ARTIFACT

She came screaming in from the black sky, her wide wings eclipsing the bright stars as she skimmed over the Polar wastes, lower, lower, until her long landing skids touched in a flurry of snow and powdered ice, touched, rebounded, and touched again. From her needle sharp prow there was the brief, blinding flare of braking jets and she slowed abruptly to a halt.

Lights came on inside her body, and the slowly settling ice crystals scintillated in the hard radiance from the ports like microscopic diamonds.

After a long while — there were tests to be made, measurements of atmospheric pressure and temperature to be taken — a door in her side opened. A dark figure, bulky in protective clothing, jumped down to the snow, followed by a second, similar figure, and a third, and a fourth. The leader carried a long staff with a pointed ferrule, drove it, with a single, decisive action, deep into the snow. There was enough wind briefly to unfurl the flag at the head of the staff, to flaunt the gaily coloured silk in the beam of the searchlight that had been directed upon it from the ship. The four men stood stiffly to attention, their right hands raised to their foreheads in salute. Then, one by one, they returned to their ship. Silently the door shut behind them. The only sound was the whispering and creaking of metal that, heated almost to incandescence by the flight through the atmosphere, was now cooling.

In the cabin, Dr John Taylor carefully uncorked the whisky bottle, poured carefully measured doses into each of the six glasses.

"Don't be so damned finicky, Doc!" shouted Commander Peters. "We've got here, and we're celebrating — we aren't taking medicine!"

Taylor grinned whitely at his Captain — he, like the other five men was deeply tanned—and went on pouring. Then, as an after-thought, he added two milimetres to the contents of the glass that he handed to Peters.

The Commander took it, handling it appreciatively.

"It's good," he said, "to be able to take a drink like a civilised human being at last. Eight months of sucking fluids out of plastic bulbs is eight months too long!"

He got to his feet. The smile slipped from his face, leaving it stern and hard and, thought the Doctor, dedicated. He raised his glass. "To the first men on Mars!" he said.

"The first men on Mars!" repeated the others.

Taylor, as did the others, gulped his whisky.

Then — "Are we the first?" he asked quietly.

"Of courser snapped Peters. "Who could possibly have got here before us?"

"The Russians?" suggested Wesley, the Navigator, dubiously.

"If they had, said the Commander, "we should have known about it ..."

"Not necessarily," demurred Taylor. "They were always secretive—in their dealings with each other as well as with the outside world. We know that they were pretty close to interplanetary flight twenty years ago—and that was when their top men in the field lost their lives when the atomic powered rocket blew up on take-off. There must have been records destroyed at the same time ..."

Not speaking, Peters held his glass out to Taylor. Silently, the little Doctor refilled it.

"To the first men on Mars," he said again. "Us."

They slept poorly that night — the weight of their bodies, even in the slight Martian gravity, was irksome after the months of Free Fall. They were up and about before sunrise, unloading and assembling the equipment that they had brought with them. They had already reported their safe landing to the main fleet in its orbit around Mars, now, whilst the others put together the light, incredibly tough tractors, the Radio Operator tested the set that he would use to maintain communications during the trek to the Equator.

At noon they were ready to commence their journey southwards. The two tractors, thought Doctor Taylor as he stood well away from them, taking his photographs, looked like weird insects, looked, with the bulbous, pressurised tents dwarfing the chassis beneath, like the honeypot ants he had once seen in Australia. And the ship herself, with the long skis of her landing gear, looked like some huge grasshopper. He wondered briefly if there were any insects on Mars, if there was any life at all apart from the vegetation of the fertile areas.

"We shall soon find out," he whispered to himself, forgetting that his helmet set was switched on.

"What was that, Doc?" Peters' voice crackled in his earphones.

"I was wondering if there was any life here, Commander," he said, a little embarrassed.

"Of course there is," laughed Peters. "We're it! Hurry up and take your pretty pictures, Doc. We're pushing off, now."

Taylor put the camera back into its case, walked with long strides back to the tractors. He took his place in the leading vehicle, sharing the long seat in the driver's cab with the Commander and the Navigator.

