Ririro
READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Second Landing

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Earth was so far away that it wasn't visible. Even the sun was only a twinkle. But this vast distance did not mean that isolation could endure forever. Instruments within the ship intercepted radio broadcasts and, within the hour, early TV signals. Machines compiled dictionaries and grammars and began translating the major languages. The history of the planet was tabulated as facts became available.

The course of the ship changed slightly; it was not much out of the way to swing nearer Earth. For days the two within the ship listened and watched with little comment. They had to decide soon.

"We've got to make or break," said the first alien.

"You know what I'm in favor of," said the second.

"I can guess," said Ethaniel, who had spoken first. "The place is a complete mess. They've never done anything except fight each other—and invent better weapons."

"It's not what they've done," said Bal, the second alien. "It's what they're going to do, with that big bomb."

"The more reason for stopping," said Ethaniel. "The big bomb can destroy them. Without our help they may do just that."

"I may remind you that in two months twenty-nine days we're due in Willafours," said Bal. "Without looking at the charts I can tell you we still have more than a hundred light-years to go."

"A week," said Ethaniel. "We can spare a week and still get there on time."

"A week?" said Bal. "To settle their problems? They've had two world wars in one generation and that the third and final one is coming up you can't help feeling in everything they do."

"It won't take much," said Ethaniel. "The wrong diplomatic move, or a trigger-happy soldier could set it off. And it wouldn't have to be deliberate. A meteor shower could pass over and their clumsy instruments could interpret it as an all-out enemy attack."

"Too bad," said Bal. "We'll just have to forget there ever was such a planet as Earth."

"Could you? Forget so many people?"



"I'm doing it," said Bal. "Just give them a little time and they won't be here to remind me that I have a conscience."

"My memory isn't convenient," said Ethaniel. "I ask you to look at them."

Bal rustled, flicking the screen intently. "Very much like ourselves," he said at last. "A bit shorter perhaps, and most certainly incomplete. Except for the one thing they lack, and that's quite odd, they seem exactly like us. Is that what you wanted me to say?"

"It is. The fact that they are an incomplete version of ourselves touches me. They actually seem defenseless, though I suppose they're not."

"Tough," said Bal. "Nothing we can do about it."

"There is. We can give them a week."

"In a week we can't negate their entire history. We can't begin to undo the effect of the big bomb."

"You can't tell," said Ethaniel. "We can look things over."

"And then what? How much authority do we have?"

"Very little," conceded Ethaniel. "Two minor officials on the way to Willafours—and we run directly into a problem no one knew existed."

"And when we get to Willafours we'll be busy. It will be a long time before anyone comes this way again."

"A very long time. There's nothing in this region of space our people want," said Ethaniel. "And how long can Earth last? Ten years? Even ten months? The tension is building by the hour."

"What can I say?" said Bal. "I suppose we can stop and look them over. We're not committing ourselves by looking."

They went much closer to Earth, not intending to commit themselves. For a day they circled the planet, avoiding radar detection, which for them was not difficult, testing, and sampling. Finally Ethaniel looked up from the monitor screen. "Any conclusions?"

"What's there to think? It's worse than I imagined."

"In what way?"

"Well, we knew they had the big bomb. Atmospheric analysis showed that as far away as we were."

"I know."

"We also knew they could deliver the big bomb, presumably by some sort of aircraft."

"That was almost a certainty. They'd have no use for the big bomb without aircraft."

"What's worse is that I now find they also have missiles, range one thousand miles and upward. They either have or are near a primitive form of space travel."

"Bad," said Ethaniel. "Sitting there, wondering when it's going to hit them. Nervousness could set it off."

"It could, and the missiles make it worse," said Bal. "What did you find out at your end?"

"Nothing worthwhile. I was looking at the people while you were investigating their weapons."

"You must think something."

"I wish I knew what to think. There's so little time," Ethaniel said. "Language isn't the difficulty. Our machines translate their languages easily and I've taken a cram course in two or three of them. But that's not enough, looking at a few plays, listening to advertisements, music, and news bulletins. I should go down and live among them, read books, talk to scholars, work with them, play."

"You could do that and you'd really get to know them. But that takes time—and we don't have it."

"I realize that."

"A flat yes or no," said Bal.

"No. We can't help them," said Ethaniel. "There is nothing we can do for them—but we have to try."

"Sure, I knew it before we started," said Bal. "It's happened before. We take the trouble to find out what a people are like and when we can't help them we feel bad. It's going to be that way again." He rose and stretched. "Well, give me an hour to think of some way of going at it."

It was longer than that before they met again. In the meantime the ship moved

much closer to Earth. They no longer needed instruments to see it. The planet revolved outside the visionports. The southern plains were green, coursed with rivers; the oceans were blue; and much of the northern hemisphere was glistening white. Ragged clouds covered the pole, and a dirty pall spread over the mid-regions of the north.

"I haven't thought of anything brilliant," said Ethaniel.

"Nor I," said Bal. "We're going to have to go down there cold. And it will be cold."

"Yes. It's their winter."

"I did have an idea," said Bal. "What about going down as supernatural beings?"

"Hardly," said Ethaniel. "A hundred years ago it might have worked. Today they have satellites. They are not primitives."

"I suppose you're right," said Bal. "I did think we ought to take advantage of our physical differences."

"If we could I'd be all for it. But these people are rough and desperate. They wouldn't be fooled by anything that crude."

"Well, you're calling it," said Bal.

"All right," said Ethaniel. "You take one side and I the other. We'll tell them bluntly what they'll have to do if they're going to survive, how they can keep their planet in one piece so they can live on it."

