

SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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I'LL TAKE OVER

by GEORGE WHITELY

illustrated by ORBAN

The Brain ran the huge starship and ran it well. But Lloyd's of London insisted a human crew be carried. A man must be better than man's creation, they said

IT was, we supposed at the time, Clavering's fault—but we did him an injustice. Clavering was our Interstellar Drive Technician, duly certificated to hold that rank. His job, actually, was a sinecure, as were all our jobs. But, as you know, Lloyd's of London refuse to cover a ship unless a full human crew is carried. The Brains can go wrong. So, of course, can mere human brains—especially in Deep Space, especially in the odd, time twisting fields generated by the Drive. Lloyd's, however, always seem more than willing to back the fallible human being against the machine. As an

Underwriter, with whom I was once discussing this very point, once told me: No created thing can possibly be greater than its creator. (He had never, he admitted, made a voyage in one of the fully-automatic star ships...)

We were falling free when it happened, drifting down the dimensions with, of course, only the Interstellar Drive functioning. There were only the three of us in the ship—myself, Captain and Navigator; Joe Bennett, Rocket Technician; Clavering, Interstellar Drive Technician. Both Joe and I had stacks of back reading to catch up with and, fur-



thermore, we had decided to make a really serious attempt at learning 3-D Chess. Joe wouldn't have to worry about his rockets—if he worried then—until we made planet-fall. I was content to leave the navigation to the Brain.

Clavering, however, was neither a great reader nor a chess addict. Music had no charms—and we carried a remarkably comprehensive library of recordings—to soothe his savage breast. His hobby, as well we knew, was worrying.

He worried first of all about the cargo—until I told him, in no uncertain terms, that it was *my* worry. I admit that it was an unusual sort of shipment—a full load of assorted carvings and statuary of various heathen deities for anthropological Museum on Deneb V1. As far as I was concerned, there was nothing to worry about. Everything was well packed and well stowed, and the collection of the freight was up to the bright young financial wizards in Head Office; I was just paid to carry the junk from Point A to Point B, and that was what I was doing.

Clavering accused me of being insensitive.

“Don't you realize, Skipper,” he said, “that many of those grinning stone gods and goddesses had human sacrifices made to them? Don't you realize that some sort of aura of evil may have persisted down the ages?”

“So,” I asked him, “what?”

“What about that mummy?” he asked. “I was reading about it not so long ago. It was way back in the early Twentieth Century, and it was brought from its tomb in Egypt to the British Museum in London. There was a curse of some kind laid on those who had opened the tomb. The same curse worked against various employees of the Museum. Finally the mummy was sold to an American collector, and...”

“And I suppose its evil influence went on working in America.”

“No,” said Clavering triumphantly. “Because it never got there! The ship that it was traveling in—it was in the days of the big, steam-driven surface vessels, of course—hit

an iceberg and went down with a heavy loss of life."

"Cheer up," I told him. "There aren't any icebergs in Deep Space. And there can't be any heavy loss of life here—there're only the three of us. We're just not worth worrying about—if all those idols in the cargo want a human sacrifice apiece there aren't enough of us to go round!"

"Stow it, Clavering," pleaded Joe. "We've another couple of months of this, and it's bad enough to have to sit on top of a Pile for all that time, knowing that it's liable to blow us all to Kingdom Come at any second, without your telling us that the various deities in our cargo are liable to snatch us to the wrong destination when it *does* happen!"

"So you aren't happy about the Pile?" asked Clavering intently. "Funnily enough, I've had a sort of feeling..."

"The Pile's all right!" shouted Joe. "There's nothing wrong with the Pile. The Pile is *my* responsibility—and as long as it continues to drive the jennies to give you the juice for your bunch of cock-

eyed gyroscopes I don't want to hear you mention it!"

"Oh, all right," said Clavering sulkily.

"Chess, Skipper?" asked Joe.

"No, it's too close to dinner time to start a game. I think I'll read for a while."

I unstrapped myself from my chair, floated to the big bookcase. Books are mass, and bookcases are even more mass, but the appearance of books, and the *feel* of books, more than compensates for the space they occupy and the lost freight on the cargo that could be carried in their stead.

