

THE WHITE PINNACLE

Carl Jacobi

Start Recording:

It was in late January while coasting along the Asteroids' rim that Kalhern got the idea of putting in at Renit-4. I was against it at once, but Kalhern was getting old—he was space-tired and anxious to set his feet on firm soil. Nevertheless Renit-4 was described in the *Pilot* as "Unexplored" with the warning to navigators, "Land at own risk."

We were six months out of New Chicago with a hold full of pagcite and other radioactive ore samples. We had satisfied the average requirements for a Galactic Mining exploratory cruise, and I could see no reason for risking our necks unnecessarily at this stage of the trip.

Kalhern, however, had his mind made up.

"The *Pilot* says traces of arquium might be found there," he said.

"We've got a quarter ton of arquium already."

"This may be higher grade."

So that was that. We altered course and two days later, landed on Renit-4. Right away we ran into the trouble I had foreseen. Descending, one of our landing-gravitors failed, and the ship, out of thrust, caromed against a rocky perpendicular, shearing off two deflector auricles and opening a sizeable rent in the forward embayment. A good week of repair work confronted us.

Kalhern, however, was not disturbed. "There's an atmosphere here and vegetation," he said. "By Godfrey, what more do we want?"

I could have answered that, but I didn't. Atmosphere,

there was, but the vegetation gave one a headache to look at it. Trees thirty meters tall, resembling giant cat-tails, growing in geometrically spaced clumps, and between them wide swales of violet-hued ipso grass that rippled like silk when the wind struck it. Eye-like flowers, replete with ochre iris and pink cornea that seemed to stare back at you even from a distance. Directly before the ship was a high escarpment, blood-red in color, and to the east, approximately a mile off, a white something probed the sky like a slender obelisk.

I pointed this out to Kalhern, but he had already seen it. "A priathe outcropping probably. Might even be chalk. We'll investigate it later."

We stayed pretty close to the ship that first day. Carson Shores, our navigator, whose name always reminded me of a real estate development, made an examination of the ship's damage, and then he, Stewart and three crewmen set about to make repairs. Hammond, silent and emotionless as always, got out his camera and began to take pictures. And McKay shuffled about, doing little or nothing.

McKay was the giant of our outfit, a six-feet-five hulk of a man whose brain had not quite kept pace with his body. His great strength came in handy, handling the electric drills and pneumatic hammers our work required. But his interest lay in one field only.

Perfume! That was McKay's hobby. The big fellow nearly drove the rest of us mad with the bottles, philters, and vials he was always dragging out of his cabin and spreading over the mess table. Oddly, his experiments in the past had had some professional results. He had sold manufacturing rights to two scents: a spicy cologne he had distilled from the root of the canal-flower of south-eastern Mars and a lingering musk-like aroma whose source was the dehydrated marsh-soil of central Venus.

Now as I stood there, adjusting the bracket of the searchlight, I saw McKay suddenly turn and grow tense. His nostrils twitched and a gleam entered his eyes.

A moment later I caught it too. Coming on the night wind; faint at first, but gradually growing stronger, was a cloying flower-like smell. A sickish sweet odor that crept down my lungs like smoke. It was an alien smell, a scent of death and it brought with it a feeling of unexplained terror.

Kalhern emerged from the ship's hatch and stopped short

before me. A paroxysm of coughing seized him as the smell reached his nostrils.

"In heaven's name, what is it?" he said. His voice rose to a shout. "McKay, where are you going?"

The big man seemed not to hear. Head erect, like a robot whose controls have jammed, he strode rapidly out across the ellipse of artificial light and disappeared into the wall of darkness. For a time we heard his heavy footsteps grating on the gravel. Then that sound died off and there was only silence . . . and the smell.

"McKay!" Kalhern called again. His fists clenched, "The fool! There's no telling what he'll run into out there."

As suddenly as it had come, the smell was gone. The paralysis of mind and body which had held me passed on, and in sixty seconds I had the searchlight mounted on the bracket and was turning it on the swivel. The two foot wide shaft of white radiance ate into the blackness, probed outward like a groping hand, etched every mound and rock into sharp relief but revealed no sign of McKay.

