, high in the sunlight, his ebon wings outstretched, his cruel, observant little eyes studying the desolate terrain below. Buried in the sand, away from the cold, he and his mate and their companions had slept through the winter. Now Kaw was fiercely hungry. He could eat ants if he had to, but there should be better food available at this time of year.

Once, his keen eyes spied gray movement far below. As if his poised and graceful flight was altered by the release of a trigger, Kaw dived plummet-like and silent toward the ground.

His attack was more simple and direct than usual. But it was successful. His reward was a large, long-tailed rodent, as clever as himself. The creature uttered squeaks of terror as meaningful as human cries for help. In a moment, however, Kaw split its intelligently rounded cranium with a determined blow from his strong, pointed beak. Bloody brains were devoured with indelicate gusto, to be followed swiftly by the less tasty flesh of the victim. If Kaw had ever heard of table manners, he didn't bother with them. Kaw was intensely practical.

His crop full, Kaw was now free to exercise the mischievous curiosity which he had inherited from his ancient forbears. They who had, in the long-gone time when Earth was young, uprooted many a young corn shoot, and had yammered derisively from distant treetops when any irate farmer had gone after them with a gun.

With a clownish skip of his black, scaly feet, and a show-offish swerve of his dusty ebon wings, Kaw took to the air once more. Upward he soared,

his white-lidded eyes directed again toward the ground, seeking something interesting to occupy his attention and energies.

Thus, presently, he saw a brownish puff that looked like smoke or dust in the gully beside the ruined blue tower at the pinnacle of which he and his mate were wont to build their nest in summer. Sound came then—a dull, ringing pop. The dusty cloud expanded swiftly upward, widening and thinning until its opacity was dissipated into the clearness of the atmosphere.

Kaw was really startled. That this was so was evinced by the fact that he did not voice his harsh, rasping cry, as he would have done had a lesser occurrence caught his attention. He turned back at first, and began to retreat, his mind recognizing only one possibility in what had occurred. Only the Itorloo, the Children of Men, as far as he knew, could produce explosions like that. And the Itorloo were cruel and dangerous.

However, Kaw did not go far in his withdrawal. Presently —since there were no further alarming developments—he was circling back toward the source of the cloud and the noise. But for many minutes he kept what he considered a safe distance, the while he tried to determine the nature of the strange, bulging, grayish-green thing down there in the gully.

A closer approach, he decided finally, was best made from the ground. And so he descended, alighting several hundred yards distant from the narrow pocket in the desert.

Thence he proceeded to walk cautiously forward, taking advantage of the cover of the rocks and dunes, his feathers gleaming with a dusty rainbow sheen, his large head bobbing with the motion of his advance like any fowl's. His manner was part laughably ludicrous, part scared, and part determined.

And then, peering from behind a large boulder, he saw what he had come to see. It was a bulging, slightly flattened sphere, perhaps a yard across. From it projected flat, oval things of a gray-green color, like the leaves of a cactus. And from these, in turn, grew clublike protuberances of a hard, horny texture—spore-pods. One of them was blasted open, doubtless by the pressure of gas accumulated within it. These spore-pods were probably not as complexly or powerfully designed as those used by the parent growths on Mars, for they were intended for a simpler purpose. The entire plant bristled with sharp spines, and was furred with slender hairs, gleaming like little silver wires.

Around the growth, thousands of ant bodies lay dead, and from its vicinity other thousands of living were retreating. Kaw eyed these

evidences critically, guessing with wits as keen as those of a man of old their sinister significance. He knew, too, that presently other spore-pods would burst with loud, disturbing noises.

Kaw felt a twinge of dread. Evolution, working through a process of natural selection—and, in these times of hardship and pitiless competition, putting a premium on intelligence—had given to his kind a brain power far transcending that of his ancestors. He could observe, and could interpret his observations with the same practical comprehension which a primitive human being might display. But, like those primitives, he had developed, too, a capacity to feel superstitious awe.

That gray-green thing of mystery had a fantastic cast which failed to identify it with—well—with naturalness. Kaw was no botanist, certainly; still he could recognize the object as a plant of some kind. But those little, bright, eye-lenses suggested an unimaginable scrutiny. And those spines, silvery in sheen, suggested ghoulish animation, the existence of which Kaw could sense as a nameless and menacing unease.

He could guess, then, or imagine—or even know, perhaps—that here was an intruder who might well make itself felt with far-reaching consequences in the future. Kaw was aware of the simple fact that most of the vegetation he was acquainted with grew from seeds or the equivalent. And he was capable of concluding that this flattened spheroid reproduced itself in a manner not markedly unfamiliar. That is, if one was to accept the evidence of the spore-pods. Billions of spores, scattering with the wind! What would be the result?

Kaw would not have been so troubled, were it not for those crumpled thousands of ant bodies, and the enigma of their death. It was clear that the ants had come to feed on the invader—but they had perished. How? By some virulent plant poison, perhaps? The conclusions which intelligence provides can produce fear where fear would otherwise be impossible. Kaw's impulse was to seek safety in instant departure, but horror and curiosity fascinated him. Another deeper, more reasoned urge commanded him. When a man smells smoke in his house at night, he does not run away; he investigates. And so it was with Kaw.

