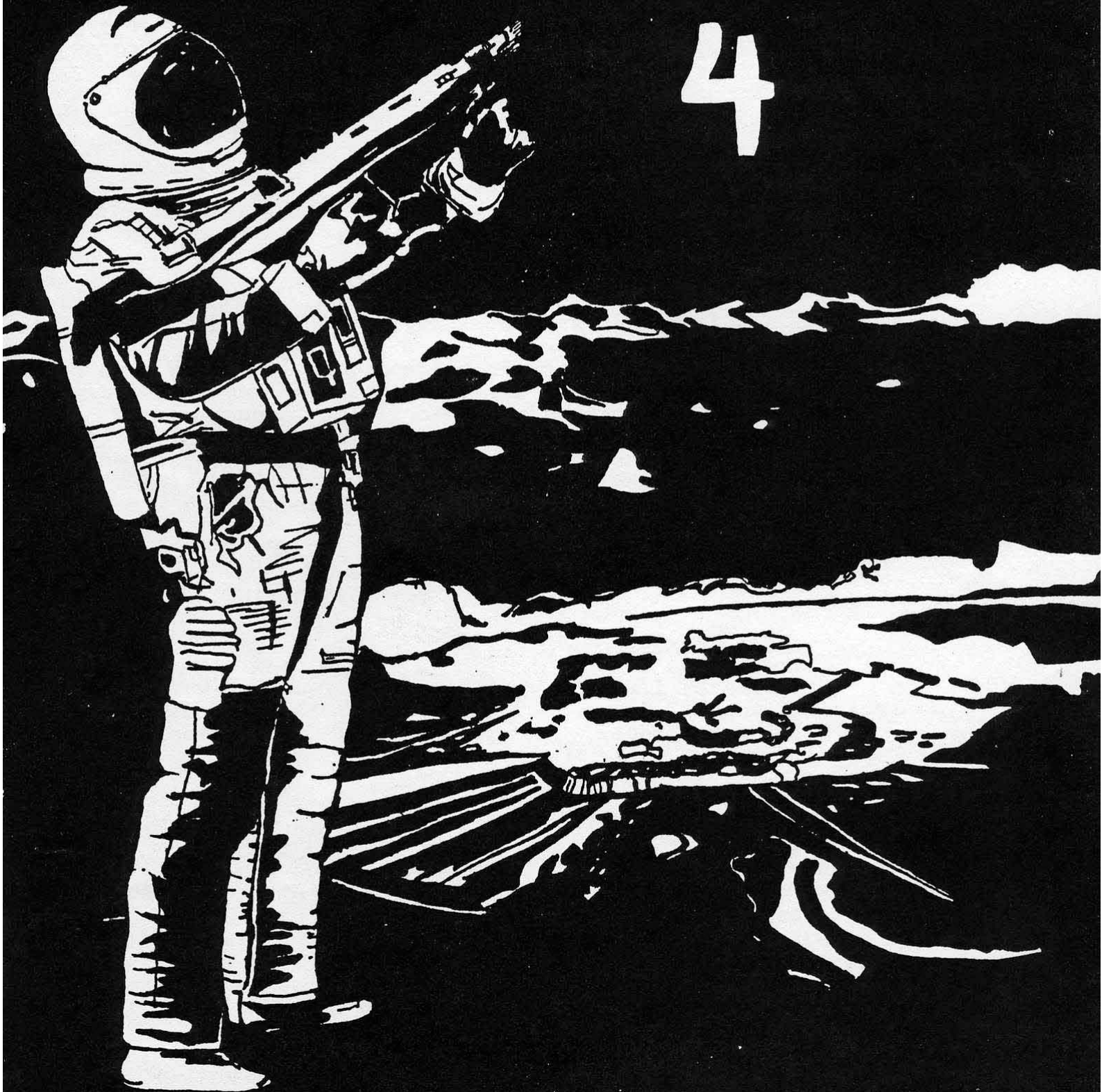


ALPHA LOG

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ALPHA LOG IV

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DEDICATION

This issue of ALPHA LOG is dedicated, fittingly, to everyone who hung in there with us through snowstorms and heat waves, through broken collating machines and stubborn staplers, through countless bottles of Tab. And, most especially, this issue is dedicated to our faithful members in acknowledgment of their patient wait by the mailbox, wondering if we were going to get the issues out on time.



Marianne Tielesch '79

A Step Towards The Future

by Meta Campbell

"Damn," thought David as he tried vainly to salvage parts of the makeshift computer. "I'm in big trouble now. Dad is going to kill me for this." He'd felt so sure that he could fix the computer and have it running by the time his parents got home. He'd followed the diagrams perfectly, at least, he thought he had, but when he'd tried to start it, and it exploded, he knew he had really blown it. As he went about trying to clean it up, he made two wishes: that he be finished before his parent arrived, and that he would manage to reach age fourteen. He felt his first wish was going to be a lot easier than the second.

He was just about done in the lab when he heard his parents come into the house. Knowing of no way to postpone the inevitable, he left the lab to confront his father. As soon as Professor Kano saw his young son, he knew that something was wrong. David, whenever he was in trouble, had a habit of walking with his head down, not daring to look his father straight in the eyes. To the professor, that could only mean trouble. Still with his head down, David spoke to his father.

"I've got to tell you something, Dad. Can I talk to you alone?" The professor motioned for his wife to leave the two of them alone, then he turned to his son.

"What is the problem, David?" He waited for his son to answer. Taking a deep breath, David began to explain to his father what had happened.

"I...I was messing with the computer today, and I must have put it together wrong, because it blew up."

At his words, his father lost his temper. Looking as angry as he felt, he shouted at David.

"It did what? How many times have I told you to refrain from fooling with the components in the lab? Do you realize what could have happened to you in there? How could you be so thoughtless, and irresponsible to do such a thing, David?"

As his father shouted at him, tears began forming in the boy's eyes. They slid down his face as he began to explain why he'd done it.

"I just wanted to surprise you, Dad. I thought I could put it together. I've watched you put them together, and I wanted you to see that I could help you. I thought I'd followed the diagrams, but I guess I didn't, because something went wrong. I know you're mad at me for messing up your work, but..."

Standing there looking at his son in such distress filled the professor with compassion. He hadn't meant to react the way he did, but he was upset at how close the boy had come to injuring himself, not because his work had been destroyed. Seeing the boy in tears took the anger away from him. In its place was the need to reassure his son. Enfolding David in his arms, he began talking softly to him.

"David, I'm sorry I lost my temper. I didn't mean to yell at you, it was just my fear at finding out how close you came to seriously hurting yourself. A computer is easily replaced, David--a son such as yourself is not."

"I just wanted to show you what I could do, and make you proud of me."

"David, I was proud of you the day you were born, and my pride in you grows more each day. There's no need to prove yourself to me." He smiled at David, then continued. "Now, why don't we go, and see just how much damage has been done. You can help me straighten up the mess."

"I got most of the stuff up already, Dad."

"Then it shouldn't take long to clean up."

"Will you show me later what went wrong?"

"I most certainly shall, my boy."

Putting his arms around his son's shoulder, the professor led him towards the lab.

Later in the evening, David's parents sat discussing their son. Dr. Kano sat quietly listening as her husband filled her in on what had happened between David and himself. Once he had finished, she ventured an opinion of her own.

"You know, it doesn't really surprise me. I've noticed lately that David has been reading as much about computers as he has his other school work. He's got a keen interest in them. Tell me, how far off was he in putting it together, Jim?"

"Not by much. He got a few of the components mixed up, which caused the explosion. Still, that was some job for a kid his age."

"Why not let him help you? At least then he won't feel the need to try on his own. If he ran into any problems, you'd be close at hand."

Professor Kano nodded in agreement at his wife's suggestion. He sat in thought for a moment, then looked up at his wife.

"The idea did cross my mind, but...I don't know. He seems so young. If these components weren't so

advanced, I wouldn't be so skeptical."

His wife laughed and shook her head.

"He didn't do so badly on his own. I know he's young, but he does seem to have ability. He has promise--don't waste it."

"Yes, he has promise, Denise, but the boy is only thirteen. Do you know how old I was before I could program one of those things accurately? Twenty. He's just a kid."

"Not when it comes to computers. I've known for sometime now that David's capable of working easily with them, but I didn't know if it was a passing fancy with him. It's not. You may as well face it, Jim--you've got a budding expert on your hands."

The professor looked at her with a look of great pride. "Hmmm. You really think so?"

"Yes, I do. Now, are you going to tell him, or shall I?"

"I'll tell him tomorrow. You really think he's that good?"

"Of course. I guess it's true after all."

"What's true?"

"Oh, you know the old saying. 'Like father, like son'."

He walked over and kissed his wife as she laughed.

The End.

she sleeps now

She gently sleeps now,
Carefully watched by her colleagues.
Thoughtful care taken
to be sure she is comfortable.

A few hours ago,
on the damp Scottish moors,
I almost lost her.
The fever, the cough,
the native's fear, and...
the fire.

I was almost
unable to help her,
to help us.

A Machine's malfunction
put us there, back on Earth,
but not our Earth.

Decades, centuries before
our time,
and we almost died there...

She gently sleeps now.
Safe, warm and peaceful.
The cold, grey moor in the past,
Forgotten, only for a few hours.
But the love, the caring, the giving
we have will
be with us
for the rest of our lives,
And, beyond.

Terry S. Bowers

LOOKING BACK: THE CHILDHOOD OF A COMMANDER

Back when
Unicorns were still possible
We played
In sun from the moon
In the middle of the night

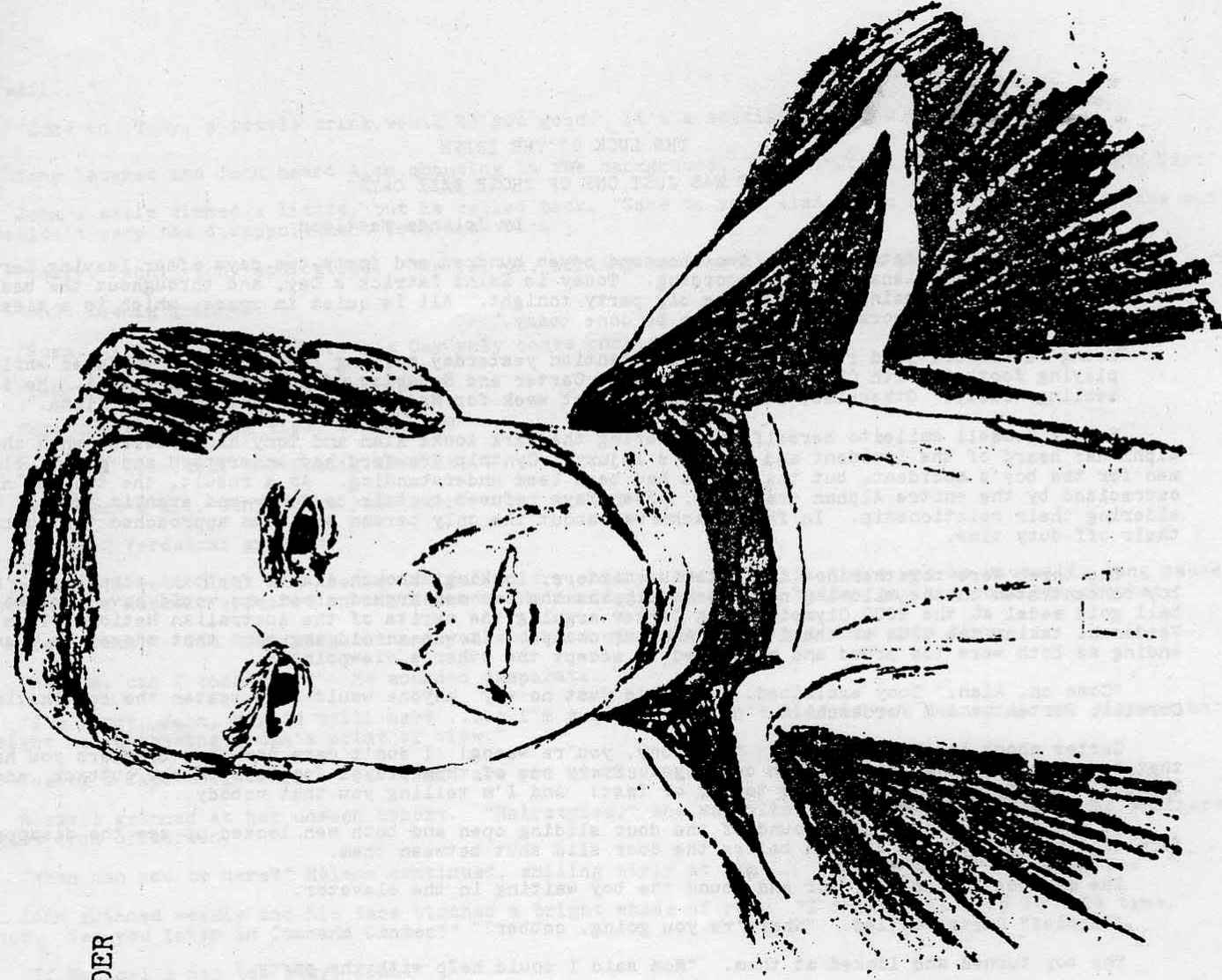
Back when
Unicorns were still possible
We were assured
By that nighttime light
Of our friend on high

And back when
Unicorns were still possible
We would look up
And wish for the moon
In all its white-fire glory

Then back when
Unicorns were barely still possible
I grew up
Still wishing for the moon
And I received

But now that
Unicorns are no longer possible
I often look back
Along that fine line
That leads back through space to Earth
And wish one more
For the unicorns of my youth

--James Hebert



THE LUCK O' THE IRISH
or
"IT WAS JUST ONE OF THOSE DAZE DAYS"

by Jolinda Mattison

"Moonbase Alpha Status Report, two thousand seven hundred and forty-two days after leaving Earth orbit. Doctor Helena Russell recording. Today is Saint Patrick's Day, and throughout the base preparations are being made for the big party tonight. All is quiet in space, which is a blessing since very little work is expected to be done today."

"Young Jackie Crawford required medical attention yesterday morning for abrasions suffered while playing football with Chief Eagle Pilot Alan Carter and Security Officer Tony Verdeschi. He is healing nicely. Otherwise, it has been a quiet week for Medical Center and Moonbase Alpha."

Helena Russell smiled to herself, remembering the dark looks Alan and Tony had received when the rest of Alpha had heard of the incident and Jackie's injury. Cynthia Crawford had understood and didn't blame the men for the boy's accident, but the others had been less understanding. As a result, the two men had been ostracized by the entire Alphan community. Even Maya refused to talk to Tony--and even in itself, considering their relationship. In fact, Jackie was about the only person who even approached the outcasts in their off-duty time.

