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A CRY FOR HELP

by ERIC RODMAN

The strange beings on World 9, System XG could enter into a man's brain at will and make certain changes in the cells, changes to suit their ruthless purpose

"LISTEN," Walters said. "There it is again. You can just barely make it out, above all the other noise of the forest. Hear it?"

His three fellow-members of the Terran Exploratory Force stopped in their tracks and cocked their ears for the sound Walters had claimed to hear.

"There!" Walters cried. "That was it!"

"Probably just some alien baboon howling in the trees," Buckmaster said in a thick, scornful voice.

"I'm not so sure," Stivens put in. "Walters may have been right."

"But it's impossible!" Buckmaster retorted. "A human voice out here on an unexplored alien world, crying

for help? Be reasonable, man! How—"

"Quiet!" O'Dell snapped. "Here it comes again!"

The four Earthmen fell silent. The wind changed slightly, blowing in toward them, and, borne on the wind, came the sound that Walters had said he had heard.

It was a high-pitched cry, drifting on the wind. It was louder now than it had been before. And this time there was no mistaking the identity of the sounds that floated on the wind.

They were words. Terran words.

Someone on this unexplored alien world was screaming for help.

"Well?" Walters asked tri-

umphantly. "Now do you believe me, Buckmaster?"

The biggest of the four Earthmen was shaking his head in stunned disbelief. "It can't be," Buckmaster muttered. "How could there be an Earthman out here? We're the first, aren't we?"

"Someone's making that sound, though," O'Dell said. "Impossible or not?"

"Someone?" Stivens asked. "Or something?"

Walters whirled. "What are you trying to say?"

Stivens shrugged. "Just wondering. We're liable to find anything at all on an alien world that's previously unexplored. But it's a lot more likely that we'll find an alien life-form capable of imitating human speech than that we'll discover a castaway Earthman in a part of space where no Earthman's ever been before."

"You think it's an alien being making that sound, then?" Walters asked.

Stivens said, "I'm not making any guesses about something I have no information on."

"We ought to go investi-

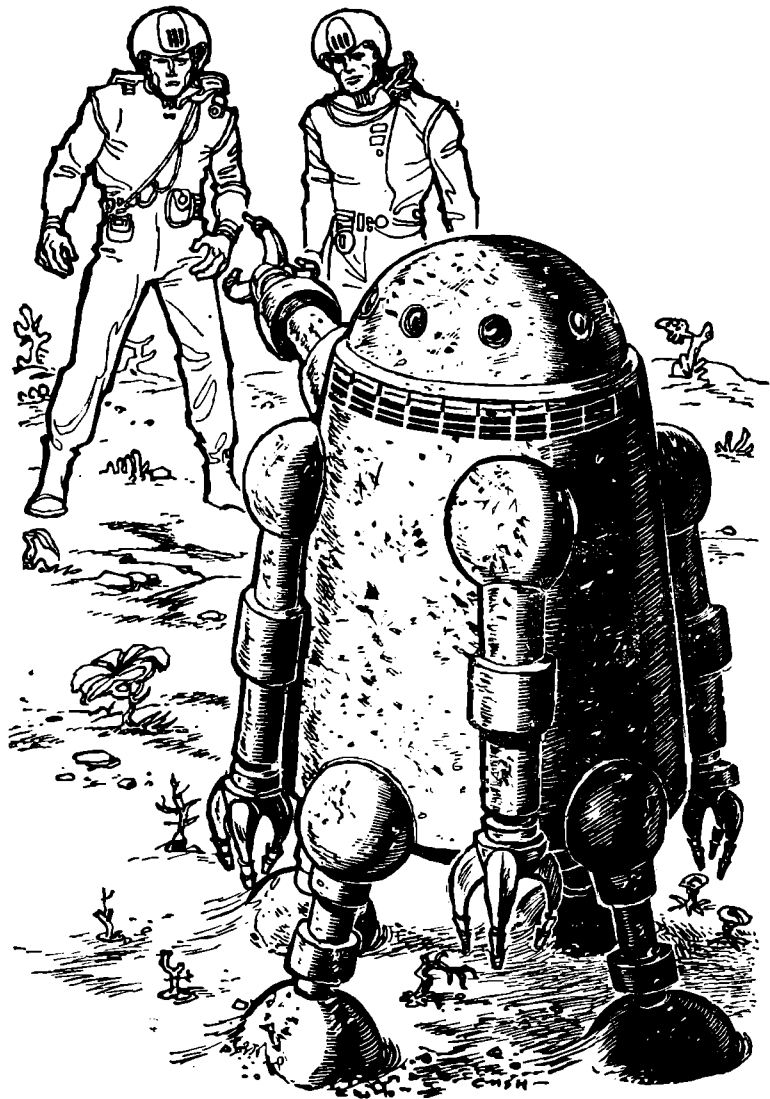
gate," O'Dell said quietly.

