

by

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(Illustrations by Charles Hornstein)

When one comprehends the vastness of the cosmos, the seemingly infinite procession of galaxies that compose it, each with its millions of suns and still more millions of worlds revolving around those suns, it is staggering to conceive of the diversity of life forms that could evolve within the universe. Picturing such life forms and situations that might relate to them requires more than mere imagination on a writer's part, it demands a real gift of words and feeling. Rarely has a science-fiction writer so sensitively captured the essence of alienity as has the author of this fine story.

DONALD BREWSTER was alone. From the blazing wreckage of his spaceship to the canopy of foliage overhead the forest itself seemed to be conspiring against him, to be whispering and protesting as only a forest can when its age-old privacy has been invaded.

An immense emerald prison was the forest, fragrant with growing things, strident with the cries of snowy-crested birds.

It was a prison without bars, beautiful and strange and frightening. It was a naturalist's paradise, and on Earth it would have challenged an explorer to take pride in loneliness and walk with squared shoulders. But what pain could be greater than the pain of loneliness light-years from Earth, what agony of frustration harder to endure than the crystallization of emotion which took place in a man when his heart whispered that he would never see Earth again.

Never again the russet-and-gold splendor of an autumn landscape or the gleam of sunlight on familiar meadows. Never again a journey by sea and land—a journey made for delight alone with a woman tender and yielding at the end of it.

Few would deny that the most desolate fate that can befall a man is the fate of the hermit. To be surrounded day and night by the unknown and the unknowable, to call out and hear no answering voice, to be cut off forever from all human sympathy—who can be blamed for preferring death to such a fate?

No man perhaps. Yet Brewster did not want to die, and as the first shock of bitter realization wore off he found himself accepting with gratitude the fact that he was still alive and in full command of his faculties.

Whatever befell, he would fight to stay alive until his strength gave out. He inspected carefully the rations he had dragged from the burning ship, checking them item by item. Grim experience had taught him that strange fruits and berries were a major hazard, to be sternly shunned until hunger made a mockery of all caution.

He'd have to risk poisoning himself if his skill in setting traps failed him. But he refused to believe it would fail, and meanwhile, if he husbanded every scrap, he could make his food last for at least a week.

He pulled a flask from his pocket and took a long drink. Then he gave the bottle a pat, corked it firmly, and returned it to his hip.

"First lesson in survival," he muttered to the jungle shadows. "A man's best friend is himself—first, last, and all the time."

Five minutes later he was threading his way through the forest in search of a place to camp. A sun much hotter than Sol burned down like an angrily pursuing eye, mocking his confidence and making him feel suddenly fearful, and less sure of himself.

It irked him to realize that the planet was down on the charts as an uninhabited world. There was an abundance of animal life, but no chance at all that he might be given food and shelter by friendly natives.

He comforted himself with the thought that humanoid creatures were as often as not unfriendly. To see a creature intelligent enough to have mastered the use of fire come loping out of the jungle on eight stalk-like legs would not be a pleasant experience, and if a man were himself unarmed—

BREWSTER'S THOUGHTS congealed. He stood utterly motionless, refusing to believe in the reality of what he saw, telling himself with a sudden, tremendous tensing of his muscles and nerves that he had escaped death too recently to have it confront him again in so horrible a form. It was against all reason, a twist of fate too cruel to accept at face value.

The lizard towered directly in his path. It had emerged from a tunnel of dark vegetation less than seventy feet ahead and it was staring straight at him—a scaly and vermilion-crested monster with a row of armored spikes running the length of its spine.

There were shadows where it stood, a mingling of sunlight and darkness which in some queer way made

its swaying bulk seem even greater than it was.

A flicker of light gleamed on its bared teeth, and it was staring with the malign ferocity of a carnivorous beast aware of its own strength and agility, a beast that had come suddenly upon a prey that could not possibly escape.

Brewster was still frantically telling himself that it was an illusion—when a gun roared nearby.

The roar was deafening, but its reverberation was almost instantly drowned out by the lizard's piercing scream as the monster went hurtling back into the underbrush, its body cut in two.

There was an instant of silence, complete, mind-numbing. Then from the underbrush stepped a tall man with a smoking gun, his face peering mournfully into the shadows as if he felt pity for the beast he had been forced to slay.

Amazingly he wore a uniform which Brewster recognized, but had never expected to see again. His eyes were steel-gray and piercing, his cheekbones prominent, and his nose a sharp, bony ridge slightly flattened at the tip.