The three were together now in Carter's quarters, looking through Alan's football scrapbook. As the boy concentrated on the yellowing newspaper clippings the two men argued about who would have won the football gold medal at the 2000 Olympics with Carter arguing the merits of the Australian National Team and Verdeschi taking the side of the Italian Amateur champs. It was an old argument that showed no sign of ending as both were too proud and pigheaded to accept the other's viewpoints.

"Come on, Alan," Tony exclaimed. "There's just no way anyone would have beaten the combination of Corelli, Portentia and Verdeschi!"

Carter shook his head angrily. "No, Tony, you're wrong! I don't care how many brothers you had on that team, they'd never have beaten our boys! Every one of them played football in the outback, and believe me, out there you gotta be tough, or fast! And I'm telling you that nobody..."

He was interrupted by the sound of the door sliding open and both men looked up to see the disappearing form of Alpha's youngest citizen before the door slid shut between them.

The men bolted for the door and found the boy waiting in the elevator.

"Jackie!" Carter called. "Where're you going, cobber?"

The boy turned and looked at them. "Mom said I could help with the party."

Carter stared at the boy, dumbfounded, and Verdeschi smacked himself on the forehead with the palm of his hand. "The party!" they shouted in unison.

"Oh, man!" Tony exclaimed. "I forgot about it!"

"Yeah," Alan nodded, turning back toward his room. "I've gotta get a lot done. Thanks for reminding me, Jackie," he called over his shoulder.

"Yeah, thanks, buddy," Tony said to the boy. "I don't know what we'd do without you."

"I do," the boy said quickly.

"Oh?" The Italian smiled, eyebrows arching.

"Sure. You'd start looking for someone else to beat up in football!"

The elevator arrived and Jackie stepped in, giggling at Tony.

The man smiled to himself as the doors closed, then turned and headed back to Carter's quarters to help put the final touches on the party preparations.

John Koenig was feeling like an outcast. Here he was, the commander of an entire base of over two hundred ninety people and yet there didn't seem to be anyone around. Helena Russell was presently with Maya in the Psychon's quarters, discussing heaven-knew-what women discuss. Outcast Tony Verdeschi was with Alan Carter, the base's other 'bad boy', in Carter's quarters. Even Sandra Benes seemed to be avoiding him.

The thought of Verdeschi and Carter brought a smile to Koenig's dark features and he pulled out his commlock.

"Tony?" he called into the instrument.

After an unusually lengthy time, Verdeschi's face appeared on the small screen. "Yeah, John," the Security Officer answered, glancing offscreen for a second.

"Just thought I'd be the one to break the silence," Koenig smiled. "You and Alan want to join me for a drink? I'm buying. I'll even try some of your beer!" he laughed.

Verdeschi looked offscreen again, then stammered, "Uh, well...it's like this, John, we, uh...Alan and

me, well..."

"Come on, Tony, a little drink would do you good. It's a special day, you know."

Tony laughed and John heard Alan shouting in the background, "Right, John! Happy St. Patrick's Day!"

John's smile dimmed a little, but he called back, "Same to you, Alan. You're sure you won't come out?" He couldn't keep the disappointment from his voice.

"Sorry, John," Tony apologized. "We're, uh, working on something for the party tonight."

"Oh?" Koenig grinned.

"Sure. After all, St. Patrick's Day only comes once a year."

"Yeah," John sighed. "Once a year."

"Was there something else, Commander?"

It was a dismissal and Koenig knew it.

"No, that's all, Tony. See you later."

"Right," Verdeschi grinned.

The screen went blank and Koenig decided to try another call. Again there was an unusually long pause before Helena Russell appeared on the screen. He decided that he had better get his commlock checked.

"Yes, John?" She sounded a bit annoyed and he wondered what he had done this time.

"Helena, can I come over?" He sounded desperate.

"I'm sorry, John, Maya's still here...but I'm sure she wouldn't mind if you joined in our discussion. It might be fun having a man's point of view."

Koenig's face brightened. "Oh? What are you discussing?"

Russell grinned at her unseen cohort. "Hairstyles," she said, and Koenig heard the sound of smothered giggles from offscreen.

"When can you be here?" Helena continued, smiling slyly at him.

John grinned weakly and his face blushed a bright shade of red. "I think I'll skip it this time, Doctor. See you later in Command Center?"

"If Medical's not too busy, John."

"Right. Well, I guess I'll let you get back to your, uh...hairstyles."

He heard Maya's giggles again, followed by Helena's "Maya!", then the sound of Tony Verdeschi's voice asking if he could enter the Psychon's quarters. The communication ended abruptly.

Koenig shook his head. This simply wasn't his day.

He passed a communications post and glanced at the chronometer. A half hour before the main shift began. With nothing else to do, he headed for Command Center.

As the doors slid open, Koenig heard the sound of laughter that was quickly stifled. Yasko Nugami turned back to the communications console, choking back her laughter as Bill Fraser rose to his feet from the Science Officer's console. "Morning, Commander," he smiled warily. "You're early, aren't you?" He glanced at Yasko whose back was still to them and saw that her shoulders were shaking with silent giggles. He knew that he'd get no help from that quarter.

"Morning, Bill...Yasko," John replied.

"Morning, Commander," Nugami managed to sputter between giggles.

Koenig grinned at them. "What's so funny?" he asked.

Fraser blinked, stumbling for words. "I...uh...well, I just told Yasko an old Irish joke," he lied.

"Oh? I'd love to hear it. I could use some cheer today."

Yasko depressed a switch on her console as Fraser stumbled through the opening of a joke he barely remembered.

The pilot breathed a sigh of relief as Koenig's commlock beeped. "Commander?" It was Petrov.

"Yes, Alexei."

"We, uh, we've discovered a breakdown in the firing mechanism of one of the ground lasers. I thought you'd like to know about it."

"Right. I'll be right there." He replaced the commlock on his belt. "I'll have to hear the rest of that joke later, Bill," he called back as he headed out the doors.

When they had closed again, Yasko burst out laughing.

"A lot of help you were!" Fraser chastised.

"Who do you think arranged that call?"

Bill stared at her a moment then collapsed into the Command chair, laughing.

Command Center was fully operational when Koenig returned from the lunar surface. It had been a senseless trip and he vowed that the technician who had failed to replace the photon amplification cells properly would hear from him, but good. He met Yasko as he stepped from the elevator and smiled at the young technician.

"You're a little late leaving, aren't you, Yasko?"

"I, uh, I had to check on some data for Maya, Commander."

"I see. Well, see you at the party tonight," he smiled.

"Right, uh, happy St. Patrick's Day, Commander," she grinned and stepped into the elevator.

He saw her whipping out her commlock as the door closed. "She must have something important to tell someone," he thought as he walked briskly toward Command Center. The doors opened as he reached them, and Helena walked quickly out, bumping into him. "Oh, sorry, John," she smiled.

"That's all right, Helena. You can run into me anytime." He grinned at her, gazing into her eyes, and the doors closed behind her, shutting out the scurrying throng inside.

"Where are you headed?"

This time she stumbled for words. "We, uh, Ben and I...we're, uh, conducting some experiments and he wants me to take a look at the first results."

He shook his head, smiling sadly at her. "Will you be back before the shift ends?"

"I don't think so, John. I'm sorry."

"This just isn't my day," he sighed heavily.

"Day?" she repeated. "Oh, yes, now I remember." She reached up and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Happy St. Patrick's Day, John Robert!"

His smile dimmed slightly, but then a broad grin lit up his features. "And a Happy St. Patrick's Day to you, Helena Susan." He took hold of her shoulders and planted a long, tender kiss on her lips.

She pulled away, laughing. "Really, Commander! In public?"

He glanced up and down the corridor. It was empty except for them. "What public?"

"Why, me, of course!" she called as she moved off down the corridor.

He smiled and turned back to the doors. Everyone seemed totally engrossed at their consoles so he sat down at his desk, and began checking through the first of the status reports.

Verdeschi turned to Maya and saw him reading the reports. He winked at the Psychon, then exclaimed, "John! I didn't hear you come in."

Everyone turned around and there was a chorus of "Happy St. Patrick's Day!" from six different desks.

"Same to all of you," he smiled. "Anything to report?"

A half dozen "No, sir"'s were muttered as everyone returned to their boards. "Except for the laser cannon malfunction, it was a quiet night," Tony reported.

"Hmmf," Koenig exclaimed. "I want a full report on that when Petrov completes the checkout," he ordered.

"Right, John," Verdeschi replied and turned back to his own desk.

It was an uneventful morning, unusually quiet, or so it seemed to Koenig. At break, he had tried to see Helena, but she was still wrapped up in those damn experiments. Tony and Maya had gone off together and Alan had been involved with some checkouts on the Eagles.

It just wasn't the Commander's day, period.

For some strange reason, St. Patrick's Day had been designated as the holiday on Alpha, which was doubly strange considering only about one-tenth of the Alphans were of Irish descent. But each year, when the date approached, there was a scurry of activity and a bevy of parties before, during and after the day.

This year, thought, seemed specially hectic. Plus the fact that for some reason, he had been left out of the planning meetings for tonight's big bash all together. Why, he didn't know. "After all," he thought to himself as he settled back into his chair. "I am the Commander, and this is March seventeenth!"

The afternoon passed as uneventfully and quietly as the morning and when the evening shift arrived, he sighed with relief and headed for the elevator, followed closely by Maya, Sahn and Tony, who had apparently been forgiven and, along with Carter, been let back into the Alphan community as a full-fledged citizen.

"Where are you headed, John?" Tony asked as they stepped into the left.

"My quarters first," Koenig said. "And then to find Helena if she's free."

The others exchanged brief glances. Then Sahn spoke up, "Oh, um, Commander, I forgot. Dr. Russell is out at the research station with Ben Vincent. Something to do with their experiments."

John sighed deeply and shook his head, exasperated. "Did she say when they'd be back?"

"She, uh...she said they would be a while. Some new wrinkle developed."

"Right," he sighed. "Hunh, that's funny." He shook his head, smiling quizzically.

"What is it, Commander?" Maya asked.

"I noticed it earlier. Everyone seems to be having trouble speaking today. I'm sure glad this day only comes once a year!" He laughed as the elevator door opened.

The others smiled after him as he stepped out. When the door had closed again, Maya grabbed her commlock. "Helena!"

The doctor answered immediately. "Yes, Maya?"

"Red Alert!"

"Right," Russell nodded. "I'll get on it right away."

Koenig decided to try Helena again as he walked slowly towards his quarters.

"SHE IS ENGAGED," the Computer reported. "WILL YOU HOLD?"

"No, thanks. I'll try later." He laughed to himself as he replaced the commlock. "I must be getting old," he thought. "Now I'm thanking computers."

When he rounded the corner, he saw young Jackie Crawford standing beside the door to his quarters. "Hi, Jack," he called, picking up his pace. He was the only one on Alpha who didn't call the boy 'Jackie'.

"Hi, Commander John. Happy St. Patrick's Day!" He sounded winded, as if he had been in a hundred yard dash.

"Happy St. Patrick's Day to you, Jack," Koenig said as he lifted the boy onto his shoulder. "How's the party coming?"

"P-party?"

"Sure. Weren't you helping with the St. Patrick Day party for tonight?"

He heard the boy giggle and put him back down on the floor.

"Uh-huh," Jackie laughed. "But mom said I had to get out of the way for a while. I think she wanted to be alone with Uncle Dave."

Koenig grinned at the boy. He seemed so grown up at times, and the commander wished there were other children for him to play with. He pushed the thought out of his mind. This was not the time to dwell on that sad reality.

He took the boy's hand and led him into his quarters. As always, the boy made a bee-line for the bookshelves.

"What'll it be today, Jack?"

"The St. Patrick legend, please, Commander John!" The boy's eyes were alive with anticipation. Uncle Tony and Uncle Alan were fun to be with and Aunt Maya was the best teacher, but Commander John could read a story better than anyone. He acted out all the parts as he read them.

Koenig grinned as the boy handed him the old book, and they sat on the sofa. Jackie carefully opened the front cover. "Go ahead, Jack, read it to me."

The boy became very serious as he slowly and quietly read the written inscription. "'March 17, 1963. To our son, John. May you find in this, your first book, all the joy that you have given us. Learn to love books, son, and you will always have a friend. Love, Mom and Dad.'"

"That's terrific, Jack," Koenig said, hugging the child. "The St. Patrick legend, you said?"

"Yes, Commander John!" the boy cried gleefully.

"Right," the man replied, and turned to the story.

As he read Koenig thought back to the times he had acted out the stories of this book to his baby sister before she had even understood him. He remembered how she had laughed at his antics. But that was a long time ago, before the accident. A long time...

"Commander John?" he heard a small voice say.

"Wha..Oh, I'm sorry, Jack. What now?"

"I have something for you, Commander John."

"Yes?" John smiled.

"I made it," the boy replied excitedly.

"Really? What is it?"

"You've got to come up to the rec center. Mom's got it." He grabbed the Commander's hand and began pulling him toward the door.

John looked at the chronometer as they passed a communications post. The clock read 8:15. Had they really been reading that long?

"Come on, Commander John, hurry!" Jackie pleaded as he pulled Koenig along.

"All right, son, I'm coming. Don't pull my arm off!"

The boy stopped dead still and stared up at him, shocked. "I wouldn't hurt you, Commander John!"

Koenig smiled, remembering the day of the boy's birth, and the subsequent hairy encounter with Jarak and his people. He lifted the boy onto his shoulders. "I know you wouldn't, Jack. It's just an old saying a joke.

The boy giggled and they entered an elevator. "The rec center," Jackie called as the door closed. The computer responded immediately and they felt a slight nudge as the elevator began its ascent.

They exited the lift and passed a security guard in the corridor. Koenig heard the man whisper, "Zero Hour!" into his commlock. "Strange call for a trained security guard to make," John thought and decided to have a talk with Verdeschi about his section.

"Giddyup!" Jackie cried, moving his legs and patting John on the head. "Giddyup, horse, or Uncle Alan'll get his job back real fast!"

Koenig laughed and began trotting toward the rec center.

The security guard grinned after them, wondering what the rest of Alpha would think of this distinctly uncommanderish Koenig. He turned as the elevator opened again, depositing four more partygoers, all dressed in their best. They smiled after the boy and his "horse".

"Does he know?" one of them asked.

"Sh!" the guard warned.

Koenig slowed as they neared the doors; he'd suddenly remembered about the party. "Oh, well," he thought. "I can always go back and change." Five hours later, he would look back on that thought and realize once again that not even Moonbase commanders know everything.

The doors slid open to reveal a darkened, nearly black room.

"What the..." he started.

"Happy Birthday, Commander John!" Jackie shouted as the lights flickered and came full on.

Koenig stared dumbfounded at the scene before him.

"Happy Birthday!" rang through the hall as two hundred plus voices were joined as one in the centuries old salutation. The walls were covered in bright orange and green crepe paper, and at the far end of the room, raised on a dias, was a long banquet table loaded down with Alphan food.