Kalhern went into action at once. He roused Shores, Stewart, and Hammond from within the ship. He posted Shores at the searchlight, and then the three of us paced slowly to the extreme end of the aisle of light and moved with it as Shores arced it slowly from left to right. At intervals Kalhern cupped his hands and called McKay's name. There was no response.

"The damned fool!" he said again. "I gave strict orders no one was to go twenty yards beyond the ship until we could get the Tester going."

Hammond fingered his gun quietly. "I'll scout around and bring him back, if you say so."

Kalhern shook his head. "You'll do nothing of the sort," he snapped. "You know the landing rules: 'No crewman or officer shall venture into uncharted territory on a Class C planet until that territory has first been quartered with a Tester.' Well, this is a Class C planet. By Godfrey, I'm taking no chances!"

We divided the rest of the night into watches, setting off Regal flares at intervals of every ten minutes, but there was no sign of McKay. Dawn came at last, bringing with it no lessening of the tenseness that was mounting within each of us. Somehow the red escarpment seemed redder and the

violet swales a deeper more alien color than before. And off to the left the white pillar stood, reflecting the sunlight, a monument to the mystery which surrounded us.

I tried not to think about McKay, but the absence of his cheery "Good morning, Mr. Judson; it's a very nice day, isn't it, Mr. Judson?" hit me hard, and at breakfast even emotionless Hammond was visibly affected by the sight of the big man's empty chair.

"Of course, all he did was walk away under his own power," said Kalhern. "There's no reason to believe yet that harm has come to him."

His forced cheerfulness fooled no one. We all had been on too many strange planets in the past.

And then at high noon, like a prodigal son returning, McKay came back. He came out of the swale grass, stumbling drunkenly, hands hanging loosely at his sides. When he reached the ship, we saw that those hands were dripping blood, that his tunic was ripped, torn, and dirt-stained and that there was an ugly welt under his right eye. Kalhern, his anger at the big man's disobedience overcome for the moment by his relief, seized him by the hand.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Where did you go?"

It was five minutes at least before McKay could speak. When he did his voice was hoarse and trembling.

"I caught one," he gasped. "It tried to kill me. It's got the strength of ten men, but I caught one."

"Caught what?" said Kalhern. "What tried to kill you?"

"A wafer-head. That's what it looked like anyway. A wafer-head!"

Kalhern glanced at me and shook his head. "Put him to bed," he ordered. "Give him a couple of cerebra-tabs, five grain. Maybe he'll snap out of it later."

That afternoon we got the Tester into operation and made ready for our first survey. Fundamentally we were still on duty for Galactic Mining, and ore samples were our paramount interest. Stewart as geologist of the party had been eyeing that white pinnacle with interest. He wanted to go there first.

We did that. With Kalhern driving and myself chanting aloud the dial readings, we set the Tester moving over the -virgin ground.

"Gravity thirty-five, air temperature 24 C., water sixty to a hundred feet, paldine five, sub soil organic twenty . . ."

The dials showed nothing unusual or dangerous to man.

As we crossed and criss-crossed our way forward the white pinnacle slowly grew in height and clarity before us. I estimated it to be seventy meters high and fifteen meters or less in girth. The surface was a dull grayish white, resembling chalk, as Kalhern had said, and yet at intervals high-lights appeared, reflecting the sunlight with a dazzling sheen. Mid-way up the side of this pyramid were a series of black marks, but whether they were part of a natural formation or hieroglyphics, the work of intelligent life, I could not tell at that distance.

But as we drew ever nearer, that same tautness, that same terror I had experienced the night before welled over me. It was as if a sub-sonic chord were striking my ears steadily in a register too low for me to hear.

Then Kalhern braked the Tester to a stop and we were directly before the white pinnacle. We got out and walked around it slowly; the swale grass and other vegetation grew to the very edge of it on three sides; on the fourth side, which was the side nearest the low flanking cliff, there was a lane about three feet wide which bore no growth but was exposed cleanly to the bare gravel.

"Looks almost like a conduit from the cliff proper," Kalhern said reflectively. "What do you make of it, Stewart?"

