Fleecy dabs of cotton-wool grew into vaporous cloud as the stratocraft dropped from its 78,000 ft. lane towards the Sussex Downs. Rick Deeping turned his gaze below through the transparent nacelle. France was dim behind under morning mist, and London just visible as a muddy smudge far ahead. His eyes sought objects nearer beneath the murmuring plane. Here, within a scant fifty miles of each other, were the two greatest projects ever attempted during the long, varied history of mankind. And he was intimately connected with both.

“Twenty thousand and still descending on course,” the Captain stated.

Rick’s strong, humorous lips twitched. “ We’re nicely on schedule. Take your own time. Captain.”

The craft swept into tenuous vapour which obscured earth and sky. The jets were a murmuring whine, muted after the long upward drive from Rome, little more than an hour behind. Rick thought of what he had seen. Yes, both projects were fast turning from hopeful dreams to urgent necessities. Populations were too large. Earth and her natural power resources too small . . .

“You expect a double success — or a twin failure ?” Ross asked unexpectedly.

Rick let the question pass. Five years' work on the Solar Royal site had taught him the danger of prediction. Captain Bob Ross knew that as well as he and left the subject.

“ Soon be under cloud ceiling,” he said.

Suddenly the thinning haze was gone. The river Arun was a thread through the flat-tinted downs. On its west bank a vast mass of rectangular buildings jutted square and huge at the pivot of a ten mile circle of cleared countryside spoked by concrete roads. From the enormous buildings mighty power cables followed two lines of high electric pylons. One line branched away to London and the north. The second terminated at Hastings, where giant inductors beamed power to Boulogne.

The plane dropped, touched concrete, and taxied to the end of the wide runway. Rick threw up the nacelle roof.

“ That’s all for now. Bob. Be seeing you.”

He strode towards the office buildings. Seen from ground level the Eglington Plant was even more huge. Its nearest side was twelve storeys high and a full half mile long, dwarfing the offices. The whole had a deceptive appearance of drowsiness. He limped almost imperceptibly, but the injury of two years before had not stooped his strong shoulders, or destroyed the humour at his lips. At twenty-eight Rick Deeping was tough as any man. Nor had he gained his position at the Solar Royal site through favouritism. Earth's first interstellar ship was too important to place in the hands of incompetents.

Inside, the reception clerk recognised him. " Commander Prestigan and Miss Simon are waiting for you, sir."

" Good."

Rick passed through the inner door and along a ringing corridor. Disdaining the lift he surmounted the stairs two at a time and emerged on the third level of the office block. A further corridor; an outer office; then the inner door opened to his touch and a man of fifty, grey haired and upright, of medium height and military bearing, was rising to greet him.

" I hoped you'd be early. Deeping." His voice had the quiet confidence of twenty years of authority. " Our schedule's been brought forward six hours."

Rick saluted. "To mid-day tomorrow !"

" Exactly."

"That's zero hour for the first trial of the Solar Royal"

" I know." Prestigan sounded apologetic. " Top authority gave the order, but no reason. I gathered some high brass would be this way and not want to wait. We had no real excuse for delay."

None, Rick thought. But it was galling that the initiation of the Eglington nuclear-electric pile should coincide with the first free-flight test of the Solar Royal. He had hoped to have first-hand experience of both, but now would be compelled to partake in the ship trial alone. His dark eyes clouded.

" I'll be sorry to miss it. Expecting difficulties ?"

The commander shook his grey head, resumed his seat, and pyramided his hands. " Everything's taped, far as we know. Naturally no one can be sure. This is the first time a direct fission-electric plant has been operated. Getting current directly from nuclear destruction should be about five million times more efficient than the old

heat-exchanger systems of the 1960's. Beyond that we can't go, except to say it's sound in theory and works small-scale."

"And is needed," Rick put in. Earth was an industrial muddle. Coal and oil were long since impracticable and antiquated sources of power. For a time the old style of atomic power stations had seemed promising. But they had brought their own problems. Thousands dotted Europe, and disposal of their by-products had become almost impossible. The Eglington Plant should replace them all, and have no by-products. It would yield electricity alone, direct from the atom. No heat-exchangers driving generators, no continuous outpouring from the secondary coolers of millions of gallons of contaminated water; no shedding of poisons into the winds of the world . . .

"You look disappointed," a voice said,

He shifted his gaze to the opened door of the second room and smiled. Reni Simon was a sight to make any man smile, he decided. Gold hair in long, smooth curls framed her smooth features. Her eyes were cool grey, direct with the courage of self-reliant twenty-four. Yet they could snap in temper — had, to his knowledge. Prestigan had once claimed that it was her efficiency which had gained him his latest promotion.

"Just sad that I can't be on the Solar Royal and here at the same time," he said.

" That's scheduled for noon tomorrow ? Can't you delay it ?"

"No more than you can delay here, when orders from above say otherwise."

She grimaced slightly, closing the door with easy grace. " If you can't be here you'd like a look round at least ?"

"I would."

It was two months since he had been inside the plant. In the last two months of a project things — changed. Further, he hoped that Reni might still be interested enough in things outside the plant to occupy the place he had faithfully conserved for her on the Solar Royal. As they went out he smiled.

"Bugs in the pile still ?"

"No." Her laugh tinkled. "Only butterflies in the commander's stomach. This project is military. That's not surprising, remembering its possibilities and cost. If anything goes wrong bang goes Commander Prestigan's stripes too, and the career that's his life, as well."

A two-level connecting wing took them to the main building. Its centre was a single

chamber, the roof many floors above and supported on intricate girders. Below, the chamber sank two hundred feet into the earth, and from the balcony rail Rick surveyed the great unit occupying its centre. Never before had a direct fission-electric plant been made, eliminating intermediate, power-wasting stages.

The pile's inner workings were concealed behind the cadmium lead outer sheathing, through which ponderous cables in ridged insulators appeared. From here could flow current for all England and half Europe.

" What's new ?" he asked, wondering how to mention the vacant berth.

"The protective reactor controls below."

She descended metal steps lightly. He looked down on her bobbing curls, following. " Tomorrow will be the first time a full-sized spaceship has left Earth," he said. " And the first time we've tried the continuum shift in flight."

He saw the interest in her eyes as they crossed the vacant floor space and knew his guess was right so far.

"She'll fly ?"

He laughed. " Without doubt ! Eglington isn't the only place where techniques improve. We plan to circle Earth, then set her down for checking. But we could as easily make a round trip to any star within twenty light years." He nodded. "Yes, we're that sure. The ship goes up with its full complement, crew, stores — the whole lot. We'll make history."

Reni Simon entered a corridor near the foot of the pile control rooms. " A fine thought."

The admiration was in her voice, too, and Rick smiled. " You could come as well !"

She halted, looking back, abruptly frozen as if by some trick of the fluorescent lighting. "Me !"

" I've fixed a place — been wangling it for months !"

Her lips parted. " I'd love too ! But Commander Prestigan would have a fit "

He shook his head. " Your work here will be finished an hour before the initiation of nuclear-electric fission. You'll only be an onlooker."

Rick knew he had gained his point. She would come. Her woman's curiosity would

make her. If Prestigan looked like blowing up she would slip away, knowing it did not matter. Her work was done, as was Prestigan’s.

He admired the controls. Everything that human ingenuity could devise had been done to make the plant safe. Tests had been conducted to a superfluous degree. The plant would work, flooding Europe with fission current.

Time fled and at last he halted. “ There are other things we should both be doing. Remember I’ll pick you up when I leave for the Solar Royal."

They parted, she to return to Prestigan’s office; he to catch up with duties undone. He glanced again into the huge central chamber before leaving. The silence was uncanny — the silence. It was because the workmen were gone, he realised. Two months before they had swarmed everywhere. Now, instead, was a feeling of waiting. The pile was like a living thing that rested, awaiting the touch that would stir it to life. Awaiting noon on the morrow.

When engineers passed the tension was clear on their faces. Rick sensed it in the air, all the stronger because suppressed under a superficial pretence that all was just as usual.

He delivered his reports. Rome, mouthpiece of Europe, was interested in both the Solar Royal and the Eglington Plant. To him the whole affair was infinitely boring with the boredom peculiar to politics. Ship and plant were the things that mattered; their political significance was mere dry-as-dust addenda. It was late when he turned in to sleep.

He awoke to repeated tapping on the door and saw it was already light. Rising, he looked into the passage. A short, slight man, untidily dressed, was waiting uneasily. Some of the anxiety went from his thin face.

“ Saints, but I thought ye’d never wake, Mr. Deeping !”

Rick drew the zip to his chin. At least half Irish, his caller was almost hopping from one foot to the other.

"Me name’s Jack Simkin. I’ve seen Commander Prestigan but he kicked me out.” Memory clouded the light blue eyes. "He wouldn’t listen !”

" To what ?”

" To what I tells ’im ! They mustn’t switch on this plant ”

Rick would have laughed except for the intense determination of the little Irishman.

Instead, he held the door wide, frowning.

" Come in here and tell me.”

Simkin edged through. "I has hunches. Me grandmother knew fairy folk.” His gaze flickered through the window to the huge building. “ They mustn’t use it ! If they do— ”

He ended expressively and Rick felt unease and irritation. "You’ve proof something’s wrong ?”

“ Proof ? Saints no ! It’s all here.” Simkin tapped his forehead.

It was twenty minutes before Rick could make him leave, explaining for the seventh time that no one in his senses could have the great plant delayed without some sound reason.

” An’ ain’t me reasons sound enough ?” Jack Simkin declared as he was almost forced out of the door. “ Don’t I have hunches, and don’t I know ”

The words and intense expression remained in Rick’s mind. They remained as the hours wore on and he picked up Reni Simon and turned the big staff car west on to the main Winchester road.

For most of the drive she was unusually silent, and he wondered whether Prestigan had mentioned Simkin and his hunch.

From a mile away the gleaming Solar Royal stood like a beckoning church spire. A junction led through trees; beyond was the vast rocket site, with its buildings away to one side and the ship centred upon its quarter-mile disc of asbestos concrete. Articulated lorries waited at its base, and a cage crawled with apparent slowness up to the open port.

" She’s splendid !” Reni Simon said, eyes shining.

He smiled at her enthusiasm. " I’ve a lot to check, and want to see Bob Ross, too. I’ll see you up top half an hour before zero.”

He jerked a thumb at the silvery lance that was the Solar Royal, and left her. Everything was treble-checked, as at Eglington. But there were always last-minute details, final points to discuss with Steve Wallsend, who would handle her, and final engineers’ reports to pass. The interval to zero hour would not be idle.

The sealed ship murmured quietly with unleashed power, waiting on the inevitable

movement of the control-room bulkhead clock. Steve Wallsend already occupied a bucket seat. There would be no bone-crushing, violent release of energy, no skyrocket trajectory into space. Instead, the Solar Royal would lift smoothly on critically controlled jets, gentle as the elevators threading the skyscrapers of New London. She would circle Earth unhurriedly.

“Nearly time,” Rick said. He thought of Prestigan, back at the Eglington Plant. Tension would be mounting there. Even the high brass would be watching the clocks.

Wallsend nodded. In his thirties, strongly built, he had an air of observant repose. “Never felt so confident of success in my life.”

The lorries were rolling away to the distant buildings. Reni Simon was with observers, technicians and other personnel in the passengers’ berths mid-way down the ship. Below was the full complement of stores. The ship might have been prepared for interstellar flight.

The radio man looked up from his panel. “ Ground control reports all clear, sir.”

Warning bells chimed the length of the ship. The red second hand crossed noon zero. Simultaneously, an even, unhurried murmur arose and the Solar Royal lifted like a feather, acceleration barely moving the seat springs into compression. The site dropped away, a diminishing disc; the view opened east and west in the sunshine, the strip of the Channel creeping into sight.

Rick opened his lips to speak, but his tongue clove into silence. Miles away to the east a green beacon, violent and awesomely huge, blossomed into being. From its core a green ball of flaming energy leapt heavenwards into the curling cirrus cloud blanketing the eastern sky. Over many miles green sparks bright as the sun shuttled from sky to earth, subsiding into flickering lightening as the centre pillar of energy subsided.

“ The Eglington Plant !” Wallsend’s tense face blanched.

His hands flickered over the controls and the ship’s acceleration ceased. Rising steadily, she curved east. The downs showed clearly below, and the thin line of the Arun. The Eglington Plant stood intact except for its roof, which had collapsed into a sinter-filled crater. Far as the eye could see the great pylons were twisted wrecks, blued and smoking.