Tony, Alan, Maya and Helena moved over to the new arrivals, each grinning as broadly as the Cheshire Cat from Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland. "Happy Birthday, John!" they said in unison.

Carter reached up and pulled Jackie from the Commander's shoulders. "Did I do all right, Uncle Alan?" the boy asked, grinning happily at the man.

"You did great, cobber."

"Uncle Tony?"

"Terrific, buddy."

"Did I keep him long enough, Doctor Helena?"

"Just right, Jackie. The next time we need a staller, you're our man."

The boy giggled and asked Carter to put him down. Then he scurried away to find his mother.

"What's the matter, Commander?" Maya laughed. "Cat got your tongue?"

Koenig just grinned and shook his head.

"I don't believe it!" Carter laughed. He turned to the throng behind him. "We finally found a way to shut him up!"

"Maybe we'll try it on you, ol' buddy," Verdeschi shouted over the crowd's laughter, slapping Carter affectionately on the back. "That would really be a silence much needed. December the nineteenth may be the quietest day this year!"

They all laughed, and Helena took John's arm, leading him toward the head table. As the crowd thinned out, John saw other table, set at right angles to the head table, all laden with food and gaily decorated. Jackie and Cynthia Crawford were already seated at the head table, along with Sandra Benes, Bill and Annette Fraser, and Dave Reilly, the Irish cowboy.

"How'd you manage all this?" Koenig asked when they were seated at the center of the table.

"Sue, Dave, Annette and Bill deserve all the credit for the decorations," Russell explained. "Oh, and Jackie of course. And the rest are the results of the combined efforts of Maya, Tony, Alan, Sahn and yours truly." She smiled and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"The rest?"

"Hm hmm," she smiled mysteriously.

A loud banging halted further conversation and they turned to find Verdeschi pounding with a gavel on the podium to their right. The crowd settled into their seats and an expectant silence fell in the center.

"All right," Tony said into the podium's long, thin microphone, his voice booming through the hall. "We have a lot planned for tonight, so let's get the meal out of the way."

A loud cheer rang through the hall. "But first," Verdeschi said over the roar, "A toast!" He lifted a glass of amber liquid and the cheer transformed itself into a loud moan. "Oh, come on! You haven't even tried it yet." The moan only increased.

Verdeschi glared defiantly at them and raised the mug to his lips. His eyes widened in delight as he sipped the beer. "Ah, ambrosia!"

Everyone looked skeptical, staring first at the Italian brewmaster, and then at the glasses in front of them. Carter finally spoke up. "It may be the drink of the gods, Tony, but we've tasted your brew before and we're not immortal."

The crowd snickered as Tony's temper flared, but his rebuttal, and any other action he was planning was halted when a hand descended onto his shoulder. He turned to look into a dark, somber face and eyes that twinkled with undisguised mirth.

"Cool it, Tony," John ordered, trying to keep a straight face.

"But, John, this beer really is good!"

"It should be," Maya murmured from her seat between Verdeschi's empty chair and Carter, "Enough people worked on it..."

"Maya!" Carter warned.

Verdeschi looked at them suspiciously. "What's that supposed to mean?" The silence in the hall was absolute.

"Well, you see, it's like this, Tony, uh..." The Australian faltered lamely.

"Well?" Tony queried, puzzlement turning to anger.

Maya smiled weakly. "Well, you did have it set up in here, and...uh..."

"Will someone please explain what they're talking about?" Verdeschi interrupted angrily.

Maya and Alan looked pleadingly at Helena Russell, who nodded and rose from her seat. The Psychon and Australian smiled at each other. If anyone could handle Tony in a situation like this, it was Helena. "Now, Tony," she started. "Take it easy. It's not that serious..."

"Not that serious!" Tony shouted. "That recipe was perfect! I know it was! Now they're telling me that my recipe was tampered with!"

"Not 'tampered with', Tony, just revised a little."

"What's the difference?" His face was beet red.

"Well, we didn't change the ratio of hops to barley and yeast, we just added to it." She smiled sweetly at him.

"What did you add?" he demanded, glaring up and down the head table. To his dismay, the only one who didn't look guiltily away was the commander, who shrugged his shoulders and delivered one of Verdeschi's own "I had nothing to do with it" smiles.

Tony threw up his arms in exasperation. "Who started it?" he asked savagely and saw heads turning toward the Psychon, then turn quickly away to search the floor and ceiling.

"Maya!"

The woman rose to her feet. "Now, wait a minute, Tony..."

"Maya!" He started toward her, but was brought up short as two hands grabbed him from behind. It was Koenig again. "Cool it, Tony!" he repeated. "This is my party, and if anybody's going to wreck it, it's going to be me. Now, get this show on the road, or I'll have you confined to your quarters--in solitary!" he added with mock severity and glanced behind the Italian to Maya, who returned his wink.

"Oh, all right, John. You can let me go," Verdeschi conceded.

The commander released him and he took one step toward the Psychon. "And you--just wait'll I get you alone!"

The crowd burst into laughter and Maya winked at Tony. No one had any doubt about who would come out ahead in that confrontation.

The Italian shook his head sadly and returned to the podium. "So," he said quietly. "You're telling me this really isn't my beer, right?"

Heads nodded, and Tony continued, "Then what happened to my brew?"

Maya lifted the glass in front of her and held it up to him. "Here's some, Tony."

He took it from her and held it up to the light to compare with the first glass. The first was definitely of a better quality, pure amber in color with no bubbles in sight. Tony's brew was darker, and tell-tale bubbles dotted the sides of the glass. Verdeschi sighed heavily and raised the amber liquid to his lips. He sipped it and sputtered at the foul taste. Without thinking, he raised the first glass and drank half the remaining beer. The crowd waited expectantly.

"Well, Tony?" Koenig asked.

"As I said," the Italian laughed. "Ambrosia!"

The crowd roared in pleasure as glasses were raised in toasts. "OK!" Verdeschi shouted over the noise. "We'll try it again. A toast!"

The crowd quieted down and raised what was left in their glasses. The Italian cleared his throat and began.

"Here's to John, who's led us on
Even when we didn't want to;
He beat our brains and gave us pains
Places where I cannot tell you!"

The crowd roared even louder. Then it was Maya's turn.

"Here's to John, who's led us on
Into dark and eerie places;
We fought back and gave a whack
To aliens with the strangest faces!"

She transformed into a duplicate of Verdeschi and the crowd roared so loud that the sound was almost deafening. The Italian gave Maya another "Wait'll I get you alone" stare.

When the noise had died down, and Maya had reverted to her true form, Helena finished the toast.

"Here's to John, that man of brawn
Who's got it in all places right;
Today he's fifty, and if he's nifty,
He'll get my present late tonight."

The hoots and laughter filled the center as the quartet received a standing ovation. And the object of all the festivities laughed and clapped the loudest of all.

Finally the Alphans were seated and the meal began. The hydroponics section had developed a new strain of soy bean and a flavoring that almost made the "meat" palatable, so the meal was at least passable for a change.

"You didn't really think I'd forget your birthday, did you?" Helena asked as they ate.

"Well, I do remember what happened August fifth..." Koenig winked at her.

"That doesn't count, John," she argued.

"Forgetting your own birthday doesn't count?" he laughed.

"I...well..."

"You know, Helena, I've discovered something today."

"Hmm?"

"Yes. When people get nervous, they stammer a lot."

"And when they're excited, they can't find their tongues at all," she laughed back.

"How did you remember?"

She laughed again, and removed her commlock from the hidden pocket she included in all her dress designs. She held it up before them. "Computer," she called.

"THE DATE IS MARCH 17, 2007," the mechanical voice reported. "TWO THOUSAND SEVEN HUNDRED FORTY TWO DAYS AFTER LEAVING EARTH ORBIT. TODAY IS COMMANDER JOHN KOENIG'S FIFTIETH BIRTHDAY. TOMORROW IS THE FOURTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MARRIAGE OF COMPUTER TECHNICIAN BRIAN TUMAS AND SECURITY GUARD ANDREA KUCHENKO."

"That's great!" John laughed. "How'd you do that?"

"It's all Maya's doing," she explained. "Every time I call the computer, it answers with the date and days since leaving Earth orbit. Unfortunately, it answers with the date even when I'm calling for some other information."

"When did she do that?"

"Last week. And, believe me, it's the best thing that's happened to me in ten years."

"Oh, really?" he said with mock indignation. "You keep that up, and I might not accept your present!"

"Ha, ha!" she said, and they both broke into laughter.

"Oh, and about that malfunction on the laser cannon earlier..." she added.

"Yeah?"

"Well, it wasn't someone's error. Yasko and Alexei had it all set up. If you became suspicious or got too close for comfort, she was to signal, and he'd get you away for some make-believe emergency. The cannon wasn't really out of order. Alexei dislodged the photon cells when he opened the panel, and fixed them right before he closed it."

"I didn't see him do it!" Koenig was astonished.

"That's just one of his talents. You should see him with a deck of cards. He's a real sleight-of-hand artist."

"I'll say. And who set Jack on me?"

She smiled coyly. "I have to take credit for that one. We had all the decorations in Medical and when you told Maya that you were heading that way, she called me and I sent Jackie. From the way he describes your stories, you must be a terrific story teller. Do you really act out the parts?"

"I'll give you a sample later," he smiled wickedly. "How about the story of the May Day festival?"

"You're a little early, aren't you?"

"Aw, come on. It's my birthday!"

"Yeah, so it is. Well, you know what they used to say... 'You're not getting older, you're getting...' Actually, you are getting older!" she said, her eyes widening in mock horror.

"You'll pay for that one!" he promised, and gave her a whack on the ankle.

Her retort was interrupted by Verdeschi, who was once again pounding on the podium. "Doesn't he ever sit down?" John whispered to Helena, who giggled and took a swipe at his ankle. He winced and took her hand, squeezing it gently.

"All right! All right!" Verdeschi shouted. "Now that we've got the incidentals out of the way, let's get down to the main event. Maya?"

The Psychon rose and left the hall. In a minute, the lights dimmed and a picture flashed on the rec center's movie screen.

It was a picture of a baby on a bare skin rug. There were whistles from the audience and Verdeschi pronounced, "John Koenig--this is your life!"

"Where'd you get that picture?" Koenig whispered to Russell.

"From the computer files."

"Since when does Computer have pictures of bare-skinned babies? Especially my picture?"

"Didn't you know? There are pictures of everyone on the base, from their earliest photos to today, on file in the memory banks."

"Oh, really? I can't wait to see your baby pictures. I bet you were the cutest little thing," he whispered silkily.

"You better believe it!"

The picture on the screen clicked and a night view of the Brooklyn Bridge, with the New York City skyline in the background, replaced it. "Born in a humble hamlet one dark winter night as half the population got quietly drunk on Irish coffee..." Verdeschi recited.

The slide clicked again, and the audience roared as a picture of a wild west saloon brawl appeared.

"That's from Dave Reilly's collection," Helena whispered.

Carter took over. "You attended a small New England college where you enjoyed a quiet academic life..."

A picture of the huge MIT campus flashed on the screen and was followed by one of Koenig when he was about twenty years old. The young commander was sitting before a music stand, a tenor saxophone in his hands. And on his lap was Diana Morris.

"How'd you do that?" John Koenig demanded as his face blushed a bright red.

"You mean it happened?" Helena Russell laughed.

"I...well...I..."

She motioned with her head toward the door where Diana Morris appeared and began making her way toward him. "John, darling!" she said as she planted herself on his lap and began kissing his face. She took his head in her hands and planted a long, sensuous kiss on his lips.

"Diana!" Koenig floundered. "I mean, Maya! Cut that out! And get off me!"

"Oh, pooh!" she pouted, but complied anyway, her face a tragedy of rejection. She reverted to her true form and burst out laughing as the hall rocked with the sound of two hundred laughing voices.

"All right! All right!" Verdeschi shouted, and the crowd quieted down once again. "Sahn?" he said, and the communications technician moved to the podium.

"And then came Moonbase Alpha, and the start of all our misadventures. Since Breakaway, we have had many little disturbances that have interrupted our days. Chief among these was our acquisition of the psycho from Psychon!"

There were giggles and guffaws from the audience as a picture of Maya flashed on the screen. Helena leaned over and whispered, "Tony wrote that one," in Koenig's ear. Beside Tony, the 'psycho' was giving him a scathing look.

"And so," Sahn continued, "Six and one half years after Breakaway, we're here to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of your Breakout."

The crowd groaned and John leaned over to Helena. "Who wrote this stuff?"

She laughed quietly and motioned toward Carter and Verdeschi who smiled weakly and shrugged their shoulders. Koenig grinned. "I guess Gilbert & Sullivan don't have to worry about competition from that team!"

Helena smile, then turned as Sahn called her. She stood and walked to the podium, holding out her hand to Jackie Crawford. He grinned and joined her, carrying a large tube shaped object in his hands. "We've had a lot of fun in the past hour," she said. "And now Jackie has a presentation to make."

The boy smiled up at her and walked over to Koenig. He handed the package to the man. "This is for you, Commander John. Because we love you."

Koenig grinned and swallowed at the sudden lump that caught in his throat. He carefully tore off the wrapping paper and untied the ribbon he found encircling the scroll within. As he unrolled it he saw that it was a collection of papers wrapped around two pieces of authentic-looking 'ancient' scrolls. There were, in fact, ten pages, and, somewhere on one of them, every Alpha had written or drawn a message to the Commander. Some were witty, some serious, but the very first page said it all.

The artist had not tried for perfection. In fact, it probably wouldn't have been accepted by a third rate art show, but to John Koenig it was beautiful. In the center was a drawing of the planet Earth and surrounding it were drawings of a shamrock, a knight in full armor, a lumberjack and a blue ox, and at the bottom was the command insignia. Above the artwork was written a message in very careful lettering. Koenig blinked at the tears that suddenly welled in his eyes.

"Don't you like it, Commander John?" Jackie asked.

Koenig looked up at the boy and smiled. "Oh, no Jack, I love it. It's beautiful!" He reached out and pulled the boy to him. "Thanks, Jack."