"As near as I can determine, Captain," Wesley was saying, "we made our landing almost exactly at the Pole. The Magnetic Pole can't be far away, so our compasses are practically useless. Too much vertical force, not enough horizontal…"

"Steer for the sun," ordered Peters. "That'll be as near due south as dammit for an hour or so. Keep the ship right astern. I'll keep an eye on your tracks to see that you're keeping a straight course."

"But the azimuth is changing all the time," protested Wesley.

"Steer for the sun, repeated Peters. "We'll have to put some mileage between us and the Magnetic Pole before our compasses will function. As soon as they are some good, check the error — there's bound to be Variation, and maybe some Deviation as well ..."

"As you say, Commander," replied Wesley.

The note of the turbine rose an octave, the tractor lurched forward. Its motion, over the undulations of the ice cap, was not unlike that of a small craft in a seaway. The glare from the snow was painfully dazzling until Peters adjusted the polarisation of the forward window of the cab.

So they pressed on, taking it in turns to drive. By sunset the compass was less sluggish and a halt was called while Wesley determined the compass error and meals were prepared in the pressurised tents. Two hours after sunset, and they were ploughing through, as much as over, pulverised sand. Taylor had wanted an exploration, even only a brief one, of the edge of the ice cap, reasoning that life forms might exist there, but Peters was determined to make as good time as possible, to prepare the landing strip at the Equator for the other two racket planes by the appointed date, if not before.

Through the night they drove on, the beams of their headlights more brilliant than the light of Phobos — they were still too far north for Deimos to show above their horizon. By watches they slept — or tried to sleep — in the pressurised tents, by watches they drove.

It was at dawn that they reached the bank of the canal.

Reluctantly, Peters agreed to a halt.

He was, thought Taylor, in many ways an ideal for his job. He was not, now that the first thrill of landing had passed, a romantic to enthuse every minute of the day about the wonder and the glory of standing and walking on the surface of another world. He was not one to allow the requirements of scientific research to get in the way of his mission, which was to proceed with all possible despatch to the Equator and there prepare the landing strip for the other rockets. The other ships would bring in the scientists. Peters was not a scientist, neither were his men. They were naval officers, technicians. Of them all, only Taylor and Wesley, the Navigator, showed any desire to stand and stare. Of them all only Taylor, by virtue of his age and rank, could hope to argue with the Commander.

"We've made good time," he said. "We can afford a halt. We can try to discover whether or not these canals are artificial waterways. We can look for ruins ..."

The Commander consulted with Wesley who, using his bubble sextant, had taken observations. He told Taylor that he would be allowed two hours for his exploration. He said that he, personally, would use that two hours for sleeping, and strongly advised the others to do likewise. Wesley, however, decided to accompany the Doctor.

The two men walked along the canal bank, stopping frequently to stoop to examine the scattered plants that grew there. Spherical they were, most of

them, ranging in size from a marble to a basketball, with tough, dark green, leathery skins. Taylor felt vaguely disappointed. He should, he knew, have felt only awe at the evidence of the universality of life — but, as he put it to Wesley, it had been one helluva long way to come just to look at a lot of pumpkins .. .

"And as for the canals," he said, "as far as we can see they're no more than trickles running to the Equator from the Poles. They may look straight from Earth, or the Moon, or from a few million miles out in space — but they're far from being straight lines when you're standing beside 'em ."

"I was expecting a few ruined cities," said Wesley.

'So was I, frankly. Oh, I've no doubt that there will be cities here—but only after we build 'em. Oh well— I'll cut myself a pumpkin or two and find out if they're fit to eat when we get back to the tractors ..."

South they ran, and south, keeping well to time. At set periods the brief messages crackled from the surface of Mars to the orbiting fleet, at set periods the laconic replies flashed back. Taylor, reading between the lines of scientific colleagues' terse messages, sensed their disappointment. There were deserts a-plenty on Earth—and these deserts could and did maintain a far greater variety of life than did the Martian wastes, beings that crept and ran and jumped and flew. The sands of the Earthly deserts hid the ruins of past civilisations — but it seemed most unlikely that there had ever been a civilisation on Mars. Evolution had produced the highly specialised plants, and then lost interest.