White-lipped, shaken, Brewster shifted his weight from one trembling leg to the other. He waited for the stranger to speak, but the tall man seemed in no hurry. He stood for a moment nodding at Brewster, as if to give the man whose life he had saved full opportunity to regain his composure.

Then, suddenly, his ruggedly handsome features widened in a grin. "Ugly brutes, those lizards. For all I know they may be harmless. But the odds seem definitely against it."

"Harmless—"

The tall man chuckled. "Well, I've never been attacked by one. I've been careful to keep out of their way. At fifty feet or so a wrong guess might kill you. That's why I blasted when I saw how close you were." Brewster shivered. "I'm glad you didn't waste any time thinking it over!"

"So am I!" The stranger's grin was enlivened by a merry twinkle of voice and eye. "Guess I should introduce myself. I'm Captain James Emery, United States Interstellar Survey. We had a crackup some two months ago, and we've been living off the land ever since."

"You're not alone then?"

Brewster was still so shaken he was afraid the other might think him lacking in courage. But Emery answered his question in a tone which had nothing of contempt in it, only a warm friendliness.

"No, my wife came along to look after me. She's a Survey officer in her own right, but this is the first time we've explored a new planet together. The trip was to be a kind of second honeymoon for both of us." He nodded. "It's funny, you, know. When you emerge from overdrive tens of thousands of light-years from Earth you get a feeling of renewal, of rebirth. There's a brightness and newness about everything, and you're not weighed down with memories."

His eyes grew speculative. "The psychos could probably explain it. There was a character in one of Shakespeare's plays who lightly dismissed a crime he'd committed by claiming it happened long ago and in another country. It's easy to find that amusing—or viciously cynical. But I've always felt Shakespeare's scoundrel displayed profound insight. Time and distance does make a difference, even when you're not a scoundrel."

"That's an angle I didn't have time to think about," Brewster said. "My ship cracked up and caught fire. I

was looking for a drier place to camp when that lizard appeared I thought I was having a nightmare."

"They're agile," Emery conceded. "First you see them, then you don't."

Brewster did not smile. He was staring at the Survey officer as if amazed by the tricks of fate.

"Do you know—I wouldn't be here at all if my sensitive instruments hadn't analyzed every ounce of metal in your ship far out in space," he said. "I had no way of discovering that the metal was in a wrecked spaceship. I thought that there was a rich lode of Ullurian ore here in a natural state. That's why I headed straight for this vicinity and was probably wrecked by a repetition of the same ugly weather conditions that you ran into."

Emery nodded and gestured toward the forest gloom, his rugged features sympathetic.

"That's quite possible," he agreed. "Even those trees are no protection when the elements really cut loose here. But at least we've found a place to camp. You're welcome to share it with us if you don't mind taking pot luck with a man whose only specialty is hunting food animals. Without my instruments I'm just the bright lad who got himself shipwrecked without a compass or a guiding star."

"I don't mind at all," Brewster said.

"Fine! I forgot to ask your name—"

"Donald Brewster, I'm a rare-metal prospector, as I guess you've surmised!"

"Welcome to the third planet of the bright star Rugulius, sir. Welcome to a camping site that's distinctly on the unbelievable side."

He seemed amused by Brewster's puzzlement. "Believe it or not, we're camping in a circular limestone tower eighty feet high. It's not a ruin, exactly. It's more like a big sea-shell rising from the forest floor, scoured and glistening inside and out."

"You mean it really is a shell?"

Emery shook his head. "I wouldn't call it that. Only a highly intelligent creature could have built it. The individual limestone blocks are perfectly aligned, and the design as a whole is far too imaginative to be accidental. It could have been constructed only by some creature with an eye for beauty of design."

He laid a friendly hand on Brewster's shoulder. "Come see for yourself," he said. "It's less than ten minutes walk, if we keep to this path."

It was an incredible walk. Butterflies as huge as dinner plates, vivid scarlet and aquamarine, rose in swirling clouds before them, and half-blinded them with their fluttering. Little fuzzy creatures with enormous ears peered from rifts in the foliage, and then shrieked and vanished like startled elves, leaving behind them a faint odor of musk.

Once the survey officer seized Brewster's arm and pulled him abruptly to one side. In the path a ten-foot snake reared, its viper-like head repulsive with jungle phosphorescence. They found their way blocked in another place by a hideous swarm of blood-red worms, and in still another by a brooding bird with iridescent plumes and a huge gular pouch.

The bird refused to budge until Emery bent and gave her a gentle prod. Then she arose and went screaming away through the forest, leaving behind two pale-blue eggs which Emery gratefully pocketed.

