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MR. LONELINESS

by HENRY SLESAR

illustrated by ORBAN

It is lonely out there in space. Very, very lonely! A man needs to see a human face, hear a human voice. So visitors have to be sent out somehow — by some means

THERE were winds on the asteroid, and they blew in threads of heat and cold, chilling your feet and dampening your brow with sweat. The man shivered and cursed when the winds blew, condemning the freak currents of space, damning the Authority which had anchored him to this lonely outpost.

"If you could only feel them," he said intensely to the three men at the other side of the room.

"No, thanks," said Briggs. He laughed, and the sound was like brass.

"I feel it in my sleep sometimes," the man said moodily, staring at the floor. "It does something to your dreams. I

have the strangest nightmares..."

"Maybe it's the rations," Towne suggested, with the hint of a twinkle. Towne was a great kidder.

"Trouble with you, Pace," said Briggs. "You think too much. Too many gadgets out here to do your work for you. The Authority oughta scrap some of these robot controls and get you to use your hands. It's a great cure for the dol-drums, you know."

Murchison, the third man, looked grave. "In my opinion," he said judiciously, "we need a better rotation system out here. How long have you been observing on GT-8?"

"One year, five months, two



weeks, three days..." Pace looked at nothing.

"Two hours, forty minutes, and seven seconds, eh?" Towne chuckled. "You outposts are all alike. Living clocks, every one of you." He nudged Murchison's side. "Watch this, Deano. What time is it now, Pace? No fair looking."

"Sixteen hundred plus twenty," the man answered dully.

Towne checked his wrist. "On the button," he said gleefully. "You really get a talent for it on this job."

"Use your hands," Briggs insisted. "Get out and dig. Plant something. Build something. Make yourself some furniture."

Murchison frowned. "Not so fast, Freddie." He took a folded paper from his hip pocket and whispered something to the man by his side. "Spec sheet, GT-8."

"Never mind," said Pace. "I don't expect you to know the specs on every outpost on the Belt."

Briggs looked embarrassed. "Oh. Well, okay. So you can't do planting here. But you could find *something* to do.

You know this fellow Morgan on TW-1? He's got quite a project under way. He's building a miniature Earth."

Towne giggled. "Ambitious fellow—"

"No, really," Briggs said earnestly. "Got himself a plastics shop, and he's making models of every city on Earth. Fabulous thing. Take a lesson, Pace."

The man stood up and went to the viewport of the cabin. "I'm not a child, Briggs."

"That's a lousy attitude," Towne said cheerfully.

"Perhaps," Murchison said solemnly, "you've lost sight of your purpose out here."

"Nuts," said Pace inaudibly.

"We've got reason to be mighty proud of you fellows, you know. You're the real backbone of the space fleet. You're the men who keep the space lanes safe."

"You're only happy when you're griping," Towne said good-naturedly. "That's okay with me, pal. That's the American way, isn't it?" He grinned at the other two. "Just like the Army. Gripe, gripe, gripe." He rubbed the flesh around his

middle and yawned sleepily.

"Then there's the radio, of course," Briggs said. "You can always hear a friendly voice."

"Friendly?" Pace smiled grimly. "Have you listened in on your control stations lately? Those boys are all business."

"Well, they're pretty busy, Pace. You have to remember that." Murchison folded his hands into his lap.

"Busy," said Pace enviously.

"I know what's eating him," Towne said wisely. "It's the girl."

Pace looked away.

"Laura was very sorry about not showing up, Pace," Murchison said. "It's this rotten virus stuff that's going around. You know how she looks forward to these visits—"

"You bet," Towne agreed. "There's an outposter on G-70 who'll *really* cry in his beer when we show up without her."

"The Sweetheart of Space," the man said sardonically.

"Oh, come on," Briggs said. "You like to see her as much

as anybody else, Pace. She's a good kid."

"All right," Pace said.

"Everybody likes to look at a pretty girl," Towne said archly. "Can't blame you for not being happy with only our mugs to look at. That's really the trouble, isn't it?"

"No!" Pace answered.

"Don't kid me," Towne said. "Don't forget, I'm the Personal Affairs Officer. I know what you guys are interested in. That's the big beef on the belt—dames."

"It's not just that," Pace said painfully.

"Sure—"

"It's not! It's—" Pace looked disgusted. He picked up an object from the table and turned it in his hand.

"What's that, Pace?"

The man jiggled it in his palm. "A carving. I've been doing some carving. Only this coal-type mineral."

"Let's see it."

Pace concealed it. "It's nothing," he said.

"That's the stuff, Pace." Briggs looked pleased. "Keep those hands busy. Keep your mind off space."

"And Laura," Towne said.

Murchison stood up. "Well..."

"Well, what?" Pace glanced up anxiously.

"Time to focus out," Murchison said. "Got a lot of space to cover."

"But it's only sixteen hundred plus thirty—"

"See what I mean?" said Towne, checking his watch. "It's a sort of genius—"

"We'll be back in a couple of months," Murchison said, gesturing towards the others. "We'll have a real long chat then."

"And we'll bring Laura with us," Towne said significantly.

"Don't go yet," Pace pleaded.

"Really, Pace—"

"Tell me about things. Back home."

"You get the newscasts," Briggs said. "What more can we tell you?"

"So long, fella," Towne stood up.

"It's early, I tell you!" Pace dropped the object in his hand. The light glittered on the smooth-planed surfaces as it fell. It was the bust of a wom-

an, with long flowing hair, her chin tilted defiantly, her blank eyes somehow vital and seeing. When it hit the ground, it shattered into white powder, and the wind leaped upon the fragments like a hungry animal.

"YOU'RE lucky we stayed this long," Towne said, speaking now without a smile. "You're no fun to pay a call on, Buster. Let me tell you."

"Cut it out, Towne," Murchison's tone was sharp.

"There are fifty guys on our itinerary," Towne said. "They all have the same problem. But you're the bleedingest heart of 'em all, Pace."

The man glowered. He got to his feet.

"Maybe I'll get lucky in two months," Towne said. "Maybe I'll get a nice convenient virus, too—"

"Towne!" Briggs touched him on the elbow, and Towne shook off his fingers angrily.

"I'm sick of this guy," he said bitterly. "Sick of all his stupid complaints. Mister Loneliness—"

"You dirty groundworm!" Pace's voice shook. "You rot-

ten—"His hands clenched into white-knuckled fists.

"You watch your step, buddy."

"Cut it out, you guys!"

"I'll kill you!" Pace put a stumbling foot forward. "I'll kill you, Towne!"

Towne stared at the man, and then he laughed.

"Go ahead," he said. "Try."

Pace made an ugly noise. His body crouched, and then he sprang at the laughing figure of this visitor. Instinctively, Towne threw up his arms in defense.

"Pace!"

"Don't be an idiot!"

The man's arms thrust forward like driving pistons, fingers clutching toward the throat of Towne. His face twisted into a parody of rage. His motion propelled him half a foot off the ground.

He realized his mistake too late.

His hands went through and

beyond Towne's throat, his arms slipping through Towne's chest. He fell heavily through the man's body, and hit the ground with sickening abruptness.

He lay there, still conscious. He began to cry and the sound brought a look of disgust to the face of the shadow he had attacked.

"What a baby," Towne said.

Briggs looked uncomfortable. "Let's focus out," he said.

"Right," said Towne.

In a room back on Earth, a dial was spun, and a connection severed.

In a room on a lonely asteroid, three spectral images—electronic ghosts on a mission of mercy—faded, and vanished.

The man pulled himself to his feet, and looked around him.

All was silence.

The winds blew.

THE END