He hopped forward cautiously toward the invader. A foot from its rough, curving side he halted. There, warily, as if about to attack a poisonous lizard, he steeled himself. Lightly and swiftly his beak shot forward. It touched the tip of a sharp spine.

The result left Kaw dazed. It was as though he had received a stunning blow on the head. A tingling, constricting sensation shot through his body, and he was down, flopping in the dust.

Electricity. Kaw had never heard of such a thing. Electricity generated chemically in the form of the invader, by a process analogous to that by which, in dim antiquity, it had been generated in the bodies of electric eels and other similar creatures.

However, there was a broad difference here between the subject and the analogy. Electric eels had never understood the nature of their power, for they were as unresponsible for it as they were unresponsible for the shape of the flesh in which they had been cast. The spore plant, on the other hand, comprehended minutely. Its electric organs had been minutely preplanned and conceived before one living cell of their structure had been caused to grow on another. And these organs were not inherited, but were designed to meet the more immediate needs of self-protection. During the winter, the invader, studying its surroundings, had guessed well.

Slowly Kaw's brain cleared. He heard an ominous buzzing, and knew that it issued from the plant. But what he did not know was that, like the electric organs, the thing's vocal equipment was invented for possible use in its new environment. For days, since the coming of spring, the invader had been listening to sounds of various kinds, and had recognized their importance on Earth.

Now Kaw had but one thought, and that was to get away. Still dazed and groggy, he leaped into the air. From behind him, in his hurried departure, he heard a dull plop. More billions of spores, mixing with the wind, to be borne far and wide.

But now, out of his excitement, Kaw drew a reasoned and fairly definite purpose. He had a fair idea of what he was going to do, even though the course of action he had in mind might involve him with the greatest of his enemies. Yet, when it came to a choice, he would take the known in preference to the unknown.

He soared upward toward the bright blue of the heavens. The porcelain tower, the ant hills, and the low mounds which marked the entrances to the rodent colonies slipped swiftly behind. As if the whole drab landscape were made to move on an endless belt.

Kaw was looking for his mate, and for the thirty-odd, black-winged individuals who formed his tribe. Singly and in small groups, he contacted

and collected them. Loud, raucous cries, each with a definite verbal meaning, were exchanged. Menace was on the Earth—bizarre, nameless menace. Excitement grew to fever pitch.

Dusk, beautiful and soft and forbidding, found the bird clan assembled in a chamber high-placed in a tremendous edifice many miles from where Kaw had made his discovery. The building belonged to the same gentle culture which had produced the blue porcelain tower. The floor of the chamber was doubtless richly mosaiced. But these were relics of departed splendor now thickly masked with dust and filth.

From the walls, however, painted landscapes of ethereal beauty, and the faces of a happy humankind of long ago peeped through the gathering shadows. They were like ghosts, a little awed at what had happened to the world to which they had once belonged. Those gentle folk had dwelt in a kindlier climate which was now stripped forever from the face of the Earth. And they had been wiped out by creatures who were human too, but of a different, crueler race.

Through delicately carven screens of pierced marble, far up on the sides of the chamber's vast, brooding rotunda, the fading light of day gleamed, like a rose glow through the lacework of fairies.

But this palace of old, dedicated to laughter and fun and luxury, and to the soaring dreams of the fine arts, was now only a chill, dusty gathering place for a clan of black-winged, gruesome harpies.

They chuckled and chattered and cawed, like the crows of dead eras. But these sounds, echoing eerily beneath cloistered arches, dim and abhorrent in the advancing gloom of night, differed from that antique yammering. It constituted real, intelligent conversation.

Kaw, perched high on a fancifully wrought railing of bronze, green with the patina of age, urged his companions with loud cries, and with soft, pleading notes. In his own way, he had some of the qualities of a master orator. But, as all through an afternoon of similar arguing, he was getting nowhere. His tribe was afraid. And so it was becoming more and more apparent that he must undertake his mission alone. Even Teka, his mate, would not accompany him,

At last Kaw ruffled his neck feathers, and shook his head violently in an avian gesture of disgust. He leaped from his perch and shot through a glassless window with an angry scream that was like the curse of a black ghoul,

It was the first time that he had ever undertaken a long journey at night. But in his own judgment, necessity was such that no delay could be

tolerated.

The stars were sharp and clear, the air chill and frosty. The ground was dotted sparsely with faint glimmerings from the chimneys of the crude furnaces which, during the colder nights of spring and fall, warmed the underground rodent colonies.

After a time the Moon rose, huge and yellow, like the eye of a monster. In that bloom and silence, Kaw found it easy to feel the creeping and imperceptible, yet avalanching growth of horror. He could not be sure, of course, that he was right in his guess that the mission he had undertaken was grimly important. But his savage intuition was keen.

The Itorloo—the Children of Men—he must see them, and tell them what he knew. Kaw was aware that the Itorloo had no love for any but themselves. But they were more powerful than the winds and the movements of the Sun and Moon themselves. They would find a swift means to defeat the silent danger.