The geologist had his little hammer out and was tapping lightly against the stone shaft. "Hard as flint," he said. "I never saw anything like it before. It's obviously nature formed, and yet it's so geometrically perfect it looks almost as if it were carved."

Kalhern nodded. "Judson," he said to me, "make a copy of those marks around the middle, and we'll study them later. . . . By Godfrey!"

His eyes had turned to the cliffside up to where a low out-cropping and scattered pile of boulders formed a low shelf. Spread-eagled there, fastened to rock jags by strips torn from a GM tunic, was a creature about three feet in height with a curiously repulsive body and a flat wafer head. Its two lidless eyes watched us in baleful silence.

"So McKay was telling the truth after all," Kalhern said

slowly. "Only this thing doesn't look particularly dangerous. Help me take it down."

The creature snarled wickedly, but made no effort to resist us. Stewart quickly passed a rope around it and led it off snarling and spitting, to the Tester where he secured it in the rear seat. We lingered a moment longer, staring at the strange white pinnacle. It was only when we were about to leave that Stewart made his discovery.

I remember that at the moment it struck me that Stewart was deliberately playing up an insignificant detail in the jealous hope of magnifying his own powers of observation. Neither Kalhern nor I realized then the vital importance of his words.

"Look here," Stewart said. "There are two flowers on this stem."

Kalhern stared. "So what?" he demanded.

Stewart was on his knees now, studying the gravel lane on the fourth side of the pinnacle. "And every pebble has a duplicate of the same size and shape. Take a squint out there," he continued, pointing to the expanse of open savannah. "Notice how every grass stem has but a single blossom until you reach a point forty or fifty feet from this column; then there are double blossoms. Now look at the cliffside. Look closely."

My eyes followed his gaze, and for a moment I saw nothing unusual. Then crevices, rocks and outcroppings arranged themselves in my vision and I understood the significance of Stewart's discovery. Every feature of the flanking cliff had its duplicate feature; every discernible mark or protuberance to the left of the column had an identical mark or protuberance to the right. It was as if a stereo photograph had been taken and the negative superimposed against the backdrop before us.

Kalhern stared and his eyes slowly widened in amazement. Then he turned to look at the creature secured in the Tester.

"Some freak of volcanic action probably. Come on, I want to get back to the ship."

We placed the Renitian—as Kalhern promptly named our captive—in one of the ship's storerooms, gave it food and water and left it alone for two hours to adjust to its imprisonment. During those two hours excitement ran high among

our company. But it wasn't the presence of this alien creature alone that accounted for our interest; nor was it Stewart's description of the strange phenomena surrounding the white pinnacle. It was rather Stewart's subsequent discovery which he made accidentally while looking over the two Micro latent counters with which the Tester was equipped.

The geologist reported that delayed readings of the instruments showed conclusively that somewhere in the vicinity of the pinnacle there was a deposit of radioactive ore of undreamed richness. Furthermore—and here Stewart's eyes took on a gleam of unmasked avarice—if he had read the instruments correctly, that ore was something new, an unclassified element giving off Gantzen rays in addition to the usual alpha, beta and gamma rays.

"Of course I can't be sure yet," Stewart said. "But all indications are that we've struck something big."

Kalhern took this information stoically. He smoked his pipe in thoughtful silence. Then he got up and led the way to the storeroom where, while the rest of us watched in silence, he attempted to communicate with the Renitian.

He tried the Gabre method of inter-racial communication first. When that failed to elicit any response, he tried a number of jargons which he had picked up in his years of roaming the spaceways. As a final effort he made several attempts with sign language.

Without result. The Renitian watched us calculatingly but gave no sign that it understood. Yet there was intelligence in those lidless eyes and physically at least the thing's wafer skull appeared to have a large brain capacity.

It was not until Carson Shores said with disgust, "Turn it loose. The thing's only an animal," that the creature reacted. It faced Shores with malevolent hatred and then it gave off the smell.

The same sickish sweet smell that had drifted out of the blackness the night before. With it came that same feeling of inner tenseness, of cold terror.

Kalhern stood up. "We can do nothing more here," he said. "We'll decide what to do with it in the morning."