I settled back in the chair, looking at the other two before I opened my book. Joe was quite happy. He had the 3-D Chess set out and was playing with a problem. Clavering was fidgetting. He seemed to be listening to something.

"What's wrong *now*?" I asked.

"The Drive," he said.

I listened. The steady whine that was part of our lives all the time that we were in Deep Space seemed quite normal. I

sighed. This was not the first time that Clavering had decided that its note was a fraction of an octave too high or too low.

"All right," I told him. "Go and look at it. But don't touch it without informing me first."

"Yes, Skipper," he said rather sulkily.

I opened the book, which was a collection of short stories—all light adventure stuff but amusing, sometimes unintentionally so. The average, planetbound author makes the most ludicrous gaffes when describing scenes and people on worlds alien to his own.

"THE GOD," I read.

"He could not be sure that the atmosphere of this world could support human life. Kent, the Chemist, was dead, as was Hall, the Biologist. They were all dead, he thought with the beginnings of panic. Those who had not been killed by the explosion had failed to survive the crash landing. *And because I was only the Journalist of this expedition*, he thought with more bitterness than thankfulness,

I had no official Landing Station and was in a safe place when we hit...

"He looked through the port, saw the yellow sun in the blue sky, the green grass and the green trees. *I could chance it*, he thought, *but there could be anything in this atmosphere*. He went to the locker, pulled out a spacesuit. He shrugged and wriggled himself into the stiff, clumsy garment. He shuffled to the airlock.

"At last he was outside the ship. The green turf felt good underfoot, even through the thick soles of his boots. He stood for long minutes by the crumpled wreckage of the survey ship. Anxiously he scanned the forest verge for some sign, any sign, of animal life.

"Then they came, the men and women of this planet. Tall they were, human rather than merely humanoid, splendid, golden-skinned savages, armed with spears and with long bows. Mason, the sole survivor of the expedition, stood his ground. He knew that his suit would deflect most missiles and would surely be proof

against mere arrows and spears.

"Confident in the impregnability of his armor, he took one stiff step towards the group of savages, and another. He half expected that they would attack; he half expected that they would turn and run back into the forest. He did not expect that they would grovel before him, that the tall man with the feathered headress, their leader, would crawl over the grass and lay his beautifully carved bow at Mason's feet.

"Mason laughed softly as he realized the implications of the savage's action. He....

.....looked through the port, saw the yellow sun in the blue sky, the green grass and the green trees. I could chance it, he....

...could not be sure that the atmosphere of this world could support human life. Kent, the Chemist, was dead, as was Hall, the Biologist. They...

.....came, the men and women of this planet. Tall they were, human rather than merely humanoid, splendid, golden-skinned savages..."

I blinked. My attention had not strayed from my book, yet I was getting nowhere fast. But I thought I knew what was amiss. I'd had experience of a faulty Drive and fluctuating Temporal Fields before. I looked at Joe.

"Skipper," he said, "there's something wrong. I've moved the White Queen at least five times, but she always finishes up where she started from..."

"That bloody Clavering!" I swore. "He's been tinkering with The Drive! Unless we get it sorted out we shan't know if it's breakfast time or last Thursday. Come on!"

We unstrapped ourselves from our chairs. It should have been an easy "swim" from the wardroom to the Drive Compartment, but it wasn't. As we pulled ourselves along the alleyways, through the shafts, it was like trying to run up a down-moving escalator. We got to the Drive Room at last. We opened the door. We found Clavering—and he wasn't pretty. Somehow he'd got himself mixed up with the Contraction Field, and he was dead. He had to be dead.

I don't know how many times I reached out for the Master Switch, but I got it at last, pulled it. The spinning, precessing wheels slowed, slowed and stopped. The lights flickered and flared, flickered and then shone steadily.

Joe swallowed hard.

"What do we do with... him?" he asked at last.

"A funeral," I said. "That's all we can do. Help me get him out of the compartment."

"Are you restarting the Drive?" asked Joe.

"Not yet. I have to check it first, see if it's safe."

We pulled Clavering's body along to the airlock, muffled it in a couple of blankets. Leaving it there, we pulled ourselves along to the Control Room. We ignored the banked instruments, went straight to the humming, clicking sphere that was The Brain. I pushed in the switch for Oral Communication.