And so, till the gray dawn, Kaw flew on and on, covering many hundreds of miles, until he saw a low dome of metal, capping a hill. The soft half-light of early morning sharpened its outlines to those of a beautiful, ebon silhouette, peaceful and yet forbidding. Beneath it, as Kaw knew, was a shaft leading down to the wonderous underworld of the Itorloo, as intriguing to his mind as a shadowland of magic.

Fear tightened its constricting web around Kaw's heart —but retreat was something that must not be. There was too much at stake ever to permit a moment of hesitation.

Kaw swung into a wide arc, circling the dome. His long wings, delicately poised for a soaring glide, did not flap now, but dipped and rose to capture and make use of the lifting power of every vagrant wisp of breeze. And from his lungs issued a loud, raucous cry.

"Itorloo!" he screamed. "Itorloo! "

The word, except for its odd, parrot-like intonation, was pronounced in an entirely human manner. Kaw, in common with his crow ancestors, possessed an aptitude for mimicry of the speech of men.

Tensely he waited for a sign, as he swung lower and nearer to the dome.

III

Zar felt irritable. He did not like the lonely surface vigil and the routine astronomical checkings that constituted his duty. All night he'd sat there at his desk with signal lights winking around him, helping surface watchers at the other stations check the position of a new meteor swarm by means of crossing beams of probe rays.

Angles, distances, numbers! Zar was disgusted. Why didn't the construction crews hurry? The whole race could have been moved to Venus long ago, and might just as well have been. For as far as Zar could see, there was no real reason to retain a hold on the burnt-out Earth. The native Venusians should have been crushed a century back. There wasn't any reason why this pleasant task shouldn't have been accomplished then—no reason except stupid, official inertia!

The sound of a shrill bird cry, throbbing from the pickup diaphragm on the wall, did not add any sweetening potion to Zar's humor. At first he paid no attention; but the insistent screaming of the name of his kind—"Itorloo! Itorloo! "—at length aroused him to angry action.

His broad, withered face, brown, and hideous and goblinlike, twisted itself into an ugly, grimace. He bounded up from his chair, and seized a small, pistol-like weapon.

A moment later he was out on the sandy slopes of the hill, looking up at the black shape that swooped and darted timidly, close to his head. On impulse Zar raised his weapon, no thought of compassion in his mind.

But Kaw screamed again: "Itorloo! Itorloo!" In Zar's language, "Loaaah!" meant "Danger!" very emphatically. Zar's hand, bent on execution, was stayed for the moment at least. His shrewd little eyes narrowed, and from his lips there issued yammering sounds which constituted an understandable travesty of the speech of Kaw's kind.

"Speak your own tongue, creature!" he ordered sharply. "I can understand!"

Still swooping and darting nervously, Kaw screamed forth his story, describing in quaint manner the thing he had seen, employing comparisons such as any primitive savage would use. In this way the invader was like a boulder, in that way it was like a thorn cactus, and in other ways it resembled the instruments of death which the Itorloo employed. In all ways it was strange, and unlike anything ever seen before.

And Zar listened with fresh and calculated attention, getting from this bird creature the information he required to locate the strange miracle.

Kaw was accurate and clear enough in giving his directions.

Zar might have forgotten his inherent ruthlessness where his feathered informer was concerned, had not Kaw become a trifle too insistent in his exhortations to action. He lingered too long and screamed too loudly.

Irritated, Zar raised his weapon. Kaw swept away at once, but there was no chance for him to get out of range. Invisible energy shot toward him. Black feathers were torn loose, and floated aflame in the morning breeze. Kaw gave a shrill shriek of agony and reproach. Erratically he wavered to the ground.

Zar did not even glance toward him, but retraced his Way leisurely into the surface dome. An hour later, however, having received permission from his superiors, he had journeyed across those hundreds of miles to the gully beside the blue porcelain tower. And there he bent over the form of the invader. Zar was somewhat awed. He had never been to Mars. For two hundred thousand years or more, no creature from Earth had ever visited that planet. The Itorloo were too practical to attempt such a useless venture, and their more recent predecessors had lacked some of the adventurous incentive required for so great and hazardous a journey.

But Zar had perused old records, belonging to an era half a million years gone by. He knew that this gray-green thing was at least like the flora of ancient Mars. Into his mind, matter-of-fact for the most part, came the glimmerings of a mighty romance, accentuating within him a consciousness of nameless dread, and of grand interplanetary distances.

Spines. Bulging, hard-shelled, pulpy leaves that stored oxygen under pressure. Chlorophyl that absorbed sunshine and made starch, just as in an ordinary Earthly plant. Only the chlorophyl of this growth was beneath a thick, translucent shell, which altered the quality of the light it could reflect. That was why astronomers in the pre-interplanetary era had doubted the existence of vegetation on Mars. Green plants of Terra, when photographed with infra red light, looked silvery, like things of frost. But—because of their shells—Martian vegetation could not betray its presence in the same manner.