At that moment the sound came again. There was no doubt about it, this time. It was an undeniably human voice; crying, "Help me! Please—help me!"

THE quartet of Exploratory Force men moved forward uneasily, away from their ship and toward the point of origin of the sound, a couple of hundred yards away in the forest. The bright yellow sun climbed to its noontime height above them. The forest was warm; the men perspired heavily. Small birds cheeped at them from the oddly angular limbs of the gaunt trees that made up the forest; insects sang shrilly inches from their feet.

A voice crying for help in the forest. On the face of it, it was impossible.

The planet was designated on the charts of Terran Central Command only as World 9 of System XG. It was a small, moderately Earthtype world many thousands of light-years from Earth. According to the records of Central Command, no Earthman



had set foot on World 9 of System XG before the arrival of this four-man exploratory team.

No Earthman had set foot here. But yet someone—or *something*—was crying for help in the forest.

Tree-shadows slanted before them as they walked. The forest floor was soft with the decayed remnants of undisturbed centuries of fallen leaves. No one spoke. Every few minutes the strange cry was repeated: "Help me? Won't you help me?"

The cry grew louder as they approached.

O'Dell said, "We'd better be careful. This may be some kind of trap."

"Trap?" Walters said. "What do you mean, *trap*?"

"I don't know," O'Dell said. "I just think we ought to be careful."

"It *has* to be a trick," Buckmaster said. "There couldn't be another human being out here on this planet. Not twenty thousand light-years from Earth."

They moved forward cautiously. All four of them had

been in the Exploratory Force long enough to know that you had to move with step-by-step care when exploring a new world.

You never knew when the ground would give way beneath your feet, sucking you down into a trap where a lurking flesh-eating creature waited. You never could tell when sinewy tentacles would descend from a tree and haul you up to become some beast's meal. You never could be prepared against the sudden spring of a jungle animal with legs like coiled steel.

All you could do, on these alien worlds, was to take one step at a time, look north, east, south, west, up, and down all simultaneously, and trust to your luck.

Especially the last. It took luck to survive as a member of the Exploratory Force.

Stivens had survived sixteen years of active duty. O'Dell and Buckmaster were each twelve-year men. Walters, the youngest of the outfit, was an eight-year veteran himself. This was no green and inexperienced crew that had been

sent forth to World 9 of System XG.

"Help me!" wailed the pitiful voice.

"It's not far from us now," Stivens said. "No more than twenty yards."

They peered through the thick curtain of closely intertwined shrubbery, looking. Almost unconsciously, four hands crept to four hips, and blasters appeared.

They fanned out. .

"Here I am!" the voice called. It was an unmistakably Terran voice. "Over here!"

The Exploratory Force men exchanged worried glances. Then, quietly, they converged on the clump of shrubbery which lay between them and the unseen speaker.

Buckmaster was the first to get there.

"Help me!" cried the familiar voice.

Buckmaster gasped heavily. "What—what are you?"

A moment later the other three were there. Stivens whistled in amazement. Walters nibbled his lip. O'Dell frowned.

"It isn't from Earth, that's

for sure," Buckmaster said. "But how did it learn to speak our language so well? And in the voice of an Earthman?"

"And what is it?" Walters asked.

THE thing, whatever it was, stood on four stubby legs. It was about five feet tall, tapering conically up from its four legs and terminating in a round dome. Big saucer-like eyes ringed its head about six inches from the top of the dome. The eyes, which were the size of silver dollars, were arranged in a circle clear around the creature's head, giving it a complete three hundred sixty degree sweep of vision.

It had four arms, likewise arranged in a circle around the body. The arms ended in long triple-jointed fingers. There was no mouth, only a kind of grillwork equidistant between eyes and arms.