The path changed direction, and the great trees thinned a little.

The clearing was visible for a full minute before they reached it, a glimmering oval in the foliage-choked jungle wall directly ahead, growing continuously brighter.

EMERY WAS THE first to emerge. He swung about and watched his companion claw his way into the open. He was eager to observe Brewster's expression when he first set eyes on the tower.

The Survey officer's curiosity was satisfied almost instantly, and in a wholly satisfying manner. Brewster had been told what to expect, but there was a look in his eyes as he stared which left no doubt that his imagination had left enormous gaps. The beauty and vitality of the tower had to be seen to be appreciated.

It did resemble a gigantic sea-shell, but its smoothly flowing whorls and convolutions bore the unmistakable stamp of intelligent artistry.

There was a circular opening at its base, visible clear across the clearing, and in the opening stood a woman whose face and figure, once seen, could not be readily forgotten.

Helen Emery must have heard her husband coming and had gone to the door to meet him. Brewster could see her smile clearly, the flash of ivory-white teeth. The sun touched warm glints in her hair, and her dark eyes were bright with an eager questioning.

In a moment the two men were at the door, and Helen Emery was greeting her husband. Brewster could see that her love for him was both strong and elemental. It was in the caress of her fingers on his face, in the tenderness of her expression, in the very way she held herself when she kissed him. An instant of fulfillment it seemed, complete in itself, as if he had been gone from her for a whole lifetime. Then she turned quickly to Brewster, her eyes wide again with unspoken questions.

Emery talked with her for a moment, raising his voice a little so that Brewster could hear everything that was said. When he had finished Helen Emery came forward and took Brewster's hand in hers.

"Welcome to Riddle Manor, Donald Brewster," she said. "It may be a long time before we see Earth again. I'm glad we're not alone, as we feared."

"I'm glad too," Brewster said.

"Where are you from, Donald?" Helen asked.

"New York," Brewster said.

A roaring seemed to fill his ears as he spoke. He saw sunlight bright on gigantic metal buildings, heard the scream of jet planes, the deep, never-ceasing drone of the underground.

He saw the bright waters of New York Harbor, the tangled maze of shipping in the harbor, and the spaceports of New Jersey hugging the shores of the outer bay. He blinked, and the bright, tremendous vision was gone.

"I'm from Boston," Helen Emery said. "The Charles must be beautiful now. In the autumn, when the leaves start to fall, and you can see the golden dome of the capitol—"

Emery put his arm about his wife's shoulder and together they entered the tower. Brewster followed—and halted abruptly. With a shock that almost made him doubt his sanity he stared up at a series of ascending platforms, each circular and slightly overlapping, the entire structure towering to the roof.

The staircase—if it were a staircase—rose like a burst of frozen energy, its summit a snowy disk, the individual platforms grooved and notched and scooped out in weirdly symmetrical fashion.

Emery and his wife paused on the third platform, and Brewster saw two rude couches fashioned of boughs, an ammunition box, and another gun, its barrel, gleaming blue-black in the shadows. Scattered about were other articles of camping equipment—a tiny magnetic stove, metal eating utensils, and even a charred and badly-dented camera.

Helen turned, her eyes sweeping the platform. "This is all we could save from the wreckage," she said, with a wry grimace. "Luckily we've had good shooting. I've decided that Jim is the best marksman in the Survey, barring some white-mustached old colonel I've never even met."

Emery laughed. "I'm no better marksman than she is a cook, Donald."

He patted her shoulder. "She'll have dinner ready before this place can really start to haunt you."

Emery never forgot his first dinner in the tower. It was like nothing he could have imagined, its goodness matching the hospitality of Jim and Helen— friends completely new. As they ate they talked.

"What's it like to be a rare-metal prospector, Donald?"

He told them, keeping many things back but wishing that he could find courage to be completely honest, for once in his life. He told them about the narrow escapes, the loneliness of the extragalactic planets, and the moments of wild joy and triumph when a ruined humanoid city or desolate crater yielded minerals unknown on Earth.

He matched shining stories with Emery, fire mountain with fire mountain, strange animal with strange animal, morning mist with sunset splendor. But he forgot to mention how he had cheated and lied his way to wealth, how he had won and lost and won again with loaded dice. He was silent about the disloyalties and betrayals, the false salvage claims, the ships deliberately wrecked.

Finally the shadows of evening crept into the tower, and the setting sun dyed the ascending spiral red, and they knew it was time to put an end to talk.

Brewster stood up. "Are the nights cool?" he asked.