And so we spent our second night on Renit-4. How the past events affected the others of our company I did not know

but, for my part, I found sleep impossible. The heavy silence weighed on my ears. After months of listening to the drone of the ship's motors, the absolute quiet of this planet seemed a tangible thing, without chirps of a cricket or call of a night-bird to break the monotony.

At two o'clock I got up and sat down at my desk. Before me was the torn page from my notebook with the scribbled copy of the hieroglyphics that adorned the middle of the white pinnacle.

I've had quite a little experience deciphering unknown writings in the past which is probably why Kalbern turned the job over to me.

The hieroglyphics were semi-picture writing, conveying thoughts in generalities rather than exact oral translations. In a vague way they suggested the cliff markings of Mars' red desert country but with a difference. Where the Mars writings were "passive" with the preciseness of an old race, these were bold and almost dashing, the stigma of a form of life still in its youth.

As near as I could translate, the legend on the white pinnacle read:

Know you by the powers of the infinite that the phenomena of all creation must be the same to two beholders who in themselves move with a tempo of motion relative to one and to each other. Know you also that whereas the unseen life-in-a-rock is the smallest known fragment of creation there can be no means of telling its place in the moons of zero in a given moon. The rock giveth and the rock taketh away.

It struck me that philosophically here were two astounding statements, manifesting an advanced state of culture. The first was nothing more than a pure Einsteinian declaration, the concept of absolute motion through space. As for the second, if we substituted "time" for "moons" and "space" for "zero" what did we have but Heisenberg's application of the Quantum Theory to the position of an electron? The last eight words meant nothing to me.

I turned out the light and walked across the room to one of the ports. There were no clouds this night and the sky was

spangled with stars; strange constellations burned brightly, casting an eerie glow over the land.

Somewhere out there there must be other creatures like the one imprisoned in our storeroom; they must have villages, houses, families. What were their thoughts, their fears, their beliefs? What would they do when they discovered one of their number was missing? Or were they already aware of our presence, watching us . . . waiting. . . ?

With the morning the giant McKay was himself again and beyond a few scratches and cuts where the Renitian's talons had left their mark, he betrayed no ill effect from his experience. Neither did he evince any interest when I told him we had found his captive and brought it here to the ship.

He looked at me dully, then turned and stared off in the direction of the white pinnacle.

"We've got to leave here, Mr. Judson," he said. "We've got to leave here right away. This is an evil place, Mr. Judson."

"Nonsense, McKay, Stewart says this is the richest planet we've visited yet. He says there are indications of a new radioactive ore in that cliff back of the pinnacle.

But the big man shook his head. "This place is bad," he said slowly. "I can feel it."

At noon mess Kalhern presented a plan of action which he stated quietly was to be followed to the letter. First of all, he said, we would release the Renitian unharmed. Next, no less than two men would post guard about the ship at all times. Third, a trip would be made in the Tester to see if any native villages were in the immediate vicinity. If there were, we would make no attempt to contact them but would simply observe for war-like activities. Then, and not until then, was Stewart's ore to be mined. And as soon as a representative sample of the deposit was obtained, we would clear out and head for our Earth base.

And then Kalhern voiced almost the same fear McKay had. "Things have been going a little too smoothly," he said. "There's an—well, call it an atmosphere—about this place I don't like."

At two o'clock that afternoon Carson Shores, Hammond and I entered the Tester. Half an hour before, the Renitian had been brought out of the ship, escorted to the edge of the camp and there freed of his bonds. The native stood uncer-

tainly for a moment, still watching us with those lidless eyes. Then he slowly headed into the swale grass and a moment later was lost to view.

Now as the Tester got under way taking the same general direction, Shores suddenly spoke. "Hold it a moment. I left my reading glasses in the ship."

He was out of the Tester, running back to the camp before I could stop him. In the silence while we waited his return, Hammond swore.

"The idiot! What's he need reading glasses for out here?"

Shores came back breathlessly. "It's all right. I just wanted to be sure I hadn't lost them. They were on my desk." He smiled at Hammond's muttered profanity. "I left them there."