This, thought the Doctor, was rather a pity, for the flesh of pumpkinlike things was fantastically rich in nutriment. It would be possible, he told the Commander, for a man to live indefinitely off the country. It almost seemed, he went on, that Providence had prepared the Red Planet for colonisation by Man. Peters, spitting out an experimental mouthful of the overly tart flesh, spluttered, "Not by this man!"

South they ran, their metal tracks rattling over low stony hills, over plains of shingle that might once have been the vast beaches of some long forgotten sea. South they ran, through a forest of tall, columnar plants, brittle, whose branches, shaken by the vibration of their passing, shattered with the crystalline clatter of breaking glass. It was here that both tents were badly torn; until the convoy was clear of the forest, when repairs were made, the men had to live in their suits and helmets.

A day ahead of time they reached the Equator, and Peters steered east until he found what he decided was the best site for a landing strip. It was to the west of one of the canals, and the sand was fine, but not too fine, and there were no buried rocks. Even so, it was necessary to use the earth levelling equipment that they had brought with them, the grader blades that could be fitted to the tractors.

Peters drove his men, and after two days hard work the strip was ready. Messages were exchanged between the tractors and the ships. Then, when word was received that the rockets had already entered the atmosphere, the smoke bombs were set off, their long streamers of white showing the

direction of the wind.

The six members of the first landing party stood by their tractors, which had been withdrawn well clear of the landing strip, and scanned the clear sky for the first sight of the ships, They appeared suddenly — mere silvery specks at first, but expanding with almost frightening rapidity to vast, winged shapes. One after the other they swept down, vanishing momentarily, as their skis touched the surface, in clouds of upflung red sand. Then there was the handshaking and the shouted congratulations and, finally, the planning of the campaign for the further exploration of Mars.

Taylor didn't like Grant. He felt, as did all those who had made the first landing, a little superior to those who had come in to the prepared strip on the Equator. He felt that Mars was, by right of first occupancy, his planet—but Grant made it all too clear that he thought that Mars was his. Technically Grant, who was the Biologist of the expedition, was Taylor's superior — and this, too, he made all too clear.

He was excited when he called Taylor into his tent—but he contrived to hide his excitement beneath a mask of maddening superiority.

"You fellows," he said, "came all the way from the Pole to the Equator with your eyes shut."

"We did not," said Taylor.

"But you did, my dear Doctor, you did. You assured me that where was no evidence of the existence of animal life on Mars. As for intelligent life —that, you said, was entirely out of the question."

"There is no evidence," said Taylor dogmatically.

"Isn't there? It may interest you to know, Doctor Taylor, that I have found an artifact . . ."

"Where is it?" asked Taylor, suddenly excited.

"Come with me," said the Biologist.

The two men put on their helmets, left the pressurised tent. Grant led the way to the canal, then along its bank to a sharp bend, past this bend there was a patch of damp sand on which, for some as yet inexplicable reason, none of the pumpkin like plants was growing. Save in one spot the surface of the sand was smooth — and there somebody, something had been digging. He — or it — had done more than dig. In a neat row stood six little towers on the sand, six little towers of sand, six little truncated cones.

"Fantastic!" breathed Taylor. He looked around him, almost expecting to see deck chairs, a cockle stall, an ice cream barrow.

He said, "But those aren't necessarily artifacts. There are plenty of worms on Earth that eat mud and sand, passing it through their bodies as all organic matter is extracted . . ."

"I thought of that," said Grant, "but the idea won't hold water. It's a

Martian who's done this—an intelligent being letting us know that he's around

"An intelligent being," argued Taylor, "would have scratched Pythagoras' Theorem on the sand."

"Not necessarily. For all we know these six little sand castles, in a straight line, represent some glaringly obvious mathematical truth—to a Martian, that is . . ."

"Have you told the Commodore yet?" asked Taylor.

"No," said Grant. "I'll tell him when I'm ready."

"In other words," said Taylor, "you'll tell him when you can lead a real, live Martian up to him by the hand and say, Please sir, Commodore Jones, sir, look what I've found, sir!”

"Cut out all the 'sirs'," said Grant coldly, "and you've got it. I think it quite disgraceful that men of science should be under the orders of Naval brass hats.”

"I'm a naval officer myself," Taylor reminded him.