"That'll go over big. Advice is always popular."

"Can't help it. That's all we have time for."

"Special instructions?"

"None. We leave the ship here and go down in separate landing craft. You can talk with me any time you want to through our communications, but don't unless you have to."

"They can't intercept the beams we use."

"They can't, and even if they did they wouldn't know what to do with our language. I want them to think that we don't need to talk things over."

"I get it. Makes us seem better than we are. They think we know exactly what we're doing even though we don't."

"If we're lucky they'll think that."

Bal looked out of the port at the planet below. "It's going to be cold where I'm going. You too. Sure we don't want to change our plans and land in the southern

hemisphere? It's summer there."

"I'm afraid not. The great powers are in the north. They are the ones we have to reach to do the job."

"Yeah, but I was thinking of that holiday you mentioned. We'll be running straight into it. That won't help us any."

"I know, they don't like their holidays interrupted. It can't be helped. We can't wait until it's over."

"I'm aware of that," said Bal. "Fill me in on that holiday, anything I ought to know. Probably religious in origin. That so?"

"It was religious a long time ago," said Ethaniel. "I didn't learn anything exact from radio and TV. Now it seems to be chiefly a time for eating, office parties, and selling merchandise."

"I see. It has become a business holiday."

"That's a good description. I didn't get as much of it as I ought to have. I was busy studying the people, and they're hard to pin down."

"I see. I was thinking there might be some way we could tie ourselves in with this holiday. Make it work for us."

"If there is I haven't thought of it."

"You ought to know. You're running this one." Bal looked down at the planet. Clouds were beginning to form at the twilight edge. "I hate to go down and leave the ship up here with no one in it."

"They can't touch it. No matter how they develop in the next hundred years they still won't be able to get in or damage it in any way."

"It's myself I'm thinking about. Down there, alone."

"I'll be with you. On the other side of the Earth."

"That's not very close. I'd like it better if there were someone in the ship to bring it down in a hurry if things get rough. They don't think much of each other. I don't imagine they'll like aliens any better."

"They may be unfriendly," Ethaniel acknowledged. Now he switched a monitor screen until he looked at the slope of a mountain. It was snowing and men were cutting small green trees in the snow. "I've thought of a trick."

"If it saves my neck I'm for it."

"I don't guarantee anything," said Ethaniel. "This is what I was thinking of: instead of hiding the ship against the sun where there's little chance it will be

seen, we'll make sure that they do see it. Let's take it around to the night side of the planet and light it up."

"Say, pretty good," said Bal.

"They can't imagine that we'd light up an unmanned ship," said Ethaniel. "Even if the thought should occur to them they'll have no way of checking it. Also, they won't be eager to harm us with our ship shining down on them."

"That's thinking," said Bal, moving to the controls. "I'll move the ship over where they can see it best and then I'll light it up. I'll really light it up."

"Don't spare power."

"Don't worry about that. They'll see it. Everybody on Earth will see it." Later, with the ship in position, glowing against the darkness of space, pulsating with light, Bal said: "You know, I feel better about this. We may pull it off. Lighting the ship may be just the help we need."

"It's not we who need help, but the people of Earth," said Ethaniel. "See you in five days." With that he entered a small landing craft, which left a faintly luminescent trail as it plunged toward Earth. As soon as it was safe to do so, Bal left in another craft, heading for the other side of the planet.

And the spaceship circled Earth, unmanned, blazing and pulsing with light. No star in the winter skies of the planet below could equal it in brilliancy. Once a man-made satellite came near but it was dim and was lost sight of by the people below. During the day the ship was visible as a bright spot of light. At evening it seemed to burn through the sunset colors.

And the ship circled on, bright, shining, seeming to be a little piece clipped from the center of a star and brought near Earth to illuminate it. Never, or seldom, had Earth seen anything like it.

In five days the two small landing craft that had left it arched up from Earth and joined the orbit of the large ship. The two small craft slid inside the large one and doors closed behind them. In a short time the aliens met again.

"We did it," said Bal exultantly as he came in. "I don't know how we did it and I thought we were going to fail but at the last minute they came through."

Ethaniel smiled. "I'm tired," he said, rustling.

"Me too, but mostly I'm cold," said Bal, shivering. "Snow. Nothing but snow wherever I went. Miserable climate. And yet you had me go out walking after that first day."

"From my own experience it seemed to be a good idea," said Ethaniel. "If I went out walking one day I noticed that the next day the officials were much more

cooperative. If it worked for me I thought it might help you."

"It did. I don't know why, but it did," said Bal. "Anyway, this agreement they made isn't the best but I think it will keep them from destroying themselves."

"It's as much as we can expect," said Ethaniel. "They may have small wars after this, but never the big one. In fifty or a hundred years we can come back and see how much they've learned."

"I'm not sure I want to," said Bal. "Say, what's an angel?"

"Why?"

"When I went out walking people stopped to look. Some knelt in the snow and called me an angel."

"Something like that happened to me," said Ethaniel.

"I didn't get it but I didn't let it upset me," said Bal. "I smiled at them and went about my business." He shivered again. "It was always cold. I walked out, but sometimes I flew back. I hope that was all right."

In the cabin Bal spread his great wings. Renaissance painters had never seen his like but knew exactly how he looked. In their paintings they had pictured him innumerable times.

"I don't think it hurt us that you flew," said Ethaniel. "I did so myself occasionally."

"But you don't know what an angel is?"

"No. I didn't have time to find out. Some creature of their folklore I suppose. You know, except for our wings they're very much like ourselves. Their legends are bound to resemble ours."

"Sure," said Bal. "Anyway, peace on Earth."

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