

Planet: Uninhabitable

by Jim Bollinger

As the deep-space craft *Venturer IV* finished its last orbit of the unexplored blue planet before touchdown, its captain, Janus Ramon, allowed his thoughts to drift. They wandered past the cold steel-gray of the bridge to a summer's day, a golden sun, and a pretty girl. The squawk of the intercom jolted him out of his reverie.

"Biologist Samson, sir. Final atmosphere check: oxygen 24%, nitrogen 72%, no poisonous traces. Slightly high on the CO₂, but generally O.K. for us. No life-support equipment should be necessary, sir."

Turning to his co-pilot and first-mate, Lieutenant Jase Alexia, Ramon said, "O.K., Jase, let's set this bird down. Standard landing procedure. Set down at Target 'C.'"

"Aye, sir. Isn't that just outside one of those civilization centers?"

"Yeah. If that's what they are. Visual contact can never be too conclusive, y'know." His thoughts flashed back to the equipment failure which rendered the life detectors useless. "Damn those foreign parts, anyhow."

The engines spewed an orange-yellow inferno as the craft fought the natural tendency to fall and settled somewhat laborously to earth. Again Ramon's mind floated away: "This last planet, then it's back home. Back to Anne, a warm bed . . . yeah, a big, soft bed. After six months of one desolate space-rock after another . . ."

The jolt of the touchdown jerked him back to reality. "Easy on those landings, Jase, or I'll send you back to the academy."

"Sorry, sir," his first-mate replied, "Number seven lander just went out again. And we don't have any more replacements."

"No sweat," Ramon reassured him, "we won't need it again, anyway."

The control panel flashed a myriad of green and yellow lights. "Orders, sir?" inquired Alexia.

"Yes, Lieutenant. Routine landing party, standard equipment; I think the only weapons you may need are hand-disrupters, if that."

"Yes, sir."

Alexia flicked on the ship's intercom: "Jaxon, Fleton, Cox to number One hatch. Prepare to disembark, standard gear. Please acknowledge."

"Felton, sir. Acknowledged."

"Jaxon, here, Lieutenant. On my way."

"Cox, sir. Can I bring my swim trunks?"

Alexia chuckled, "Aw, c'mon, Phil. I wanted to go skinny-dippin' with ya."

"What would your wife think, sir?"

"She'd think I was hard-up. Now get movin'."

"Yes, sir."

Alexia prepared to leave. "When do you want us back, sir?"

"Do you think three hours is enough time?"

"I dunno. I didn't wanna miss any of the sights. I guess I'll have to cut some things out, but I'll try to make it."

"Don't forget to take some pictures for your momma."

"I left the camera at home with her. We'll keep in touch."

Alexia disappeared down the access ladder. Five minutes later, the exit hatch hissed as it pressurized to let the landing party out. After ten minutes, the communicator sounded.

"Captain, Cox here. Radio check once every hour, at the hour. Next check at 14:00 UST." The signal died.

Ramon's thoughts drifted back to wonderland. Again he saw that friendly sun, the warm lush forest, bare skin against skin. "Oh, my sweet Anne . . ."

The squeal of the communicator destroyed the image. Puzzled, he reached for the mike. Only twenty-five minutes had passed since the first radio-check.

"What's wrong, Jase?" the Captain asked.

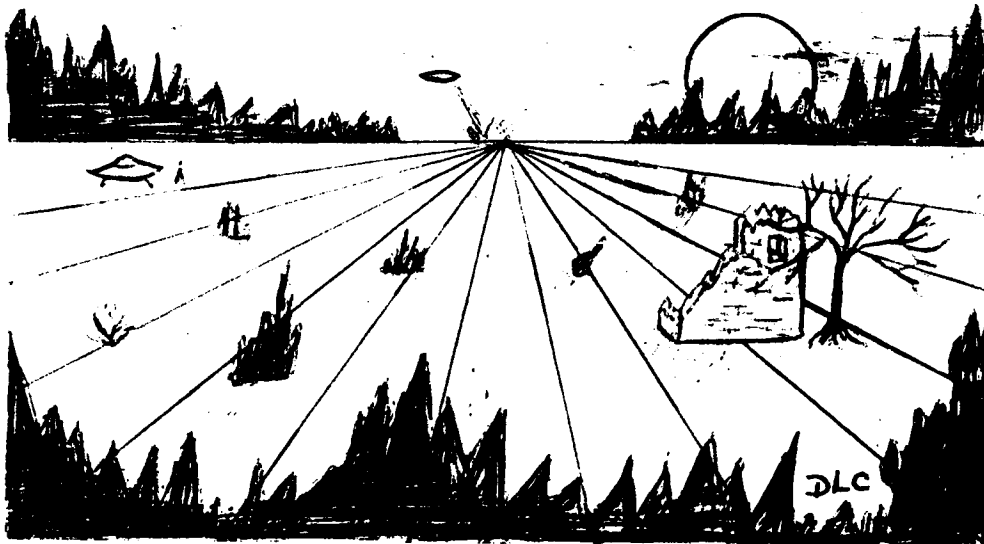
"Nothing really, yet. But we've come on three giant fur covered creatures like nothing I've even seen before. One seems to be emitting a loud, grating, humming sound. Just a minute, sir." His voice faded, "Cox! Not so close!"

There was a scream. Alexia came back on, "Jan, better get ready to move. One of the things got Phil. His disrupter didn't even phase it. We're coming back, and fast!"

Ramon ordered general alert, battle status. After a few minutes, Alexia was back on the ship - alone. He immediately got on the intercom. "It . . . was horrible!" he panted. "They're so agile, and . . . so big! I was lucky to make it . . . they ate the others! They're indestructible!"

Captain Ramon, nervously rubbing his scaly green arm, ordered an emergency take-off. But he was far too late. He emptied the weapons batteries at the monsters. But it was far too little. The ship flew right into the waiting paws of the hungry, and playful, kitten. The last thing Ramon's three eyes saw was the pink interior of the cat's mouth.

Quite plainly, planet Earth was uninhabitable . . .



LIBERATE



||MARIJUANA||

Herself . To Me

by Romeo Trajanus

Her face radiates colors of every hue;
Her eyes reveal electra in blue;
Her smile touches deep in my heart,
And strums my love like the strings
of a harp.

Her look transforms my self to clay,
And her voice sings of the wonder
that play
Inside her lovely head, and speaks
again still
Of visions dancing in her eyes of
turquoise crystal.

Her hair shimmers in the dimness of
the eventide,
As it covers her brow, as if to hide
Completely that ephemeral beauty
Which speaks to me with stunning
frailty,
Of a need and a desire
To love me forever.

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