"Cool enough," Emery said. "Why, Donald?"

"I was thinking it might be a good idea to bunk near the top. If you don't mind climb up and look."

"Sure, go ahead," Emery said. "Helen and I just picked a platter at random."

He smiled. "We've got into the habit of calling those platforms 'platters.' Just imagine how nice it would be to have one set before you at mealtime, filled to the brim with a steak-and-mushroom dinner."

His smile increased in volume. "I can't promise you a bat won't fly in and wake you up. But it's cool and comfortable enough at any level. If it's privacy you're worried about—these overlapping, scallop-shell edges guarantee that."

"If you were right up above you couldn't see us," Helen said, laughingly. "We'd be hidden away in our own jungle paradise."

"You're making it tough for a lonely bachelor," Brewster complained. He drew a deep breath, and picked up his ration kit. Then he turned and looked up. "I might as well climb to the top anyway. If I don't like it up there I'll descend a few platters."

Emery chuckled. "Prefer to be lord of all you survey, eh?"

Brewster started, and looked at the survey officer closely. He saw at once that there was no hidden meaning in the other's merriment and to hide his confusion he started quickly up the spiral.

He turned once to call back. "That dinner was really special! Thanks again!"

"Glad you enjoyed it!" Emery shouted. "See you at breakfast."

It took Brewster a full minute to reach the heights. The disk at the top was enormous, its edges curving upward. Breathing heavily, he sat down on a projecting limestone shelf, and dropped his ration kit.

He looked up in awe. It was curious, but the oddly-fashioned grooves and hollows in the walls of the tower made him think of an old nursery story from childhood. Even a few of the words came back, although he wasn't sure of the exact phrasing.

And she slept in each of the three beds, and ate from each of the three bawls. The first bed was very small, and the second not large at all. But the third bed was enormous.

BREWSTER UNLACED his boots, and leaned back with a weary sigh. The shadows were growing darker, and they seemed to cluster about him as if seeking to drain warmth from his body and mind. The sun no longer bathed the roof of the tower in a rosy light.

He shut his eyes and relaxed completely.

There is an interval between sleeping and waking which can be sensed by the dreamer even as the long night can be sensed. But Brewster could not even remember the numbing drowsiness which usually warned him of the approach of sleep. He had experienced neither the long night nor the surprise of awakening from a borderland state of half-slumber in which the firm contours of reality remained elusively remote.

Was it a dream that he was having, a terrifyingly dream? Or was he awake and in the grip of some strange power, some alien intelligence, which had seized control of his mind?

Of one thing only could he be sure. He was in another world. It was a world of tremendous contrasts, of sea and jungle, of rain and scorching sunlight. He seemed to be walking through it, but more slowly than

he had ever walked before. He seemed almost to glide, to crawl over the ground.

It was a world of thunder and tumult. You could stand by a sea-wall and stare out over rocky headland separated by miles of blowing spray. You could swing about, and glide inland through a flowering wilderness over paths of snow-white coral.

In the inland world there was no thunder and no tumult. If you listened carefully you could hear the furtive movements of little animals, the whirl and drone of invisible insect life. But unless you were skilled in Nature's ways you might suppose yourself in a garden of enchantment, with each fruit-bearing tree and blue-and-vermilion flower artificially designed to create delight.

"The spaceship was a tiny dot at first in the depths of the sky. But it grew swiftly larger, sweeping straight down toward the sea wall like sweeping a wind-buffed cocoon. It circled and wheeled and swept ever lower, the sunlight glistening on its cylindrical hull.

Then it was resting motionless in the garden wilderness, and all about it the startled wild life of the region was protesting the intrusion. Sea birds shrieked and circled, dipped and wheeled, and outraged lizards hissed and slithered like clockwork automatons into their burrows on the landward side of the sea wall.

The ship burst suddenly into flame.

He watched the conflagration, saw the tremendous sheets of fire darting skyward. He watched, alone and appalled, and the slowness of his movement toward the ship was like the slowness which afflicts the terror-stricken in dreams.

Yet now more than ever he felt himself to be awake. The feeling remained when the immense white buildings and the glittering instruments of science came to replace what he had seen by the sea-wall, and he heard voices whispering in his mind.

"I knew that we could heal them. But they were so close to death when we removed them from the wreckage I feared our task would be a difficult one."

"Even if they had died—we could have healed them," a second voice said. "Every living tissue carries within itself the somatic pattern of the organism as a whole. We could have restored and revitalized their bodies and their brains from a single living cell."

