

PLANET STORIES



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TASK OF TAU

By J. Harvey Haggard



Tau tore him to pieces.

Tau was metal. Tau was chemical. Tau was electrical. Yet Tau could face death like a man.

A GLEAMING BINARY SWUNG in the blue sky, sending a moist warmth across the swaying fern-growths of the *Fourteenth Planet*. Feathered creatures of bright colors flashed through the underbrush and made noises there. A figure came stalking down through the shaded clearings, and small scaly bodies scurried out of sight, leaving ungainly tracks scrawled in the swamp mud.

Tau, the metal man, a mechanical half-sentient messenger from the far distant past, strode impassively along, not heeding the smaller creatures of the jungle. He had sighted the tiny habitable world from the distant depths of an outer galaxy, and had

moored his space-ship in a clearing that was not distant.

He halted his beryllite six-foot body in a leafy glade and let the wind play about his cold outer surface. The lens-cased inscrutable orbs in his head peered about, taking in the scene with photographic detail.

"Life! This is life!" he thought to himself. "This is the life the Master said I would find some day."

Though his memories were of a distant past, of a remote planet, and of the Master whose atoms might lie even now in the etheric dust, Tau remembered with perfect clarity. He could recall the aged countenance of the Master, the broad forehead,

the jutting chin, and the determined undertone of his deep voice.

"Men may die," the Master had said, "but their deeds live after them." And Kendall Smith's face had lighted inwardly as though from some deep inspiration. Tau had said nothing in reply, but in the neurochemical mechanisms of his brain the words had been imprinted forever.

"You're just a robot," the master had said, "with responses and reactions that are the involuntary activations of metal and chemical-change impulse, yet I believe that some day in the aeons which will pass, you will learn to reason for yourself to some extent, and perhaps understand your mission. But you will never live, even though you may carry the germs of life into the far distant future."

And now Tau, standing in the mire of that world of the future he had talked about, wondered at the mystery which was called Life, and doubted if he clearly understood what the Master had meant. One thing he knew certainly, that his metallic body was meant to bridge the epoch which yawned between the life-lines of the past and those of the future. Old Kendall Smith, stalking back and forth in his laboratory, had explained as much, and Tau had never forgotten.

"Our life-line is narrowing, the earth is dying," the Master had explained. "That one-in-a-million chance of opportune conditions in which life may exist is vanishing. I doubt if the circumstances can be duplicated in the entire universe. But someday, by the very laws which govern chance, they must return again. It is not within the powers of man to bridge the gap of space and time, but you, Tau, the robot, swinging in the non-conducting realms of the vacuum of space, will be next to eternal."

Tau had learned the secrets of extracting radiant energy from the atom, had become adept in applying the forces to the mechanisms that propelled the space-ship and supplied motivation for his own metal body. Many other secrets the Master had taught him in the laboratories, and he had come to know the uses of the scientific paraphernalia that was sealed in the inner heart of the space-craft. When the occasion came for Tau to use the equipment, Kendall Smith had said, he would understand the true nature constituting life.

THE binary descended, and night fell. Glittering shards of the stars pierced the black firmament. Night creatures let out occasional shrieks and snarls. Once a six-legged catlike creature, half as tall as the metal man, was attracted by Tau's movements, and sprang upon him. Tau's responses were mechanical, and he knew no such thing as fear. He simply ripped the creature apart with the tremendous strength that surged in his metal arms.

Later that night he returned to the space-ship. As he approached the gleaming ovoid a circular door opened. Crossing its threshold, he passed into the interior, distorted by intricate mechanisms, and the aperture closed behind him.

Slowly Tau walked to the center of the room, his body reflected in gleaming surfaces of berylite stanchions and sheathings. In the center of the whorled contrivances a row of ingenious troughs lay exposed. Each of these troughs was centered by a molding that had the perfect outline of a man, empty in the crystalline interior.

All that night iridescent gleamings crawled along the monstrous glassite tubes, illuminating the busy robot with an eerie splendor. Miniature lightning shot and sparkled from insulated spheres high in the nose of the craft. Pulsating, sluggish liquids gave off radiant colors and seeped through tortuous channels along the tubes of glassite. The central troughs became opaque, and formed a webwork now into which the throbbing aqueous masses were assembling. A chill current of the outer atmosphere was forced by rotating blades along a channel that whirled in a maelstrom around the central apparatus.