“ Ground control has ceased transmitting,” the radio man said in murmuring silence.

Wallsend glanced at him sharply. " Receiver in order ?”

“Yes, sir.” An odd note underlay the words.

“Keep trying.”

Rick judged their altitude to be perhaps six miles. Most of the rocket thrust was combating gravity, and the downs drifted slowly along beneath. Nearer, he saw that the damage to the Eglington main building was extensive, and had all the appearance of a gigantic electrical flash-over. The discharge he had seen could have been electric — yet had been of odd colour.

A seat grated on its pivot. The radio man, his face like dirty white chalk, stared at them.

“ I can’t pick up any station . . .”

Steve Wallsend swore. Rick got up and gripped the operator’s seat back. “Your receiver "

“ It’s all right ! " The man twisted controls. A loud background of atmospheric static filled the cabin. He twirled the dials. There was static, nothing more. He pointed shakily at meter dials standing at normal. “ No transmitter on Earth is working."

Rick’s throat tightened. “ That’s impossible !"

“ Saints, but likely enough !" a voice put in. “ Ain’t I been telling ye ?"

Untidy, thin face intense, Simkin stood in the doorway, hands each side gripping the metal.

" Didn’t I warn Prestigan ?" he demanded. " Didn’t I tell ye all ?"

“ Stowaway !" Astonishment jerked the word from Rick.

“What if I am ? Think I was going to stay down there ?" Simkin pointed earthwards. “Didn’t I know what was due to happen?"

His voice rose. Steve Wallsend scarcely turned in his seat. “ Get him out of here !" he snapped over a shoulder.

Protesting, Jack Simkin was pushed out, and the door closed. Rick wondered if there was an element of truth in the untidy Irishman’s wild statement.

“ If we keep low we may see a little of what’s happened," he suggested.

That a grave disaster had arisen at the Eglington Plant was apparent to the unaided eye. Rick studied the scene with binoculars. The damage was confined to the pile building and power lines. The latter puzzled him. No ordinary electrical current could possibly have caused such destruction, however high its potential. Nor had its flow been halted by any of the insulators.

The plant slid behind and the wide main roads to the north came into view. Rick gave an exclamation. Traffic should have been flowing along the great highways. Instead, every vehicle was stationary. Groups of people talked on the road. At a junction four men, tiny dots, were pushing a sedan to the side, but no vehicle moved on to pass.

“Very — odd,” Wallsend said almost inaudibly.

The tall buildings of New London drew into sight. Their neon signs were dead, every window dark. In all the crowded streets no vehicle moved. Along the riverside the dock electric train system was inert as an abandoned toy.

The Solar Royal began to gain altitude and speed and he saw that Wallsend was taking her away and up. Wallsend caught his eye.

“We’re scheduled to circle Earth — and that’s what we’ll do !”

The distant land border of Europe began to dawn out of the haze half to starboard. Rick descended the stairwell and found Reni Simon looking from one of the viewports with a group including Simkin. She greeted Rick.

“ Why have all the vehicles stopped ?”

Rick moved to her side. The great cities of Europe would soon pass below. “ I can’t pretend to know why,” he said.

Simkin nodded his untidy head sagely. “ Saints, and they ain’t all that’s stopped !” he stated. “Have you seen a light since then ? And how about them city signs ?”

A brilliant gleam was in his light blue eyes. Examining him, Rick wondered at the extent of his knowledge. Sincerity, at least, was clear in his voice. True or false. Simkin believed what he said.

“ And what else has stopped ?” Rick asked.

He felt tension. Simkin’s gaze strayed below, then back to him. Tears stood in the light blue eyes.

“ Everything, mister,” he said. “ Everything using electricity. That electricity from the

pile was wrong. ”

He halted, lost for words. Reni gave an exclamation. “It’s impossible !”

“It’s ’appened !” Simkin shook his head sadly. “I had a feeling electricity from the pile would run through everything — insulating things, too — and that no other current would ever pass again.”

Rick saw that the other had no terms with which to explain what he believed. Yet proof of something odd lay below in the halted vehicles and unlit cities.

Swift, murmuring on her course, the ship sped on. France was still, as if every vehicle had been frozen into immobility by magic. Paris was dark. Time passed and the Black Sea and Caspian Sea slid away behind. Darkness came, star-flecked above, uninterrupted below. Only once did Rick see a spark of light. His glasses showed a bonfire blazing on a hill slope. The great cities of the East were dark. Gripped beyond thought of passing time or fatigue, he watched Tokyo slip behind in gloom. Dawn came, showing a stilled North America. They came low over Chicago and New York. Vehicles remained where they had halted. Folk hurried on foot, some pausing to look upwards. The great airport on Long Island was dotted with still planes.

Stiff, Rick moved from the port. Other faces were white; eyes avoided his. Reni Simon followed him.

“ Is it possible, Rick ?”

He looked at her. “ You’ve an explanation ?”

“No. But was there something wrong about the nuclear-electric current, as Simkin said ? Something that would jerk atoms into isolation ? That could circle the planet and make electrical equipment fail ?"

He did not answer. How could cities — humanity itself — survive, with a civilisation based on vehicles, communications, processes and equipment which no longer functions ? Gone centuries before were the windmills, steam trains, horses; gone, too, was the simple way of life, which could continue with those things. Men depended on a complex system of artifacts, nine-tenths of which relied, in some part, upon electrical equipment. The whole tied up into a situation of extreme gravity, Rick thought as he returned to the control room.

Steve Wallsend was tired-eyed. Rick guessed he had not left his position since the previous noon.

" Investigation of what’s happened must wait," Wallsend said. “ The urgent question is

— what do we do ?"

Rick guessed what he meant. The Solar Royal had broken contact with Earth bare moments before the surge from the fission-electric plant had stilled the planet.

“As I see it, the effect might have been instantaneous only,” he said. “If so, it presumably damaged any and all electrical equipment. Or it may have left some lasting effect still able to immobilise the electrical currents by which we work.”

There was silence, then the radio man got up from his chair. He, too, had not rested. “ Suppose we dropped one of our parachute radio marker beacons ?” he suggested.

Wallsend’s gaze turned to him, comprehending. “ Do that !”

The man left for the stairwell. The beacons could be dropped to give fixed reference points — had been prepared to help map a strange planet over four light years away.

The radio man returned, nodding. “ It’s being done.”

He settled down before his panel, tuning to the marker frequency. A creamy parachute blossomed below, floating with its gleaming, swinging box. Simultaneously, an audio tone came on the receiver.

“ That’s it !” the radioman said flatly.

Rick watched with the binoculars as the white disc receded. The tone wailed on and on. Far below were green slopes. Simkin’s homeland. Breaths were held. The note wailed on and on — and ceased. Rick saw the parachute collapse upon the hillside.

“ It could be — damaged in falling ?” he asked, dry lipped.

" Impossible ! They’re made to drop — can strike solid rock unharmed !”

The silence seemed oddly complete now the audio tone was gone. Rick wondered what damnable electrical rot had swept over the planet. If the Solar Royal touched down, her radar, and the thousand electrical devices upon which she depended, would be stilled, perhaps for ever.

“ Heaven help the folk down there,” Wallsend whispered. “ The cities will be — hell.”

“Saints, an’ there’s only one thing we can do !” a voice said from the door.

They looked at the stowaway. Simkin seemed taller, straighten. His light blue eyes were very direct, almost penetrating.

“ We must go to Beta I, far though it be !”

Wallsend drew in his breath with a hiss. “This time I think I agree with him ”

Strangely silent, Europe slipped into its second night of unrelieved gloom. Great cities were still, seaports noiseless except for the rise and fall of the age-old tides. No vehicles sped along the wide highways. Airports stood deserted. Most planes had landed safely. As their wheels touched earth, their electrical equipment died, mysteriously yet finally. Denied ground-control aids, other craft were less fortunate. At the main Berlin airport a stratocruiser from Iran, with eighty aboard missed the runway and ploughed through ranks of grounded craft, stranded passengers, and two hangars. Hundreds died in the pyre light of her burning.

Darkness swept westward. Great ocean liners wallowed, their electrical equipment not responding to the efforts of their sweating crews. Over all the Earth civilisation faltered, its pivot withdrawn. In many cities panic came quickly, as power failed. In rural areas the panic was slower, spreading most often from some dark, dying city. With the second dawn came crowds on foot, fleeing cities where dwindling foodstuffs had leapt to a hundredfold their usual price. Civilisation shuddered upon the edge of a new dark age.

Everywhere on the planet electrical technologists struggled helplessly with unresponsive instruments. The equipoise which had distinguished conductors from insulators was gone, shaken for ever from its delicate equilibrium by the shock wave that had radiated from England. Agitated into electrical isolation, no atom would conduct.

In the shadow of the silent Eglington Plant engineers calculated what had happened, and saw its inevitability. They knew now — too late.

The Earth dwindled behind to the thrust of the Solar Royal's jets and Rick wondered if he would ever see her again. A mere full-scale test had suddenly been changed into the real thing. Better to go on, than risk returning, even when the step was so vast.

The shudder of the continuum shift came soon, and the stars blacked out. This was it, he thought — the test that meant failure or success.

Ship, method, and motive had arisen together. Tiny robot craft had reached Luna, then Sol’s planets, and returned with data disappointing yet expected. None would support life. Some had intolerable gravity, giants frigid and remote from the sun. At the system’s centre. Mercury frizzled. Even Mars and Venus were impossible, one with atmosphere so thin a man would die in hours, and the other scalded under acid, toxic vapours. Simultaneous with the disappointment had come the discovery of a planet

circling Alpha Centauri, over four light years away. Spectrum tests were favourable, if uncertain. Named Beta I, the Planet seemed unattainable until an unknown engineer, working in secret, announced the result of over ten years of labour. For six months rivals tried to show the Fitzgerald continuum shift drive was impossible — and failed. Within the year the Solar Royal was begun. Fitzgerald, an old man, had died, but the ship lived on. Rick had seen him once, infirm and white-haired as an aged saint.

After the shift the darkness and silence was akin to eternity itself, muting even the ship's engines. But gone, too, were the limitations of space imposing a laboured journey of years. Within hours the shudder arose again, and Rick saw Alpha Centauri blaze into life and stars flick on in unfamiliar constellations.

Astrogation sought Beta I and found her. The Solar Royal circled, examining her surface prior to selecting a site and testing the atmosphere. Rick was awakened from sleep by the ship's communicator system. They were going down. He rose quickly from his bunk.

Seen by the naked eye. Beta I was not promising. Dry, devoid of sea or rivers, she had the appearance of great age. Millions of centuries had eroded her mountains to conformity with the flatlands below. Reni Simon was coming along the shoulder-wide corridor, and pursed her lips.

" Seems a little grim, Rick !"

He nodded. " We must be glad it's no worse. Time will show."

Exactly what, he did not care to guess. A gentle thrust began as the ship sank upon her braking jets. They were far from home, he thought. Damned far !

Motion ceased and the engines drifted into silence. Alpha Centauri flooded golden sunlight across them. Machinery began to hum — the lift, the lock mechanism.

" Let's go," Reni said.

Rick stood in the shadow of the Solar Royal, which pointed far away across the sandy flats. Secure on her wide stern fins, she had touched down with a smoothness which might have been the result of scores of trial landings.

Wind sighed round her, carrying brown, dusty sand. Always this dust, Rick thought with distaste. It only settled when the dry wind ceased, leaving a film of particles over every item of equipment. Ash of a dead world — not that Beta I was wholly dead, he reminded himself. Rather was she shrivelled, drained of moisture by ten thousand years of drought. In the week since landing they had found no water, no vegetation, and no life bigger than the tiny, scaled lice that ran in the sand.

A murmur grew far away on the rim of the flats and the half-track that had lain in the ship’s hold mounted an undulant ridge into view. A grunt came from behind Rick.

" Saints, an’ we’re sunk if they’ve struck a blank again.”

" Not necessarily. We could make another series of explorations, to a greater radius.”

“ An’ probably find things as bad !”

Rick felt inclined to agree. A fifty-mile radius should give a fair sample of conditions. Dust had obscured much of the planet’s surface when they approached. He had chosen the sandstone flats because it was thinner there, and did not fancy taking the Solar Royal up on unnecessary hops.

Simkin went out towards the slowing truck, and he followed. Steve Wallsend pushed off his goggles, wiped dust from his face, and left the driver’s seat.

"Infernal sand !” he said. “I’d give something for the green hills of Earth !”

He squinted heavenwards at the sky, faintly brown from high floating dust. Rick pretended not to hear the sadness in the voice.