We headed east, the Tester ploughing through the swale grass effortlessly. Far ahead low rolling hills broke the skyline, but they seemed to recede and dwindle away as we went on. At three o'clock, we sighted the first animal life, a high flying bird of tremendous proportions. The thing apparently had a repulsive saurian head though at that height it was impossible to see it clearly.

The bird made no attempt to attack, and we went on. Then suddenly we were atop a low hillock, looking down into a shallow ravine. In the center of that ravine arranged in the form of a circle was a double row of clay buildings and passing to and fro amongst them were groups of Renitians, some smaller, some slightly larger than the one we had captured, but all with those curious wafer heads. The buildings were all cube-shaped, identical in size, inter-connected by a narrow overhead gallery cut in the form of battlements with up-raised nodules every few yards surmounted by flat disc-like caps. The meaning behind these architectural contrivances was not clear though it seemed safe to assume they constituted some kind of defense. Before each building stood a flat panel, many-colored and bearing inscriptions in the same strange writing that adorned the white pinnacle.

For twenty minutes we remained there in silence, watching. Through binoculars we saw the natives go about their routine household tasks, but we observed no sign of war-like activity. Neither did we see any evidence of weapons.

Then quietly we swung the Tester about and headed back for camp.

It was when we came into sight of the ship that Shores suddenly reached in his pocket and uttered an exclamation.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"My glasses . . ." he faltered. "I . . . I left them on my desk in the ship. I know I did. . . . And yet I've got them here now . . ."

Hammond grinned. "You get like that after you've been on these trips enough times . . ."

But Shores was deadly serious. The moment the Tester drew up before the ship he leaped out and headed for his quarters. A moment later he reappeared, a dazed look on his face. "I must be getting dotty. I could have sworn I left those glasses on my desk."

When Kalhern learned of the close proximity of the native village he frowned and tapped his pencil on his desk thoughtfully.

"We can only hope that the trouble we had here while you were gone won't arouse them against us," he said.

"Trouble? What trouble?"

"That damned fool, McKay! He sneaked away from camp again, caught up with the Renitian and cut off his scent gland."

"He did what?"

He discovered that the source of that strange smell the native gave off was a small external sac located at the base of the thing's skull. You know how mad McKay is about new sources of perfume. It's practically an obsession with him. The idiot tracked the Renitian after it had left our camp and deliberately amputated that gland. He claimed the native felt no pain, never even let out a peep; but that's beside the point. I've ordered McKay confined to quarters."

Dusk changed to darkness and the long night snailed by. I lay in the warm vitiated air of my cabin—the ventilators had broken down, and we hadn't got around to repairing them as yet. About midnight a low pulsation from far off drifted in the open port. The sound was at the limit of my hearing range, and for a time I thought it was drums—native drums—but after a time it died away, and I fell asleep.

At breakfast the first of the incredible events took place. I was drinking my second cup of coffee when it happened.

Stewart was just reaching for the sugar bowl when his eyes happened to turn toward the open port. He stared a moment, then turned to Kalhern.

"I thought you had confined McKay to quarters," he said quietly.

The chief looked up questioningly.

"Because if you did, he apparently didn't think much of the idea. Take a look out there."

Kalhern looked, kicked back his chair and froze. "By Godfrey!"

The port opened onto the east half of the camp. Walking out of the swale grass toward the ship was McKay, his tunic buttoned up to the throat, his hands hanging stiffly at his sides. He looked to neither side but came on at that same slow mechanical pace.

There was something utterly strange about his presence there, apart from his being out of the ship. Staring at him, I got the impression that I was viewing a scene through a microscope.

The figure reached a point where the trodden-down grass marked the edge of camp; it stopped there as if waiting. Below us we heard steps in the outer corridor; the outer exit hatch creaked as it opened and closed. *And then a second McKay came into view as he emerged from the ship!*

I wasn't dreaming. Out of the corner of my eye I could see every man about the mess table poised rigid, eyes riveted on the scene framed in the open port.

The second McKay advanced across the camp toward its waiting counterpart. Detail for detail, lineament for lineament, feature for feature, they were duplicates of each other. It was as if a giant mirror had been placed out there at the edge of the swale grass and the reflecting image prevented from movement.