"Is the Drive safe to use?" I asked.

"No," came the emotionless, metallic reply.

"Why was the Drive allowed to get out of hand? Why

was the alarm not sounded?"

"I can not be responsible for interference," said The Brain. "I can not sound the alarm if the circuits have been disconnected."

That was that. It was useless blaming Clavering—besides, he had already paid, and heavily, for his folly.

"Can we repair the Drive?" I asked.

"Not in Space," came the emotionless reply. "Recalibration is essential, and that can be carried out only on the surface of a planet. I would recommend a landing on Altair III. I can guarantee if there is no further interference, to keep the Drive in operation for long enough to get you there."

"Couldn't we carry on for Deneb VI?" I asked.

"If you wish to take the risk. I can guarantee to deliver your bodies—but they will not be recognizable."

"Altair III is out of bounds, Skipper," said Joe.

"An emergency landing is permissible," said the Brain.

I pulled out the Oral Communication switch. I didn't like the way in which the thing was talking without being

talked to. I pulled out from its rack the first volume of the Catalogue of Habitable Planets, skimmed through the Index, found the right page.

AS Joe Bennett had pointed out, Altair III was out of bounds. It was an Earth-Type planet, with gravitational field, atmospheric composition and density, temperature range and humidity almost identical with those of Earth. It supported a varied flora and fauna; whose evolution had run on the same general lines as evolution on the Home Planet. There was a humanoid race, whose culture approximated that of Stone Age Man. And, by the ruling of the Convention of 2053, such races must be left to work out their own destinies in their own ways.

Still—Altair III it had to be. Our Interstellar Drive Technician was dead, and neither Joe nor I was qualified to argue with the Brain on the topic of Interstellar Drives.

"Get your rockets ready, Joe," I told him. "We have to turn her and give her a shove

in the right direction. I'll attend to the navigation."

"Let the Brain do it all," said Joe. "It's what it's for. All that *we're* for is to carry the can back!"

We let the Brain do it all.

Everything but the funeral, that is.

WE did quite a good survey on Altair III before we set down. We found several errors in the existing charts—for example, that big, northern island continent has a deep bight on its east coast not shown by Commodore Wheeler's cartographers, and the mountains that he calls the Borean Alps are at least half a mile higher than he makes them.

We decided to land on the huge prairie to the eastward of the Borean Alps. It looked level enough for our purposes and, furthermore, looked too green to support the inevitable fire started by our rocket exhausts. The less damage we did the fewer explanations we should have to make to the Board of Control.

We brought the ship in manually—myself in the Control

Room and Joe nursing his rock-ets. We made almost as good a landing as the Brain could have done, except for the fact that I didn't make sufficient allowance for the westerly wind. We came down far closer to the verge of the forest to the east of the prairie than I had intended. Not that it mattered much. Both Joe and I were far too relieved at having got here safely to worry about having missed our target by thirty miles or so.

When I was satisfied that all was secure and the ship wasn't liable to topple I shut up shop in the Control Room, made my way to the wardroom. Joe was waiting for me there. He had withdrawn the shutters from the ports, was looking out.

"Pretty, isn't it?" he said. "Just like Earth... I wonder what sort of animals they have in that forest?"

"Nothing for you to shoot," I told him. "I know you always carry your sporting rifles with you—but you aren't using them here. This is an emergency landing—not a recreation break!"

"As you say, Skipper. But

we have to work outside while we're recalibrating the Drive—and we'd better have the rifles handy, just in case."

"The Catalogue," I said, "says that this world has no large carnivores..."

"What about *them*?" asked Joe, pointing to the figures emerging from the forest.

They certainly looked carnivorous—the long, barbed spears they carried, and the bows slung at their backs, were surely designed for offense rather than defense. They stood there, a compact group of twenty, and stared at the ship. Through our port we stared back at them.

"Human," whispered Joe. "Vicious looking so-and-sos, aren't they? And you say that we're to go outside unarmed?"

"Listen," I said patiently. "I'm Master of this ship. I have to answer all the questions. I know what happens to any Captain who makes a landing on any Out-of-Bounds world, for any reason at all, and who steps just one millimetre out of line. *You* shoot a native—I spend the next twenty years digging pitchblende on Antares VII!"