" Struck blank again ?”

Wallsend slapped his trousers and dust flew. “I’m not sure. There's a depression which might be an old watercourse, with caves beyond. We turned back because we’d made a circular trip and fuel was short.”

Rick felt there was excitement behind the guarded words. Yet it would be best to wait until dawn the next morning. Night often brought strong winds which swept dust thickly across the flats.

“We were too far away to see much.” Wallsend said, as if cautioning against optimism, and went into the sectional hut they had set up as H.Q.

The ship’s radio operator descended from the open port. Each man had his duties, and Rick knew the operator had maintained search and watch for any signal showing intelligent life existed in the Alpha Centauri system. When men came so far from home they must be ready for anything.

“ There’s something I’d like you to hear,” the man said.

There were lines about his lips and his eyes were uneasy. Rick looked at him sharply,

nodding.

“We’ll go up !”

The ascent cage rose to the port, giving a wide uninterrupted view of dusty brown earth, powdery as sand, untouched by rain for millennia. Beta I was old, Rick thought, as he licked his lips and tasted the dry, gritty flavour of the dust.

In the control room the radioman tuned his equipment to a short waveband and a fizzling chatter burbled through the speaker. Wavering, rapid as a record played at tenfold speed, something about it set Rick’s nerves on edge.

“ You haven’t heard it before ?” His voice was hard.

The other silenced the quickfire bedlam of sound. “Not until I came out.” He hesitated. “ It’s local — the strength shows that.”

Rick sucked in his lower lip. This was about the last thing he had expected. “ How close ?”

“Can’t say yet. Probably within a thousand mile radius.”

" You’ve taken directive bearings ?”

“ Yes. sir. The source is east, and not stationary.”

Rick gazed across the plain to where Alpha Centauri was setting, red behind the floating dust. So far Beta I was unknown. They had explored but a tiny area on her vast surface.

" Let us know if anything develops,” he said.

He descended to the hut and told Wallsend. Bob Ross and the others were reviewing the map which represented the extent of exploration. It was unsatisfactory enough, a bare area of insignificant natural features.

“ Pity the ship couldn’t carry a helicopter,” Ross decided.

The shadows were growing, the sky reddened with evening. Outside, Rick found Reni Simon with a phial containing sand lice. She smiled at his glance.

“Nothing else to examine — yet.”

He looked at them. Large as a finger-nail, silvery, they searched rapidly for escape.

“ We’ll be away early at dawn,” he promised.

The half-track halted on the top of the dusty hill. The night wind had gone, leaving the clearest hour of the day, and Rick stood up in the back of the truck, scanning the panorama below through binoculars.

Far in the distance a shallow depression ran parallel with the horizon, as if a giant finger had drawn a straight line in the sand. The long, slow fall of the hills terminated at it. Beyond, sandstone hills rose quickly, the sharpest slope he had yet seen. Many apertures dotted the face of the hill flanking the depression.

“Caves, or I’m a Dutchman!” Steve Wallsend said from the driver’s seat.

A thin skein of smoke drifted from the mouth of one and Rick felt excitement. Here was intelligent life, even if primitive. Beta I was not mere rock and dust, empty

They rolled down the slope, dust following in billows and the purr of the engine echoing from the elevation behind. A short figure of less than human height had come from a cave, and was watching them. He appeared sage, kindly, immeasurably placid with age-old wisdom, and wore only a simple garment belted at the waist. He could have been a desert dweller of Earth, Rick thought.

On a barren, rocky pinnacle near the planet's axis blue light flickered intermittently. Quiescent in its glow, the alien being let its circle of awareness drift out over the lifeless deserts surrounding the point where it had landed. Here was a planet that would at least give temporary repose, the alien thought. Later, a moister, less barren world must be sought. Satisfied, the alien attuned its mind to the equipment it had set up on the rocky peak. The blue light flickered more strongly, radiating information away into the vastness of space. Beyond Alpha Centauri, equipment attuned to its burbling oscillation responded. A shoal of ovoid craft changed course, bows set for the planet many millions of miles away.

The alien let its consciousness drift on, scanning increasing areas of the planet it had found, and its level of awareness suddenly increased. Far away, dim, inarticulate as the minds of lowly creatures in worlds it had left, was a pool of thought strange to it. It directed its intelligence fully in that direction; simultaneously the flickering glow from the equipment on the rocky outcrop grew in frequency and complexity of waveform.

Beacon Green- view of car from cave mouth“ So Beta is just about what we expected,” Rick said. “ Old. Populated when Earth was steaming jungle. Dead, now — almost ”

His gaze returned to the figure who had waited without fear while the truck rumbled into the shallow valley bottom. The placid blue eyes met his unwaveringly. The face

was weathered, more oval than a man’s, the hair white. He would hesitate to guess at the Betian’s age, he decided. The simple vestment of woven plant fibres left the arms exposed. They were lean, well-muscled, devoid of any of the fragility of age. Yet the eyes were those of a philosopher.

" I am surprised still,” Rick said.

“ Because I accept your coming so easily ? Or because I speak your tongue ?” The other smiled, half wistful. “ It is so ?”

“A little of both.”

“It shall be explained, as I have said. We in the caves saw the fire of your ship burn through the sky and knew it had come.” A browned hand took in the half-track. "Yesterday I saw your vehicle upon the hill and awaited you.”

Rick felt at a loss. " For the present all is strange, like your name, Dalit Yo.”

" Time will bring understanding.”

Dalit Yo disappeared into the cave and Rick looked his unspoken question at the others. It was a mere hour since they had halted the truck, yet already the Betian treated them as deserving no particular curiosity or astonishment. Furthermore, he had replied instantly to their first hesitant question, as if accustomed to their language.

" A cool customer,” Bob Ross said quietly.

The other caves were silent. Only from Dalit Yo’s did a thin line of smoke drift, rising slowly from a tiny heap of brittle thorny twigs. Beta I was just about finished, Rick thought. Her peopled youth was gone. Who could guess how many thousand years of slow decline had passed ?

Reni Simon sat on the step of the half-track, eyes pensive. “If wisdom could have saved them, they’d be prospering still,” she murmured.

Dalit Yo came from the cave, and Rick saw what she meant. The lined face had the placidity of complete understanding and knowledge. Earthmen were mere children of a race in its infancy.

“I will show you something you might not find,” he said, his voice whispery as the dry hills upon which he lived.

They climbed into the truck and rolled away. Dalit Yo spoke little, directing them with

movements of a lean arm. The dry watercourse grew deeper, then ceased. Hills came, then lower ground where tiny thorny bushes scarcely larger than a man's hand held reluctant tenure in the rocky dust. Another watercourse appeared, descending slowly between hills.

"I have not been so far for many years," Dalit Yo said sadly.

The descent continued, and patches of a dry herb appeared, spines occasionally decked with tiny white flowers. Abruptly the hills ceased and in a basin before them arose a city of slender towers, wide streets and creamy buildings, silent and deserted.

"Zirreh," Dalit Yo said. "Town on the Spring. It was the last."

The truck's motor echoed from the walls. The edges of the city were lost in the creeping dust of the hills, buildings and tall towers slowly receding into the sandy brown until even their tops were lost. Moisture stood in the old native's eyes.

" You see but a third. Zirreh was mighty — "

They walked round the buildings in the centre of the basin, where the dust was scarcely ankle deep. Rick felt the absolute dearth of green and moisture overpowering him, shrivelling his very spirit. He caught Simkin's eye and Simkin wiped his brow.

" Saints, but I'd give ten years of me life for a green field !"

Dalit Yo nodded, leading them into a building topped by four pinnacles. " When water goes — death comes — "

They walked through echoing corridors decorated with designs of strange beauty, colours glowing in the dimness. A circular chamber opened out, large and domed. At its centre was a walled hole.

"The source of the spring," Dalit Yo stated. "There is water for some months each year."

Some months of the year, Rick thought. Yet even that was infinitely precious. Mere weight had limited the Solar Royal's cargo and the same problem had been in all their minds.

He looked into the well. It descended out of the reach of the light coming through the curved windows. Any pumping equipment which might once have supplied the city was at a lower level or removed.

"This is the deepest point of the spring," Dalit Yo said as if guessing his thought. " The

pumps were elsewhere. But there is a chain, a hundred times longer than you can span, and a vessel which was lowered at the time of celebration of the rains.”

He showed them. The chain was of hard metal, yet worn to almost hair flimsiness where the sides of the links had rubbed the shaft. Clearly it had been the only means of drawing water for a long time.

They left at last, sobered. Rick tried to imagine what scenes had taken place in the city. Zirreh, Town on the Spring. A fitting name — and one showing what water had meant.

Outside, he rubbed a gauntlet against carved masonry, trying to guess its age. The stone collapsed with a whisper of particles, bringing down a little heap of rubble. He saw the others watching, saw, too, their expressions. As Dalit Yo had said, the city was old.

“ Where’s Bob ?” Steve Wallsend asked as they climbed into the truck.

Rick halted. He had not noticed, or seen where Bob Ross had gone. They shouted. Their voices echoed loudly, but brought no reply. Rick’s surprise became unease. He went back quickly into the chamber, but it was empty.

“ Our footprints may help,” Wallsend said behind him.

They circled carefully, studying the dust. They had not separated much, and only at one point did footsteps lead away from the centre of the chamber.

“ I didn’t go that way,” Simkln offered.

"Nor I.” Wallsend shook his head.

Rick followed the steps. They led to an arch, as if Bob Ross had gone to look out. Two paces beyond the arch they ceased. From that point a smooth indentation, made as if by a giant rolling ball, led away straight as a line in the ankle deep dust. Looking at the mark, Rick felt chilled. It was so unexpected, so odd.

“I have never seen such a mark,” Dalit Yo said at his elbow. His lips were twitching, and his pale blue eyes turned down upon the sandy brown.

Four days passed. Dalit Yo had barely a score of companions, but Rick admired their quiet wisdom, comparing their arts with the futile productivity of Earth. Their age could not be guessed, but several appeared much younger than the old leader. All were upright, strong, noble. No racial weakness was causing their disappearance from the planet, but lack of life-giving water.

Bob Ross was not found. They had followed the indentation for some hours, then lost all trace of it on a rocky plateau many miles in extent. Away beyond lay a wilderness which might reach fully to the polar regions, for all Rick knew, and he decided further search was for the time impossible. They talked long after the distant sun had set, that night. Ross's disappearance was baffling, its cause one confounding speculation.

On the fifth evening Rick stayed at the caves. The thought of remaining permanently on Beta was appalling if conditions so far encountered were representative. Yet no radio signals had followed them from Earth and that fact was conclusive. If the Solar Royal touched down there, she might never rise again. Without refuelling, the trip back to Earth would be one-way and final. Only the odd burble continued on the radio, sometimes strong, sometimes moving from direction to direction. Later, the radioman had reported another sound of like character, but weak and apparently originating far out in space. It was, he said, increasing in power. The news filled Rick with a vague unease.

He stood with Dalit Yo near the summit of the cave-dotted slope. The distant sun was going.

"Tell me of Earth," Dalit Yo said quietly.

Rick looked at the monotone sky, devoid of cloud, as always. " It is very different — green and moist. There are great rivers and seas. tall trees, many people — "

The old Betian nodded slowly. " We have our legends of a green world." His gaze turned, direct and piercing. "If you return to Earth you will take us ?"

Rick felt astonishment. "If you wished. I had not thought of it. But Earth is different, now." He thought of the great Eglington Plant and dark cities below in the night.

" You still have what most matters — soil, rain."

" Yes. But those things had ceased to matter much to many of us." Impossible to explain, he thought. Earth's millions had slaved to produce baubles of no real worth. Sweating in the stink of their own industrial productivity, men had lost touch with simple virtues. He sighed. " You could teach us much, Dalit Yo !"

" Perhaps."

It was simple agreement, devoid of pride. Dalit Yo returned to his cave to sleep, and Rick went up to the crest above, unable to rest. West, the sky was deep red, blending with the red of the plain. East, it grew dark purple and black, blending with the horizon, featureless upon each hand. The slight wind of evening, that followed the sun,

was going.

He searched the horizon again and frowned. Far away north a speck of light had glowed, so faint it might have been imagination. Or sunlight reflected from some high metallic strata ? No, he decided. Instead of diminishing, fading as it should as the sun went, it was increasing, though still so distant as to be only a pin-point of blue.

While minutes ticked by he gazed. The blue was growing steadily stronger, resembling now a single vivid reflection from some precious stone. It sank from sight, then rose, clearer, and he knew that it was following the configuration of the ground.