Zar shuddered, though the morning air was not chill by his standards. The little gleaming orbs of the invader seemed to scrutinize him critically and coldly, and with a vast wisdom. Zar saw the shattered spore-pods, knowing that their contents now floated in the air, like dust— floated and settled—presenting a subtle menace whose tool was the unexpected, and

against which—because of the myriad numbers of the widely scattered spores—only the most drastic methods could prevail.

Belatedly, then, anger came. Zar drew a knife from his belt. Half in fury and half in experiment, he struck the in-vader, chipping off a piece of its shell. He felt a sharp electric shock, though by no means strong enough to kill a creature of his size. From the wound he made in the plant, oxygen sizzed softly. But the invader offered no further defense. For the present it had reached the end of its resources.

Zar bounded back. His devilish little weapon flamed then, for a full two minutes. When he finally released pressure on its trigger, there was only a great, smouldering, glowing hole in the ground where the ghoulish thing from across space had stood.

Such was Zar's and the entire Itorloo race's answer to the intruder. Swift destruction! Zar chuckled wickedly. And there were ways to rid Earth of the treacherous menace of the plant intelligences of Mars entirely, even though they would take time.

Besides there was Venus, the world of promise. Soon half of the Itorloo race would be transported there. The others certainly could be accommodated if it became necessary.

Necessary? Zar laughed. He must be getting jittery. What had the Itorloo to fear from those inert, vegetable things? Now he aimed his weapon toward the blue tower, and squeezed the trigger. Weakened tiles crumbled and fell down with a hollow, desolate rattle that seemed to mock Zar's ruthlessness.

Suddenly he felt sheepish. To every intelligent being there is a finer side that prompts and criticizes. And for a moment Zar saw himself and his people a little more as they really were.

Unlike the lesser creatures, the Children of Men had not advanced very much mentally. The ups and downs of history had not favored them. War had reversed the benefits of natural selection, destroying those individuals of the species best suited to carry it on to greater glory. Zar knew this, and perhaps his senseless assault upon the ruined building was but a subconscious gesture of resentment toward the people of long ago who had been kinder and wiser and happier.

Zar regretted his recent act of destroying the spore plant. It should have been preserved for study. But now— well—what was done could not be changed.

He entered his swift, gleaming rocket car. When he closed its cabin door behind him, it seemed that he was shutting out a horde of mocking, menacing ghosts.

In a short while he was back at the surface station. Relieved there of his duty by another little brown man, he descended the huge cylindrical shaft which dropped a mile to the region that was like the realm of the Cyclops. Thrumming sounds, winking lights, shrill shouts of the workers, blasts of incandescent flame, and the colossal majesty of gigantic machines, toiling tirelessly.

In a vast, pillared plaza the keels of spaceships were being laid—spaceships for the migration and the conquest. In perhaps a year—a brief enough time for so enormous a task—they would soar away from Earth, armed to the teeth. There would be thousands of the craft then, for all over the world, in dozens of similar underground places, they were in process of construction.

Zar's vague fears were dissipated in thoughts of conquest to come. The Venus folk annihilated in withering clouds of flame. The glory of the Itorloo carried on and on—

IV

Kaw was not dead. That this was so was almost a miracle, made possible, perhaps, by a savage, indomitable will to live. In his small bird body there was a fierce, burning courage that compensated for many of his faults.

For hours he lay there on the desert sand, a pathetic and crumpled bundle of tattered feathers, motionless except for his labored breathing, and the blinking of his hate-filled eyes. Blood dripped slowly from the hideous, seared wound on his breast, and his whole body ached with a vast, dull anguish.

Toward sundown, however, he managed to hobble and nutter forward a few rods. Here he buried himself shallowly in the sand, where his chilled body would be protected from the nocturnal cold.

For three days he remained thus interred. He was too weak and sick to leave his burrow. Bitterness toward Zar and the other cruel Itorloo, he did hot feel. Kaw had lived too long in this harsh region to expect favors. But a

black fury stormed within him, nevertheless—a black fury as agonizing as physical pain. He wanted revenge. No, he needed revenge as much as he needed the breath of life. He did not know that Itorloo plans directed against the intruding spores from Mars were already under way, and that—as a by-product—they would destroy his own kind, and all primitive life on the surface of the Earth

Kaw left his hiding place on the fourth day. Luck favored him, for he found a bit of carrion—part of the dead body of an antelope-like creature.

Somehow, through succeeding weeks and days, he managed to keep alive. The mending of his injured flesh was slow indeed, for the burnt wound was unclean. But he started toward home, hopping along at first, then flying a little, a hundred yards at a time. Tedium and pain were endless. But the fiendish light of what must seem forever fruitless hatred, never faded in those wicked, white-lidded eyes. Frequently Kaw's long, black beak snapped in a vicious expression of boundless determination.

Weeks of long days became a month, and then two months. Starved to a black-clad skeleton, and hopeless of ever being fit to hunt again, Kaw tottered into a deep gorge one evening. Utterly spent, he sank to the ground here, his brain far too weary to take note of any subtle unusualness which the deepening shadows half masked.