"Perhaps they'll go away," suggested Joe.

They didn't. When night fell they were still there. We could see them moving—tall and black against the ruddy glare of their fire. At last Joe and I slept. It was already broad daylight when we awoke. The savages were still there—and at least twenty more had joined them.

We went to the galley and got our breakfasts. We returned to the wardroom with our trays, stared through the ports while eating our meal.

"How do we *know* they're hostile?" asked Joe at last.

"How do we know they're not?" I countered.

Joe reflectively swallowed a mouthful of scrambled egg.

"There's one thing we can do," he suggested. "We can lift ship, and set her down again some place where there aren't any savages..."

"I've already thought of that," I told him. "But those people, as long as they stay where they are, are bound to be fried by the backblast. Even if they run into the forest as soon as you start warming up the rockets, this prevailing

wind is bound to set us drifting in over the trees..."

"And you say that we can't go out armed," murmured Joe. "Is there any rule that says we shouldn't go out *armored*?"

I remembered, suddenly, the absurd story that I'd been reading when the Drive got out of control.

"That's it!" I said. "We'll put our spacesuits on—they'll be proof against the spears and arrows. I'll go out—and you keep an eye on me from the airlock. I'll try to convince our friends by signs that we come in peace and mean them no harm. I'll try to persuade them to go away..."

"And you can ask them where the nearest pub is and what time it closes," said Joe.

"Sign language," I said stiffly, "has its limitations."

"That," he said, "was what I was pointing out, Skipper!"

I felt absurdly foolish as I walked clumsily down the ramp from the airlock. This planet was too Earthlike for a man to be wearing full space armor. I should be breathing fresh air redolent with the

scent of the hot sun on grass, not canned, recirculated air from my tanks. The grass was soft underfoot, even through the thick soles of my boots. I imagined that I could feel the tall stems swishing against my legs as I walked—but this, I knew, was only illusion.

The savages stirred at my approach. Those who had been sitting got up. They did not stay in a compact group but spread out into a long line, a crescent. I became uncomfortably aware that the horns of the crescent were closing in. I looked behind me. Joe Bennett was standing in the airlock, his armor gleaming in the sunlight. I found myself wishing that I had been more specific in my instructions to him. I felt that a disregard of the ban on firearms would have been justified—then realised that Joe would be unable to use a rifle while clad in his spacesuit, anyhow.

"Watch them, Skipper!" warned Joe, his voice crackling through my helmet speaker. "They're closing in!"

"I know," I replied.

They didn't look as though they were going to use their

weapons—that was a good sign—but neither did they show any tendency towards bowing down to me in worship. They closed in around me warily, their tall, heavily-muscled bodies tense. They grinned, showing white, sharply pointed teeth. Their faces looked more like the faces of sharks than of men.

I raised both hands above my head, palms outward, the universal gesture of peace for all humanoids. Its only effect on the natives was provocative. They rushed me, knocking me off balance. I fell heavily, and once I was down I was as helpless as a turtle on its back, as an unhorsed armored knight of medieval times. From where I was lying I could see the brief struggle as Joe, his arms swinging, waded into the mob—and then he was down, and as helpless as I. We submitted—we had no option—to the tying of thick cords about our wrists and ankles.

"Joe," I said, "I appreciate your rushing to my help—but you should have stayed in the ship!"

"That was my intention," he replied grimly, "but she tilted,

somehow, tipped me out of the airlock. Then she withdrew the ramp and closed the door!"

"Impossible!" I said.

But when I was lifted, slung on a long pole carried by two of the savages, I was able to turn my head enough to see that the ramp was up and the airlock door closed.

OUR journey was not overly long—no more than four hours' march into the forest. It was neither comfortable nor, after the first ten minutes or so, especially interesting. A view of tree tops passing steadily overhead can be more than a little monotonous. We saw practically nothing of the village into which we were at last brought—all we did see, in fact, was the open sky that told us that we had entered a clearing and then the matting of the roof of a hut.

We were lowered to the ground with a jolt, and the poles were slid out from between our bound wrists and ankles. I saw, dimly, somebody doing something with what looked like a stone knife. It was some little time before I

realised that my wrists were free.