"I'm sorry, Surgeon Commander Taylor. I forgot. But I'm still your boss, even though the Commodore is mine. Anyhow, Doctor—you know these naval types. Don't you agree that if they do find out that there's a Martian in the vicinity there's liable to be all sorts of warlike activity that'll do more harm than good?"

"All right," said Taylor, after a long pause. "We keep it dark for the time being—just our own little secret. What then?"

"Tracks," said Grant. "You can see that something has walked over the sand. A biped, I'd say, with big feet like a camel's. Unluckily it went over that patch of bare rock, and beyond that there're stony hills and that warren of canyons.

Taylor stared at the little mounds, already crumbling as the dry air sucked the moisture from them.

"These couldn't have been made so long ago," he said. "What's your guess?"

"About an hour after the morning thaw," said Grant. "Say about 0930 Local Time. Now, here's what I propose doing. We get shovels from the camp, and a sheet of aluminium — they've already started dismantling the wings of the ships, ready for blasting off (why the hurry, God knows!). We dig a trench, roof it over with the metal sheet, cover the aluminium with sand. We'll leave peepholes for ourselves, of course ..."

"And when are we doing all this?"

"Now. But we'll come to the hide first thing tomorrow morning, before sunrise. You'll see that the sand is levelled off smoothly, and then leave me to keep a watch ."

"I'll do nothing of the kind," said Taylor. "I shall be in the hide with you. Oh, it's all right — I think I'll be able to get somebody to cover us up and keep his mouth shut. Wesley—he was our Navigator on the run south ..."

The most awkward part of the construction of the hide was the "borrowing" of the aluminium sheets. This was accomplished when all members of the expedition were at their midday meal. Digging the trench took very little time; the excavated sand was thrown into the shallow water of the canal.

Taylor, rather to his surprise, slept soundly that night. He was able to awaken at any time without being called, and on this morning the gift stood him in good stead. He went first to the pressurised tent where Grant slept alone, shook the Biologist into wakefulness. He then went to the tent that Wesley shared with three other junior officers, all of whom, luckily, were sound sleepers.

The sun — small and weak it seemed—rose as the three men reached the hide. They brushed the sand from the aluminium sheets, lifted them, and then Taylor and Grant clambered into the trench. Wesley replaced the sheets. Faintly through their helmets they could hear the scraping sound as he respread the sand. He rapped sharply with his heel three times to indicate that he was going.

Neither Taylor nor Grant had his helmet radio switched on; they talked by bringing their helmets into contact with each other. They did not have much to say to each other. They both stared through the observation holes, watching for the Martian to appear from the hills, to leave his message on the sand.

He came at last — a tall, shambling figure, humanoid.

Humanoid? thought Taylor. Humanoid?

Feet and body were wrapped in layer upon layer of shapeless rags — but on the shoulders there was the dull gleam of metal braid, of epaulettes. The face was dark brown where it was not covered by a thick, black beard. The black hair hung down to the being's waist.

It — he? — squatted on the smooth sand. Working with silent concentration it filled the little, bucket shaped container it was carrying with the moist grains, patted them tight, upended it .

"But it's ..." Taylor began to whisper.

The Martian — even though the words were spoken inside the helmet of a spacesuit — heard the sound and took alarm. In a second he was gone, loping over the rocks, vanishing among the canyons of the hills.

Taylor and Grant came out from the hide.

Taylor picked up the little "pail" that the Martian had dropped. A food container it must have been. He pointed to the characters, faded but still visible, on the dented metal.

"There'll be a wreck in the hills," he said. "A spaceship. It'll have a hammer and sickle painted on the bows, or the tail fins . . ."

"And it's not a Martian at all," whispered Grant. "Just a survivor, a crazy survivor ..."

"No," said Taylor. "A Martian. Perhaps the Martian. That Russian ship had a mixed crew, you know. A child born here, brought up here, could, conceivably, manage to get along without a spacesuit, a helmet ... (If only Lysenko were alive to see this!) You've found your Martian ..."

And what of the mother of a race? he wondered. What of the woman who, clinging desperately to memories of a childhood spent on the shores of the Baltic or the Black Sea, had taught her son how to make castles in the sands of Mars?