He scarcely saw the rounded things scattered here. Had he noticed them, his blurred vision would have named them small boulders and nothing more. Fury, directed at the Itorloo, had made him almost forget the spore plants. He did not know that this was to be a place of magic. Chance and the vagrant winds had made it so. A hundred spores, out of many millions, had lodged here. Conditions had been just right for their swift development. It was warm, but not too warm. And there was moisture too. Distantly Kaw heard the trickle of water. He wanted to get to it, but his feebleness prevented him.

He must have slept, then, for a long time. It seemed that he awoke at the sound of an odd buzzing, which may have possessed hypnotic properties. He felt as weak and stiff as before, but he was soothed and peaceful now, in spite of his thirst and hunger.

He looked about. The gorge was deep and shadowy. A still twilight pervaded it, though sunshine gilded its bulging, irregular lips far above. These details he took in in a moment.

He looked, then, at the grotesque shapes around him— things which, in

the deeper darkness, he had thought to be only boulders. But now he saw that they were spore plants, rough, eerie, brooding, with their little, lensed light-sensitive organs agleam.

The excitement of terror seized him, and he wanted to flee, as from a deadly enemy. But this urge did not last long. The hypnotic buzz, which issued from the diaphragmic vocal organs of the plants, soothed and soothed and soothed, until Kaw felt very relaxed.

There were dead ants around him, doubtless the victims of electrocution. Since no better food was within reach, Kaw hopped here and there, eating greedily.

After that he hobbled to the brackish spring that dripped from the wall, and drank. Next he dropped to the ground, his fresh drowsiness characterized by sleepy mutterings about himself, his people, and the all-wise Itorloo. And it seemed, presently, that the buzzing of the invaders changed in character at last, seeming to repeat his own mutterings clumsily, like a child learning to talk.

"Kaw! Itorloo!" And other words and phrases belonging to the speech of the crow clans.

It was the beginning of things miraculous and wonderful for Kaw, the black-feathered rascal. Many suns rose and set, but somehow he felt no urge to wander farther toward his home region. He did not know the Lethean fascination of simple hypnotism. True, he sallied afield farther and farther, as his increasing strength permitted. He hunted now, eating bugs and beetles for the most part. But always he returned to the gorge, there to listen to the weird growths, buzzing, chattering, speaking to him in his own tongue. In them there seemed somehow to be a vague suggestion of the benignance of some strange, universal justice, in spite of their horror.

And night and day, rocket cars, streamlined and gleaming, swept over the desert. Now and then beams of energy were unleashed from them, whipping the sand into hot flame, destroying the invading spore plants that had struck root here and there. Only the law of chance kept them away from the gorge, as doubtless it allowed them to miss other hiding places of alien life. For the wilderness was wide.

But this phase of the Itorloo battle against the invading spore plants was only a makeshift preliminary, intended to keep the intruders in check. Only the Itorloo themselves knew about the generators now being constructed far underground—generators which, with unseen emanations, could wipe out every speck of living protoplasm on the exposed crust of

the planet. Theirs was a monumental task, and a slow one. But they meant to be rid, once and for all, of the subtle threat which had come perhaps to challenge their dominion of the Earth. Kaw and his kind, the rodents, the ants, and all the other simple People of the Dusk of Terra's Greatness, were seemingly doomed.

Kaw's hatred of the Children of Men was undimmed, more justly than he was aware. Thus it was easy for him to listen when he was commanded: "Get an Itorloo! Bring him here! Alone! On foot!"

Zar was the logical individual to produce, for he was the nearest, the most readily available. But summer was almost gone before Kaw encountered the right opportunity, though he watched with care at all times.

Evening, with Venus and the Moon glowing softly in the sky. Kaw was perched on a hilltop, close to the great surface dome, watching as he had often watched before. Out of its cylindrical hangar, Zar's flier darted, and then swung in a slow arc. Presently it headed at a leisurely pace into the northwest. For once its direction was right, and it was not traveling too fast for Kaw to keep pace with it; Clearly its pilot was engaged in a rambling pleasure jaunt, which had no definite objective.

Kaw, pleased and excited, fell in behind at a safe distance. There he remained until the craft was near the gorge. Now there was danger, but if things were done right—

He flapped his wings violently to catch up with his mechanical quarry. He screamed loudly: "Itorloo! Itorloo! Descend! Descend! I am Kaw, who informed you of the unknowns long ago! I would show you more! More! More!" All this in shrill, avian chatterings.

Kaw's trickery was naively simple. But Zar heard, above the noise of his rocket blasts. Suspicion? He felt it, of course. There was no creature in this era who accepted such an invitation without question. Yet he was well armed. In his own judgment he should be quite safe. Curiosity led him on.

He shut off his rocket motors, and uttered the bird jargon, questioning irritably: "What? What is it, black trickster?"

Kaw skittered about defensively. "Descend!" he repeated. "Descend to the ground. The thing that bears you cannot take you where we must go! "

The argument continued for some little time, primitive with matching curiosity and suspicion.