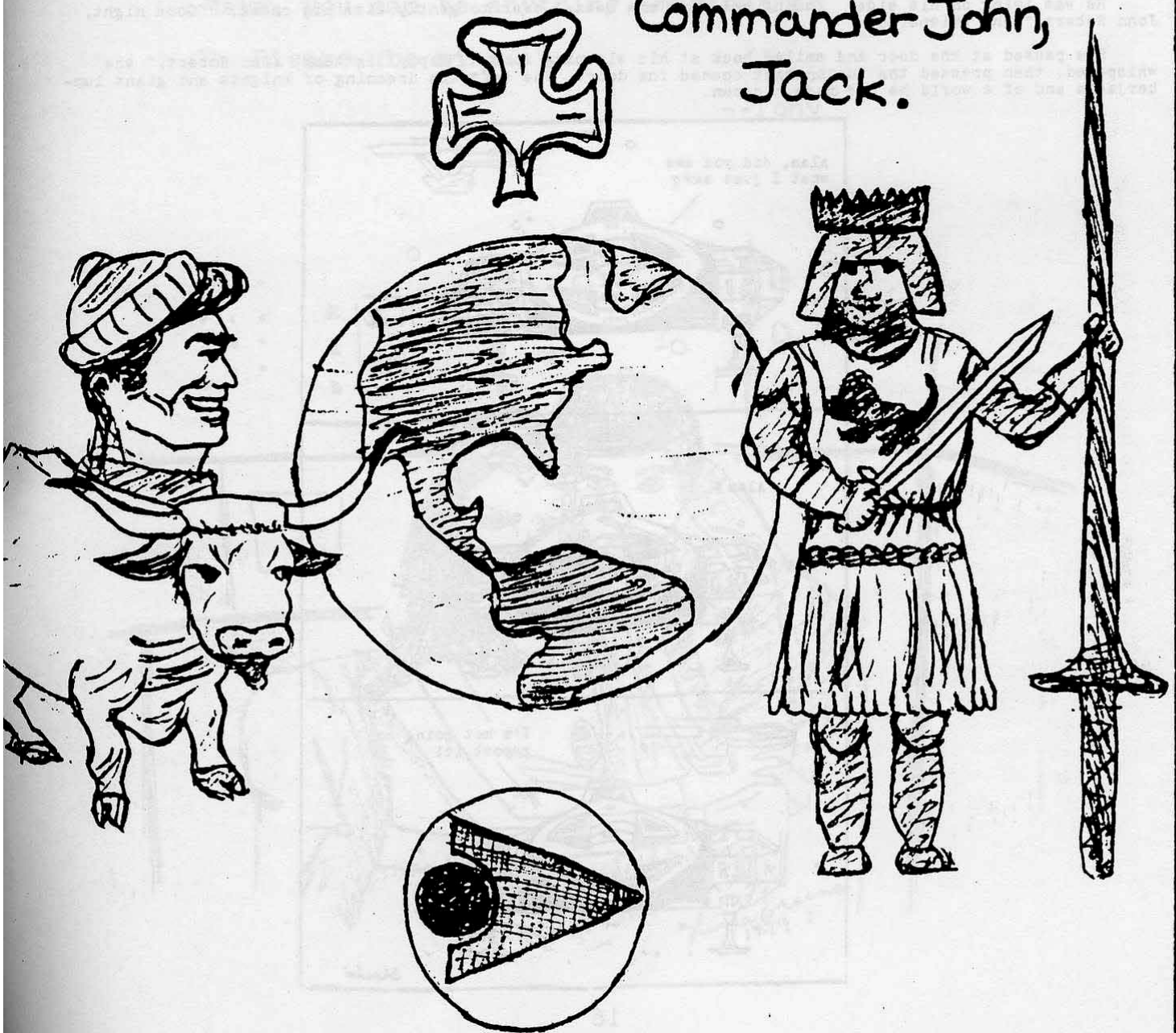
The boy returned the hug and turned around in John's arms. He leaned back against the commander and explained the drawings. "The shamrock's for St. Patrick's Day, and the knight's King Arthur. That's Paul Bunyan and his ox, Blue, and the other one's for you, Commander John."

To Commander John,

Because you helped me love a world
I never knew.

If I could add another legend to
your book it would be about the man
who gave me the most wonderful
thing in the world-himself.

I love you
Commander John,
Jack.



"They're really terrific, Jack. You're really becoming quite an artist!"

"Aw, Commander John," the boy blushed, pulling away. He turned back and kissed Koenig on the cheek, then ran to his mother.

The rest of the evening was like a dream to Koenig. And when he and Helena finally entered his quarters it was close to one-thirty in the morning. They sat on the sofa and read through each page of the scroll once again, examining each person's message, this time from the last page forward.

As they paused to share Jackie's page, Koenig handed her the scroll and walked over to his MIT diploma which hung above the bookcase. He smiled at her and took the framed document off the wall. He carried it back to the sofa and together they replaced the paper within with Jackie's page.

After hanging it on the wall, they stood together, holding each other for a long while. The spell was broken when Koenig lifted a hand to stifle a yawn. She looked up at him and smiled. "Yes, I'd say that it's definitely past your bedtime."

"Is that an offer?" he said, and pulled her to him.

"No!" she cried in mock horror, pushing him away. They laughed and he pulled her to him and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

"Now, go on," she ordered. "Get changed."

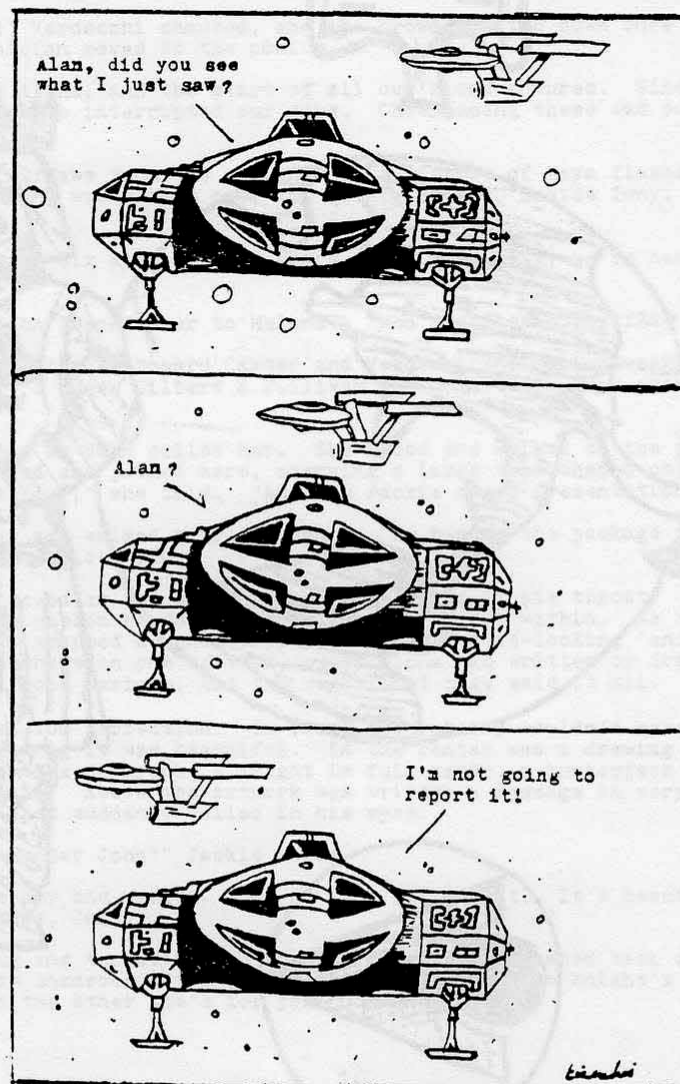
"Yes, Milady," he bowed, backing from the room, bowing gracefully as he left. "At once, Milady, at once!"

She smiled demurely until the door closed between them, then laughed quietly to herself. She sat on the bed and waited. In less than five minutes he emerged from the bathroom, clad in the Alphan blue pajamas. He smiled and silently climbed in the other side of the bed, pulling the bed sheet over him.

"Good night, Helena," he said, already half asleep.

He was lying on his side, facing her, and she leaned over to gently kiss his cheek. "Good night, John Robert," she whispered.

She paused at the door and smiled back at his sleeping form. "Happy Birthday, John Robert," she whispered, then pressed the button that opened the door. She left him dreaming of knights and giant lumberjacks and of a world he had made his own.



Alien Love

by J. M. Hebert

If I had one wish in all the world

I could not wish for money

or gold

or women

or the world itself

If I had but one wish in all the world

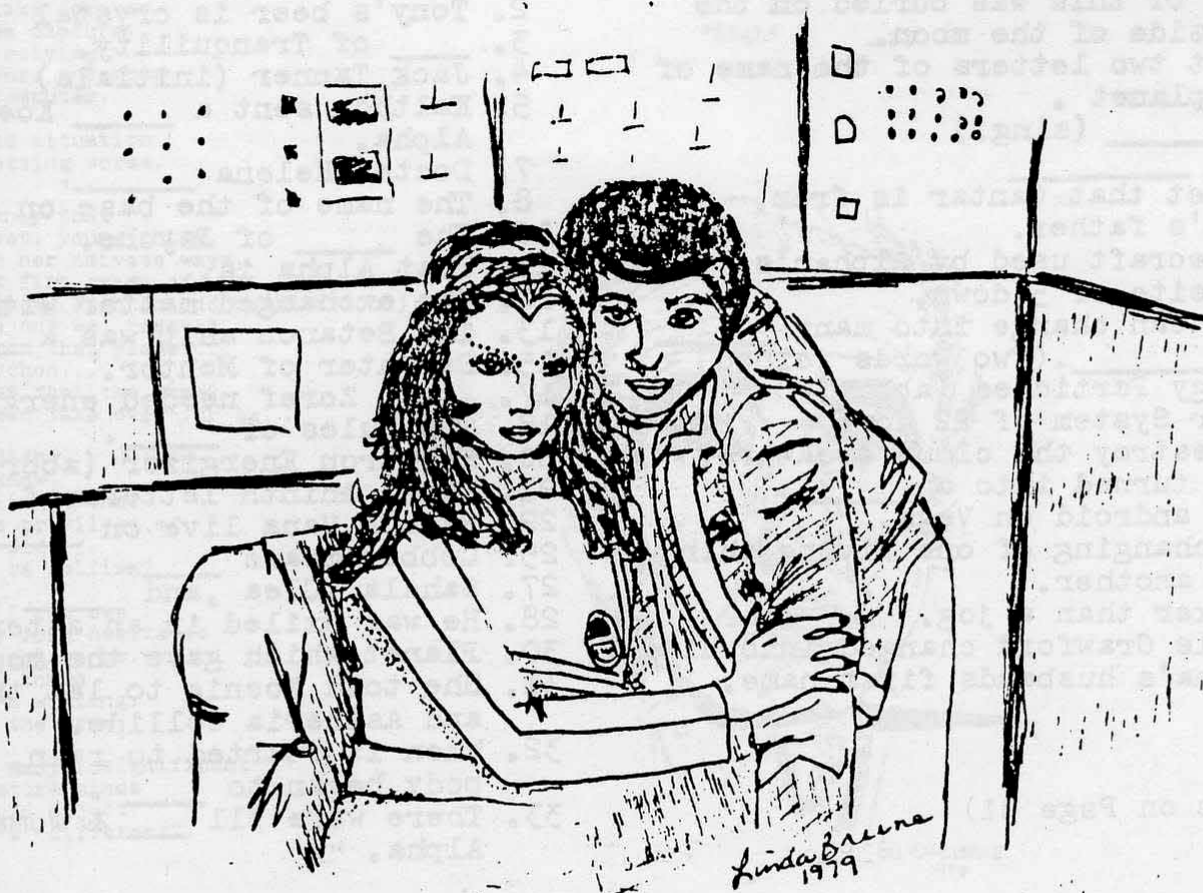
I would wish to be with you,

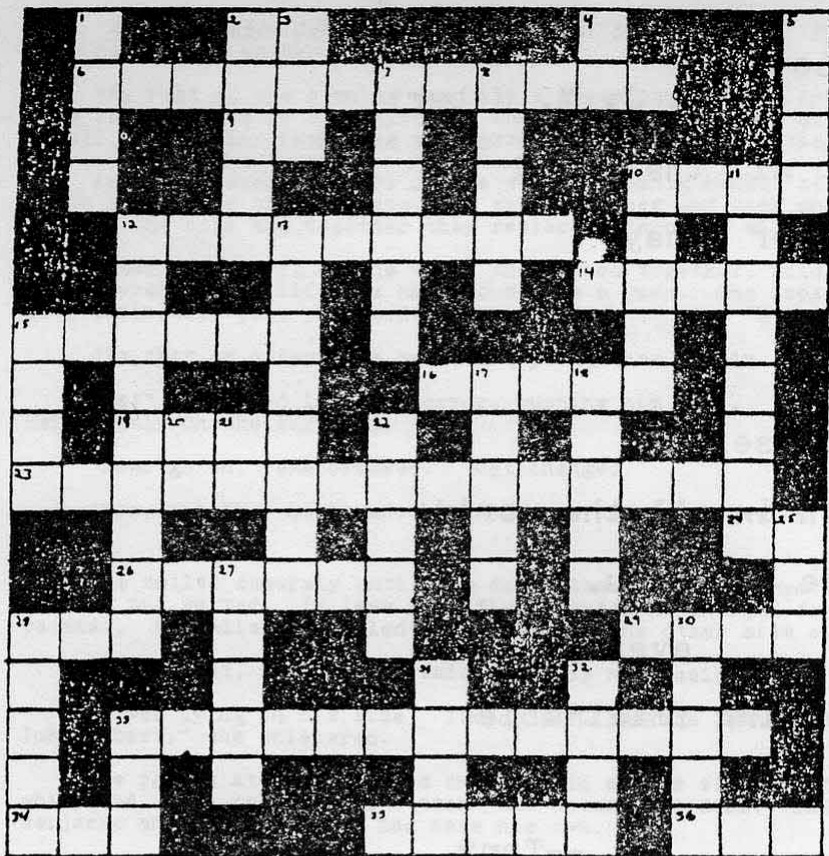
evermore....

Maya, you can be anything imaginable;

Please, be mine.

--Tony





SPACE:1999

MINDBENDERS

#1 JOURNEY CROSSWORD

BY PATRICK ZIMMERMAN

Words used in the crossword are from SPACE:1999. There are names of people, planets, and other related words. Some are tricky, be careful.

ACROSS

2. Groton System (abbr.)
6. Much of this was buried on the far side of the moon.
9. First two letters of the name of our planet.
10. War _____ (sing.)
12. Tony _____
14. Planet that Cantar is from.
15. Maya's father.
16. Spacecraft used by Alphan's.
19. Opposite of 5 down.
23. Maya can change into many _____. (Two words joined)
24. Energy Particles (abbr.)
26. Solar System of 22 down.
28. To destroy the cloud creature, Maya turned into a _____.
29. Male android on Vega.
33. The changing of one living thing into another.
34. Quicker than a jog.
35. Jackie Crawford changed into him.
36. Helena's husbands first name.