The voice paused, then went on. "Somatic death is never instantaneous. The brain dies more slowly than the body, as energy-discharge tests have shown, and there are always a few cells which survive for an incredible length of time. Even without the aid of a nutrient fluid we could have kept a few cells alive."

"That is true," the first voice agreed. "Had they died the vast complexity of their brains would have continued to survive in rudimentary form in a single neural filament. From a tiny living fragment of damaged brain tissue teeming with neurograms—the basic patterns of memory and inheritance—we could have reconstructed all of the perished stimulus-response circuits and linked memory-chains which are the wellsprings or [bought, of imagination and desire.

"Life would have returned in all of its stormy splendor, for intelligent life is like a great sea in its restlessness. It may seem to have ebbed forever, but the slightest under-surge will lash it to hurricane violence and send it crashing across the beaches of eternity.

"You cannot confine life to a single planet of a single star, and even as it perishes it lights torch after torch on its stormy crests and hurls them afar to dazzle other worlds with its dreams of survival.

"Fortunately these two did not die, even though their injuries would have resulted in death if we had not

healed them by a combined application of surgical techniques and somatic revitalizing rays.

"Every such victory over death is a milestone in the progress which science must make if intelligence is to increase its mastery over the blind forces of Nature. We have built a great and enduring civilization by holding fast to that one aim—the conquest of Nature by patient research alone. But we must never forget that our greatest victories lie ahead."

There was a swirl of brightness and Brewster became aware that he was inside one of the buildings, staring at moving shapes that loomed semitransparent in the gloom.

Standing side by side in what appeared to be a high-walled laboratory glittering with instruments of science such as he had never before seen were two white limestone slabs, each supporting an unmoving human form. Behind the slabs towered gleaming transparencies of metal and crystal, and a circular, mirror-like object which reflected spots of light down ward on a man's drawn face and a woman's tousled, dark hair.

The man and the woman were naked in the glow. For a moment the downstreaming rays penetrated the shadows in steady shafts. Then they lit filaments of darting flame upon the woman's head and shoulders, and traced out a fiery circle about the torso of the man.

Slowly the light weaved back and forth, assuming changing patterns, and from behind the mirrorlike object something arose in the flame-streaked gloom that was not a machine. Something huge and white with protruding eyes and sluglike horns projecting from its head. It was quickly joined by another of its kind.

On the slab Helen Emery stirred and opened her eyes.

Then brightness again and the scene changed. There were dark clouds across the entire sky, obscuring the outlines of the white buildings. Lightning forked down, shafts of blinding radiance circled the sky.

Did the radiance come from the buildings themselves? Brewster was never to know, for he fell at last into a deep sleep and did not awaken until dawn came to the tower.

Awakening, he felt for an instant a sense of unreality, a suspension of reason that made his temples throb. He arose in alarm, and stared down the enormous spiral that sloped away beneath him.

In the cold gray dawn what had seemed merely incredible took' on a nightmare quality of fantastic madness. How could his mind interpret thoughts from a nonhuman brain? How could he see images and hear voices his memory had never recorded?

Did something dwell in the tower that could physically implant itself on its surroundings, as the sea could be tinted red by a sunset, or the jungle darkened by the shadow of a dangerous beast? Everything was quiet now. Everything was completely peaceful. Yet what he had seen and experienced could not have been a dream.

He knew what psychologists had discovered about the nature of dreams. It was a peculiarity of dreams that inner experiences were expressed in such a way that the mind was freed from the necessity of feeling deep concern for others. That had been positively established. Tests had been made which left no room for doubt. And in dreams the events which took place were subject to a special logic of their own which could seldom be justified on awakening.

But then—could the logic of what he had seen and heard be justified? Could an alien science cheat death on the planet of a distant star, light-years from Earth across the great curve of the universe? Could a

greater science than man's restore the mortally injured to warmth and life and fire?

They'll know, he thought. If their ship circled a sea-wall they'll remember. I'll ask Jim and Helen to take me to the wreckage.

He looked up, and saw the dawn warming the sky through a window high in the tower. The sky was as bright as any dawn sky on Earth, and deep in the forest birds were singing.

They'll know; they'll tell me.

HELEN EMERY was bent above the tiny magnetic stove, her hair aureoled by the dawn light. She looked up quickly when she heard Brewster descending.

"Is that you, Donald?" she called out. "You're up early, aren't you?"

He appeared suddenly before her, his face drawn.

"I hardly slept at all," he lied. "I was too tired, I guess. More badly shaken up than I realized. Where's Jim?"