He withdrew a little so that retreat down into the caves would be more easy, if necessary. The pinpoint was resolving into a perfect sphere of vivid blue that travelled with smooth rapidity over the ground. Its size and exact distance were difficult to judge, but Rick estimated that its speed easily exceeded by many times the maximum the truck could put up.

It grew, and he decided it would soon be very near. Without sound, shimmering oddly, somehow lacking any appearance of physical solidity, it was unlike anything he had ever seer. Its even, rolling motion was such, he judged, as would make an indentation like that beyond the old city.

At a few hundred yards it slowed to a halt. It was perhaps ten feet in diameter, he thought. Shimmering, yet not in any way frightening.... No, he thought, it was harmless... Cool green fields floated up before his gaze. Involuntarily he stepped forward. Harmless, he thought. Blue sky, fleecy with cloud, extended over the green fields. A river ran under trees, water cool and inviting He walked on, hastening now.

Wonderful to know rivers and trees still existed, he thought blissfully. Flowing water tinkled in his ears. A cool breeze stirred among the trees, bringing the smell of green fields He began to run, half stumbling, eyes fixed on the blue, shimmering sphere that somehow seemed the hub of the whole panorama. He must reach it quickly, he thought, must reach it before the scene faded

“Stop, Earthman ! ”

The command shot into his brain with the incision of a steel blade. He halted, stone.

“Come hack, Earthman !

He turned slowly. The scene was unreal. The green fields and trees were hazy, a fading view projected as if against dusty slopes. Outlined against the sky stood Dalit Yo, straight and still as if carven.

“Come back”

Rick looked unsteadily at the blue sphere, hub of the wonderful scene. There was no river, he thought . . no green trees . Instead, the sphere had somehow opened on the side facing him. Trembling, he turned and stumbled back up the slope.

Dalit Yo took his arm, leading him down towards the caves. The blue sphere did not follow.

“ You — you read men's minds,” Rick said unevenly. " That was how you knew our language.”

Dalit Yo halted within the mouth of the cave, looking back the way they had come. “ It is an ability we have possessed many thousands of years.”

“ But the — ” Rick felt at a loss for words. How to describe all he had seen, if see it, he had ? All had been so real, so compelling.

“ I understand,” Dalit Yo said quietly. “ I saw as with your mind. I was in my cave, but watching you. Scenes sprang to your brain such as I knew could not exist here. I came quickly.”

“The sphere—?”

“ I do not know. I tried to touch it with my mind but could not. There was a brain, a seat of reasoning, there — but alien, frightening, unlike your mind or mine.”

Rick saw that the other was shaking visibly. His lined face was pinched, his lips thin and tight. He looked at Rick.

“ Alien," he said. “ Horrible."

They remained in the cave, the dim light at its mouth fading. A faint whispering of dust grains upon the rock, carried on the soundless wind, filled the night. Rick sat on the floor, elbows on knees and chin on hands, gaze seldom straying from the oval of dim sky. Dalit Yo spoke only once.

“ I and my people will not stay here, Earthman. It is not safe.”

The alien waited, attending the arrival of its fellows. There was much it could do investigating the planet upon which it had settled. But new thoughts repeatedly came within the orbits of its consciousness, and for many days it brooded unmoving on the isolated rocky pinnacle. Visions of a watered, plant-covered world had sprung into the elementary biped’s mind when the alien had adopted its usual method of making

visible at conscious level a victim’s deepest unconscious yearning. Such a green planet would be an ideal world, the alien decided. It must be found. If other of the elementary bipeds lived there, and objected, they could be eliminated. Content with the plan, it waited.

Dalit Yo adjusted the woven satchel on his back. “ There was a spring far to the west,” he said. ” We shall go there.”

Rick stood with his back to the wide caterpillar tracks of the truck and eyed the aged Betian and his companions. All were equipped to move : all similarly sure it was folly to stay.

“ At least let us take you,” he urged.

The other shook his head. “ Your ways are not our ways. We are accustomed to many days without water.”

“And just how long is it since any of you went to this spring you speak of ?” Steve Wallsend put in from the driver’s seat.

Dalit Yo did not reply. He said something in a flowing, melodious tongue which Rick did not understand, and the others lifted their packages to their shoulders. They turned their faces to the west, winding in single file up the hillside. Rick watched them pass from view over the slope, the glow of the morning sun at their backs. With the truck he had explored almost a hundred miles westward — and found a hundred miles of barren desert.

“That leaves us on our own,” Wallsend said regretfully. He reversed the truck, pointing it back up the slope towards the remote, unseen ship.

Remembering his uneasy night in the cave, Rick felt Dalit Yo was justified. The sphere had gone by dawn, but the line it had made in the sand resembled that at Zirreh. Dalit Yo’s companions had begun to appear with the first light. No words passed and Rick supposed they had been in communication during the whole long night.

“ Now what ?” Reni Simon asked from her seat at the back of the open truck.

Rick climbed up into the vehicle. Jack Simkin watched him, cheeks drawn in so that his face was even more thin. Steve Wallsend tapped the driving wheel with his fingers.

“ We need some definite plan,” he said.

Rick nodded. " The ship is our safest H.Q. We must keep watch, in pairs when possible. How does her fuel make out ?”

“ Just as we expected. There’s enough for perhaps one trip round this planet, and the return to Earth. We’ve none to spare for repeated take-offs here.”

“ So you intend to go back ?” Reni asked.

Wallsend did not reply. Rick guessed his thoughts. Beta I was inhospitable. Yet Earth was now an unknown quantity; their only knowledge of her was negative, arising from her complete radio silence during take-off, when no contact with the Solar Royal had been attempted. If they made the trip back to Earth it would be one-way and final.

The girl put a hand in the pocket of her jeans and took out a phial. Rick recognised it and the silvery insects it contained. Her cool grey eyes rose from it to the horizon.

“Even they can’t live without food,” she said, and tapped the bottle. “They die unless they’re given fresh sand. What does that suggest ?” She smiled slightly. “ Not that they eat it, but that it contains food.”

“ Contains food ?” Rick echoed, astonished.

“Yes — an answer which poses another problem. But I believe I’ve solved it.” She jumped down and scooped up a handful of the powdery dust. “ Sand,” she said. “ Sand, earth — and pollen.”

“ Pollen ?” Wallsend’s thick brows rose.

" Yes, carried almost the whole day round by the wind — light, dry, dusty grains, but food for the sand lice. Pollen must come from plants, and we know the direction of the prevailing wind.”

Rick saw what she meant. Continuously, in infinitesimal particles, a thin scattering of pollen was deposited with the dust and sand. And it could have only one source— living plants. It was their most important discovery since touchdown.

He felt enthusiasm returning, higher than since Bob Ross’s disappearance. “ We need a full-scale expedition, with all the stores we can carry and drums of extra fuel for the truck.” He turned his face to the gentle wind. As always. It was depositing a thin layer of dust upon everything. It came almost continuously from the east, and he wondered if Dalit Yo had for once been in error when he struck off westward.

“ If we fail, we could make one circular trip in the Solar Royal," Wallsend said.

“ We’ll prepare,” Rick decided. “ We’ll need radio in the truck, to contact the ship as we travel, and as much fuel as we can carry.”

He guessed that more days would drag by. If the expedition was to be of any real use it must be carefully prepared. It would take them out into uncharted wildernesses far removed from the safety of the ship.

They hastened preparations. Additional tanks of fuel were installed, raising the vehicle's cruising range to a figure which Rick estimated as near 800 miles. The half-track had never been intended for such forays, but should do, unless some major breakdown arose. Transmitting and receiving equipment was fitted, with compass and navigation aids. Rick felt they could do no more, with the means to hand.

They set off dead east by compass at earliest dawn. As he watched the ship sink away behind, Rick wondered whether the tiny party of which he was a member had been most wisely chosen. Yet circumstances had dictated the choice, he thought. Wallsend must stay with the Solar Royal to take her up if some unexpected danger arose. Reni had to be on the truck, to study the incidence of pollen, their only guide. A crewman named Field, of whom he had seen little, completed the party, as relief driver. Simkin had been left behind protesting. ,

The ship was lost in the dust haze before they had covered two miles. The brown plain slipped past at a steady 20 m.p.h. and Rick stood in the open truck studying the horizon through binoculars.

" Like being in a desert, or at sea," Reni said from her seat.

Swaying to the movement, he nodded. "The towns and settlements would have been in valleys, by water. As the planet lost its water centuries of dust storms would fill the depressions. The towns would be lost one by one. Zirreh may be the last — and in another thousand years every building will be covered."

Behind and far ahead were slight rises, but north and south he could pick out a continuation of the depression they were crossing. He wondered if some great city lay below, immured for ever in the dust. The depression was browner than the surrounding higher ground. Was this a new explanation for the tinted hollows of Beta, he wondered. Were they valleys — dust-filled outlines of great waterways of thousands of years before ? Did moisture still seep down those covered waterways so that the spores Reni had found grew briefly, changing the brown for a while to dusty green ?

He tried the radio, signing off after contact was assured. Field watched him from the driver's seat, keeping the vehicle on compass bearing at economical speed. Dust drifted in a plume behind them, carried slowly on the prevailing east wind. After five hours they halted. Rick stretched his legs and watched Reni gather sand and perform what she termed a pollen count.

“ Over 5 per cent, higher already,” she stated.

They checked the wind bearing and found it veering slightly, whether due to daily change or other cause they could not decide.

“It would be wise to stay here until dawn,” Rick suggested. “We can check the wind bearing every hour, and set our course by the mean reading.”

He sat in the shade of the truck and wondered if they had been wise to come. Had the trip of the Solar Royal itself been wise ? Impossible to decide. Compared with Beta, Earth must still be a paradise ... or was that only a hopeful guess ? He sighed, wondering what had happened to Bob Ross.

“Damned rotten planet, isn’t it ?” Field said unexpectedly from his seat.

Rick looked up at him. Field had pushed up his goggles and revealed two clear patches against the grime and dust of his face.

“Suppose so.”

Field grunted. “Dry as hell and half as cheerful.” He stood up and dust fell from the wrinkles in his clothing. His boots sank ankle deep as he walked round the truck. “ Whole place is dead,” he stated with conviction. "Was dead when we were chipping flints !”

He hunched in the shade. Rick took another wind reading. The bearing had veered ten degrees south and he felt uneasy. Its strength had increased, too and its dryness and burden of dusty particles reminded him of the arid, suffocating sand-winds of Africa and Asia. To windward, the lower half of the vehicle’s metal tracks was already covered.

Reni had put her equipment away. “ A brisker wind than we’ve seen,” she said.

He nodded, wondering what it would be like on the open plain if a real simoom sprang up. Visibility had already decreased, and grit stung his eyes when he removed his goggles.

She got into the truck, looking round, and he saw her stiffen. “Come up here, Rick.”

He wondered at the new edge to her voice. She pointed into the brown haze as he gained the top step. He raised the binoculars, focusing, and drew in his lower lip quickly. Four blue dots were rolling in line near the horizon. Bright as specks of brilliant light, they seemed to be running parallel with the half-track’s course. Even as he stared dust whiffled up nearer, obscuring the view and he could not be sure

whether they were slowing or changing direction.

“ We must keep a look out and be ready to move,” he said.

He told Field what they had seen. Field was silent, but his face had a pinched expression.

By dawn the wind had returned to its prevailing direction. Rick contacted the ship. The operator’s voice replied, then was replaced by that of Wallsend. who listened to the report with occasional grunts of affirmation.

"We’ve sighted half a dozen of the rolling spheres round the ship,” he said. “The midnight watch saw them first. Don’t know what to make of it.”

Rick thought of the vision that had lured him from the caves, so real, momentarily sweeping away consciousness of danger. " Better all stay inside,” he suggested. “ If danger arises, take the ship up.”

" Yes—”

From the tone he knew what Steve Wallsend was thinking. One or two hops by the Solar Royal and there would be no going back to Earth, ever.

They drove in turns throughout the day with only two stops for pollen counts. Both showed a rise. Once, on the limit of the horizon, a bright blue dot matched its path and speed to theirs for a full hour. Rick watched it from the back of the swaying truck.

Towards evening the wind again increased. Needing rest, they decided to camp. The morrow would see them at the outmost limit of their trip, with half the fuel gone.

The flying dust kept low and for the first time Rick could pick out one or two of the major constellations near the zenith. A moon hung very low, red and dim.