And meanwhile, in the gloomy gorge cut in vague geologic times by some gushing stream, entities waited patiently. Sap flowed in their tissues, as in the tissues of any other vegetation, but the fine hairs on their forms detected sounds, and their light-sensitive cells served as eyes. Within their forms were organs equivalent to human nerve and brain. They did not use tools or metals, but worked in another way, dictated by their vast disadvantages when compared to animal intelligence. Yet they had their advantages, too.

Now they waited, dim as bulking shadows. They detected the excited cries of Kaw, who was their instrument. And perhaps they grew a little more tense, like a hunter in a blind, when he hears the quacking of ducks through a fog.

There was a grating of pebbles and a little brown man, clad in a silvery tunic, stepped cautiously into view. There was a weapon clutched in his slender hand. He paused, as if suddenly awed and fearful. But no opportunity to retreat was given him.

A spore-pod exploded with a loud plop in the confined space. A mass of living dust filled the gorge, like a dense, opaque cloud, choking, blinding. Zar squeezed the trigger of his weapon impulsively. Several of the invaders were blasted out of existence. Stones clattered down from where the unaimed beam of energy struck the wall.

Panic seized the little man, causing him to take one strangling breath. In a few moments he was down, writhing helpless on the ground. Choked by the finely divided stuff, his consciousness seemed to drop into a black hole of infinity. He, Zar, seemed about to pay for his misdeeds. With a mad fury he heard the derisive screams of Kaw, who had tricked him. But he could not curse in return, and presently his thoughts vanished away to nothing.

Awareness of being alive came back to him very slowly and painfully. At first he felt as though he had pneumonia¯ fever, suffocation, utter vagueness of mind. Had the spores germinated within his lungs, he would surely have died. But they did not, there; conditions were too moist and warm for them. Gradually he coughed them up.

He felt cold with a bitter, aching chill, for the weather had changed with the lateness of the season. Fine snow sifted down into the gorge from clouds that were thin and pearly and sun-gilded. Each tiny crystal of ice glittered with a thousand prismatic hues as it slowly descended, And the

silence was deathly, bearing a burden of almost tangible desolation. In that burden there seemed to crowd all the antique history of a world—history whose grand movement shaded gradually toward stark, eternal death.

Zar wanted to flee this awful place that had become like part of another planet. He jerked his body as if to scramble feebly to his feet. He found then that he was restrained by cordlike tendrils, hard as horn, and warm with a faint, fermentive, animal-like heat. Like the beat of a nameless pulse, tiny shocks of electricity tingled his flesh in a regular rhythm.

It was clear to Zar that while he had been inert the tendrils had fastened themselves slowly around him, in a way that was half like the closing of an ancient Venus Flytrap, carnivorous plant of old, and half like the simple creeping of a vine on a wall.

Those constricting bonds were tightening now, Zar could feel the tiny thorns with which they were equipped biting into his flesh. He screamed in horror and pain. His cries echoed hollowly in the cold gorge. The snow, slowly sifting, and the silence, both seemed to mock—by their calm, pitiless lack of concern—the plight in which he found himself.

And then a voice, chattering faintly in the language of Kaw the Crow: “Be still. Peace. Peace. Peace. Peace. Peace—”

Gradually the sleepy tone quieted Zar, even though he was aware that whatever the invaders might do to him could bring him no good.

Plants with voices. Almost human voices! Some sort of tympanic organs, hidden, perhaps, in some of those pulpy leaves, Zar judged. From the records of the old explanations of Mars, he knew a little about these intruders, and their scheme of life. Organs, with the functions of mechanical contrivances, conceived and grown as they were needed! An alien science, adapted to the abilities and limitations of vegetative intelligences—intelligences that had never controlled the mining and smelting and shaping of metal!

Zar, tight in the clutch of those weird monstrosities, realized some of their power. Strangely it did not affect the hypnotic calm that wrapped him.

Mars. These wondrous people of the dusk of worlds had survived all animal life on the Red Planet. They had spanned Mars in a vast, irregularly formed network, growing along dry river beds, and the arms of vanished seas. They had not been mere individuals, for they had

cooperated to form a civilization of a weird, bizarre sort. Great, hollow roots, buried beneath the ground, had drawn water from melting polar snows. These roots had been like water conduits. A rhythmic pulsation within them had pumped the water across thousands of miles of desert, providing each plant along the way with moisture, even on that dying and almost dehydrated world. The canals of Mars! Yes, a great irrigation system, a great engineering feat—but out of the scope of Itorloo methods entirely.

And through the living texture of those immense joining roots, too, had doubtless flown the impulses of thoughts and commands—the essence of leadership and security. Even now, when Mars was all but dead, its final civilization must still be trying to fight on.

Strange, wonderful times those old explorers had seen. Cold sunlight on bizarre ruins, left by extinct animal folk. Thin air and arctic weather, worse than that of Earth in the present age. Death everywhere, except for those vegetative beings grouped in immense, spiny, ribbonlike stretches. Dim shapes at night under hurtling Phobos, the nearer moon, and Deimos, her leisurely sister. Zar did not know just how it had happened, but he had heard that only a few of those human adventurers had escaped from the people of Mars with their lives.

