



Test Rocket!

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Captain Baird stood at the window of the laboratory where the thousand parts of the strange rocket lay strewn in careful order. Small groups worked slowly over the dismantled parts. The captain wanted to ask but something stopped him. Behind him Doctor Johannsen sat at his desk, his gnarled old hand tight about a whiskey bottle, the bottle the doctor always had in his desk but never brought out except when he was alone, and waited for Captain Baird to ask his question. Captain Baird turned at last.

"They are our markings?" Captain Baird asked. It was not the question. Captain Baird knew the markings of the Rocket Testing Station as well as the doctor did.

"Yes," the doctor said, "they are our markings. Identical. But not our paint."

Captain Baird turned back to the window. Six months ago it had happened. Ten minutes after launching, the giant test rocket had been only a speck on the observation screen. Captain Baird had turned away in disgust.

"A mouse!" the captain had said, "unfortunate a mouse can't observe, build, report. My men are getting restless, Johannsen."

"When we are ready, Captain," the doctor had said.

It was twelve hours before the urgent call from Central Control brought the captain running back to the laboratory. The doctor was there before him. Professor Schultz wasted no time, he pointed to the instrument panel. "A sudden shift, see for yourself. We'll miss Mars by a million and a quarter at least."

Two hours later the shift in course of the test rocket was apparent to all of them and so was their disappointment.

"According to the instruments the steering shifted a quarter of an inch. No reason shows up," Professor Schultz said.

"Flaw in the metal?" Doctor Johannsen said.

"How far can it go?" Captain Baird asked.

Professor Schultz shrugged. "Until the fuel runs out, which is probably as good as never, or until the landing mechanism is activated by a planet-sized body."

"Course? Did you plot it?" The doctor asked.

"Of course I did," Professor Schultz said, "as close as I can calculate it is headed for Alpha Centauri."

Captain Baird turned away. The doctor watched him.

"Perhaps you will not be quite so hasty with your men's lives in the future, Captain?" the doctor said.

Professor Schultz was spinning dials. "No contact," the professor said, "No contact at all."

That had been six months ago. Three more test rockets had been fired successfully before the urgent report came through from Alaskan Observation Post No. 4. A rocket was coming across the Pole.

The strange rocket was tracked and escorted by atomic armed fighters all the way to the Rocket Testing Station where it cut its own motors and gently landed. In the center of a division of atomic-armed infantry the captain, the doctor, and everyone else, waited impatiently. There was an air of uneasiness.

"You're sure it's not ours?" Captain Baird asked.

The doctor laughed. "Identical, yes, but three times the size of ours."

"Perhaps one of the Asian ones?"

"No, it's our design, but too large, much too large."

Professor Schultz put their thoughts into words. "Looks like someone copied ours. Someone, somewhere. It's hard to imagine, but true nevertheless."

They waited two weeks. Nothing happened. Then a radiation-shielded team went in to examine the rocket. Two more weeks and the strange rocket was dismantled and spread over the field of the testing station. The rocket was dismantled and the station had begun to talk to itself in whispers and look at the sky.

Captain Baird stood now at the window and looked out at the dismantled rocket. He looked but his mind was not on the parts of the rocket he could see from the window.

"The materials, they're not ours?" the captain asked.

"Unknown here," the doctor said.

The captain nodded. "Those were our instruments?"

"Yes." The doctor still held the whiskey bottle in a tight grip.

"They sent them back," the captain said.

The doctor crashed the bottle hard against the desk top. "Ask it, Captain, for God's sake!!"

The captain turned to face the doctor directly. "It was a man, a full grown man."

The doctor sighed as if letting the pent-up steam of his heart escape. "Yes, it is a man. It breathes, it eats, it has all the attributes of a man. But it is not of our planet."

"Its speech ... " the captain began.

"That isn't speech, Captain," the doctor broke in, breaking in sharply, "It's only sound." The doctor stopped; he examined the label of his bottle of whiskey very carefully. A good brand of whiskey. "He seems quite happy in the storeroom. You know, Captain, what puzzled me at first? He can't read. He can't read anything, not even the instruments in that ship. In fact he shows no interest in his rocket at all."

The captain sat down now. He sat at the desk and faced the doctor. "At least *they* had the courage to send a man, not a mouse. Doctor, a man."

The doctor stared at the captain, his hand squeezing and unsqueezing on the whiskey bottle. "A man who can't read his own instruments?" The doctor laughed. "Perhaps you too have failed to see the point? Like that stupid general who sits out there waiting for the men from somewhere to invade?"

"Don't you think it's a possibility?"

The doctor nodded. "A very good possibility, Captain, but they will not be men." The doctor seemed to pause and lean forward. "That rocket, Captain, is a test rocket. A test rocket *just like ours!*"

Then the doctor picked up his whiskey bottle at last and poured two glasses.

"Perhaps a drink, Captain?"

The captain was watching the sky outside the window.

THE END

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