They watched in turns. Rick awoke at midnight, taking Field’s position. An hour had gone and he was scanning the horizon yet again when something at higher altitude drew his gaze. Far off but approaching, apparently very high, it had the odd appearance of a cluster of floating globes. Each was a dim silvery grey and all seemed to rotate round a common centre. Binoculars trained, he followed them as they slowly came overhead. Thin pink rays extended between each globe and its fellows. There were ten in all, locked like balls on a wire frame, the nine at the perimeter rotating evenly round the tenth. All passed slowly from sight, soundless and smooth as a cloud. Rick relaxed, and was aware that the hairs of his scalp had stiffened as in some unconscious primordial expression of fear.

He watched a while, then opened up the dust-proofed radio. Wallsend must know that there was another craft on Beta, he thought. And one whose overall diameter fully equalled the length of the Solar Royal

He called twice without reply. A background of static proved the receiver was operating and he frowned. Radio watch on the ship should have been continuous for just such an eventuality as this.

Minutes dragged on and his annoyance changed to unease. It was impossible that the bleating of the automatic equipment on the ship should not by now have aroused someone. After ten minutes he woke Field, who sat up with a start.

“ There’s no reply from the ship !” he said.

Field looked astonished and Reni appeared from under one of the dust canvases.

“ Perhaps there’s some breakdown,” she hazarded.

" Why should there be — and they have other equipment.”

Rick tried the set again while they watched. At last he abandoned it. “ The ship’s not hearing us, or unable to answer.”

He repeated the call at half hourly intervals until dawn with the same lack of result. He wondered if the radio silence justified turning back, and decided against it. A simple explanation probably existed, and they had already come so far. Better to hurry on to the outward limit of exploration, then return.

Towards noon the vista ahead took on a rising character, as if once high tableland. Long, low ridges ran parallel with their course and they followed the top of one permitting a wide view in each direction. Miles ahead the ground was of a yellowy colour.

“ Another hour and we shall be down to half our fuel,” Field said, driving.

The yellow grew more distinct, extending each side farther than binoculars could reach. From half a mile Rick could see it was not the earth alone. Tiny plants, bushy and scarcely a hand’s breadth high, thickly dotted the whole area. Dusty and fragile, they sent up clouds of spores under the truck’s weight. The spores rose on the wind, drifting west like smoke.

Rick sat frowning on the step while Reni made quick tests. The disappointment on her face was obvious. She put the apparatus away.

"This is where the pollen comes from.”

He stirred the arid, scorched plants with a boot. “ You’re sure ?”

“ Absolutely,” she said. " It’s unmistakable.”

They drove through the drifting cloud to a rise. Beyond, the peppery yellow plants extended to the horizon. No sign of water interrupted the dusty expanse of desert. No feature on the horizon warranted further exploration.

Disappointed, Rick gave the order to turn back. The vast area of arid plants fell away behind. Dust rose from the tracks, following them, now, so that they rode in a cloud of their own making. The wind was brisker. Each attempt to regain radio contact failed. They would drive in shifts, he decided, so as to waste no more time.

The hours passed monotonously. Rick spent many periods at the radio, hearing nothing, and his fear that much was wrong grew to certainty. If she had taken off for safety, contact could have been maintained. Short of her complete destruction, or the absence of her crew, there seemed no explanation. If absent they were, it was not from choice. They could travel no useful distance on foot, and would in any case never leave the ship unmanned.

Night came and he wondered of Ross and Earth. Dust hid the heavens and he longed for the clear sky of home. The course was maintained by compass bearing, a spotlamp casting a seesaw beam ahead. Evidence for a successful attack on the ship appeared conclusive. Noon should bring them within sight of her.

The sun rose red at their backs, throwing their shadows before them across the few score miles remaining. Field roused himself from a rest period during which he had obviously not slept and took the wheel. Rick brushed the eternal brown layer from the radio and opened it.

"Still trying ?” Reni asked. Her face was dusty up to the rim of the goggles, her overall powdered as a miller’s.

He nodded and switched on, waiting for the set to heat. First was silence, then a signal immeasurably weak and distorted so that it was unintelligible. His fingers grew tight on the controls. It was the Solar Royal’s frequency. Yet the signal was so weak he could be sure of no single word, except that it seemed to be a call repeated over and over.

Reni was watching him. “ They’ve — moved ?”

He was silent, listening. He would have expected a more powerful signal even with the

ship half a hemisphere away, or a full fifty thousand miles up in clear space. The Solar Royal's equipment was powerful, designed for interplanetary communication. There was an odd fluttering distortion, too, such as he had never encountered before.

" Don't know what to make of it," he admitted at last.

As they rode on the signal did not change, never rising above the background noise. Rick looked ahead and at his watch. The half-track must go, her fuel sinking. An hour would show.

The configuration of the low slopes ahead slowly took on familiar lines, drawn out to give a view of the plain where the ship had descended. He stood in the swaying truck, binoculars to his eyes, anxiously searching a first glimpse of the tall rocket.

The view opened suddenly as they crossed the top of a long, rolling ridge. A shock ran through Rick. Simultaneously Reni, standing at his side, gave an exclamation, and Field halted the truck so abruptly that they stumbled.

The Solar Royal stood intact exactly as she had landed, but encompassed by a shimmering dome of transparent green radiation. Exact as a perfect sphere divided in half, it looked fully five hundred yards in diameter. The ship stood in its centre like a model in a dust-cover, Rick thought, astonished.

Field reversed the truck so that it was behind the brow of the ridge. His face was pale under the dusty grime and he slid from behind the wheel.

" What— is it ?"

The words trembled. Rick felt no surprise at Field's terror. It was frightening to return and find the Solar Royal cut off from them. The rolling spheres, the strange silvery ship, and now this, Rick thought. It was clear some other agency was interested in Beta, and intended to contest possession. And indications were suggestive of considerable technological development.

" I think they're following us," Reni said, her voice very small.

A blue sphere was rolling into view up the distant slope. It gained speed, bounding over the dust as it swept towards them in a long curve. Rick scrambled into the driving seat, starting the truck with a jerk. Sand shot up from under the spinning tracks and she heaved into motion, engine screaming. A glance showed them their speed was too low. The sphere gained rapidly, overtaking them at a distance of scarcely ten paces. For a fantastic moment he had a vision of its shimmering outline. It seemed of no solid material, but a globe of blue energy, in which rode a strange, single being little more than four feet tall, of creamy white, and with six triangular appendages, four of which

were clasped around controls in the centre of the sphere. Then the thing was gone, speeding on ahead through the dust, curving away back towards the great dome surrounding the ship.

Field and Reni clung to the truck's handrails. From a high hillock Rick saw a dozen of the blue energy capsules sweep up into view behind them, following. Then the half-track bounded down to lower ground and they were lost to sight in the depression.

" What to do ?" Field yelled above the engine.

Rick knew what he meant. The fuel would soon be gone, even if they could outdistance the objects speeding behind.

They swept down the gentle slope at full throttle. Without warning the ground ceased to give support. The truck lurched, falling, and dusty sand closed over their heads, choking away light and air instantly.

Rick struggled upright in his seat, automatically holding his breath, and found himself free but in stygian darkness. The lamp belted to his waist was intact, and lit at his touch.

The silent truck was half on its side and two-thirds covered with sand and dusty earth, which convulsed as Reni appeared, then Field, coughing and gasping. Close at their backs was shelving rock; higher, the peak of the avalanche of sand which had descended with them. Its downward movement had ceased, and no crack of daylight showed. Almost knee-deep, they were in some underground crevasse. Rick listened, and could hear nothing but his own breathing. If the bounding blue energy spheres passed overhead they made no sound.

"We'll never get the truck out !" Field said.

His voice was muffled in the confined space. Rick wondered whether they themselves could escape, or whether the sand would merely slide down under their feet. He sat on the projecting step of the truck and put out his lamp. The absolute darkness was nowhere relieved.

"It may be wise to stay here a bit," he suggested.

" To escape them up there ?" Reni was unseen. " They may not know what's happened."

He ceased looking for daylight and put on the lamp. The others were pale under the grime and he wiped his face.

“ If we go up now we haven’t a chance.”

“ Better wait for night,” Field put in. “ We can scout on foot.”

Rick tried to clear the truck radio, then abandoned it. Each time they scooped away sand more slipped down from above, finer particles rising so that they coughed.

[[Return to story index]]

An hour passed. Silently because he had nothing to say, Rick wondered how those in the ship were withstanding the siege, or if they still lived. The dust subsided, and he noted how relatively clear and fresh the air was. Apparently they had fallen into no mere pocket covered by drifting sand, but into a cleft of some proportions.

Alien approaching rocket, Beacon GreenHe rose, following the walls of the narrow space which the light revealed. Opposite the truck the sloping sand did not touch the roof. Instead was a space through which a man might crawl.

“ Looks worth investigating,” he said.

He wriggled into it. Sand pressed his stomach, and the rock his back, then the sand fell away and it was possible to stand. Reni came behind, and Field, slithered down amid the brown dust. He undid a zip pocket and cleaned his goggles, forehead wrinkled.

" If I hadn’t lost my sense of direction I’d say this led towards the ship !”

Rick felt inclined to agree, though it was little more than the prompting of some sixth-sense. Field seemed more collected, and he was glad. There was no room for panic — not that the crewman could have been blamed.

In places the fissure was sheer sided, a great crack in the rock as of some enormous movement of the crust of ages before. It ran straight as a line and walking became easier, the bottom changing to hard, dry mud obviously undisturbed for centuries. As time passed Rick wondered if some hands other than those of nature had helped to fashion the cleft, or smooth away projections and widen narrow spots. It was difficult to be sure.

The fissure showed no sign of ending, and cautious elation began to replace his initial dismay. He tried to deduce its most probable direction. If the truck had not turned round in falling, it was towards the ship.

They rested once, and he saw that the same possibility was in his companions’ minds.

Hope was replacing the despair in Field's eyes, and Reni had a determined look upon her face, such as he had not seen for many days. The character of the rock began to change, as they went on, resembling the sandstone of the fiats upon which the Solar Royal stood.

" Wonder how far we are from the surface ?" Field said.

Rick wished he knew. The cleft had seemed to descend, but now rose almost imperceptibly. It was more irregular, narrowing and widening. After passing fallen stone, both shoulders brushing the walls, Rick halted. Ahead, luminous in the dark, was a green, shimmering wall.

" The dome," Reni breathed.

He advanced slowly. The cleft opened out and the shimmering wall completely obstructed it. It exactly resembled the side of the dome he had seen, and just such a slight curvature as would be expected. He stayed the others with a hand.

" Wait."

Moving slowly, he went on alone. The green surface was transparent, so that he could see the rocks beyond, and disappeared into the sides of the cleft as if the presence of earth and stone meant nothing. He licked his lips, his tongue dry. This was the least expected yet most logical development, he thought. The Solar Royal was not captive under a mere half-sphere dome, but centred in a complete sphere which extended through the planet's crust as readily as through the air above.

At a few paces' distance he could hear a slight humming, as of a violin string under a bow that never halted. He tossed a pebble at the surface. It rebounded without sound. He searched for a larger rock, flung it, and saw it halted as by a steel wall. The green surface itself, shimmering like water, proved to be cool to the touch, resisting his fingers like ice. The largest stone he could lift, flung with all his strength, rebounded from the wall like a pea from a windowpane.

He was about to retreat when movement beyond drew his gaze. A man, slight, untidy, thin-faced . Jack Simkin, Rick realised. He had arisen from near the wall beyond and was pounding on the screen. His light blue eyes were round, his face distorted. His lips opened and his tongue showed in an unmistakable bellow, soundless as mime beyond the gently singing barrier. As if realising the futility of calling, he began to gesticulate, pointing above and behind. Bare inches from his face, Rick tried to show that he could not hear, did not understand. Simkin seemed not to follow him. Abruptly he began pounding the transparent wall again, then his lips opened, he turned, and began running back down the cleft. Rick saw that he had no light, and his bobbing form disappeared in the gloom beyond.

Shaken, Rick turned away, and saw that the others had witnessed Simkin’s terror and flight. The spherical screen was impregnable from below and above alike, suppressing even the passage of radio waves from the ship.

“We must go back," he said flatly.

Their footsteps were not now lightened by hope and Rick felt that the previous twenty-four hours would have exhausted any man. Disappointments and difficulties had multiplied sharply, bringing a situation of great peril.