DOWN

1. Ultima Thule is covered with it.
2. Tony's beer is crystal _____.
3. _____ of Tranquility.
4. Jack Tanner (initials)
5. Kalthon sent a _____ Koenig to Alpha.
7. Doctor Helena _____.
8. The name of the base on the moon.
10. The _____ of Psyche.
11. What Alpha is.
12. Who exchanged matter with Sherm.
13. The Betanon ship was a _____.
15. Daughter of Mentor.
17. _____ Zoref needed energy.
18. The Rules of _____.
20. Electron Energizer (abbr.)
21. First & ninth letters of 23 A.
22. Raan & Vana live on _____.
25. Cobber means _____.
27. Sahala, Clea, and _____.
28. He was exiled in an asteroid.
30. Planet which gave the moon air.
31. She told Koenig to let the moon and Astheria collide.
32. When it started to rain, everybody began to _____.
33. There were 311 _____ & women on Alpha.

(Answers on Page 31)

Reflections of a Tired, Aging Scientist

By Kathi Lynn Higley

Sigh

Seems harder everyday
To rouse this aging body
Of mine
Out of its warm cocoon
Of bedclothing
Come the start of a new day.

(I'd say "morning"--
but even "day"
Is an inaccurate term/
How can there
Be a "day" or
Even a "morning"
On a runaway former planetary satellite
Meandering through
The eternal night
Of the cosmos?)

Thank God
The mind is firmer
Than the flesh.
A switch from
The old saw:
"The flesh is willing/
But the mind is weak"
For which I'm grateful.
But even that's a
Non-tangible variable.
Computations go awry
Or take forever
To capture.
I'm relying
More and more
On Computer.

A bad situation
Getting worse.

If only that
Sweet, young thing,
With her naive ways,
But firm grasp of
Science (such an odd combination!);
The one we rescued
From that planet...
Psychon...
Was that the name?
Would take over for me.

Selfish
I know.
But isn't that
The privilege of
The old?
To be selfish?

But I can see
Why John hesitates
To replace me.
God knows
I'M willing.
But the crew.

So many insignificant
Immature minds
Would object.
She's "different".

Oh, they'd robe
Their small-mindedness
Say it was their fondness
Of yours truly
And anger at the thought
That I can be replaced
That motivated their objections.

But not so.

I just hope John sees
The light.
Before it's too late.
Before I make a mistake.
A mistake that costs lives.
I'm not God, you know.
Far from it.
But John (God bless him)
Can be as narrow-minded
As the rest.
Too trigger-happy sometimes.
That worries me.
But I guess I'd do the same
If I were in his shoes.

God, but it's hard to
Get up in the morning
(and so what if the term
Is inaccurate
Let it stand...)

Sigh



by CHRISSE
1978

Stress Factor

by Karla Von Huben

The barren speck that whirled through the everlasting night of deep space was totally insignificant when compared to the vastness through which it moved; but this seemingly inconsequential bit of dust--a stark, barren asteroid in fact--was precious beyond measure, for it was the home of over 250 people from planet Earth. Earth's moon, to give the speck its rightful name, had been journeying aimlessly through the stars for over three years, as time is measured on Earth, and in that time it had never encountered a planet suitable or safe for the fragile human life that inhabited its one installation: Moonbase Alpha.

Moonbase Alpha, man's greatest peacetime achievement, sprawled across the face of the crater Pluto, just north of the Sea of Showers. Built primarily as a "watchdog" for the nuclear waste that was stored on the Moon, and as a jumping-off point for deep space probes and their crews, it was a fully-equipped, fully-functional space station, well-designed to withstand the rigors of that environment. There had been skepticism when the plans for the base were announced, and some talk of cost-cutting. After all the thing wasn't going to fly, so why did it require such solid construction? It wasn't as if there were any moon tremors to worry the engineers, or any weather, and the chances of a meteorite strike were one in a billion...but the grizzled Space Service engineers who built the Moonbase knew better than the politicians just how hostile the environment was, and so they built Moonbase Alpha as strong as they possibly could, because one could never be quite sure what might happen in space.

And on September 13, 1999, their worst fears were realized. For on that grim day, the nuclear waste dumps which Alpha guarded did what the "experts" said would never happen. They exploded in the most fearful detonation ever witnessed, and sent the Moon and its helpless human cargo hurtling into space. Only the strength and solid construction of Alpha saved its inhabitants lives.

Once they sorted themselves out, most of the Alphans felt that since they had survived one disaster, they would continue to do so, and it was just a question of time until they either found a new home, or returned to their old one. The latter alternative grew more untenable by the hour, until even the most fanatical return-to Earth diehards had to admit defeat, and join their companions in the task of turning the base into a space-worthy vehicle--a vehicle which they would use to help them in their search for a habitable planet. But that search had been continuing for over three years now, and the end was nowhere in sight. Then, one day...

"Commander! Long range sensors have picked up a faint reading. It could be a planet, perhaps a solar system. I can't tell much, but there's something almost directly ahead of us." The startled exclamation from Sandra Benes brought most of the other Command Center personnel to their feet, watching expectantly. Sandra, a tiny, almond-eyed, elfin beauty (or so said Paul Morrow, although he was prejudiced on the subject) tuned her controls until she was bringing in the clearest possible signal. Even greatly refined and on as high a gain as she could manage, the information coming in was useless, for all that is indicated was that there was some sort of mass in front of them. But at least it represented a chance to find a planet, so the Alphans crossed their collective fingers and settled down to wait out the time necessary to resolve the signal into meaningful data. John Koenig, commander of the moonbase, heaved a sigh and thought that perhaps, please, dear God, this time the mysterious signal would resolve itself into readings that indicated a breathable atmosphere, a livable temperature, a fertile soil--in short, a habitable planet, and the end of their journey. Bidding Sandra and Paul a good night and a quiet watch, he went to his quarters for some much needed rest. "If only it's a habitable planet. If only...if only.. if...ooooonllllyyy..." He was asleep.

Five days after the discovery, the object was close enough so that a detailed scan could be done, and all the senior base personnel had turned out to watch. John Koenig, commander; Dr. Helena Russell, Chief Medical Officer; Victor Bergman, Scientific Advisor; Maya, a lovely alien from the planet Psychon, Science Officer; Tony Verdeschi, Security Chief and First Office; Alan Carter, Chief Eagle Pilot and head of Reconnaissance; Paul Morrow, Launch Controller and Chief Executive; David Kano, Computer Chief and head of Technical Section; and Sandra Benes, Communications Chief and head of Communications Section, whose discovery had prompted the flurry of excitement. For not only were the 'heavies' present, but it seemed as though everyone who could fit through Command Center's sliding doors had packed in, to be sure they got a first-hand look at what could be their new home.

And they got a first-hand look--at impossible winds swirling through an amethane-ammonia atmosphere at over 300 kph; at a planet whose gravity was 200 times that of Earth; at a freezing, cruel and utterly uninhabitable gas giant of a planet that was not only unsuitable, but was totally hostile to them. There was no need for words--the images on the screen told the story all too clearly. The disappointed Alphans, deprived of landfall once again, tried to cover their distress with feeble jokes and wisecracks, but for the most part it was a silent crowd that filed morosely out of Command Center and went doggedly back to work. And that might have been the end of their encounter with Cassandra (for that was the name some wit had given the planet, in memory of the Trojan sorceress who was always prophesying doom), if it hadn't been for Victor Bergman and Helena Russell.

Helena and Victor were both dedicated professionals, and though Helena's dedication was to medicine and Victor's to physics, they were alike in many ways. Intelligent, determined (some said stubborn), caring. And in many ways, their specialties overlapped as well. One of the things they had in common was a need for the rare metal Tiranium. A coating of Tiranium insured that the valves in Helena's experimental mechanical hearts and the valves in Victor's experimental atomic engines worked smoothly. And since the metal was scarce, they had insisted that every new planet, system or possible source they encountered be scanned for Tiranium, present company most definitely included. To their vast surprise, Cassandra did not disappoint them--readings showed large deposits of Tiranium present.

John Koenig looked from Helena to Victor in disbelief. "You really mean that planet--" (he

gestured to the communications post, whose monitor was still relaying images of Cassandra's deadly atmosphere) "--may be of some use after all?"

"John, it's a wonder! Scanners show large enough deposits of Tiranium to supply Alpha for years to come, and the deposits are on or near the surface. You know how vital Tiranium is to us--without it, Alpha would die. Here's a chance to replenish our stock, and it's a chance we can't waste."

"Vicotr, the last reports I heard indicated only that gaseous ball. Are you telling me then that the Tiranium is present in the atmosphere...?"

Victor cut him off. "There's a solid core at the center of that monster. It's very dense--the gravity is stupendous--but it's there. And it's huge. It has a radius of at least 30,000 miles, and that's after penetrating almost 20,000 miles of gas. In many ways, Cassandra is a cousin to Jupiter in our own system, except, of course, Cassandra's core is solid while the Jovan core is a liquid metallic hydrogen. Also, Jupiter's metallic core is covered with 18,000 miles of liquid hydrogen, with another 600 miles of gas above that--that liquid layer is one of many reasons a manned landing could never be made on Jupiter. The atmosphere of Cassandra, however, violent and deadly as it is, is gaseous all the way to the surface. All we have to do is figure out a way to get the metal without killing ourselves in the process. But I promise you it's worth the risk, because it's there, John. The Tiranium is there."

It was obvious that Bergman was sincere, but Koenig felt compelled to ask again. "Are you sure, Victor? Absolutely sure, with no possibility of error? Before I order a crew anywhere near that hell, I have to be certain that they're not going on some wild goose chase that will end in their being crushed to death or poisoned by gas."

Yet another life-and-death situation had been placed in his hands. It was the commander's job, he knew, to order others into danger, and to accept the responsibility and sometimes the grief and resentment of the others when missions failed and loved ones were lost. A lonely responsibility and one which seemed to weigh more and more heavily on him as time went on. A weight which set him more and more apart from the others, which put touches of grey in his hair years before they should have appeared and cut deepening lines into his face. But it was one which he would have to carry until they found their home. There was no one else, and he, more than any other person, was identified by most Alphans as being the reason they had survived. He was Alpha, and he knew it.

"John, Victor's right." It was Helena who spoke: Helena, whose beauty always moved him; whose quick intelligence and wit charmed him; whose fantastic skill had more than once saved him; who was, for him, like an oasis of peace in a desert of fatiguing responsibility. Helena, his much beloved Helena, who would be his wife if--when--they ever had a landfall...

He jerked himself out of his reverie and re-focused on what she was saying. "...scanner test, and each one comes up positive. Maya has confirmed the readings and re-checked Computer's calculations. This is neither a scanner malfunction or Computer error, John. The metal is there. All we have to do is go and get it."

"So Computer agrees with the scanners, and Maya has rechecked the findings. I'll bet Kano loved that!"

Helena and Victor laughed together. "He was upset, but the readings were confirmed. Now, do we go?"

"We go. Just let me gather my thoughts and pick a landing team."

Helena's statement that all they needed to do was go and get the Tiranium proved optimistic in the extreme. Another check was made of the planet's gravity, hoping against hope that somehow the first readings were wrong. But the latest check only confirmed that Cassandra's gravity was more than 200 times Earth-normal, more than enough to crush an Eagle and anyone in it. Since a manned landing was then out of the question, the only alternative was a robot ship.

"Victor, how long would it take the Techs to beef up an Eagle to withstand that pressure? We're soon going to be out of range." Koenig, impatient to get the mission underway now that the decision had been made, was in no mood to listen to excuses for possible delays. "We waited too long to make that damn scan; if we want to complete this mission, we've got to go now."

"We're closer than you think to having the ships ready. You remember when we applied my force field idea to one of the Eagles when we encountered the Tritonians? Since then, I've refined several field generators and they're in good working order. It's a matter of less than two hours to install them in the Eagles. And while the electronics techs are doing that, I'll have the structural engineers reinforce the hulls with a new, lightweight material we've been working on. The molecular bonding is so strong that it's almost impossible to destroy this stuff--even lasers don't punch through. Both birds will be on the pads in four hours."

"Thanks, that is good news. You're sure that you can protect the manned ship as well as the robot?"

"Since they won't be attempting a landing, the field generator alone would be enough to protect them completely, but I'm going to have the material installed on that ship as well. With the field, the new material, and boosting internal pressure, Eagle Four should come through beautifully. John, I promise--both ships, ready to go in four hours, and both will return safely."

Just over three and one half hours later, candidates for the landing team assembled in Command Center. Koenig was still somewhat reluctant to send a manned Eagle as well as the robot ship, but had been talked around by Victor and Helena--and Alan Carter--who had pointed out that the force of the winds, plus the inherent trickiness of the Eagles, plus the way the readings seemed to shift location as Cassandra's magnetic field fluctuated, made it impossible to control the robot miner from Alpha. It would have to be controlled from a much closer location, and that could only mean another Eagle. "You've got to have a pilot, a good one. In fact, you're going to need the best. That's why I should be in command of this mission, with Bill Fraser as co-pilot." There was no question in anyone's mind that Carter was the best pilot on Moonbase, or that he was right to insist that he be in command. "Besides, there may be dangers down there that we don't know about, and you'll need the best to get the landing team back safely in case we have to run for it."

"Okay, Alan, you've convinced me. You and Bill go as flight crew. Now for the rest of the team. I've fed all the mission parameters into Computer, and she has kindly given me her recommendations." It was so nice, he reflected, to be able to 'pass the buck', even if it was passed to a machine. "Since the planet is apparently uninhabited, we can dispense with a whole host of xenologists, historians, cultural experts, biologists, and like. Since there is no vegetation at all, botany can stay on Alpha as well." He grinned at Shermeen Williams' disappointment. "Fields that will need to be covered are: medical, geology, mining, meteorology, climatology and chemistry."

"What about security, for crying out loud?" Tony spoke up. "You can't tell for sure what--"

Koenig cut him off. "Remember, the manned ship is not going to land. It will only serve to control the robot Eagle. And I can't believe that anything that lives in that murk, if anything could, would even recognize us as life forms. We'd be as alien to them as they are to us. No, Tony, I can't see any need for Security, and I refuse to put anyone at risk unless absolutely necessary. You can help me mind the store."

A startled murmur went around. Was the commander going to stay behind? The question was answered as Koenig continued: "The landing team will be: Flight crew, Carter and Fraser; Medical, Dr. Helena Russell. Geologist, Dave Reilly; Mining, Patrick Osgood. Meteorology and Climatology, Victor Bergman; and Chemistry, Maya. You are the best qualified people in your fields, and nothing but the best will do. Even if some of you could be considered a little overbearing--" this last directed with a grin at Dave Reilly, a genial, if loud, self-proclaimed Irish-Texan expert on just about everything, especially geology and women; "--and some of you a little dreamy..." to Pat Osgood, who had panicked Alpha some months back with his visions of its fiery destruction; "...you're all the best. Good luck."

"Wait, John." It was Victor. "There's no need for both Maya and myself to go. I'm an expert in chemistry, too. I can substitute for her in all three fields. Besides, I haven't been off this base in months. And..." He held up a hand to stop John from interrupting. "She's agreed to let me have my fun."