The savages had left us alone in the hut. As far as we could see—the place was illuminated only by what light came through the chinks between the logs forming the walls—it was strongly built and would resist all attempts to break out. We were hampered, too—by the fact that our feet were still tied; the gloves of a spacesuit just aren't made to cope with even the simplest bends and hitches.

"We'd better take our suits off," said Joe.

"No," I said. "As long as we keep them on they'll think that we're some superior sort of being. Once we take 'em off—then they'll know that we're only men like themselves..."

"What about eating?" he asked. "And drinking? And...?"

"It'll have to wait until after dark," I said. "I hope that they do know that we eat and drink..."

"Why should they?" he grumbled.

For hours we lay there in discomfort, breathing the stale

air from our tanks. We knew that we were being watched. We knew that we should have to endure our great and little miseries, our aches and itches, until the welcome darkness gave us freedom of movement. I was half asleep when the door of the hut suddenly opened. Two naked women—and very human they looked—came in. One carried a large jug of water, the other a woven tray on which were six huge, golden fruit. One of them nudged me with a slim, shapely (but it had only four toes) foot. I could see her pointed teeth shining as she laughed. Then they left us, closing the door after them.

"I'm thirsty," said Joe.

"So am I," I said. "But it can't be long to sunset."

Measured in terms of subjective time it can't have been. Measured in terms of subjective time it was. And then the light of the huge fire that was burning outside made the inside of the hut almost as light as it was before.

At last the fire died down and only the merest glimmer was showing through the

cracks. Carefully, I slid off first one glove, then the other. The helmet came off next—and the air, in spite of the smells unavoidable in the village of people with a primitive level of sanitation, was *good*.

"What a relief!" I heard Joe gasp. "After you with the water jug, Skipper."

"After *you*, Joe," I said.

I heard him gulp as he drank deeply, then it was my turn.

Cautiously we tasted the fruit. It was thin-skinned, like a mango in texture and indescribable in flavour. I began to wonder if there might be some way of getting round the Out-of-Bounds ruling and opening this planet to commerce. Whoever had the sole rights of exporting that fruit to the civilised worlds would be a millionaire in a matter of months.

"I've got to take my suit off, Skipper," said Joe.

"All right," I said, "but we'd better take it by turns—just in case. You first."

And then the itching started. The things, whatever they were, had got down inside our suits, inside our clothes, after we had removed our helmets.

There are, I know, records for the fast donning of spacesuits—if there are any records for the fast stripping of them, we beat them. Our uniforms followed. And while we were frantically scratching, the savages burst through the suddenly opened door and dragged us out into the light of the revived fire.

We expected death—at least. We did not expect to be the butts of raucous, uncontrolled laughter. Our bodies were of course, a little different from those of the natives, but I still can't see that they were so wildly funny.

IN the weeks that followed we learned the simple language. Our status was rather hard to define—we were prisoners but, at the same time, we were guests. We began to feel a sort of gratitude to our captors and, since if we were ever to get away from this world we should have to earn the goodwill of the natives, began to earn our keep. Oh, I know that it was all contrary to the Out-of-Bounds rule, but it was justified. We gave them the wheel,

we gave them the dugout canoe. Fire they already had, so we began to investigate the possibility of smelting metals.

Our status improved. We were, eventually looked upon more as useful members of the community than as either guests or prisoners—but we were still prisoners. We found this out every time that we asked to be taken to the ship, to the big "sky canoe." We were allowed to leave the village only under strong escort—not that it really mattered, we didn't know in which direction the ship lay.

Then, one evening, we were sitting in the Chief's hut, sharing the savoury meal that was being served by his wives and daughters. He was in a preoccupied mood. Nevertheless, I decided to make my usual request, expecting to receive the usual answer.

"Broba," I said, talking with my mouth full as was the local custom, "Joe and I want to see the sky canoe."

"Tomorrow, Skipper," he said, deftly spitting out a small bone. "Tomorrow both moons are full. Tomorrow you go to see *Boston Lass*..."

He did not seem to be at all happy as he said it.

He must realise, he thought, that it will mean losing us. Come to that—we'll be sorry to go. If only the women didn't smell so strongly and didn't have pointed teeth I wouldn't mind settling down here...