"Taking an early morning dip," she said, brushing back a strand of hair that had fallen across her forehead. Dark hair, that had lain in a tumbled mass beneath shifting lights and shadows.

She seemed embarrassed by his stare, and added quickly: "It's only a ten-minute walk to the sea-wall, I wish I enjoyed bathing in the sea as much as Jim does. I was born inland, on a farm, and I never saw the sea until I was eighteen."

The sea-wall!

He never quite remembered how he persuaded her to take him to the wreckage. The shock of her words had started a whirring in his brain, and he had only a confused recollection of giving her some very logical and plausible reason for wanting to make the trip. More sharply impressed on his mind was her quick nod of agreement.

It was an easy journey they made, along a path previously cleared. There was silence between them, broken only by the occasional crackle of a twig underfoot. They saw no birds or reptiles, but once a tiny mole-like creature darted across their path and vanished in the underbrush with an eerie screeching.

A few minutes later they heard the roar and crash of the sea. The vegetation thinned and fell away, and they emerged into the open.

A startled cry burst from Helen Emery's lips. She stood staring, the blood draining from her face, her eyes wide with stark disbelief.

Suddenly she was running—running straight toward the bright new ship which stood by the sea-wall.

"It's our ship!" she cried. "Donald, it's the ship that brought us here! What could have happened? How could it have been rebuilt?"

Brewster stared at her still in motion, shouting the questions as she ran. Without replying he joined her beside the ship, a stunned horror in his eyes. He reached out and felt the cool, shining metal of the port locks. He looked in through a gleaming view-pane at an intricate cluster of navigational instruments.

Fear came and stood beside him, and for a moment his eyes wondered to the sea-wall and came to rest on the shadows lurking there.

The dawn of understanding. It touched his mind, and retreated, and came back again. An intelligence so powerful that it could impress its thoughts on its surroundings would not find it difficult to rebuild a wrecked spaceship—even a ship gutted by fire. An intelligence of such power equipped with instruments of science could do . . . almost anything it wanted to do.

A trembling seized him and he could hardly trust himself to speak. The ship had been rebuilt for a purpose. What purpose? To study its construction, as human scientists would have studied a strange ship wrecked on Earth.

He had to be alone. To think—and reach a decision. An opportunity had presented itself and with opportunity had come a choice he would have to make. It was a decision which could not be put off, could not be delayed another instant.

He tried to speak calmly, tried to keep his voice from betraying him. "Get Jim," he said. "Jim must be back by now. He'll know if this is really your ship."

"I'll bring him as quickly as I can," she promised. "But I'm sure it's our ship. The instant I saw it I knew, I could tell."

She looked at him steadily for a long moment, as if trying to read his mind.

"I won't be satisfied until Jim is sure too," he said. "It means—there is intelligent life on this planet. It means that we're not alone, as we thought. We're being watched—studied."

Her eyes widened in sudden alarm. "You really think that?"

"What other explanation is there? What other possible explanation?"

"I'll get Jim," she said.

She turned, and was gone.

Brewster stood for a moment listening to her footsteps die away. Then he turned back to the ship, his mouth strangely dry.

He entered the ship through the open port-lock, and stared about him. Everything seemed incredibly new—new and bright and shining. He saw the double pilot seats, facing the controls. He went to the instrument board, tested the air pressure, and looked out through the viewpane at the green immensity of the forest.

In the small compact control room there was a security which could not be found in the forest, or by the sea wall. The forest could kill in a thousand cruel ways. And by the sea-wall lurked shadows which could threaten a man's sanity.

In the forest a man could die horribly, and his bones lie bleached and whitening under cold stars. There were two pilot seats, but one man could pilot the ship. There was room for two—but not for three. The ship could not carry two men and one woman back on overdrive to Earth.

The jungle was green and threatening outside the viewpane. The jungle whispered: Do not be a fool! This is your chance! Act quickly!

Brewster climbed into one of the pilot seats.

He stared out into the green jungle. But he did not see the jungle. He saw New York.

He was back in that tremendous city, the lights of evening fading from the windows of the buildings he loved, the rooftops shining clear in the heavens.

He was back in New York with a lot of money to spend. He was back in his favorite restaurant at his favorite table. It was dark outside, he could see the stars shining in the winter sky. The wine was poured quickly, it bubbled in his glass.

Opposite him sat a woman. Her name did not matter. He only cared that she was a woman, tender and very beautiful, and that if he lost her, there would always be another woman waiting.

He shut his eyes and she was tight in his arms. Her lips were fire, and the words she spoke to him would have prevented him from seeking another. He would have welcomed that too. He would not have cared.