He forced tiring limbs on, dogged by the memory of Simkin’s face beyond the screen, his frenzied, silent shouting, and flight. Reni stumbled, and he took her arm. Behind, Field walked like a man reaching the limit of exhaustion. They had not retraced half their way when Rick knew that they must rest — sleep, if possible. They sat on the floor, backs to the wall, and he turned off the lamp, whose beam had dimmed appreciably. Absolute silence and darkness enfolded them.

A thin wind whispered across the undulating plain, gently moving the folds of Dalit Yo's garment. Unhearing, unseeing, he gazed into the east, hazed now with dawn. All night fear deep within other minds had tugged him, hastening his steps. Those minds were not of his companions, but akin to them. Earthmen. Instinctively he wished to help, if he could, against the strange, powerful alien beings that had found the planet. The Earthmen had offered to help him, too, by giving passage to the young, green world from which they had come. Dalit Yo longed for its sanctuary.

Some of the minds were quieter, now, as if they slept. Deeper lines had come to Dalit Yo's sage face. In his wisdom he knew he must give help for help offered, and save the Earthmen, if he himself and his race were to be preserved, with all their age-old knowledge. He stirred, falling into a wiry step which he could maintain for twice the rising and setting of the sun.

Rick awoke and switched on his lamp. Its weak light revealed the buried truck and a descending trickle of sand, whose whisper had roused him. He had lost count of passing time, or of the hours during which they had toiled along the cleft.

More sand descended, dust puffing up. A steady trickle changed into a miniature avalanche. They got up quickly, backing.

“Something coming,” Field said hoarsely.

Sand slipped thickly, carrying a wriggling body that by some miracle did not lose its feet but slid down within a pace of Rick, who felt a vast relief.

“Dalit Yo!”

The other shook dust from his garment. His face was placid, but his eyes keen as they darted round the limits of the cleft.

“I felt you were troubled,” he said simply. His gaze passed beyond them into the dark. “ It is many centuries since this channel has been used. The sands covered it — ”

“ Until we fell in,” Rick interjected.

“ As you say.” Dalit Yo considered them pensively. “ It is now night outside — a good time to leave.” ,

“ Our ship is still there — still surrounded ?”

The old Betian was silent for long moments. “ Yes. I see it, and a glistening dome through which nothing can pass. I feel the minds of your companions, though uncertainly. They plan something, but are afraid. They are full of doubt.”

He dropped silent and Rick saw he could tell them no more. Contact between the planet’s natives might well be perfect; but between Betian and human it was not.

More sand descended, and a young native whom Rick had seen with Dalit Yo. Strong, wide-shouldered, his face had the same kind tranquillity.

“ Amami,” Dalit Yo stated simply, “ son of my son.”

They pulled down sand with their cupped hands until a hole appeared, and Amami lent strong shoulders and muscular arms to help them up. Rick saw that the dry sand had shelved down into the cleft in such a way that only a slight depression showed its presence. Truck and men had virtually disappeared without explanation.

Dim moonlight illuminated the surrounding dunes, shrouded in silence so deep as to refute the existence of anything other than the age-old stars. Shadows rose from the sands, and Rick saw a knot of Dalit Yo’s companions had waited motionlessly. He listened, gaze following the horizon. Nothing stirred.

“We should go this way,” Amami said quietly, and moved off following low ground.

Their feet whispered in the dust Somewhere behind Rick heard Field’s voice, and a low reply from Dalit Yo. There were unoccupied caves, concealed by the marching sands, where only one small entrance was exposed. There, they should be safe.

Amami moved quickly and Rick seldom let his eyes stray from his back, almost unseen

in the gloom. Only once did he speak.

“ Perhaps we could draw free your vehicle, Earthman.”

Rick wondered if it would be much use. The fuel was low, and could not be replaced except from the Solar Royal. But there were stores aboard which they might need.

“ Do, if you can without danger,” he whispered.

Amami nodded, going on. Time passed and in the silence Rick wondered what Reni thought of the situation. He slowed, letting the others pass him. Field and Dalit Yo were last. Reni was not there. The shock of his discovery made him halt

"Where is Reni ?”

Field hesitated, Dalit Yo with him. “Miss Simon ? I thought she was in front with you.”

Rick saw his error. He himself had assumed she was bringing up the rear with Field. The others had halted, barely visible in the dark. He looked back over the spreading dunes and knew he could not abandon her. It was impossible.

Field stirred uneasily. “ We’ve come miles.”

Rick did not look at him. “Go on with the others! I’m going back.”

He watched them disappear. Only when they were gone from the dim limit of vision did he realise a lean shadow still stood at his elbow-

“ I will come also,” Dalit Yo stated simply.

Rick pressed his arm in thanks, and they began to plod back through the loose sand. He wondered by what sixth-sense Dalit Yo led the way among the shadowy dunes, never hesitating,

“It is a long way — a very long way, Earthman,” he murmured.

Fatigued, Rick scarcely knew how time passed. He was aware of a seemingly unending march, and of the sky slowly lightening so that he could see the aged Betian’s belted form. The eastern light was strong when Dalit Yo halted. Rick saw that they were upon the edge of a saucer-shaped depression.

" It is here that your vehicle lies,” Dalit Yo stated.

Despair seized Rick. Reni was not there . . might have strayed anywhere along the

way.

“ She came up from the cleft with us,” Dalit Yo said.

His aged face was set immobile as rock. Eyes closed, he stood as if listening. Rick saw, understood, and was silent. At last the wrinkled eyes opened and Dalit Yo’s gaze settled on him.

“ I cannot find her, Earthman. Her mind is — not thinking.”

Rick’s lips grew dry. "Dead — ?”

“ Perhaps. Perhaps not. She is — not thinking. I have touched her mind before, and could find it as the eye finds a spark of light in the night. Now all is dark. The spark is not there.”

Wiry fingers closed on Rick’s arm, sustaining him. Rick realised that fatigue and dismay had brought him very near to the limit of physical and mental exhaustion.

“I will tell you if I find her,” Dalit Yo said. "I will watch for her mind as the traveller for his homing-fire.”

As the light grew Rick cast about for signs, but the thin dust that always came on the wind had already obscured their footprints. Only in one place could he discover a long line drawn across the sand. It resembled that first seen at Zirreh. But whether left by a sphere that had been searching for the truck, he did not know.

“It is unsafe to stay,” Dalit Yo warned at last. “Come quickly.”

The way was circuitous, their progress slow, and the sun already high towards the zenith when they ascended a long, slow rise and emerged to a level giving sight of brown desert to the horizon. Rick halted. On the plain ahead and slightly below rested the curious alien craft. Its ten silvery globes appeared to be connected only by pink beams of light. Its overall dimensions astonished him.

“ I have never seen such a thing,” Dalit Yo breathed.

Rick studied the vessel, oddly resembling a peculiar wheel formed from metal balls joined by wire. “I have seen it flying. But it is larger than I supposed.”

They withdrew to the brow of the slope. Several blue energy capsules appeared from beyond it, speeding away across the sands like self-motivated balls. After them, emerging from behind the ship, swiftly floated a device more strange than any Rick could have imagined. At front and back were vibrant green discs, large and small,

supported on blue pillars that oscillated up and down with electric fire. At the bottom there appeared to be a long, black metallic rod. What it contained, and whether it was supported by the blue pillars, or other means, Rick could not see. It sped away across the desert, followed by four bounding blue spheres.

“ They are going towards your ship,” Dalit Yo stated.

The spheres and equipment of unknown purpose went from view.

Rick switched his gaze back to the ten units of the alien vessel, now resting without sign of movement. If Reni had been wandering over the dunes Dalit Yo would have known, he thought, and they would have found her. If captured, where else would she be taken but to the alien vessel ? The deduction lent Rick new determination.

"I'm going down to search !” he said.

The old native’s blue eyes settled on him. “ It is not safe—”

“ Sometimes things other than safety count most !”

Dalit Yo examined his face. “I see you will go. But at least wait until dusk. Watch until then.”

That was wise. Rick had to admit. They dug a shallow trench in the sand and lay upon the ridge. The vessel was still; none of the rolling capsules in which the aliens transported themselves appeared. Nor did any return, or the curious equipment.

“I sense that your friends in the ship are afraid,” Dalit Yo said once.

The sun was low with evening. Rick strained eyes and ears in the direction of the Solar Royal, standing to gain a more distant view. The slopes were without sound, but he could not be sure whether an intermittent green light did not flash and flicker away on the edge of the horizon, where the Solar Royal would be.

He ate sparingly from pocket rations, uneasy and irritated by the delay. The sun sank beyond layers of dust that obscured the sky with deep ruddy tints and the evening breeze began to whisper over the slopes.

“ It is time I go,” he said.

Dalit Yo held his shoulder. “ Wait a little longer. It is still light. And I feel your friends are so in danger they plan something hazardous. They cannot agree. All are uneasy.”

He was silent for so long that Rick rose in the gloom. "You can find what they plan . .

?”

" I am not sure,” Dalit Yo said. " It is, perhaps, that they will try to flee from this planet — ”

Rick felt shocked. Yet second thoughts made such a decision seem possible. Wallsend could not be sure whether truck and passengers alike had been destroyed. He might feel this was the last chance of saving the ship and his men in her might be driven by that consideration.

"They do not know you live,” Dalit Yo stated. “I have tried to tell them but failed. I cannot make contact. There is something in the nature of the green dome that prevents my thoughts from entering fully.”

Rick wondered what strange force held it in existence, and what catastrophe would engulf the ship if she tried to rise.

"Yes, I fear they will try," Dalit Yo murmured.

Rick wished the truck were free. There would have been a slender chance of contacting the Solar Royal by radio, before she was too far from Beta I. But without the radio they were helpless. Their very silence might be taken as proof that they were dead.

Each globe of the ten unit ship extended far above his head, dim silver and bulging outwards. The pink, connecting lines of force glowed faintly, emitting a thin, metallic crackling that never ceased. He moved under them into the space between the centre sphere and the outer ring of its companions.

An inner section of one was opened downward, so that its edge rested on the sand, forming a curved ramp up to a broad rectangular doorway. He entered.

No guard was present, nothing opposed him. Thus sure of their own power were they, he thought, listening and examining the four openings which converged on the entry lock. He took the left at random. After a few steps it opened into a chamber filled with neatly piled units of fragile crystal and complex metal connections. There was no exit, and he returned to the next opening. Beyond it was some type of power equipment which murmured softly within itself, but of a shape and nature which conveyed nothing whatever to him. He drew in his lower lip pensively as he surveyed the equipment. It was obvious that the newcomers to Beta I were technically advanced to a degree which made Earth sciences look as backward as flint hand-axes. He was astonished, too, at the almost complete absence of any mechanical devices. Instead, electronic methods seemed to predominate, as in the rolling blue energy capsules. Techniques at which he could not even guess were obviously employed and the very

air seemed charged with static power.

The next passage opened into rooms on either side. Some were empty. Others contained more equipment of such a nature that he could not guess its purpose. Higher, he emerged again into sight of dim starlight, and found a transparent section of the spherical hull surrounding him. The other globular units of the ship were visible, and an extended view over the undulating sands.

In the middle distance were several rolling spots of blue which he recognised with a shock, intensified by a second glance, which showed the speed with which they were approaching. He descended quickly to the lower level. The spheres were near, rising and falling over the dunes. Outside was no concealment. He ducked back into the first doorway.

The capsules slowed, curving towards the ramp, rolling up into the corridor he had vacated. He had an intermittent vision of strange beings crouched over controls at the centre of globes of hard blue light. Then as each sphere gained the corridor it ceased to exist, leaving only a slight, creamy being that held a curiously shaped apparatus, and walked quickly, with tiny steps, on into the ship. Each was smooth-skinned and fragile, pale as something grown in the dark. With four upper tapering limbs they carried the units from which the energy capsules sprang. The two lower limbs were slightly flattened, forming circular feet. Their heads were round, honeycombed with apertures over which thin membranes closed intermittently. Weakly creatures, Rick thought, surviving only because of the protection of the electronic devices they had created .

The last energy capsule did not vanish, but halted in the entrance lock. As through blue glass Rick saw a girl’s figure curled in a sitting position, with long, smooth golden curls. Her eyes were closed, her cheeks white as marble. Reni. He almost called her name involuntarily. Then the curved section of the ship rose slowly from the sands, moving inwards to meet the hull. Sands and night sky were excluded as it came to rest, closed.

He stepped towards the blue, transparent globe, listening. The ship was soundless except for a remote humming, very low. Her builders were occupied elsewhere, he decided, and walked quickly round the sphere, staring in. It was ten feet in diameter, and its surface had the same cold, frictionless touch as had the barrier in the underground cleft. Reni Simon’s smooth features were set as in deep sleep. He wondered if she had been taken by force or lured into captivity by some vision that fulfilled a deep subconscious, longing.