Tau worked swiftly, but days fled by as he watched the quiescent gauges and indicators, lengthened into months. Blinding storms raged unheeded on the exterior of the ovoid craft. Winter came and fled.

At last David and his tribe came to life, all molded from a magnificent scale. During those long months of creation, Tau had imprinted knowledge and learning upon the brains of the dormant bodies. Each awoke with a full knowledge of what had transpired on the dying planet of earth, and each knew that a strange newborn world awaited them. The largest and most magnificent man was named David. The Master had been careful in instructing Tau

about that. Kendall Smith had never had a son. And this synthetic offspring in a distant life-line of the cosmos would be almost like a son for him.

All of Tau's knowledges were conveyed to David and his followers, and he led them into the unknown dangers of the pristine jungled planet, guarding them from the ferocious animals while they learned the edible fruits from the poisonous ones. Gradually David's men came to recognize the dangers and constructed weapons for their own defense.

Another winter descended upon the new world. Food had been stored in the big compartment of the space vessel. Furs of slain animals had been cured to provide clothing and warmth.

Spring thaws came and Tau led them again into the jungle, but now David was big and strong and wary, quite able to defend himself against the dangers of the forest, and Tau's presence was hardly needed, though he always hovered near.

Five men and five women had been given life by Tau's instruments, and it was inevitable that a gradual pairing off would take place. Myri, a model of womanly perfection, had grown to adore the handsome leader of the tribe, and Tau was one of the first to notice signs of fecundity.

A terrific storm lashed the planet. Giant trees groaned and split across the trunks. The raging downpour built up into outer floods that raged down the lowlands in mighty rivers, sweeping everything in its path to destruction. Of all this Tau was oblivious. The fury of the tempest was deadened by the berylite walls of the space ship, and not as loud as the shrill cry of the new-born babe.

Thunder boomed outside. Lightning forked across the rent heavens, sending flickering flashes of illumination through the beating sheets of rain that poured across the glassite sheathing above the neglected control mechanisms. David the second was born, and for a brief time was cuddled against the breast of the metal man, whose terribly strong arms of metal held him as lightly and delicately as could a bed of thistle down. The imperturbable orbs of immobile transparency gazed downward, and suddenly Tau staggered.

DAVID took the child with a startled cry and stood eyeing the tottering robot. Tau's consciousness was centered upon his dragging limbs and for a moment his mentality flickered as though it were gone, then returned. He saw that his metallic body was dark and stained with an odd encrustation, and he turned and made his way to the cubicle in which he had sat while an aeon of time slipped away in the depths of interplanetary space, and the life-line of one aeon had merged with another.

There was one hooded mechanism at which he always sat, and when he was just so, the mind of the Master would speak from down the ages, and the image of Kendall Smith arose, as it had always done, in his mind. He thought he visualized the Master now, out of the dim consciousness of the past. Tall and arresting with the vigorous personality of a dynamic intelligence, the keen grey eyes peered at him again, as they had done in the distant past.

"You, Tau, are just a man of metal," the Master was saying "and yet I've a feeling that part of myself is implanted within you just as part of my mind is implanted into the mechanisms of your consciousness. As a thing of metal, floating in a nonconducting void, you are something that is almost eternal. Yet if you succeed in finding a habitable world, such as the earth has been in the past, the atmosphere of that planet will suffuse about you, and in the triumph of my wishes will lie your downfall. Oxides of the surrounding air will cause your gradual deterioration, and the only one who could help you will be nothing more than motes of cosmic dust in the unpredictable corners of the surrounding universe."

Unseen by David or any of the others, Tau slipped to the door and down a corridorway. Through an aperture he could glimpse the inner room where Myri lay, nursing the infant at her breast. For just an instant he paused, for the Master had never seemed closer than in that single moment.

Turning finally, the metal man walked impassionately through the doorway and vanished into the driving blasts of the lashing storm.