And now the second McKay was abreast of the first McKay. An instant they stood there, facing each other, the face of the figure facing us betraying no sign of astonishment, the eyes discernible even at that distance as calm and matter-of-fact.

Then the two figures merged and blended into one. The action was simple and complete; one moment there were two, the next there was one McKay standing motionless and erect in the clear morning sunlight.

It turned, that composite figure and began to walk slowly out and away from the ship. Not a word about the mess table was spoken as we watched it recede step by step, heading in a general direction for the white pinnacle . . .

Then the spell was broken. As one man we rushed for the exit hatch. Kalhern leaped into the Tester, motioned Hammond and me to join him, and a moment later we roared out of camp. As we raced on, I strained my eyes, looking for McKay, but I saw no sign of him. Then I did see him. Incredible as it seemed he had almost reached the white pinnacle. The minutes seemed like hours until we came abreast of that white column. When we did, McKay was standing motionless directly before it, head tilted back, staring at its top.

"McKay!" yelled Kalhern.

The big man didn't answer, didn't move. Hammond ran to his side, seized his arm.

Like a dummy removed from its support, McKay toppled forward and fell face downward. White-faced, Hammond reached for the man's wrist, felt for a pulse.

"He's dead!" he said hoarsely.

We buried McKay where he lay, read a simple requiem, and silently made our way back to camp. A hundred questions were surging through my brain. In Kalhern's cabin-office an hour later I put those questions into words:

"Do you think whatever it was that killed McKay had as its source the white pinnacle and do you think those damned natives had anything to do with it?"

Kalhern looked old and haggard as he sat at his desk mechanically filling his pipe.

"Yes," he said shortly.

"Yes what?"

The chief struck a match, lit his pipe with trembling fingers. "I didn't say anything about it before, Judson, but I saw something out there at the pinnacle. You'll remember that there is a lane of gravel leading from that white shaft to the face of the cliff proper, and that Stewart mentioned its looking almost like a conduit. Well at the base of that cliff I saw something the rest of you overlooked."

I sat in silence waiting for him to continue.

"I found a dial!" he said quietly. "A crude mechanism set in some kind of a stone panel but nonetheless a dial."

"Meaning what?" I said.

Kalhern spread his hands. "Meaning almost anything. A retractable shield perhaps that can turn off and on the radiations from the radioactive ore deposit. I might even suggest that the pinnacle is the work of intelligent beings, a sort of filter through which those radiations can be transmitted or directed."

"But our observations of the Renitians showed no such mechanical ability."

"The Renitians of the present, no. But don't forget this is an old planetoid. Life here may have retrogressed. The pinnacle may be only an artifact of an earlier race."

I thought this over for several minutes. "Granted that all may be true," I said, "how do you account for the duplication around the pinnacle of things organic and inorganic?" Even as I said this, I remembered the incident of Shore's glasses.

Kalhern shrugged. "My atomic science is elementary," he said. "Stewart has said that the radioactive ore is something different—a new element. Who can say what this radiation—controlled radiation will do? It may have actually affected McKay's body in the manner we saw or conceivably it might have affected us, our vision. Remember Planck's Quantum Theory and the modern postulations of Altvolk and Janer? And Thorpe's thesis on transmutation. Matter is like light. In one aspect it behaves as if it were constituted of waves; in another it appears to consist of particles. And when a body or an object is bombarded by radiations of energy, including the little-known Gantzen rays. . . ." Kalhern spread his hands significantly.

"Then you're going to give up the idea of taking samples from the ore deposit?"

"No, I'm not." Kalhern banged his fist down upon the desk. "I've been with Galactic Mining thirty years, and I've never flubbed an assignment yet. We'll take reasonable precautions, of course."

Reasonable precautions included shots for radiation poisoning for every man on the ship and strict orders never to leave the ship without a lead protected suit. Before resuming our mining activities Kalhern took a blaster out to the white pinnacle and completely destroyed the strange stone dial.