The creature was greenish in color. There was an appearance of tremendous age about it, as if its thick, leathery hide had been exposed to the ele-

ments for hundreds or perhaps thousands of years.

Stivens said, "Is *this* the thing that was making all the noise?"

"I called to you, yes," the creature said gravely. Its voice emerged from the grillwork affair above its arms. It spoke in tones and inflections that were Earthlike to the last decimal place.

"I'll be damned," O'Dell said quietly. "It speaks Terran like a native."

They stared at the strange being for a long moment without speaking. The silence was broken by the creature itself.

"You are natives of a planet called Earth," it said in a flat, declarative voice. "Earth is the third planet in orbit round a yellow sun which you know as Sol. Is this true?"

"Yes, of course," stammered O'Dell. "But—"

The creature continued smoothly, "You are known in your native areas by the designations Walters, Buckmaster, Stivens, and O'Dell." The being nodded in turn to each of the dumbstruck Earthmen.

"Please confirm the accuracy of these designations."

"Sure, they're our names," Buckmaster growled. "Look here, just what *are* you, and—"

"Your purpose in visiting this planet, which you designate as World 9 of System XG, is to establish Terran claim here. The ultimate aim of Earth is to explore and colonize the entire known universe. Is this not your purpose?"

"It is," Stivens snapped. "And now, suppose you answer a few questions for *us*. First: are you a native of this planet? Second: how do you manage to speak our language so well? Third—"

The alien being interrupted in a smooth, almost purring voice. "It is not my function to answer questions, but merely to gather information and relay it to the appropriate data-gathering centers."

"You yelled for help," Walters said sharply. "But you don't seem to be in any trouble. Were you yelling like that simply as a ruse, to attract our attention?"

"I repeat," the being said. "My function is not to answer questions."

"You asked us plenty!" Buckmaster stormed.

"My function is to gather data and relay it."

"Relay it to *whom*?" Stivens asked.

"To those who built me," said the alien creature.

"To those who *built* it," O'Dell repeated in a softly wondering voice. "So it's a robot? A robot sitting here in the middle of an uncharted jungle on an uninhabited world, and a robot capable of speaking our language—even of crying for help—!"

"What's it doing here?" Walters asked, of nobody in particular. "What does it want?"

"It gathers data," Stivens said. "But what kind of data? And who does it gather it for?"

The robot stood quietly in the middle of the group, a short, blunt-topped, bizarre-looking figure that studied them emotionlessly with its big eyes.

Blandly the robot said, "I

am now authorized to reveal certain information to you. Please remain exactly where you are." The robot paused. "I am an information-gathering device built and installed by intelligent life-forms of a distant world, who have placed me here for the purpose of detection and warning in case of visitation by other intelligent life-forms—"

Stivens said hurriedly, "Quick! Back to the ship! Don't stand here listening any more!"

He turned and began to run rapidly through the underbrush toward their ship, whose greenish-gold hull glowed in the sunlight several hundred yards away. After a moment's hesitation he was followed by O'Dell, then by Buckmaster and Walters.

The robot called to them: "Flight will be futile! You are wasting your energies!"

STIVENS was the first to reach the ship. At least, he got close to the ship. Ten feet from the catwalk that led into the control cockpit, he ran into what seemed like an in-

visible wall. He bounced back five feet and lost his balance, tumbling backward with arms and legs flailing in all directions.

O'Dell and Walters, who were not far behind him, caught the falling Stivens and steadied him into an upright position.

"What's the matter?" Walters asked.

The panting Stivens nursed his bruised nose with one hand and pointed toward the ship with the other. "Some kind of force-field surrounding the ship—invisible—I banged into it full tilt."

Buckmaster, who had come lumbering up to the ship a distant fourth in the run, tiptoed forward and placed one hand cautiously outward, groping toward the ship. The hand halted in mid-air.

"Here it is," Buckmaster said. "A solid wall, all right. It feels like glass. Smooth, cool to the touch, just like glass."

He knelt and ran his hand down along a curved path toward the ground. He picked up a stick lying nearby,

gouged a couple of inches of dirt out of the forest floor, and prodded experimentally into the hole he had just created. He shook his head.

"Goes right down into the ground," Buckmaster reported. He stretched up as high as he could reach. And up, too."