Direct assault upon the sphere was clearly useless, and he retreated into the entrance to the store-chamber. Energy to maintain the rolling capsules must come from somewhere, he decided. Possibly it was generated in the ship itself, and radiated. His

mind returned to the power plant in the adjoining room. It had seemed to be in action, yet the ship was at rest. If so, could it be the source of energy? Possibly, he decided. There was logic in the deduction.

He went cautiously into the entrance lock, and from there into the next chamber. The equipment still murmured quietly. Some parts seemed conductors, others insulators, but beyond that he could not go. In its heart intricate crystals glowed faintly, and from them the power seemed to come. With all his electrical and scientific knowledge he could not decide how the unit worked. His lips curved in a crooked smile. Fortunately mere destruction did not depend upon exact knowledge !

From the store he chose an object which appeared the largest he could carry. Of many metal discs on a framework of rods, it proved just as much as he could lift. Arms clasping it, he staggered through the entrance lock with a last glance at Reni motionless in the blue sphere, then flung the gadget into the heart of the glowing crystals.

Coloured fire lanced round him, playing quick as lightning from the power unit to the walls. Yellow fumes rose. Metal conductors grew red, white, and sagged into dripping liquid, sizzling as it touched components below. Abruptly the light that had illuminated the chamber went out, leaving a dull red glow shining on the walls from the heart of the damaged apparatus.

Somewhere in the distance a quick, irregular chirping began. He sprinted for the entrance lock, lit by dim reflected light. The blue energy capsule had ceased to exist. Reni lay on the floor limp as a doll.

A thin crack showed the energy holding the flap shut was gone also. It balanced, then fell with a shock that sent up dust and sand far above his head. He swept her up and ran.

Only at the top of the first dune did he stop to look back. Half the pink rays connecting the ten spheres of the ship were snuffed out. But even as he looked one sprang again into being, and another, as if auxiliary equipment was taking over.

He ran on, panting, and became aware that another figure ran also, swift and sure, its path converging on his own. In the dimness he recognised Amami, who took the girl as easily as if she were a feather and put her over a shoulder.

“Dalit Yo, father of my father, sent me to watch, Earthman. We must hurry."

His free hand closed on Rick’s arm, guiding him. They ran, not looking back, and only after several minutes did Rick halt. Ahead, surely, must be the cleft into which they had fallen. The Solar Royal and caves to which Dalit Yo had sent the others must be far

away to their right

Amami barely paused. “This is shortest — many of us working together have pulled your vehicle from the dust!"

Rick grunted understanding, scarcely realising the words were in reply to a doubt he had not voiced. His breathing was heavy, each step ankle-deep in loose sand. He hoped he could last out.

“It is not far now," Amami said.

They sped down a slight declivity. Far ahead, just visible in the starlight, stood the truck, surrounded by fully a dozen silent forms. Rick wondered why they had not driven it to meet them

“We do not understand your machines.” The words floated over Amami’s shoulder.

He slowed, and Rick passed him. The Betians moved back on either side.

“Tell them to get in the back!” Rick cried as he took the driving seat. A glance by the dash light showed him every grain of sand had been brushed with painstaking care from every comer. Twined ropes of silvery fibre, looped over several shoulders, showed the means employed to free the truck.

Amami placed Reni on the next seat. “I feel stirrings in her mind,” he stated. “When I first carried her it was quiet with a silence deeper than sleep. But now it awakes.”

The engine started at the first touch and Rick thanked the designers who had made a vehicle virtually dust-proof, waterproof, and as durable as metallurgical science could devise.

Amami leaned from the back, a hand on his shoulder, directing him. Rick wished the fuel was not so disastrously low, exhausted by the eight-hundred mile trip to the dusty bush forest.

"What of Field and your other friends?” he asked.

Amami swayed to the rise and fall of the half-track. “I have thought with Dalit Yo. They are all coming from the caves and will join us.”

“And after?”

“We cannot stay here. The things in the ten spheres are angry. They will search every hiding place.”

Dunes rolled by and figures came on the horizon. Rick saw that Amami had communicated with his companions in the caves even as he was carrying Reni, so that they had hastened out. They climbed into the truck, making a score in all. A score, Rick thought. A score, out of millions

“We are the last, there are no others,” Dalit Yo said from the back. “It is well. Zirreh, Town on the Spring, was the last city. Our world is dead. Nowhere on her surface do other minds akin to ours think. If you cannot save us our race and people are ended.”

Rick’s gaze strayed to the fuel gauge, and back to the sloping sands ahead. Chances of safety appeared few.

“Another mind is waking,” Dalit Yo said unexpectedly. “It is your friend.”

"Where?"

Rick jerked the word out. Another mind! Bob Ross. It could be none other — freed by the damage to the ten-unit ship!

“Not near. I will show you."

A picture flickered momentarily into Rick’s mind. Bob Ross stood uncertainly outside the alien’s vessel, astonished alike by his freedom and the ship. The image faded.

"I will try to help him," Dalit Yo said. “Silence has held his mind since walking beyond the door at Zirreh. He does not understand."

Rick took the vehicle in a half circle, dust showering from its tracks. Ross could not be left.

Guided by quick words in his ear he drove at maximum speed. Every moment he expected the alien ship to come into view, or a line of rolling spheres to rise over the slopes ahead. Instead, at last a dusty figure came staggering towards them, half falling. Dalit Yo relaxed visibly and wiped his brow. Amami leapt from the truck and lifted Ross, whose strength suddenly snuffed out.

“He has fainted,” Dalit Yo said. “Now back.”

The truck spun again under Rick’s hands, swaying back across the slopes. Dark night sky flung down echoes from the engine, roaring with the thunder of full throttle. The fuel indicator lay almost on zero. Rick raised his eyes from it and found Dalit Yo observing him.

“Your machine will soon stop?”

“It will,” Rick agreed.

A ridge rose slowly and he recognised the edge of the vast sand-stone flats where the Solar Royal stood imprisoned. Field said some-thing unintelligible. Looking back, Rick saw half a dozen blue dots of light rise momentarily into view far behind, then dip from sight, following. Evidently the damage had been made good.

Within minutes the green shimmering dome itself rose into view, luminous in the night. Rick slowed, undecided. Their present freedom could not last. The engine would fail, soon

Pillars of vapour began to tower from the Solar Royal’s stem, mounting skywards, yet retained within the dome. Rick jerked the half-track to a halt. The Solar Royal was trying to rise !

Flame joined the vapour and the great ship began to lift amid a turmoil of undispersed fumes. 'The dome was outlined starkly by the smoke it contained, and by the yellow radiance from the ship’s tubes.

“It was this I sensed in their minds!” Dalit Yo cried.

The fury grew, the ship gaining altitude ponderously, her speed increasing. Her great shining bow struck the underside of the dome at its apex. For moments she seemed to hesitate, flame streaming vertically down from her tubes, impinging on the ruby-hot sand, and billowing, up in great tongues. Then the lightning of unbalanced potentials crackled from sky to dome, and , dome to earth, glowing fitfully across the dunes. Like a giant eyelid opening the curving green swept back to the ground, was gone, then appeared again, slowly mounting to its first shape, electronic static playing round its advancing edges. The edges met; a shimmer ran over the dome, again complete.

Rick lifted his gaze to where the Solar Royal was mounting into the heavens on a pillar of flame, free and apparently unharmed.

“The radio ! The radio ! ”

Field was yelling wildly, plucking his arm. Rick scrambled into the back of the truck, tearing away its coverings. Microphone to lips, phones on head, he kept calling even as the set warmed and the rocket-trail of the ship receded into the sky, fading with distance like a dying spark.

There was' no answer. Wallsend presumed them dead, Rick thought. "Truck calling Solar Royal. Truck calling Solar Royal.” Yet radio watch should have been kept. It was

a rule. "Truck calling Solar Royal.”

Field caught his shoulder, turning him and pointing. Away back over the dunes, still remote, slowly rose the alien ship, nine periphery spheres rotating slowly about the axial globe, and with its full network of pinky rays.

Damn, Rick thought. He licked his dry lips. "Truck calling Solar Royal.”

The pink rocket trail had gone from the sky, lost with distance. Then shatteringly in the phones:

“Solar Royal to truck. You still alive?”

Rick recognised the shocked tones of the radioman. “Alive and by ship site!” he snapped. “Give me Commander Wallsend!”

“At once, sir!"

Delay. Then Steve Wallsend’s voice, urgent yet glad. “We thought you were finished. Shouldn’t have waited as long as we did but for Simkin coming back with some tale of seeing you underground.”

“Explanations later.”

“As you say. Can you make it to Zirreh?”

“Perhaps.”

“Then keep in contact and start driving!”

Field was already in the seat, watching. Rick explained quickly, briefly. The truck shot into motion.

“We used a lot of fuel getting clear,” Wallsend was saying on the radio. “It’s not safe for us to come back to the flats. By Zirreh we may be safe for a few hours. We’ll drop there and wait.”

The way seemed long. When at last they descended into the dry waterway beyond which they had first seen the caves, the rolling blue energy capsules were clearly in sight no more than a mile behind. One was outdistancing the others. All went from sight as the half-track swept up to higher ground and over the summit beyond the empty caves.

“The fuel won’t last,” Field said once.

But the engine continued to roar. Dalit Yo and his companions rode silently, and Rick wondered what telepathic communication was taking place between them. A few miles beyond the caves Bob Ross stirred, his colour returning. He looked round him, blinking, and seemed to comprehend.

“It — it was a mirage,” he breathed.

Rick guessed of what he spoke. Information that the Solar Royal had landed safely came, with a crisp reminder: “We’re waiting.”

Rick left the radio to find Reni waking. Only after minutes did the blank expression leave her eyes. She put a hand to her forehead."

“There were trees outside the cleft. I went to look.”

Her voice was weak, puzzled. Trees, Rick thought bitterly. Not on Beta I! He pressed her arm.

“Forget it. Rest a few minutes if you can.”

The ancient towers of Zirreh came into view with the first dim light of dawn. The ship stood beyond on a flat area flanking the slope of the valley, distant, a mere needle. Behind the truck a single blue sphere bounded, gaining rapidly now, and Rick watched it with unease. It curved to pass them, its single occupant riding smoothly within the shimmering, spinning blur.

They are harmless. The thought rose into Rick’s mind unbidden. They have not tried to harm us. Now one comes alone, to prove they wish us no ill.

The truck slowed, and he knew that Field had suddenly realised the same fact, and was relaxing pressure on the accelerator. A bemused feeling of comfort and security swept over him, and Rick smiled to himself.

The aliens were harmless. He must stop the truck. It was silly to run away

The spinning blue globe curved round in front of the half-track, its occupant watching them. It slowed, dropping behind, then gained speed again, circling them. Rick watched it with no feeling of danger, now. There is no danger, his mind said. Stop the truck, then all will be well.

He leaned over, tapping Field on the shoulder. They would stop.

It was foolish to run away — foolish and unnecessary.

An arm lapped round his throat from behind, pinioning him. With astonishment he grew aware of Dalit Yo shouting in his ear. Simultaneously, Amami lifted Field bodily from his seat, dropped him in the back of the truck, and took his place. The truck gained speed again, wobbling momentarily, then taking as even a course as Rick himself could have driven.

Rick closed his eyes. In his mind two elements were battling. A smooth voice insinuated that all was well and that he must stop the truck. Another urged that the smooth voice was a trick, and that they must escape. His senses reeled with the conflict. Then abruptly the smooth voice ceased. Dalit Yo relaxed, his grip removed.

“It is well,” he said.

The bounding blue sphere turned again, making off. For a moment Rick saw its occupant, half standing, facial apertures opening and closing with furious rapidity, angry in its defeat.

“They attack from within,” Dalit Yo murmured. “But we are old, and not easy victims.”

The half-track roared on, circling the ruins and climbing the slope beyond. Mid-way between city and ship the roar ceased; the truck lurched, slowed, and stopped, engine dead. Rick shook away his mental confusion.

“Run for it!”

They ran, ankle deep in loose sand, abandoning the truck where it stood. From the Solar Royal’s open port the cage lift wound slowly down. Above, Wallsend gazed out, hand raised to signal to a companion at the mechanism.

A scattered bunch of blue spheres sped from behind the ruined city, bounding up the hill. Rick wondered at the strange beings in them, and the curious sciences they employed. He stumbled, one leg hurting, but strong brown arms came round him, bearing him onwards.