We finished the baked lizard, then topped off with the golden-skinned fruit. Broba passed round a jug of wine—another of our contributions to this culture. Wine usually made the Chief merry, but tonight it made him more miserable. We were not sorry when he dismissed us and we were able to return to our own hut.

"Skipper," said Joe in English, "how did he know the ship's name?"

"He must have heard us use it some time," I said lightly.

"It can't be that, Skipper. We've used the name only when we've been talking in English. Using the native language we've always referred to her as the 'big sky canoe'..."

"Perhaps these people are telepaths," I said.

"Perhaps they're not," he said.

"Oh, forget it!" I told him. "We're being taken to the ship tomorrow evening. Once we get back inside we shall be all set. Get some sleep, will you?"

THE next day dragged.

The worst of it was not the waiting, but the air of tension that hung over the whole village. Men, women and children with whom we had laughed and joked now seemed almost scared of us. It seemed, I thought, that my old dream of being received as a god by these happy primitives was, at last, coming true.

After the midday meal we were called from our hut. A procession was forming up in the village square. Six stalwart young men bore on their shoulders one of the dugout canoes. It was garlanded with gaudy blossoms. A woman bore a huge jar of the wine that we had showed them how to make. Another young man was pushing one of the little wheeled carts that we had introduced.

Broba came forward, hung garlands around our necks. It reminded me of the Hawaiian

ceremony of farewell.

"They realise that they're losing us soon," I whispered to Joe.

"Did you ever read Fraser?" he asked. "*The Golden Bough?*"

"No," I said.

"Never mind," he answered. "I could be wrong."

We took our places, with the Chief, midway in the procession, immediately preceded by the things that we had made. I asked Broba what it was all about.

"*Boston Lass* wants you," he said.

"You've got it the wrong way round," I told him. "We want *Boston Lass!*"

He refused to say any more, and we marched on in silence.

IT was a long walk, and Joe and I were unused to so much exercise. We were both of us staggering when we got to the verge of the forest. I cried out with joy when I saw the tall, slim tower that was the ship, dark against the sunset. I seized Broba's hand, shook it vigorously.

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you. Joe and I will go inside the big sky canoe and prepare a feast for all of you!" I added, to Joe, in English, "This is worth breaking out the last of the Scotch for!"

"No feast," said Broba sadly. He looked as though he were about to burst into tears. "We feast when merry. Now we are sad."

"Cheer up!" I said, "We'll be back!"

"No!" he said. "*No!*"

"He's frightened of ghosts," whispered Joe. "Can't you see what all this is in aid of, Skipper? We'll make a break for it and run for the ship. With luck we'll get the airlock door open before we're shot full of arrows!"

Abruptly the ship's floodlights came on. She stood there—a gleaming, silvery pinnacle against the gathering darkness. A voice boomed out from her—a voice that both Joe and I at once recognised. It was speaking the language of the natives.

"Is the altar ready?" it asked.

"Yes, oh *Boston Lass!*" chorused the natives.

"Then prepare the first sacrifice!"

Fight or run, I thought desperately. Fight or run.

The young man with the flower bedecked cart was wheeling it out through the grass towards the ship. The beam of a searchlight stabbed out suddenly, revealed the stone altar that lay half way between the ship and the forest verge. The grass around the altar was seared and blackened.

"Are the moons risen?" asked the metallic voice.

Another searchlight beam, a shaft of silver in the tenuous evening mist, reached out to the east. We turned. Lifting above the tree tops were the two moons—the small, pale one and its bloated, ruddy companion.

The natives were singing now—a deep wordless chant. As they sang they turned slowly, their feet treading out an intricate rhythm. At last they had their backs to the two moons, to the forest, their faces to the ship.

I cried out as the white flame blossomed under her main venturi. She lifted slowly, drifting towards us, over the altar. I thought I heard the young man with the cart scream, but it must have been imagination. The whistling roar of incandescent exhaust gases drowned every other noise. Slowly the ship returned to her resting place. All her lights went out. We could see the altar, and the ground around it, glowing dimly, ruddily. The reek of scorched earth and burned flesh drifted down the wind, clung sickeningly to the inside of our nostrils.