"It extends all the way around the ship," said Walters. "It's like an invisible dome that somebody dropped right over the ship. A dome of force. Keeping us from getting into the ship."

Four pale, frightened Earthmen turned to stare at each other in wonderment. What had started with the mysterious cry for help in the forest now had abruptly turned into a completely inexplicable and dangerous situation.

"What's going on?" Buckmaster wanted to know. "Where did that crazy robot come from, anyway? And what does that force-field around our ship mean?"

"The force-field," said a smooth voice from behind them, "is present for obvious reasons." The men turned and saw that the weird robot had

followed them back to their ship, and now stood ten or fifteen feet behind them, eyeing them gravely. "The purpose of the force-field is to prevent you from leaving this planet until my masters arrive. But I can assure you that their arrival will take place in a matter of seconds."

"Get your blasters ready," Stivens said in a quiet voice. "Let's get into a tight formation. Back to back, facing in all directions. But don't shoot until you have to. We're a scouting team, not a military expeditionary force."

The four men edged close to each other, forming a circle no more than a dozen feet in circumference. They waited with drawn blasters. Not far away stood the robot, staring at them with no hint of expression on its alien face.

Suddenly an odd glimmering effect became noticeable in a wide area surrounding the men, the ship, and the robot. Four hands tightened on four trigger-studs.

And then, four blasters dropped to the forest floor, falling from hands unable to

control their own actions. The men stared at their weapons without being able to stoop and pick them up.

The aliens arrived.

There were eight of them. They simply seemed to pop out of nowhere. One moment there was a curious glimmering light in the clearing, the next moment the glimmering was gone and eight aliens stood there.

They looked very much like the robot. They stood the same height, had the same number of eyes and limbs. In place of the grillwork through which the robot had spoken, the newcomers had small beaked mouths. Otherwise, they were identical, even to the very ancient look of their wrinkled, leathery skins.

The robot said, "These are my masters, the Methii."

One of the aliens moved forward slightly. "we come, Earthmen, in response to a message beamed by thought-wave from our warning-post here. We are informed that a space-going race has at last entered Methii domains."

"I get it," Stivens mur-

mured. "The robot's just a sort of cosmic fire-alarm box! Whenever intelligent beings show up, the robot sends out a signal and the emergency patrol comes running!"

"Your analysis is indeed keen," said the Methii spokesman. "On each of the border worlds of our realm we have placed these telepathically-at-tuned robots whose function it is to warn us of trespassing beings. It makes contact with the trespassers through a simple stratagem, extracts telepathically from them their planet of origin and purpose of visit, and sends out an automatic warning to the nearest Methii invasion patrol. Our transportation is by matter-transmission, and is virtually instantaneous over long distances."

"We aren't invaders," O'Dell protested. "We're just explorers who thought this world was uninhabited and not owned by anyone, and—"

"You have entered Methii territory," was the calm, level reply. "By our law this constitutes invasion. We tolerate

no alien beings within our domains."

"If you're telepathic as you claim to be," Stevens said, "you can see in our minds that our intention is completely peaceful. In fact, we have orders to depart at once from any world that we find is the property of another species."

"We have no doubt of your peaceful intentions," said the alien. "In any event, there is small chance that three such beings as you could wreak any measurable damage against Methii strength."

"In that case," said Stevens, ignoring the slightly mocking tones of the last Methii statement, "we ask that you remove the force-field that your robot has placed around our spaceship, and permit us to leave this planet and this solar system at once."

"You will be allowed to leave once we are certain that you can never bring harm to Methii civilization," the alien said.

"Which means?"

"It will first be necessary to expunge certain details from your memory. Then—"

and only then—will you be permitted to depart,” the alien said coldly.

“Galactic isolationists,” Walters muttered.

“If you like. We value our privacy. There are over two thousand worlds in the Methii sphere of influence, and we do not wish alien infiltrators to enter any one of these planets.”

The aliens moved forward, gliding on their short, stumpy legs with a strange grace. They formed an open circle around the Earthmen.

Walters whispered, “Should we try to make a break for it?”

“Don’t waste your time,” Stivens advised. “We don’t stand a chance against these babies.”

“You think we cannot detect your whispers?” asked the Methii spokesman. “The oldest Earthman is correct. You would not be able to move two paces toward your ship if we willed you to remain where you are.”