Brewster climbed down from the pilot seat and went outside to wait for Jim and Helen.

The jungle screamed at him: You're quite mad! You had your chance! Why didn't you take it?

There was no answer he could give the jungle. He could not seem to bring his thoughts into clear focus. Two strangers had welcomed him as a friend, had trusted him completely. But that was no proper answer. It explained nothing, really.

"A floating disk-like object emerged dazzling his eyes with its brightness."

HE SAW THEM APPROACHING along the path and straightened in sudden concern. He'd be having a time with Jim. You couldn't just say to a survey officer: *Your ship was wrecked, and you were close to death. But an intelligence whose existence I cannot even prove healed you. It rebuilt your ship too. Climb in and take off. Hurry, Jim! Before they try to stop you. If they could read our thoughts they'd be here now, they'd stop you cold. There must be a mind block of sonic sort. Take advantage of it, Jim! Don't just stand there staring at me!*

For a survey officer had an approach to reality that would never give ground that fast. He'd have to be convinced first, and that would take time.

"Donald, when Helen told me, I couldn't believe it. I thought it was some sort of gag you'd cooked up between you. I—I've got to sit down."

Brewster looked up and saw Jim standing before him. Not the Jim he'd imagined himself opposing, but Jim the flesh—an even harder Jim to argue with.

Emery sat down on a tree stump and stared at the ship.

"How did it get here?" he asked.

"We found it here," Brewster said.

"It is our ship," Helen said. "Have you any doubt at all, Jim?"

"I'll know when I've looked at the instrument board."

Emery got up then, and went into the ship. Brewster and Jim's wife followed. Jim walked slowly around the control room, his lips tight, his eyes shining strangely.

Emery moved about the ship like a man in a trance, his eyes roving from the control board whose dials indicated ample fuel reserves and perfect mechanical, electronic functioning, to the orderly, properly fastened array of essential equipment. But a frown creased his face when he observed only two take-off pressure coaches.

"Good Lord!" he muttered. "It just can't be. It's against all reason."

Brewster knew then what had to be done. He was no hero. His past was crammed with so many things he wanted to forget that one more sordid episode wouldn't have appreciably darkened the whole. This was, however, the first time he could remember being treated as a decent human being. It was a new experience. There comes a time when a man has to give as well as take.

"Jim!" he said.

He waited until Emery had turned and was facing him.

"I've never had two better friends than you and Helen, Jim," he said. Then Brewster sent his fist crashing against Emery's jaw. It was a hard, quick blow, and it dropped Emery to the deck.

Helen cried out in horror.

Brewster turned and took her by the shoulder. She tried to wrench free, her eyes wild, but he refused to release her. "Listen to me," he pleaded. "Jim told me you were a survey officer too. You know how to pilot this ship."

"You struck him for no reason at all."

Brewster shook his head. "I had a reason. We're in very great danger, but I couldn't have convinced him. He wouldn't have listened. But he's your husband, and he's helpless now. He's your man—and a woman in love will always listen."

"Listen to what?" she asked, fiercely.

"I'm going to stay and draw the danger away from you. I'm going to make myself a target. But don't get the silly idea that I'm sacrificing myself. If you stay Jim may be the target—but my chances won't be any better."

He shook her, a little roughly, solely to anger her. "Do you understand? I'd have to stay anyway. But you can save Jim by using common sense."

She ceased to struggle suddenly. She stared at him, her lips white. "Do you really mean that?"

"Of course I mean it. I'm going outside. As soon as I'm clear—I want you to take off. Just give me thirty seconds to get clear."

He didn't wait to say goodbye. He crossed the control room in three quick strides, and swung the port-lock shut behind him.

He was seventy feet from the ship when it took off with a thunderous roar.

He walked slowly back through the forest, keeping to the path that seemed somehow now to be his last link with Earth.

A sense of almost overwhelming loneliness came upon him when he saw the tower overwhelming the trees, its summit bright with weaving sunlight. Yet he walked across the clearing with his shoulders held straight.

The tower had become suddenly very precious to him. In the tower he had enjoyed a truly wonderful hospitality. He had known himself for the first time in his life as a man capable of friendship, warm, deep and lasting.

Horribly lonely and deserted the ascending platforms seemed now. Each shadow seemed to mock him, increasing his sense of loss, heightening the desolation which rested upon him like some evil cloak which had begun to grow into his flesh.

Higher he climbed, and higher.

Near the top of the spiral he paused to stare down.