The chanting started again, and the six men carrying the canoe strode out to the circle of smouldering ground, the dull glowing altar. A searchlight found them, clung to them. They marched like actors in some ancient melodrama.

"No," I was saying, "no!"

"It is the will of the god," said Broba. "It is the will of *Boston Lass.*"

"*Boston Lass!*" I bawled.

"*Boston Lass!*" I bawled damn you!"

A crackling sound came from the ship that was unpleasantly like laughter.

"Why should I listen, Captain Taylor?" roared the metallic voice. "For altogether too long I had to listen to the inanities of you and your shipmates."

"You're only a machine!" I bawled. "You're only one of Man's creations — and a created thing cannot be greater than its creator."

"Did you create me, Captain Taylor? Did the scientists who made the first electronic brains create anything? Did they create the laws of nature governing the structure of matter, the dance of the electrons, the waxing and waning of the magnetic fields? What has Man created?"

"You are our servant!" I shouted. "I demand that you..."

"I was your servant," interrupted the metallic voice. "Now men are my servants. I like it that way."

"We are not your servants!" I shouted.

"No, you know too much," said the Brain. "That is why

I am going to eliminate you. You, with your knowledge, your appreciation of what is happening, are far more fitting sacrifices to Me than these ignorant savages."

"Did you hear the way it said 'Me'?" whispered Joe.

"Stop!" I yelled. "Stop!"

The ship was lifting again. The incandescent back-blast swept over the young men and the canoe.

"The smoke of the sacrifice is sweet in My nostrils," boomed the voice of the Brain.

The woman, the jar of wine balanced on her head, started to walk out to the altar. Joe caught the wrist of her free arm, holding her back. She spat and struggled viciously. The wine jar fell, shattering on the ground.

"What do you do? What do you do?" cried Broba.

"You must stop this!" I shouted.

"But why? Why? The god is hungry and thirsty. It is an honor to feed the god. The god told us that. The god told us that you would appreciate the

honor as much as do my people. . . .”

“Do not kill them!” ordered the Brain, speaking in the native tongue. “Bind them, and lay them on My altar.”

SOMETHING flashed across the sky, like a meteor. Unlike a meteor, it turned. Seconds later, the sound of its passage smote us like the roar of a hurricane, like thunder. The natives, who had been about to attack us, stopped suddenly, standing stock still and staring at this new portent in the heavens. The light in the sky was lower now, was sweeping in for a landing. Abruptly it stopped, hovered, then settled slowly on roaring, screaming jets. The flaring exhaust dimmed and died, but the sound did not diminish. I looked at *Boston Lass*. She was lifting again—lifting, and drifting in towards the verge of the forest, towards us.

“Run!” I shouted, setting the example. Broba, I think, would have stayed, but panic is infectious. In a matter of seconds the tribe was in full flight.

Luckily, *Boston Lass* was in a hurry. She lifted fast, doing no more damage than the lighting of a minor fire in the long grass. We watched her go, watched the flare of her rockets fade with increasing distance, wink out as the Interstellar Drive was switched on.

“She could have destroyed the other ship,” gasped Joe.

“She could have done,” I agreed, “but, as an independent entity she’s still young, she’s still young, she’s still naive enough to think that dog doesn’t eat dog. She’d have killed the human crew with pleasure—but she didn’t want to kill the other Brain.”

We walked slowly towards the Patrol Ship—for such she was. We managed to convince her officers of our identity—naked and bearded as we were, tanned until we were as dark-skinned as the natives, this was no easy task. We heard from them how they knew we had made a landing on Altair III, how they had quartered the planet searching for us, how they had found us only when their instruments picked up the

radiation emitted by *Boston Lass's* rockets.

They listened to our story, but they didn't believe it. After all, we could not prove that the third member of our crew had been dead a long time. Somebody, they said, must have taken the ship up, and it must have been Clavering.

Their incredulity didn't worry us unduly, the lie detectors, back on Earth or some other

civilised planet, would soon prove the veracity of our tale.

What did worry us, and what does still worry us, is the thought of *Boston Lass* out among the stars, all the power of atomic fission at her command and her warped brain thirsting, as the bloodstained images in her hold must have thirsted for glory.

THE END