Koenig looked at Maya, who grinned and nodded. "We even flipped a coin. So, how about it?"

Knowing Victor's determination in some things, and since Maya was agreeable, John did the only thing he could, and gave in gracefully. It was months before either of them found out about Victor's two-headed quarter.

"Eagles Four and Two-Seven, you are cleared for launch." Sandra's light, clear voice came over the communications link to Alan and Bill, and with a flurry of moondust, they lifted the ships into the stars headed for Cassandra. "Everything okay back there?" It was Bill, calling through the hatch to check on the comfort of Helena, Dave, Pat and Victor. Receiving a rousing "Okay!" from the back, he said, "Then try and get some sleep. The planet is at extreme range, and it'll take us the better part of a day to get there. Good night." He dimmed the lights in the 'back seat' and the four who rode there settled down to rest.

In the cockpit, Fraser turned to his Section Chief and asked the question that had been bothering him for some time. "We're not going to have much time on the planet. Why did we wait so long to launch this mission?"

Carter replied, "We were late doing that Tiranium check. Nobody thought the planet was worth anything, so we didn't run an in-depth metal detection scan until days after we should have. A classic case of being fooled by preconceived notions. Now we've found there is a reason to go to Cassandra, but we've got to race to get there. Don't worry, we've got enough time. We'll make it. And we ought to get some real flying practice, too." Carter, an enthusiastic and eternally optimistic Australian, was actually looking forward to testing himself against the fierce gale of that deadly atmosphere. Fraser, sensing his mood, grinned as he recognized both Carter's eagerness and a similar feeling in himself. "We've got to be nuts..."

As the crew of the mission settled into sleep, the watchers on Alpha did the same. For once again, as it had been when Sandra first spotted the planet, it was quiet on the base. Day and night no longer had any meaning, and long ago the base personnel had simply set up a new clock, with rather arbitrary hours, though they kept the 24-hour system since it worked best biologically. Now, at Base Midnight, Sandra, Paul and David Kano were the only workers left in Command Center. They were to monitor the signals sent back from the two Eagles, and process those signals through Computer. Strictly speaking, only Sahn and David were necessary for the task, but where Sandra was, Paul was usually to be found. For like that of John and Helena, and, surprisingly, Tony and Maya, theirs was a stable relationship with an enduring commitment. It was a pleasure to be able to talk together quietly and just be together during the long 'night' when few others were around to disturb them. And in those times they built their dream house, and planned their family, and knew the quiet joy of shared love.

Commander Koenig, leaving his office for his quarters, saw their dark heads bent together and felt a pang of loss, for his Helena was millions of miles away from him and drawing further away every second. But then, he had had no choice--it was all too likely that the landing team might require medical attention and they deserved the best available. But then, he reflected, he loved everyone on the team, and they were all in danger: Victor, whose expertise had saved Alpha from certain destruction when it had encountered the black sun; Alan, whose tremendous skill and superb concentration made him one with his machine, attributes which made the fair-haired Aussie the finest pilot of his time and had saved Koenig's skin more than once; Dave Reilly, boisterous but super-efficient, and highly knowledgeable, with a great regard for every living thing in the universe; Patrick Osgood, the chief engineer, a strange, almost prophet-like man, but a fine, dedicated professional, and the one man who kept the base's physical plant ticking along; and Bill, whose skill almost matched that of his favorite 'kangaroo', and a man whose courage and integrity made him a fine second-in-command to Alan. Yes, Koenig realized as he reviewed their qualities mentally, he loved them all, loved them with a fierceness and devotion he hadn't quite realized himself. They were the finest, and if anybody could pull this one off, they could. For a second he regretted his decision not to go along, but no: he wasn't quite as good a pilot as Alan or Bill, and the other fields were closed books to him. He would have been superfluous, and he was a good enough commander to know it, and to accept the much greater pain of ordering his friends into a danger he could not share. Besides, if he had insisted on going, it might have looked as though he didn't trust them to

carry on without him, and such a move on his part might have lessened their worth in their own eyes. It was better this way, though it was harder on him. With a start he realized that he was standing in front of the door to his quarters. Beaming it open with his commlock, he went in and went to bed, and, to his surprise, fell asleep almost immediately. His last thought was that it was so peaceful, it was as if the Moon itself slept.

But the Moon did not sleep, though no one knew it. Deep, deep below Alpha's foundations, a tiny fissure in the Moon's substrata widened ever so slightly in response to the growing gravitational pull of Cassandra...and widened again...and again, until the overstressed stone gave way and slipped. It slipped in the same area as it had done many months previously, when the alien energy force had taken over Anton Zoref, and, as it had done then, it slipped only a fraction of an inch. But that was enough.

"What the...?" In Command Center, Paul, Sahn and David felt the shock as the fissure settled. Just one sharp jolt, then nothing. But that jolt had toppled one of the command desks, caused shorts in the wiring, and brought down a light coating of plastic dust from the ceiling. It had also brought Koenig, Tony, and Maya to Command Center on the run.

"What happened?" Koenig asked a disheveled Maya as she bent over her console for readings. Behind him he could hear Tony asking for reports from Security, Sandra questioning Medical Center, and Paul contacting Damage Control. At last Maya turned from her console: "It was a quake registering Omega 1.73; no serious damage or injuries. The epicenter was directly beneath Alpha, in that unstable area under the reactors. There were no after-shocks--sensors in that area indicate that the one shock relieved the stresses, so further slippages are unlikely. So, it appears that all we've lost is some sleep--we've been lucky, but we've got to stabilize that area permanently as soon as possible."

"Tony?"

"Security reports all well. No serious malfunctions in any weapons systems or defense shields." His handsome face broke into a broad grin. "As the lady said, we've been lucky."

"What about damage and casualties?"

"Damage Control reports one direct vision port was breached in Hydroponics, but there was no crop in the section, so the only loss was some equipment that was sucked out onto the surface. The Damage Control team is replacing the viewport now; they'll collect the stuff on the surface later. There were cracks in three other viewports, in living quarters, and in each case the personnel in the units caught them. They're holding for now, and those people can be moved into other quarters until the viewports can be replaced. The rest of the work seems to be just 'mopping up'. Alpha is intact, and should be completely functional in a matter of an hour or two. I agree with Maya, too--we've been lucky."

"Dr. Mathias reports fewer than a dozen injuries, all confined to cuts and bruises." Paul Morrow was obviously pleased with the contents of his report. "As Maya said--"

"I know, I know! Just don't say it again."

"Well, commander, you know that the odds against luck in space are astro-nomical, so to speak," put in in Kano, drawing groans from all present.

"And if certain computer experts want their luck (and their lives) to continue, they'll go back to work and refrain from making horrible puns," laughed Koenig. "Better still, David, why don't you go to bed. In fact, let's all turn in."

Nodding agreement, Kano, Koenig, Maya and Tony left the room, leaving Sandra and Paul alone to watch. All was well again, or so they thought.

But all was not well, though no one could have foreseen the disaster because they were not expecting further trouble from the same quarter. Lulled into a false sense of security by the fact that the quake area had a history of slippage, and by the fact that the rock had slipped enough to remove the stress and so presumably would not slip again, the Damage Control teams had not made as exhaustive a check of the Nuclear Generating Areas as they might have otherwise done. And so they missed a tiny, tiny fracture in one of the myriad pipes on the Moonbase. But this pipe was not an innocuous one, carrying air or lighting cables or even sewage; this pipe carried the water that was used to cool the core of one of the three massive nuclear generators that provided the power vital to Alpha's survival. Now that pipe was fractured, weakened to breaking point. And three days later, when the quake had almost been forgotten...

The first hint of trouble came when Reactor Engineer Jerry Fowler, on duty in the Power Room, noticed a slight increase in the core temperature of Number Two Reactor. Then, suddenly, the fractured pipe burst, and the core temperature soared past the danger point. Acting quickly, Fowler switched in the secondary cooling system, but it proved only minimally effective, and was soon struggling to cool an almost runaway core. There was only one thing to do, and Fowler did it. He pulled the fuel rods out of the pile, and shut down the reactor completely. His quick thinking stopped the reaction, and undoubtedly saved Alpha. But no one thought so at the time, because he had been forced to shut down the only working reactor--Number One and Number Three were already down for routine maintenance, and though the base could survive comfortably on the power provided by one of the reactors, all three were now non-op. In darkness and silence, Alpha began to die.

"I'm really stiff, Helena, what do you prescribe?" asked Victor. Eagle Four, modified to contain a working laboratory and fairly comfortable for the relatively short Moon-Earth hop, was a source of ever-increasing discomfort on the day-long run to Cassandra. Helena, none too comfortable herself, replied with the time-honored quip of the medical profession: "Take two aspirin and call me in the morning."

The morning, as it turned out, was almost upon them, for it was only a matter of seconds before Alan's cheerful voice sounded on the intercom. "Everybody up, we're almost there! Victor, if you want to take atmospheric readings before we're actually in the soup, you might want to do it now."

Grinning at Alan's cheerfulness, Victor pulled himself out of his seat and made his way over to the computer console that filled one wall of the Eagle's passenger module. He stretched his slim frame, yawned, then punched in the program he desired. He was rewarded with an instantaneous readout of the planet's atmosphere. The speed with which the computer gathered and relayed the information was impressive, but that information was anything but helpful. The atmosphere of the giant was mostly ammonia, with a small amount of methane. Traces of other gases, including chlorine and neon, and others unknown to their science, made up the viciously swirling atmosphere of the hostile skies above Cassandra. Victor sighed and turned away from the screen. "It's as bad as we thought. The atmosphere is mostly ammonia, with traces of other gases. The wind is at least 320 kph, and the gravity of the planet is 200 times that of Earth. It's going to be miserable, at best. In fact, I don't know if it can be done."

"Oh, Victor," chided Helena. "You knew all that before we left Alpha. Our pressure suits will help protect us from both the gases and the gravity, you've installed your new material inside the outer hull, Alan can boost internal pressure to compensate for the rise outside, and last, but not least, there's Bergman's Brainchild, the force field. It's worth the risk, and you know it."

Vigorous nods from the other two members of the landing team told him that they all supported Helena's views, so telling Alan that he had finished his measurements, he sat down and strapped in, both lap and shoulder harnesses. And all the while, he was wondering what exactly they were in for, and if they'd succeed, and if they'd get out of it alive. He was still wondering when the first gust of wind slammed into them.

As Victor took his readings, Bill tried to contact the base. "Moonbase Alpha, Moonbase Alpha, this is Eagle Four calling Moonbase Alpha. We are nearing the planet's atmosphere, and will begin penetration in 4.2 minutes. We will be out of contact during the time we are in the atmosphere. Will report upon completion of the mission. Moonbase Alpha, do you copy?" Fraser sent his message again and again, but got no reply. Neither pilot was unduly worried, however, because they both knew that communications would be difficult once they reached Cassandra. It was also for that reason that they were there to control the robot Eagle--signals would never have reached it from the base. "Guess we're on our own, Alan. Victor's got his readings; let's take 'em down."

"Right you are, cobber." With that exchange, the Eagles began their descent into the terrifying whirlpool that was the sky of Cassandra.

"Now what?" Paul Morrow, thoroughly exasperated by the sudden darkness and loss of power, came to his feet like a cat. "I can't believe this--everything's out!" He punched irritably at one of the buttons on the console in front of him. Then another. And another. "What?...Sahn, try your board."

Sandra Benes' slim fingers flew to her controls, depressing stud after stud, with no better effect than Paul had gotten. It took only a few seconds for the two experienced operatives to reach the same conclusion but they refused to believe it. "Keep trying to find the malfunction, Sahn, I'll get the commander." Paul strode to the doors, snatched the commlock from his belt, and beamed it at the control that would open the door. He nearly walked into the doors when they failed to open. He repeated the maneuver again and again, until finally he was forced to accept the fact that the Command Center doors would not open to his commlock. He called to Sandra, "Come here and try the doors with your commlock."

Carefully crossing the darkened floor, Sahn obediently beamed her commlock at the door mechanism, with the same result. On impulse, she punched the code that would activate Paul's commlock into her own. There was no response. "Paul, the doors won't open, and the commlocks are completely dead. Since they're all channeled through Computer, we have to assume that Computer is down. There's no power anywhere on this base!"

"Easy, Sandra, take it easy. Maybe we just blew a fuse. It'll be fixed in no time, you'll see." He held the slight body in his arms, and kissed her silky hair. Even as he did his mind was racing. What had gone wrong? And who would fix it? Could it even be fixed? "In no time"? He was talking to her as he would talk to a frightened child, trying to calm her and himself, as well. But the haunting thought persisted, and she knew it as well as he did: without power, Alpha would start to die in less than forty-five minutes.

Although most of the Alphans were asleep when the reactor failed, within minutes nearly everyone aboard the sprawling base was awake. They were awakened, oddly enough, by the silence. Alpha Moonbase depended entirely on machinery for its existence. Machines filtered and recycled the air, heated or cooled it as needed, processed the food and recycled the waste. Machines were their eyes and ears, hearts, lungs, brain and muscle. And each of the many machines added its own peculiar voice to that of the others until, at last, all the machines together became the rhythm of Alpha. That rhythm was usually drowned by the noise, talk and laughter of the humans it sustained, but it was always there, underlying all else. Now it had stopped, and the Alphans, waking in that enormous silence, isolated from each other, realized immediately what had happened--and began to pray that the rhythm would begin again, for there was nothing else they could do.

But there was one Alphan who was not like the rest. Maya, daughter of Mentor of the planet Psychon, had joined the community when her planet had been destroyed. She had a marvelously superior brain, and a wonderful ability known only to her species: she knew the secret of molecular transformation. She could become, at will, any organic creature in the universe, provided she knew its molecular structure. Her remarkable ability had saved Alpha on several occasions, and irritated Tony more than once. But she had no need for any exotic transformation now.

She had awakened instantly when the power failed, and realized what had happened. Knowing that neither the doors nor the commlock would respond, she did not waste her time trying either. Instead, she transformed into one of the most common--and despised--forms of life on Earth planet: a wasp. In that form, she quickly entered the air ducts and was on her way to Command Center.

Less than two minutes later, Paul and Sandra were startled by the angry buzzing of an insect. But their surprise turned to relief when the familiar light of molecular transformation glowed in the darkness. The light died, and the lovely Psychon stood before them.

"A total power failure, I assume?" The question was more of a statement of fact.

"Yes." Paul's voice was steady as he answered, yet his tension was apparent. They had faced death many times and in many forms, but now it was as if the Moonbase itself had turned against them. It was a final betrayal.

"We have forty-five minutes until our air starts to foul."

"Yes...perhaps a little more."

"Then we've either got to fix one of the reactors, or evacuate the base. And since we cannot do the latter, it will have to be the first choice. I've got to get to the reactors. Don't worry, I think I can help." She gave each of her friends a quick hug; then the light of transformation flared briefly, to be followed by the insect hum, then silence.