Walters shook his head vehemently. “I don’t give a

damn,” he cried. “I’ll call your bluff!”

He broke and started to run. The aliens did not move; no visible action took place. But Walters froze with one leg in mid-air no more than a step or two from his place, and remained that way, looking like a grotesque living statue. Beads of sweat dribbled down his face. The cords of his neck stood out as he fought desperately to put his leg down, without success.

“Resistance is futile,” the alien remarked. “We have perfect mental control over you all, Earthmen.”

Walters was unable to move a muscle.

“We can destroy you with a minute flick of a mental impulse,” said the Methii. “All we need do is interfere with the nerve-channel that controls the beating of your heart, or the intake of your breath—”

Walters’ foot lowered itself gently to the ground. The stasis was broken. The young Earthman gasped heavily for breath.

“God, that was awful!” he

exclaimed. "Like being held a prisoner in your own skin! I wanted to get free and couldn't do as much as wiggle a pinky!"

"Very well, Earthmen," the alien said. "We will now enter your minds to complete the process of safeguarding Methii territory. You will not be able to resist."

The four Earthmen went rigid. Only their eyes remained able to move. Tendrils of thought drifted from the aliens to the Earthmen.

It was over in an instant—the entry into the mind, the placing of the unbreakable hypnotic command. The Earthmen were allowed finally to relax. The alien said, "It will now be impossible for you to make our existence known to others of your kind. You will return to your home world at once."

THE Methii waited while the four Earthmen crossed the clearing to their ship. The robot had already vanished into the underbrush—on guard and ready in case any other explorers ever decided to ven-

ture onto World 9 of System XG.

"The force-field's gone," Buckmaster observed, as they approached the ship.

"Sure," O'Dell said. "They just wanted us to stay around for the treatment. Now we can leave—and they want us out of here in a hurry."

They climbed silently upward into the ship. Walters, the last man in, actuated the control that shut the hatch. O'Dell began setting up for blastoff while Stevens punched out a homeward orbit on the course-computer and Buckmaster got the fuel-feeders operating.

As they worked, Walters said, "What did it feel like to you?"

"Like an ice-pick sliding into my head and sloshing around for a while," O'Dell said.

Stevens chuckled darkly. "It felt like precise surgery to me. They reached in and made a few quick incisions, and got out."

"Felt like a three-day hang-over to me," Buckmaster grunted. "Only it lasted a cou-

ple of seconds, that's all. How about you, Walters?"

"It seemed like they were pulling memories out of my mind with wires," Walters said.

"But we *haven't* forgotten, have we?" O'Dell said.

Stivens shook his head. "They didn't say *we'd* forget. Just that we wouldn't be able to communicate the truth to others."

Buckmaster looked doubtful. "Seems to me they can't stop us. All I have to do is open my mouth and say, 'Look here, there's an alien race called the Methii, and they have a robot posted on this plane as a sort of warning, and—' That's how easy it is," Buckmaster finished. "Just let the words come out."

Stivens tightened his lips. "It's easy for us, here in the ship," he said. "But maybe it won't be so easy to talk about it when we're back on Earth, among other people."

"We'll see soon enough," Walters said.

O'Dell called, "Stand by for blastoff, everyone! We're lifting ship!"

TRAVELLING by nullwarp drive, the ship needed only seven weeks to cross the immense gulf of space that separated Earth from the borders of the Methii domains. On the forty-eighth day of the journey the ship snapped out of warp to find Earth square ahead in the viewscreens, and early the following morning they effected a landing at the main Exploratory Force spaceport near the east coast of Australia.

The four men turned their ship over to the spaceport crew and presented themselves, according to regulations, to their section commander, for a review of their voyage. Stivens had with him the routing-chart of assignments. He handed it across the desk.

The section commander picked the booklet up casually. "Good trip?" he asked, routinely.

"Not bad, sir," Stivens said.

"Umm. Glad to hear it."

The commander frowned, then peered more closely at the schedule-chart. "According to this you were supposed to

head out through Systems XF, XG, and XH. But I see that you stopped short after World 9 of System XG, with nearly a third of your assignment unfulfilled."

"Yes, sir," Stivens said.

"Well, man, what's your explanation for that? How come you returned early? I notice you gave World 9 a double-plus unfavorable rating, but why didn't you go on to the next planet as scheduled?"