And suddenly he knew the secret of the tower. *The tower was a house.*

On Earth a house was not a home until it had been lived in. When a house became a home it changed subtly. The people who lived in it changed it.

If walls could speak and tell their secrets

But walls had spoken. How else explain the visions he had seen, the voices he had heard? Some wise and tremendous intelligence had built this house and it was now a home.

And why could not walls be made sensitive to waves of thought, just as photoelectric cells were sensitive to the approach of a physical body acting upon them from a distance. A science that could heal the mortally injured would find no difficulty there.

Brewster sat down at the edge of the topmost platform, and stared down the spiral, remembering the visions he had seen of a planet of tremendous contrasts, of sea and sky, miles of blowing spray and primeval jungle.

On the shores of Earth's seas dwelt enormous mollusks. Enormous for Earth, but here he had met in the jungle a lizard twenty feet tall.

A snail would not have to remain permanently attached to its house. On Earth there were mollusks which could leave their shells at will.

The ebb and flow of the sea tides, the surge of the great sea that never ceased. Would not an intelligence having its origin in the sea prefer to roam, to join itself to that surge and return to its house only at intervals?

How easy it was to imagine such a creature, weary at last of its roaming, climbing up a sea-wall in its shining eagerness to be home.

The strange grooves and hollows.

In a mollusk's body were similar grooves and hollows, for a mollusk must mold itself to its spiral house, must flow into every crevice and fill its house completely.

Brewster sat very still, listening to he knew not what, his nerves suddenly tense.

On Earth there were mollusks with great horny feet which could be fitted into grooves such as Brewster saw here on the immense spiral which fell away beneath him.

A scientific intelligence, thought Brewster, could be completely lacking in compassion. It was possible that he had saved his friends from a fate worse than death—for the lot of the experimental guinea pig was never a happy one. But it was equally possible that the intelligence might have been moved by a spirit of altruism. To restore an alien life-form and the ship which had brought that form to its own world might have appealed to it as a kindly and generous thing to do.

In that case Jim and Helen Emery would have been in no danger, and their departure would have fulfilled the original design of the intelligence. But if the intelligence had no such altruistic design in mind—might it not feel itself thwarted, and vent its rage on the one responsible?

Well, if he had to be a guinea pig—

The lapping was barely audible at first, a hollow mockery of sound that fell so lightly on Brewster's ears that if he had not been listening with every nerve alert he would have thought it a breeze blowing in from the sea, rattling the dry leaves of the forest.

He knew when he heard it that he could not hope to escape. He remained motionless, listening as the sound grew louder, listening and waiting and fighting back his fear. Louder and louder it grew, and suddenly a shadow fell across the base of the spiral that could only have been cast by a flowing shape moving with the resistless slowness of the sea tides themselves.

Straight up the spiral swept the owner of the house, darkish portions of itself slithering over the ascending disks, and into the grooves and hollows. Closely and ever more closely as it ascended it molded itself to the spiral's convolutions, as if the spiral were intimately a part of its mind and its flesh.

It had returned completely into its house, rearing a great, horned head and staring down at Brewster with eyes that seemed to probe his very soul.

Suddenly, from a crevice in the uneven limestone a floating, disk-like object emerged and swept down toward him, dazzling his eyes with its brightness.

Incredibly intricate in construction the disk seemed, its numerous knoblike projections and delicately glowing tubes proclaiming it an instrument of science designed with accuracy for a specific purpose.

That purpose Brewster sensed even before the tubes attached themselves to his brow. The walls could speak and this was their voice—an instrument of communication of a thistledown lightness which responded to every thought impulse generated by the owner of the house.

Generated by guests as well? And why not? An automatic caretaker, perhaps—taking down messages in the owner's absence and repeating them on the owner's return. Absorbing impressions from every part of the house, from millions of tiny photoelectric cell mechanisms embedded on every tier. Attaching itself to friend and foe alike—

As the tubes at Brewster's temples lit up his face he knew that the strangeness and mystery of it would forever haunt him. But he knew also that the questions he would never cease to ask himself were of less importance than the simple fact that the owner of the house was using the device now to communicate with him directly.

"For you," a voice whispered, deep in his mind. "We built it for you, Donald Brewster!" Almost the great horned face seemed to smile. "It will take you back to your home planet!"

Brewster saw the ship then, standing by the seawall in a blaze of sunlight. It was a beauty—the most beautiful ship he had ever seen.

He blinked and there was a stinging at his eyelids. He wanted to stand up, to get to his feet and shout his gratitude. But so great was his surprise and delight that all he could do was stare.