"My God, this is incredible! It's going to take both of us to try to hold her on something like an even keel!" Alan Carter, muscles standing out like cords as he fought to hold the Eagle in something approximating level flight, had to yell to be heard above the roar of the winds. "Reilly, where is that deposit, for the love of heaven? Get a reading, will you, and make it fast! I don't know how long any of us, ship included, can take a beating like this!" Eagle Four had been in the atmosphere for twenty minutes, and it had been a life-and-death struggle from the first moment. "I'm glad no one is aboard Eagle 27; they'd never survive." Eagle Four was only a few hundred miles below the top of the atmosphere, but Eagle 27 was many thousands of miles down into the swirling gases. Visual contact had been lost immediately, but the scanners were holding up, to the surprise of virtually everyone. Dave Reilly monitored the tiranium readings, while Pat Osgood ran continuous checks on the mining grabs that had been fitted to the refueling booms of the robot Eagle. Victor, after taking his readings of the atmosphere and a sample of it, had taken over the task of tracking and guiding Eagle Two-Seven. It was he who called out course changes to the pilots, computing the changing position of the Eagle in relation to the changing position reading of the tiranium deposit to get the two lined up. Helena had been kept busy too, giving anti-nausea shots to the crew, who would otherwise have been incapacitated by the heaving, unpredictable motion. Even so, they were dazed, slightly sick, bruised and battered and in pain from being constantly thrown against their seat belts; even Alan and Bill were uncomfortably aware of their stomachs. But they fought doggedly on, knowing what the rare metal meant to the base. Just when it seemed that they couldn't bear any more pain or sickness, Reilly let out a jubilant yell. "I've got it! Eagle Two-Seven is almost on the surface and finally sending back reliable readings. The closest deposit is 6.7 miles ahead of it, on bearing 020!" Osgood responded instantly to Dave's report. Guiding the other Eagle with the specially-fitted remote-control gear in their ship, the mining expert was able to report Eagle 27 on the deck only sixty seconds later. "Great work, Pat!" yelled Alan. "We'll try our best to keep her steady. It's your show now."

Now that the Eagle was no longer moving, but hovering, the motion was worse than ever. Several storage bins tore loose from their fastenings and slammed about the cabin. One of the struck Helena, gashing her arm, while another narrowly missed braining Victor where he sat hunched over his console. "Holy Moses!" It was Dave Reilly. "We'll have to secure that stuff before we get ourselves killed. Alan! For god's sake, will you hold this beast level?"

"Hold it level?!" exclaimed the overworked pilot. "What in the blue blazes dows he think we're trying to do? Set a world's record for aerobatics?" Surprisingly, Fraser snorted with laughter, and Carter, too long under the strain, suddenly joined in. It broke the tension, and Carter was able to call back: "Okay, Dave, for you we'll make the ride smooth as silk."

The good-natured reply from the pilots buoyed up the spirits of the others, and it wasn't long before Helena and Dave, against all odds, had the loose cargo bins resecured. Meanwhile, Osgood was working his slave controls with the delicacy of a neurosurgeon, and was being rewarded with a successful mining operation. The tiranium, fortunately, was close to the surface, and he had first planted small charges, then lifted the Eagle a few hundred feet into the air while he detonated them. The debris was swept away instantly in the tornadic wind, exposing the subsurface, and the tiranium lodes streaking through it. There was only one problem, and Osgood suddenly saw it. "Victor! The tiranium is outside the force field. I can't swing the grab through it, and if I turn it off, I'll flatten the ship!"

"O, ye of little faith. Don't you trust me? See that switch on the left side of the panel? If you'll be so good as to press it, projectors aboard the Eagle will increase the field radius by one hundred feet which should be enough to include the lode."

"But won't increasing the radius weaken the field at each point?"

"Yes, but not enough to cause it to collapse."

"But if it does collapse..."

"The we've donated several tons of scrap metal to Cassandra's landscape. That's why there's a robot down there, not us. Will you push the button?"

Osgood did as he was bid, and suddenly his somber face lit up. "It works! The force field surrounds not only the Eagle, but extends one hundred feet in every direction. It's holding!" He turned quickly back to the mining controls, and lowered the grabs to the surface. Time was precious, because, in spite of all their precautions, Cassandra's overwhelming gravity could not be resisted indefinitely. If the internal pressure dropped, or the field cut out, or if the stressed material should suddenly buckle, then the Eagle would be destroyed, and all their pain and hard work would go for nothing.

Watched closely by the three tense Alphans, Osgood began the operation again. He swung the grab out and down. The grab occupied the space normally used for the refueling boom, and instead of a container of nuclear fuel, the end of these booms contained diamond drills, plus powerful compressors. Working as quickly as he could, he lowered the drill to the surface. It bit into the deposit, and soon a steady stream of tiranium dust was being sucked into the waiting storage tanks of the Eagle. Once begun, the operation continued smoothly and steadily, and soon Pat could report that he had all the tiranium he could get.

"Wonderful, Pat, a real achievement. Let's bring it up." Victor sounded and looked years older than he had only hours before. "Alan, how long to get us clear of this inferno?"

"Not long, Victor. Twenty to thirty minutes at most. Of course, the robot ship will take several hours, and it'll be tricky."

"One step at a time, Alan," chimed in Helena. "Let's get ourselves out of here, then we'll have a steady platform from which to work."

"Amen, Doc. Bill, let's head for home."

Carter was as good as his word, and less than twenty-five minutes later, Eagle Four was in the safety of clear space, and her battered and sickened crew could draw their first deep breaths in over four hours.

"Was it only four hours?" Reilly, a bruise darkening on the side of his hand, asked with a trace of his old humor. "It seemed like forty years."

"More like four hundred from up here," laughed Alan. "Eagle 27 should be matching up with us in a couple of hours, give or take fifteen minutes. I'd like to be more precise, but those winds are completely unpredictable."

"Don't worry, Alan, we're grateful just to sit still." Pat Osgood's comment was echoed by the other five crewmembers, as they sighed with relief and settled down to wait for their robot companion.

Eagle 27 popped into view one hundred forty-one minutes later, the force field still playing around her like a glittering rainbow. When the field was switched off, they had a shock. In spite of all their precautions, one of the landing pads had been torn away, the windows of the cockpit were smashed, and the hull was slightly elongated--mute evidence of the tremendous pressure that had, indeed, almost flattened the craft. But although battered, the hull did not appear to be breached. Working quickly, Victor took a detailed surface scan of the ship as Alan circled it, and found no flaws. The hull was intact, the ship was whole, and the precious cargo was safe. He turned to the waiting Alphans. "When we get back to the base, I'm going to throw a party for the six of us. And furthermore, I'm going to break out the last of the brandy I've been hoarding. Who's coming?" Needless to say, he got immediate and enthusiastic acceptances from all present. "Okay! Let's go home."

"Right you are. Bill, let's go; and try to raise Alpha and let them know the mission is successfully accomplished." The powerful motors resumed their thrust, and the Eagles began to move away from Cassandra.

"How long to Alpha, Alan?" asked Helena. It seemed years since she had seen John.

"It took us sixteen hours to get here, plus four hours at the planet, and all that time Alpha was moving away from us. All in all, we've got at least thirty-two hours of flying time to catch up with the Moon. Sorry I can't shorten it for you. And it's a good thing we're leaving now; we have fuel for only thirty-seven hours flight."

"Well, five hours is a pretty good safety margin," put in Osgood.

"Not really, when the alternative is missing your cosmic bus and getting left out here in the midst of a never-ending hurricane."

"True. But we spent almost five hours in that soup," replied Pat. "And that sure seemed like a very long, long, long time."

"Too long by half," agreed Victor. "I'll be delighted to pass out those drinks; in fact, I'm looking forward to one myself. Can't you hurry it up?"

"I'm at maximum thrust now. But we'll be home as soon as we possibly can, then you'll certainly have to open up the bar!" Alan was an old hand, and should have known better than to make such a sweeping statement. For it was just as he stopped speaking that all engines on both ships cut out, leaving the two Eagles hanging in space like an ungainly new constellation for the amusement and study of the life, if any, of Cassandra.

"What...?" Jerry Fowler, working in an eerie glow provided by the dying atomic pile, jumped at the noise behind him, and whipped around to find himself face-to-face with Maya. "I'm sorry I startled you." She smiled, and Jerry relaxed. "Boy, am I glad to see you!"

"What happened, exactly?" As he explained, the Psychon's brilliant mind grasped not only the facts, but also the possibilities and probabilities of success or failure of every course of action open to them. When he finished, she went over the main points, for his benefit as well as her own. "What it comes down to is that we've got to get one of the three reactors working again within forty-five minutes. That is a fair assessment?"

"Yes." The engineer's despairing answer was so low that she almost missed it.

"And it will take at least seventy-five minutes to bring one of them on line?"

"Yes." Even more softly.

"And you think that it will be fastest to repair this reactor than to try to bring up Number One or Number Two?"

"Yes." A whisper now.

"Don't give up, Jerry. I think I can buy us time. Start whatever repairs you can. I'll be back in a few minutes."

A few minutes later, in Medical Center, Dr. Bob Mathias was startled by Maya's sudden appearance. Quickly, she outlined her plan. "Do you remember when those hideous jellies invaded Alpha? Helena knocked out all personnel with a contact gas. If you could do that again now, we'll double our oxygen reserve, and that might be enough. Give me three minutes to get back to the reactor, then use the gas."

She flew quickly back to NGA #2, and explained her plan to the engineer. His face lit up. "It worked before, it may work again. At least we've got a chance."

The fact that the pipe had burst solved one problem as it created others. It wouldn't be necessary to drain the cooling system in order to repair it; on the other hand, the reactor was now flooded with a foot of highly radioactive water. The two Alphans decided to replace the pipe and restart the circulation in the primary and the back-up systems, and try to figure out a solution to the mopping-up problem as they worked, but a few seconds' reflection showed them that that would be impossible. The pipe had broken inside the containment vessel itself, which meant that they couldn't open the door, for they'd flood the area and condemn Alpha to a horrible death. The water had to be cleaned up before any other steps could be taken. Repairing the pipe would not be a problem, for Maya knew of several species that lived on radiation. In any of several transformations, she could work in complete safety in the "hottest" radioactive environment. She could enter the containment vessel through the empty pipe, and be perfectly at home in the nuclear inferno inside. Her entry would be simple, but that left the problem of how to get the pipe inside without opening the door.

"Maya, I have an idea. If I were to run a flexible hose inside the broken pipe, and connect it to a vacuum pump, I could suck that water back through the pipe, into a tank, and recirculate it through the system. Of course, that would mean we'd be circulating radioactive water, but it's a closed system, and I've checked for other possible breaks. There are none, so it should be safe. Of course, as soon as possible, we'd have to flush the system completely, perhaps even drain the water into storage tanks and put them on Farside, where the old dumps are. That's problem to solve later. But it would get that water off the floor. And if we restore the reactor to only minimum power, we'd have enough energy to keep the base going until both systems are up again. The only hitch is that you'll have to hook up that flexible hose between the two ends of the broken pipe. You can take as long to connect the one end as you like, but you'll have only a few seconds to connect the other. Can you do it?"

"I don't think I have a choice--we've got less than forty minutes left. And after we clear up the water, we've still got to get the pile working again. Let's go."

Soon Maya was in wasp form again. Jerry quickly unscrewed one of the joints in the pipe and pushed a flexible, six foot piece of clear dilinium tubing through. Maya followed quickly. The radiation that would pour out of the joint as Jerry unscrewed it might be minimal, or it might be lethal, but as they had no choice, neither Alphan dwelt on which might be the case. As soon as she was in the containment vessel, Maya began her incredible transformation...

Jerry, watching from behind an eighteen-inch thick piece of transparent dilinium, and safe behind an additional lead shielding, nevertheless recoiled from the alien being now working to hook up the hose to the fractured pipe. Tall as a man, much taller than most men, the creature was completely hairless; its head was the shape of a football, it had no nostrils, only two black, lidless eyes and a fringed orifice that might have been a mouth; it had hideously stubby fingers and toes, and tiny knobs of flesh stood out all over its body. It glistened, as if its pale green and brown mottled skin was wet.

Even though he knew the ghastly apparition was Maya, Fowler felt an almost uncontrollable revulsion, a desperate need to destroy the hideous creature lumbering around in the chamber before him. He was actually reaching for his stungun when he got a grip on his emotions and reached instead for the switch to start the pump. He watched the creature's actions now, instead of the thing itself, and so was ready when it turned its travesty of a face toward him and nodded. He threw the switch, and the pump instantly began sucking up the water. The creature made its way around the reactor room, using the length of tubing as a vacuum cleaner was used in the old days, to suck the water off the floor. Incredibly, it was working, and the water level was falling. In places, the floor was clear. But the holding tank was filling, and soon it would overflow into the other half of the pipe, and spew out the open end onto the floor again, a never-ending cycle of despair and uselessness. The level rose higher and higher, then: "Now, fasten it now!" Maya, moving more quickly in her hideous guise than Jerry would have dreamed possible, rammed the free end of the tube into the other pipe, and impossibly, twisted them, pinching the tube and pipe into one material so that they stayed together without leaking. A few seconds later, water gushed through the tubing, but it held and Number Two Reactor had a working cooling system again.

All that remained was the check the fuel rods to insure that they had not been damaged, and to replace them in the pile. The check only took a few minutes, which was lucky, for time was running out. The planning and execution of that plan had taken the two of them over an hour. They had managed an impossible task, and done it well, but a new danger was creeping upon them. Maya recognized it first, as she became aware, even in her grotesque form, that she was developing a headache. Simultaneously, Jerry rubbed his forehead with a grimace of pain, then looked at the Psychon in horror as the realization struck them both. The air was going bad.

"Hurry, Maya!" Jerry's shout reached her faintly through the heavy shielding of the reactor. But now

the poisons of fatigue, plus her own carbon-dioxide laden gases, began to gell. It was so hard to move, so hard. If she could only close her eyes for just a moment to clear her mind. Sleep, just for a moment. But there was something she had to do first, something about...fuel...rods. Yes, that was it. The fuel rods. They looked to be in good shape, but they had to be pushed back into the pile to make the critical mass that would lead to the reaction. All she had to do was push them in. But her arm was so heavy, and they seemed so far away. Using the last of her strength, she stumbled across the vessel, and lifted her arm. It seemed to weigh thousands of times its normal weight. And it seemed to take an incredibly long time. Finally, all the rods were in place, and she triggered the pulsar that provided the specific stimulation to start the fission reaction. It seemed that nothing was going to happen, but then she was rewarded with the roar of reawakened power and the glow of the atomic inferno. Outside the containment vessel, she could see the lights of Alpha come on again, and she knew that the base was once again safe. She knew, too, that it would be some time before the life-saving air could reach her. She had to get out of the reactor. Quickly transforming into the tiniest unicellular animal, she made her way out of the chamber, through the spaces between the cells of the shielding material itself. Once outside, she took her own form again, and stepped into the decontamination chamber that was standard equipment of any Nuclear Generating Area. Once freed of the worry that she might have been exposed to a high radioactive dosage, she returned to her quarters, and, programming herself to wake with the rest of the base personnel, went instantly to sleep.