Stivens squirmed uneasily. He stared at his three comrades. His face reddened and he began to perspire heavily.

"Well, sir, I—that is—ah—"

"Yes, Stivens?"

Stivens glanced at O'Dell, Walters, and Buckmaster. "I—can't seem to say it, sir. Maybe one of the other men—"

"O'Dell, can you help Stivens out?" the commander asked.

"Sir, I—we—" O'Dell stopped. He scowled and dug the point of his shoe into the thick carpet. He clenched his fists. "Go on, Buckmaster," he said finally. "You were telling

us how easy it would be. Go on!"

The big spaceman took a deep breath and plunged in. "You see, sir, it's this way. When we—"

"Yes, Buckmaster? Go ahead, speak up!"

"When—when—"

"What is the matter with you men?" the perplexed commander demanded loudly.

Walters said, "It's a kind of compulsion, sir. We want to speak, but whenever we come to—to a certain topic—we can't talk!"

IT caused a sensation at the Exploratory Force base. Four men had returned from a distant part of the galaxy, and it was obvious that they had encountered something strange, perhaps menacing. But they could not tell anyone what it was.

Question-and-answer games got nowhere. Experts were called in to devise series of yes-and-no questions that might yield information, but every time a direct question that touched on the Methii was asked, such as, "Did you

encounter an intelligent alien race on World 9?" the immediate response was a complete muscle freeze, making impossible either a *yes* or a *no* reply.

Walters was sent off for hypnotic probing. Nothing was learning. O'Dell was given truth drugs, to no avail.

Stivens was subjected to a full-scale depth analysis,, which failed to turn up a thing. They gave Buckmaster a barrage of shock treatments without breaking through his communication barrier.

Finally all four men were called together in the office of the Exploratory Force Commanding Officer, General Bradcliffe. They stood together, O'Dell, Stivens, Buckmaster, and Walters, each knowing what the trouble was, each unable to speak.

General Bradcliffe said, "At ease, men. I've called you here to let you know that we're discontinuing our attempts to crack open your secrets. The psych boys tell us that any more probing is likely to have damaging permanent effects on your minds.

"All we've been able to find out is that you went out to World 9 of System XG and found *something* out there, something that we must know about—something that put an unbreakable lock on your tongues.

"But that's all we know, after months of probing. So we're going to risk sending another exploring team out to that planet. We've *got* to find out what's here, and if we can't get it out of you we'll have to do it some other way."

"Sir, it's no use," O'Dell said. "Any other ships that you send—the same thing will happen. They'll—they'll—"

He stopped. He could go no further.

"This is a risk we must take," the General said. "The men going out there will know the risk they're taking. They'll remain in contact with us, via subspace radio, every step of the way. As for you men, I'm afraid we'll have to pension you off. You're of no use to the Force in the condition you're in now."

So they were pensioned off and given groundside jobs in

Exploratory Force offices. They kept together, the four men, and their eyes bore witness to the secret that they could not voice, even to each other.

And a second ship, manned by eight volunteers, the cream of the Exploratory Force, departed for World 9 of System XG.

O'Dell, Stivens, Buckmaster, and Walters were on hand when the first subspace radio reports came back from the second expedition. The landing was without difficulty; they were establishing a base and preparing to explore the vicinity. On the second day after landing, a new message came from the explorers: "Dudley has heard a cry for help in the forest. We're going out to explore."

Dudley has heard a cry for help in the forest. It was the last message ever received from the second expedition. Their radio went dead immediately afterward, and they were not heard from again until their return to Earth, seven weeks later.

The eight men left the ship and reported to headquarters. They could give no account of their adventures past hearing the cry for help in the forest.

Furious, the Exploratory Force administration announced that a third, and larger, expedition would be outfitted immediately. But twelve men on Earth smiled sadly when they heard the news, knowing that there was no defense against the Methii, and that the only thing to do was to keep far, far away from World 9 of System XG, and to hope that Mankind never again trespassed on Methii territory.

Twelve men. Prisoners in their own skulls, unable to communicate their vital secret.

And it was no surprise to any of them when the third expedition suddenly went silent, on the second day of its stay on World 9 of System XG, after reporting a strange and human-sounding cry in the forest...

THE END