The ore was deeper down than we had anticipated. Our

electrolic drills cut through layers of metamorphic rock, granite, gneiss, schist and slate and an igneous formation which Stewart said was different from anything he had ever seen before. At intervals Stewart took samples of the slag back to his laboratory cabin in the ship and subjected it to his tests.

There was no sign of activity on the part of the Renitians. Once Kalhern and I thought we detected traces of that strange perfume, borne on the night wind, but the scene passed on, and we agreed we must have been mistaken.

On the first of February Kalhern announced it was his birthday and with a sentimental smile called a halt to our labors during the afternoon. We sat around in the ship's lounge and took it easy. Shores and Hammond were playing *Star-Credit* with two decks of cards, and Shores was laughing as he raked in his winnings.

I remember it occurred to me that this was the first laughter any of us had indulged in since our landing on Renit-4, but it was short-lived. Shores began to unfasten his tunic at the throat.

"It's hot in here," he said. "Don't you fellows think it's hot?"

Suddenly he got to his feet and headed for the exit hatch. None of the others paid any attention, but on impulse I followed him.

Reaching the hatch, I was in time to see Shores cross the camp compound with slow deliberate steps. My eyes lifted to the edge of the swale grass beyond, and I froze. Waiting for him there, arms akimbo, was a figure of horrifying familiarity.

It was Carson Shores in duplicate!

As had happened with McKay, the first Carson Shores reached and merged with its counterpart; and then the composite figure turned and headed for the white pinnacle.

Our number had been reduced by one more.

From here on any departure from logical continuity in this narrative must be excused. The madness which had beset us became too fast-paced for rational explanation or description.

On February second, close on the death and burial of Carson Shores, Kalhern gave orders to leave Renit-4. This reversal of decision was the result of Hammond's and my insistence, for, as Hammond argued, charting and reporting the

ore deposit should be sufficient to establish its discovery with us.

I can say now that somehow I never expected the ship to leave. Yet when Kalhern fiddled vainly at the controls and announced in a flat voice, "The motors are dead," the cold horror of the situation hit me hard.

The chief, however, was indomitable. Under his direction we fell to work, frantically checking motor conduits. The third, fourth and fifth of February passed without further incident, marked only by our ceaseless labors.

On the sixth Hammond, Stewart and two crewmen drove out to the spring to replenish our water supply which was running low. They didn't return. We found the Tester abandoned and what seemed to be tracks leading off into the swale grass. Kalhern deliberated the situation a long time before announcing his decision.

"I'll take the rest of the crewmen and go after them," he said quietly. "That will leave you alone in the ship. You will keep the hatch closed and open it under no circumstances until our return. The ship is impregnable, and you should have no trouble here."

In vain I argued. "They may have sighted some new form of animal life. A thousand things may have drawn them away from the Tester. Give them time to return."

But Kalhern was adamant. "I like Hammond," he said simply. "If it's in my power, I'm going to bring him back."

. . . I am alone in the ship. Kalhern and the crewmen have now been gone thirteen hours and still there is no sign of them. I am sitting here before the central port, staring out across the camp compound. The violet ipso grass undulates in the wind like a lazy sea, and the cat-tail trees stand stiff and stark against the saffron sky. Off to the east rises the slender obelisk-like white pinnacle.

As I wait, the truth keeps gnawing at a back corner of my mind—that Kalhern and the crewmen will not return, that they have gone to their doom like the others somewhere out there.

Even now, at intervals, a peculiar blur forms in my eyes when I look in the direction of the white pinnacle. That blur will grow . . . will develop, I know, until. . . .

I can see it now. The mist has cleared, and a human figure

walks out of the swale, heading for the camp compound. It is a tall figure with sloping shoulders and a Galactic Mining tunic unbuttoned at the throat. Its stride is slow, inexorable, and as it approaches, an overwhelming lure rises up within me like a great inner sickness.

It is myself. . . .

NOTE: *This recording, which ends here, was found by the captain of the freighter, Evening Star, when that ship made a forced landing on Renit-4 for repairs. Although its authenticity has been questioned, it is claimed to be the only existent answer to the century old disappearance of the GM cruiser, Alencon, and as such has been filed in the historical folios of the Interspatial Institute at New Chicago.*