Zar's thoughts rambled on in a detached way that was odd for him. Perhaps Nature had a plan that she used over and over again. On Terra the great reptiles of the Mesozoic period had died out to be replaced by mammals. Men and the Children of Men had become supreme at last.

Succession after succession, according to some well-ordered scheme? In the desolate quiet of falling snow, tempered only by the muted murmur of the frigid wind, it was easy for Zar to fall prey to such a concept, particularly since he was held powerless in the grasp of the invaders. Tendrils, thorny, stinging tendrils, which must have been grown purposely to receive an Itorloo captive! Zar could realize, then, a little of the fantastic introspective sense which gave these beings a direct contact with the physical secrets of their forms. And in consequence a knowledge of chemistry and biology that was clearer than anything that an Itorloo might be expected to attain along similar lines.

Zar wanted to shriek, but his awe and his weakness strangled him beyond more than the utterance of a gasping sigh.

Then the mighty spirit of his kind reasserted itself. Zar was aware that

most probably he himself would presently perish; but the Itorloo, his kind, his real concern, could, never lose! Not with all the mighty forces at their command! To suppose that they could be defeated by the sluggish intruders was against reason! In a matter of months —when the preparations for the vast purification process had been completed—Earth would be free of those intruders once more. Zar's brown face contracted into a leer of defiance that had a touch of real greatness. Brutality, force, cunning, and the capacity for quick action— those were the tools of the Itorloo, but they had strength too. Zar was no fool—no shortsighted individual who leaps to hasty, optimistic conclusions—but in a contest between the Itorloo and the invaders there could be but a single outcome by any standard within Zar's reach.

In this belief, he was comforted, and his luck, presently, after long hours of suffering, seemed far better than he had any reason to hope for. The hard, thorny tendrils unquestionably were relaxing from about him a very little. He could not guess why, and in consequence he suspected subtle treachery. But he could find no reason to suppose that some hidden motive was responsible.

All his avid energies were concentrated, now, on escape. He concluded that perhaps the cold had forced the slight vegetable relaxation, and he proceeded to make the best possible use of his chances. Some time during the night his straining hands reached the hilt ot his knife. Not long afterward Zar clutched his blast gun.

Zar limped stiffly to his flier, cursing luridly; while behind him in the gorge, red firelight flickered, and wisps of smoke lanced into the frigid wind.

Zar wished that Kaw was somewhere in sight, to receive his wrath too. The ebon rascal had vanished. Winter deepened during succeeding days. The Itorloo in their buried cities felt none of its rigors, however.

Zar had submitted to a physical examination after his weird adventure, and had been pronounced fit. And of all his people he seemed to toil the most conscientiously.

The Venus project. Soon the Children of Men would be masters of that youthful, sunward planet. The green plains and jungles, and the blue skies of Venus. Soon! Soon! Soon! Zar was full of dreams of adventure and brutal pleasure.

Periodically the rocket craft of the Itorloo sallied forth from the cities to stamp out the fresh growth of the invaders. The oxygen-impregnated substance of their forms flamed in desert gullies, and along the rims of

shrivelled salt seas, where the spore plants were trying to renew their civilization. Most of them did not get a chance, even, to approach maturity. But because even one mature survivor could pollute the Earth with billions of spores, impossible to destroy otherwise, the purification process must be carried through.

Spring again, and then mid-summer. The spaceships were almost ready to leap Venus-ward on the great adventure. The generators, meant to spread life-destroying emanations over the crust and atmosphere above, stood finished and gleaming in the white-domed caverns that housed them.

Zar looked at the magnificent, glittering array in the Spaceship construction chamber of bis native community with pride and satisfaction.

“Tomorrow,” he said to a companion, a fierce light in his eyes.

The other nodded, the white glare of the atomic welding furnaces lighting up his features, and betraying there a wolfish grin of pleasure. “Tomorrow,” Zar repeated, an odd sort of vagueness in his tone.

V

Kaw had long ago rejoined his tribe. Life, during those recent months, had been little different from what had been usual in the crow clans for thousands of years. For purposes of safety, Kaw had led his flock into a desert fastness where patrolling Itorloo fliers were seldom seen, and where only a few spore plants had yet appeared.

His first intimation that all was not well was a haunting feeling of unease, which came upon him quite suddenly one day just before noon. His body burned and prickled uncomfortably, and he felt restless. Other than these dim evidences, there was nothing to betray the invisible hand of death.

Emanations, originating in the generators of the Itorloo, far underground. But Kaw was no physicist. He knew only that he and his fellows were vaguely disturbed.

With Teka, his mate, and several of their companions, he soared high into the sky. There, for a time, he felt better. Far overhead, near the Sun’s bright disc, he glimpsed the incandescent streamers of Itorloo vessels,

distant in space. And presently, with little attention, he saw those vessels—there were five in the group—turn back toward Earth.

The advance in the strength of the deadly emanations was slow. Vast masses of rock, covering the upper crust of the planet in a thin shell, had to develop a kind of resonance to them before they could reach their maximum power.

By nightfall Kaw felt only slightly more uncomfortable. By the following dawn, however, he was definitely droopy and listless. The gradual, world-wide process of purification advanced, directed at the invaders, but promising destruction to the less favored native life of Earth, too.