“They’ll catch us!” Field yelled.

His panic brought Rick’s head round. A thin tracery of almost invisible lines stretched between the nearer spheres, forming a net that would sweep them up. The spheres were parting, intent on over-taking them on both flanks. Field, last, screamed, and sprawled on his face in the dust, tripped by some unseen projection. Two Betians, scarcely hesitating, bore him up and into the lift cage. It jerked into motion even as they crowded in, and Rick saw the tracery of lines sweep underneath, empty. '

Swaying, the cage rose. They piled into the ship’s lock. Winding mechanism and cage were drawn in, and the lock closed. Steve Wallsend’s hand closed on Rick’s arm, drawing him flat against the cool steel.

"We’ve used three times the normal amount of fuel taking off last time."

Something in his tone halted Rick more than any personal danger yet encountered. He turned to stone, rigid against the ship’s bulkhead.

"Yes— ?"

Wallsend looked at the others quickly, then back. ,"I haven’t told them — yet. There’s not enough fuel to take us to Earth."

Rick felt his nerves taut as steel wire. The tone had hinted at this. But hearing it was a shock, nevertheless. He made a quick calculation.

"You could have reached Earth if you hadn’t landed to save us,” he stated quietly.

Wallsend lowered his gaze and put his fingers in his belt.

"Perhaps.”

Rick knew what he meant. He had chosen to land, with the chance of saving them, to returning to Earth. Now, they had insufficient fuel. That fact was final. The first few minutes of flight, with its tremendous release of energy to fight the fierce pull of gravity, used more fuel than was consumed in a million mile trajectory in free space. Knowing that, Wallsend had landed.

“Thanks — for giving us the chance,” Rick said.

It was inadequate, but all he could find to say. Once again the Solar Royal was a mere immobile headquarters, from which they could only stare out on the aridity of Beta I and wait

The ten-unit alien ship flouted on the rim of the horizon, waiting for the bipeds pointed vessel to rise again. In each of the ten spheres expectancy hung. Visions of green hills had sprung into each biped’s mind, when remote hypnosis was used, and the aliens longed avidly for such a planet, upon which to settle and multiply. Now, their captains stood ready. The ten-unit ship could fly as a whole; or the pink force rays could snap out, freeing each sphere to its own course, to move at infinite speed.

In one sphere a technician manipulated controls and initiating signals danced from the extended aerials. Miles away equipment in a long, black metal rod awoke in response.

Blue pillars of energy arose from its ends, capped by vibrant green discs. The whole gained speed moving over the dunes towards Zirreh. The technician signalled to a companion, and the message passed through the ten spheres. The device. newest and most powerful creation of all they had invented, was on its way.

“It’s not the actual distance that stops us,” Wallsend said, “but the amount of fuel we use blasting off. Once we’ve gained free space and velocity we can travel almost any distance.” He grimaced. “The other big consumption of fuel comes in landing. Without sufficient thrust to defeat gravity we’d leave a hole like a brick dropped in butter.”

Rick nodded without turning round. The high control room of the Solar Royal permitted a view of many miles and something he thought he had seen before had moved into sight on the horizon. Though yet very distant, he could distinguish vibrant green discs that seemed to be supported upon hazy blue pillars, below which hung a huge black rod. It came fully into view, and he remembered. From the ten-unit ship, it had moved off towards the old rocket site not long before the Solar Royal had escaped.

Bob Ross sat hunched on a mushroom stool next the radioman’s seat. He had told of the vision beyond Zirreh and of long unconsciousness while some external force seemed to sift his brain. Reni Simon, too, had related a similar story. Watching her face, Rick wondered if she regretted her trip. She could have been on Earth, in safety — if there was safety on Earth.

"Something is going to happen,” he stated quietly.

They followed his glance. Steve Wallsend frowned deeply and a troubled expression came to Reni’s face.

“What is it?” she asked.

Rick returned his gaze, to the distant scene. The odd apparatus was larger than he had first supposed, and he could not pretend to guess its purpose. There was no parallel between alien science and Earth science, or common ground in technology or even appearance. The aliens’ devices were a mystery. All seemed to function electrically, but the practical methods of working were beyond him, he readily admitted. He guessed that Dalit Yo and the others, in lower levels of the ship, must be equally ignorant.

Half a mile along the slope of the valley the device halted. Rick watched it intently as minutes dragged by and nothing appeared to happen. Only upon its nearest edge did a faint additional radiance play, scarcely visible in the daylight.

‘"The truck ! ” Ross said harshly.

Rick switched his gaze to it. The half-track was where they had abandoned it, but an encircling radiance, faintly seen, now extended from it vertically into the air, a pillar whose top was remote as space itself. Smoke rose from the truck. It glowed, every metal part growing dull red. Simultaneously, as if the consuming power were some function reversing gravity itself, the vehicle rose, seating and lubricants aflame. It gained speed and height, grew white, then brilliant so that the eyes hurt to follow it. From the brilliance, incandescent drops of metal spattered, descending in silver rain. Within the space of ten heartbeats nothing remained but stirred dust and a thin grey smoke drifting away on the wind.

“Gone,” Rick said, dry lipped.

In their ten-unit ship the aliens felt satisfaction. The molecular construction of the bipeds’ crude mechanisms was evidently such as could be readily destroyed. The vehicle had volatilised more quickly than they had expected under the bombardment of the vertically polarised force-field. Watching from the horizon, their technician adjusted his controls, aligning the field upon its second and larger target.

As the hazy radiation round the ship grew in intensity Wallsend’s hands went to the propulsion control buttons. Rick grasped his arm, staying him.

“Wait—”

Wallsend’s face expressed astonishment. “If we wait we’re finished, ship and all! ”

The haze was growing in intensity, a pillar straight as a line drawn from heaven to earth. Before incandescence there were moments when the object to be destroyed ceased to have weight, he thought. More, some rearrangements of atoms caused actual repulsion, as if gravity were reversed. The twirling upwards movement of the truck proved that. He saw understanding come into Reni’s eyes.

“He means we may rise!” she said quickly.

A sensation of weightlessness came; and growing heat. But the ship’s hull was made to withstand the latter, Rick thought. They could last moments longer than the half-track.

The downward pull of gravity ceased. Almost as if mounting on her own jets the Solar Royal drifted from the sand, ascending in the beam. The edges of the observation port glowed visibly red and heat smote in as from a furnace. Wallsend swore, and Reni clapped her hands to her face. With scorched eyes Rick watched the red rim of metal turn to white, and the dunes of Beta I fall away below.

“Now! ” he cried.

Wallsend's fingers moved like clockwork spurred into abrupt activity. Surging thrust awoke under their feet, bringing back weight fourfold. The hazy sky-pillar slipped to their right, no longer enfolding them, and under the tornado blast of thinning atmosphere the port rim grew red, and the red faded.

Rick mopped his face. "Have we enough fuel to reach Earth and land?"

Wallsend gave him a quick look, snapped on an internal communicator, and issued quick orders. Minutes ticked by on the bulkhead clock while the altitude radarsonde crept up over the dial.

"We've just sufficient for the trip and touchdown, sir.'

"Thank you." Wallsend faced them. "Do we go? It's our last chance."

He left it expressively at that and Rick wondered what the others thought. Earth had become an unknown quantity during their absence. Worse, Alpha Centauri's only planet was inhospitable, waterless, death even to Dalit Yo and his race.

"I vote for Earth," he said.

"And I," Reni added simply.

"Saints, but ain't ye daft even asking?" a voice demanded from the doorway.

They looked at Simkin and Wallsend smiled crookedly. "As you say—"

Beta I was a red disc almost distant enough to permit continuum shift when radar recorded something following. Astrogation bent a telescope upon it and reported ten silvery spheres, very large, no longer in cartwheel formation and following rapidly. Rick felt dismay. Earth was a speck so remote that no enemy would ever find her — unless shown the way

"I'll die here rather than lead them to Earth!" Wallsend growled.

"There is the continuum shift."

"We can't trust that will leave them behind — they've equalled anything man ever invented."

The Solar Royal drifted on, drive silent. The spheres drew closer, then curved away towards space and Rick breathed again. They were no longer following. Within twelve hours the ship's radar no longer reached them and he felt confident that the return to Earth was possible without betraying the whole planet into the power of the beings

who, in turn, had been dissatisfied with Alpha Centauri's arid world.

"Good," Wallsend said and issued quick orders preparing for continuum shift.

Remote in space the aliens watched the needle-like ship, charting its course with equipment of extreme sensitivity. It was as they had supposed. The bipeds were fleeing for home. Very distant, the shoal of spheres curved in to follow their quarry. From the commander an order radiated: they must be ready for any shift into second-order space, but not draw near until the planet was pin-pointed amid the millions of systems of space.

"Thanks be we've left that stinkin' lot behind," Jack Simkin said expressively, wrinkling up his nose as the shudder of the final continuum shift subsided. "Too clever for my liking, the blighters were! "

Rick agreed, gazing through the ship's port for the first glimpse of Earth. He had watched it from the distance, a tinted ball growing in diameter, but too remote to seem real. Now, as breaks in the clouds swept below, he could see a long coastline against which lapped sparkling seas. Green slopes, woods and rivers, all were a miracle, doubly valued because once lost.

"It is a wonderful planet," Dalit Yo said eagerly at his side.

Binoculars brought the surface near. A town passed below, its streets greened. Nothing moved except a slow vehicle that puffed smoke and steam, laboriously ascending a hill. On the slopes beyond men worked with sickles, reaping corn.

Every scene told the same story, as the ship swept down, stem first, in her landing trajectory. Gone was the stink and rush of industry; gone the smoke of great factories and the busy streams of traffic. Gone, too, many people, Rick thought.

He recognised the landscape, now, though nature had crept in to transform roads to narrow tracks. Winchester sped past, abandoned. A great scar showed where fire had once swept unchecked amid the buildings. Then the Solar Royal site was under their stem, its rim of concrete specked by weeds. The ship sank upon a pillar of exhaust gases, contacted with a slight shock, and was still. With the contact came silence. A flying ship no more, Rick thought. A monument to the past, now — but home.

They unrolled the emergency folding metal ladder and descended to ground level. Rick stood by the ship, astonished. From a damaged building a man came, walking quickly. Grey, upright, of military bearing, but now dressed in shorts, with an open-necked shirt. Commander Prestigan, apparently little surprised.

"I guessed you'd come back," he stated. He looked skywards. "But I never imagined

the ship wouldn’t be alone.”

Rick followed his gaze and a chill ran through his limbs. Locked now in cartwheel formation, the ten-unit ship was drifting slowly down, ready to land within a few hundred yards. Already the curved segments of each sphere were opening. Inside, Rick could glimpse a battery of peculiar devices. From the nearest a blue ray fingered across the site, striking the building Prestigan had vacated. The concrete and steel hummed, falling into dust. The ray turned slowly, shattering to fine particles the old office buildings near. Prestigan swore and Rick felt a new and complete despair. Earth, green, helpless, unprotected — Ross alighted near him, jumping the last few feet of the ladder. “Hide until they land!" he shouted. “Until they land.”

The ten-unit ship sank lower, slowly revolving. Crewmen scrambled down the Solar Royal’s ladder, racing for the cover of the circular anti-blast trenches fifty yards from her. Stunned with shock, Rick saw the silvery spheres touch ground, and a score of blue energy capsules bound out towards them

Then the pink lines of light connecting the spheres snuffed out. The silvery lustre went from the globes, the blue capsules ceased to exist. Abruptly there was only a ring of fragile metal girders, spidery and weak, and a host of creamy, six-limbed beings that chirped madly, jabbing frantically at controls that no longer operated.

Never had he seen creatures so physically weak, Rick thought. Only by means of elaborate devices had they survived. He felt that men were immeasurably superior.

Far beyond the site, amid bushes that had sprung up thick and tangled, a yelping had begun. Out of the tall grass came a pack of dogs, every age, size and kind. Noses low, tails streaming, they swept down upon the tracery of silent girders.

Prestigan turned his back to the scene. “One of the dog packs. They won’t harm us. There are a lot about this part of the country."

The others came down the ladder. Reni Simon took Rick’s arm. “All considered. I’m glad I came that trip!”

Prestigan looked at her reprovingly. “I can’t sack you because there’s no job, even for me. Our specialists have figured it out well enough. The shock wave agitated atoms into electrical isolation, they say, so that no metal will conduct. The effect spreads immediately to conductors touching earth.” He glanced momentarily at the scene from which he had averted his gaze. “It’ll be a thousand years before equilibrium is restored, they say.”