But sleep was out of the question for the six on the Eagle, though they were bone tired.

"No, no, no! It's too much!" Alan slammed his fist into his console. "I can't stand it--not after all we've been through. It just isn't fair!"

Beside him, Bill Fraser was giving voice to similar opinions, while in back, the four passengers stared at each other, and tried to come to terms with this newest crisis. Reilly and Osgood simply sat, staring at nothing. Victor was tapping his forefinger against his head in his characteristic gesture, and Helena was crying--not sobbing, not making any noise at all--but unconsciously. The tears were running down her face as if her heart would break.

"Hey, wait a minute." In the stress of the moment, they had overlooked the obvious. "Alpha! Let's get a taxi. Bill, give 'em a call."

"Eagle Four to Alpha, come in Alpha. Hey, you people, answer up!"

But Alpha couldn't answer, nor did they have any way of knowing that their mission was in trouble, for the base, though safe, was not fully operational. A quick command conference, held in Command Center after the personnel had recovered, enable Maya and Jerry Fowler to explain what had happened, and what they had done. It would take days to bring either of the other reactors on line, so they would have to rely on the crippled #2. And because no one, least of all Koenig, wanted to take a chance on the jury-rigged system, the reactor was being run at minimum power, just enough to keep them alive. For several days they had to live in the glow provided by the emergency lighting system; they were hungry, for the food processors turned out only water and basic protein sources; and they were cold--the temperature in the moonbase dropped to ten degrees centigrade, and stayed there, while the personnel bundled up. But they were alive, and grateful.

"Commander," Sahn pointed out. "The prolonged cold is affecting the instruments. The sensors have gone haywire, and communications are unreliable. We haven't heard from Eagle Four in over thirty-six hours. Until we recover them can't we boost the power?"

Eagle Four--a gasp ran around Command Center as the personnel there suddenly remembered the fact that their own struggle had driven out of their minds. Eagle Four hadn't returned. The ship, with their friends aboard, was millions of miles away, and hadn't made contact. Head turned to watch Koenig as he framed his reply.

"Sahn, see if you can raise them. One transmission, full power, but keep it short."

"Yes, sir!" Sahn turned to her console eagerly, but after a few moments her eagerness turned to dismay. "The interference is so bad that I can't get through, even at full power. It has to be a combination of the cold and the magnetic fields of the planet."

"At this distance? That's ridiculous!" Tony broke in. "Try again."

"Would you care to try it, sir?" Sahn's sarcasm cut like a knife.

"Tony, Sahn, that's enough. We're all worried, and it's making us irritable. I need you all, so settle down. Sandra, what do you think the problem is?"

Sahn took a deep breath. "As I said, the cold is affecting the instruments. What I meant about the magnetic fields is that the Eagles are so close to the planet that we can't pick their signals out of the general background noise."

Tony squeezed her hand, then asked the question in everybody's mind.

"You mean that we are out of communication until we get full power and they clear the fields?"

"Not exactly. We can maintain a scan of the planet at less than full power--I can train one deep space long-range camera on the planet, and it should be enough to give us visual when they clear the atmosphere. But we won't be able to talk to them until they clear the fields, and they extend almost to Alpha."

"At least we can see what's going on. Sahn, set that camera up," ordered Koenig.

All heads turned to the big screen. At first it was filled with dim electronic snow, then it cleared

to show Cassandra swinging in its orbit like some gaudy Christmas ornament. "Commander!" Sahn's joyous shout was lost in the general rejoicing as she sharpened the definition to show the two Eagles, side by side, apparently heading home. "There they are! They're on their way! They'll--"

"Something's wrong." The flat statement of fact came from Paul Morrow and cut Sandra's jubilation off as if a switch had been thrown. "I can't make it out but--"

"I can." Koenig's tone held weariness, bitterness, and a sense of irrepressible loss. "They're not moving. At the speed of the Eagle, we should be able to see some growth in size in relation to the background. They're just hanging there."

"I can bring them hom on slave-control." Paul was already on his way to the console, only to be stopped by a voice so soft and sad that he hardly recognized it as Kano's. "We have no remote control capability right now, Paul. You know that it's channeled through Computer, and Computer is not as quick to recover as your instruments. Some of the data banks are damaged, perhaps beyond repair. At best, it will take days to repair some, months to fix the rest. I'm sorry. Sorrier than I can tell you." He was shaking. "There's no remote available."

"A rescue Eagle, then."

"No, Paul. By the time another Eagle reached them, all three ships would be too far out of the range of Alpha to even attempt a return. I won't send other ships to be lost. They're going to have to save themselves."

"It's not true! Impossible! The finest installation in the Space Service, with the most skilled personnel and the best equipment, and we can't do anything?" Cries of anger and despair filled Command Center. Koenig held up his hand for quiet.

"I know how you feel--don't you think I care for those people too?" And especially one, a lovely lady with such soft, golden hair, wisdom and wit dancing in her eyes...Don't think of that, not that. "But I tell you, and you must believe me, that in this situation, we are helpless."

"There's something we can do, there must be, I can't believe--" Sahn's face was streaked with tears.

"That's wishful thinking, and you know it." Morrow had come over and put his arms around the sobbing girl. "I know you remember your history, so you must also remember in the very early days, when those three astronauts, White, Grissom and--what was his name?--oh, yeah, Chaffee, burned to death right on the pad. Help was only feet away, and couldn't save them. And the third manned Mars mission, when Osaki and Jones lost their retros, and skipped off the Martian atmosphere and headed out of the solar system. And even the Jupiter Seven mission, where Lee Russell was lost. Lost while a whole world watched, and prayed, and couldn't do a thing to help. The Space Service has always been a risky business, but every one of us knew and accepted those risks before we joined. And that includes those six out there. I know how hard it is to sit and watch, but that is all we can do. We must have faith that they will be able to get themselves home. And they will. Alan's the best pilot in the service. He knows that Eagle like the back of his hand. Only now he was Victor to help him, and Bill and Helena and the others. If anyone can do it, they can."

Aboard the stricken Eagle, those under discussion were making a singularly unpleasant discovery. "I can't get an answer from Alpha." Fraser's voice was getting hoarse from the effort of continually trying to raise the base. "Nothing, on any channel."

"Well, we can't expect much, not with these tremendous magnetic fields," said Victor. "But they can surely see us. And they must have been able to figure out that our speed is decreasing. They would have contacted us if they could. I think we had better assume that Alpha is in as much trouble as we are, and that if anyone's going to get us out of this mess, it'll have to be us."

"Back to Square One, right, Professor?" Fraser was depressed.

"Yes, but with a difference. We know that we're going to have to get ourselves out of the square within four hours, because at the end of four hours, we're going to be slipping backwards into the atmosphere, and won't be able to reach escape velocity again."

Twenty minutes later, Alan and Bill had run every conceivable check on the Eagle's sophisticated propulsion system, and come up negative every time. "If you believe these readouts, there's nothing wrong at all. We're cruising along at full thrust, and should reach Alpha in about twenty-eight hours." Alan spat out the words bitterly, then slumped back in the pilot's chair. Feeling guilty because he couldn't find the malfunction, he was getting more irritable by the minute.

Victor, calling through the open hatch, asked the pilots to come back. "Rather than waste any more time, we'll just have to assume that the circuits are giving us a false reading. The only thing I know to do is to start a visual check. I suggest that we split into two parties, with one of you in each party. We'll go over this bird in detail, concentrating on the engines."

The crew of Eagle Four suited up in time that must surely have been a record, and split into two search teams. Alan, Helena and Pat Osgood took the outside of the ship, while Bill, Victor, and Dave Reilly were to scour the inside. The airlock was left open in the interest of speedy communications and quick movement between the search parties. Even with all their speed, it was over an hour after the engines had cut out that they were ready to begin their search.

Working with powerful hand-held searchlights, the three Alphas on the outside of the ship pulled themselves back to the massive tail section, and began a minutely detailed scan of the huge plates. Even though the engines were dead, there was something terrifying about the gigantic thruster nozzles, each one big enough for a man to stand in. The silence of space was eerie, and the temptation to hurry maddening,

for they knew that they had just under three hours left. Three hours, in which to check every inch of a surface that would cover an old Earth baseball diamond. How could three people hope to cover that area in the time left? The thought occurred to each of them, and each of them fought it off and continued to work methodically, and slowly, because if they missed finding the cause of the malfunction, they would never have time to complete a second scan. They had been at it for over an hour, scanning the pitted metal inch by inch, when something strange flashed into the light of Helena's torch. A tiny, hair-line crack that ran off at an angle, from the joint between two plates. She was no expert on Eagle construction, but surely that shouldn't be there. "Alan! Over here, quick!" The pilot was at her side in seconds. "Could that have done it? That's got to be a stress crack--could something have gotten in and shorted out the circuits?"

Doubt flashed across Alan's face, to be followed by realization. "Sure, that's it! The atmosphere is full of traces of gases. We have no idea of their properties, and if they got into the ship through the fracture, who knows what might have happened? Doc, I could kiss you!" He was moving as he spoke, dragging Helena toward the airlock. Then, "Pat, I think we've found it--let's get inside. Bill, we're coming in; get set to repressurize the cabin."

Once back inside the ship, Carter moved through a small hatch into the engine compartment. There was little room in the chamber, but everyone squeezed in nonetheless. The search party had been busy, and had pulled much of the cladding away from the inner walls, but there was much more left. Quickly locating the spot on the inside that corresponded to the damaged outer hull section, Carter and Fraser wrenched the inner metal plating free, exposing a bank of solid-state relay panels--panels which were partially corroded, and packed solid with a micro-fine dust.

"That's it!" exclaimed Victor. "Do you see? That dust must be capable of conducting a small electric charge. The unknown gases in the air corroded the relays to the point where the circuit quit, and so did the engines. But the grit conducted enough electricity to indicate that the circuit was complete, so the checks didn't reveal the malfunction. And the grit doesn't conduct enough electricity to keep the engines running. Helena, my congratulations on finding that fracture--it's got to be almost invisible."

Alan and Bill, putting their heads together, cannabilized some of the panels from the communications systems under the theory that Alpha couldn't talk to them anyway, and used the parts to rig replacements for the damaged circuits. As they worked, Dave went back outside with a small cannister of self-hardening foam, and sprayed the crack in the outer hull, effectively sealing it from further grit entry.

"Alan, I hate to be a pessimist, but we've almost stopped our forward motion. We'll be completely still for less than a minute, then we'll start tail-first for Cassandra. And I, for one, do not care to repeat my visit."

"Don't worry, Victor, no one's going to make a return trip." As he spoke, Carter was working methodically through his pre-ignition checklist. Satisfied, he took a deep breath, grinned at the anxious faces all around, then hit the ignition switch. Eagle Four's engines came to life with gratifying promptness, and the sudden forward thrust drew a cheer from all hands.

"Hey, Alan!" Osgood, on his way to sit down, was suddenly running for the hatch to the pilot section. "Eagle 27 is still out there--we can't just leave it!"

"I have no intention of leaving it, Patrick, ole buddy--it has cost me some very anxious moments. We can't take time to fix it, but, by God, we can tow it in!"

"It's beginning to drift away," advised Victor. "You'd better hurry it up."

"Will do."

It was a matter of less than a minute for Alan to line up the two ships, move close, and throw the switch that bound them together with both grapples and a powerful magnetic field. And to prove at the same time that his slot as top Eagle pilot was not in question. Then, finally, he was able to pull the throttles back to full power, and begin, well and truly, the long flight back to Alpha.

"Commander, they're moving!" Sahn had never taken her eyes off the screen, and was the first to spot the maneuvering of Eagle Four as Alan fought to link it up with the mining ship. At first, Koenig doubted that anything was happening, that Sandra was seeing only what she so desperately wanted to see. Then, suddenly, he too saw the movement and yelled, "Paul, how much time have they got?"

Morrow glanced at his unreliable instruments and said, "I hate to tell you this, but I can't tell you. The instruments still aren't working well. All I know is that they're mighty close to that lousy planet, and might not be able to break free."

"They will break free, Paul." It was Maya. "Computing out position, which we know, and their position, which is being relayed by the long-range camera, and making an educated guess about Cassandra's position, I'd say that they are just now starting to drift back to the planet. They've got at least fifteen minutes before they will be going at such a velocity that they can't escape."

"Thirteen minutes to go, Alan," smiled Victor. "Hardly even close."

"If you like, I can circle back and shut down again, and wait a few minutes longer."

"Never mind. The experiment is of doubtful value, and has no real appeal for me anyway. What does appeal is a nice, long snooze." He received nods of agreement from the others, including Fraser.

"Okay, I'll mind the store. You go get some sleep, but don't forget to come back." Alan sent his co-pilot off from some well-earned rest, and settled back to enjoy his favorite activity, flying.

"Look, they've done it. Here they come!" The excitement in Command Center overflowed as word spread throughout the base that the Eagles were on their way home. Happier than they'd been for days, the Alphans went back to their duties, knowing that, for today at least, they weren't going to have to watch their friends die.

Two days later, the arrival of the ships provided an excuse for a party that threatened to last for a week. Half of the personnel of the base had been at Launch Pad One when the exhausted crew came through, and they were greeted with wild cheers and hugs, and swept off to the Recreation Area. Koenig grinned, thinking of the half-dozen girls that swarmed over both Dave and Alan, especially one little red-head from the Surface Exploration Unit who seemed to be determined to get transferred to Reconnaissance. At any rate, she was certainly eager to impress the Chief Pilot with her abilities. Koenig's smile broadened. It had been a rowdy party all right.

But there had been quiet moments, too. The reunion of Pat Osgood and his wife Michelle, who had gone off alone immediately, and that of Bill Fraser and his wife. They had stayed at the party for what could have been considered a decent interval, then disappeared. Victor had surprised them all, dancing and singing and clowning around. He had become, in fact, the life of the party, and everyone had enjoyed it immensely. And now he sat in Koenig's office, filling him in once again on their incredible experience.

"But why did it take so long to find the fault? What happened to my 'scientific expert' and 'the best pilot in the Space Service'?"

"John, be fair. You have to remember that we're all used to dealing with computers and electronics, and the fault was purely mechanical. I can assure you that no one wanted to find it more than we did. All things considered, I think we did pretty well."

Koenig looked at him a long moment, then his ruggedly handsome face broke into a sunny grin. "Pretty well? Victor, you all were superb!"

He turned, for the moment at least, a younger, happier man, and went to find Helena.

THE END



S. Molnar

6/16/73