Four days. Huddled in a pathetic group in a ruined structure of antiquity, Kaw's tribe waited, Their features were dull and ruffled, and they shivered as if with cold. Some of them uttered low, sleepy twitterings of anguish.

That evening Kaw watched the pale Moon rise from a battered window embrasure. He was too weak to stand, but rested slumped forward on his breast. His eyes were rheumy and heavy-lidded, but they still held a savage glitter of defiance, which perhaps would burn in them even after they had ceased to live and see. And Kaw's clouded mind could still hazard a guess as to the identity of the author of his woes. Brave but impotent, he could still scream a hoarse challenge inspired by a courage'as deathless as the ages. "Itorloo! Itorloo!—"

Some time before the first group of spaceships, headed for Venus, had been recalled to Earth, Zar, assigned to the second group, which had not yet entered the launching tubes, had collapsed against his instrument panels.

His affliction had come with a suddenness that was utterly abrupt. Recovering from his swoon, he found himself lying on a narrow pallet in the hospital quarters of the city. His vision was swimming and fogged, and he felt hot and cold by turns.

But he could see the silvery tunic'd figure of the physician standing close to him.

"What is wrong?" he stammered. "What is it that has happened to me? A short time ago I was well! "

"Much is wrong," the physician returned quietly. "And you have not really been well for a long time. A germ disease—a type of thing which we

thought our sanitation had stamped out millenniums ago—has been ravaging your brain and nerves for months! Only its insidiousness prevented it from being discovered earlier. During its incipient stages the poisons of it seem actually to stimulate mental and physical activity, giving a treacherous impression of robust health. And we know, certainly, that this disease is extremely contagious. It does not reveal itself easily, but I and others have examined many apparently healthy individuals with great care. In each there is the telltale evidence that the disease is not only present, but far advanced. Hundreds have collapsed as you have. More, surely, will follow. It is my belief that the entire race has been afflicted. And the plague has a fatal look. Panic has broken out. There is a threatened failure of power and food supplies. Perhaps an antitoxin can be found—but there is so little time."

Half delirious, Zar could still grasp the meaning of the physician's words, and could understand the origin of the disease.

He began to mutter with seeming incoherence: "The changing Earth. Reptiles. Mammals. Men— Succession. Nature—"

His voice took on a fiercer tone. "Fight, Itorloo!" he screamed. "Fight!"

Cruel he was, as were all his people, but he had pluck. Suddenly he arose to a sitting posture on his bed. His eyes flamed. If his act represented the final dramatic gesture of all the hoary race of man, still it was magnificent. Nor were any tears to be shed, for extinction meant only a task completed.

"Fight!" he shouted again, as if stressing a limitless multitude. "Fight, Itorloo! Study! Learn! Work! It is the only hope! Keep power flowing in the purification generators if you can. The old records of the explorations of Mars—those plants! Their approach to problems is different from our own. No metals. No machines as we know them. But in hidden compartments in their tissues it was easy for them to create the bacteria of death! They invented those bacteria, and grew them, breaking them away from their own substance. Some way, when I was a captive, I was infected. The thorns on the tendrils that held me! I was the carrier! Find an antitoxin to fight the plague, Itorloo! Work—"

VI

One year. Two. Three. The sunshine was brilliant, the air almost warm.

The rusty desert hills in the distance were the same. Ancient ruins brooded in the stillness, as they had for so long. On the slopes ant hordes were busy. Rodent colonies showed similar evidence of population. In the sky, Kaw and his companions wheeled and turned lazily.

This was the same Earth, with several changes. Bulbous, spiny things peopled the gorges, and were probing out across the desert, slowly building—with hollow, connecting roots—the water pipes of a tremendous irrigation system. Like that of Mars, and like that of Ganymede, moon of Jupiter, in former ages. Saline remnants of seas and polar snows could alike provide the needed moisture.

Thoughts traveled swiftly along connecting roots. Little orbs and wicked spines gleamed. The invaders were at peace now. Only the Itorloo could have threatened their massed might. There was no danger in the lesser native life.

The subterranean cities of the former rulers of Earth were inhabited onlv bv corpses and by intruding ants, who, like the other fauna of this planet, were immune to the plague, which had been directed and designed for the Itorloo alone. The last race of men was now one with the reptiles of the Mesozoic. But all was peace.

Kaw screamed out his contentment in loud, lazy cries, as he circled in the clear air. He seldom thought of the past any more. If the new masters were not truly benignant, they were indifferent. They left him alone. Kaw, creature of Earth's dusk, was happy.

The great surface dome where Zar, the Itorloo, had once kept watch, was already surrounded by crowded growths. The plants had achieved a great, but an empty, victory. For Earth was a dying planet. Within the dome an astronomical telescope gleamed dully, collecting dust. Often Zar had directed it toward Venus, goal of shattered Itorloo dreams.

But who knew? Out of the void to Ganymede the invaders had come. Across space to Mars. Riding light to Earth. Perhaps when the time came—when Venus was growing old—

1938

The End