



Robert W.  
Lowndes,  
Editor

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*Feature Novelet*

**DOOMSDAY'S COLOR-PRESS**

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There's power in the printed word that hasn't been tapped yet — if this story, by a master of science-fiction, is entirely fictitious!

*A Novelet Of The Great Legend*

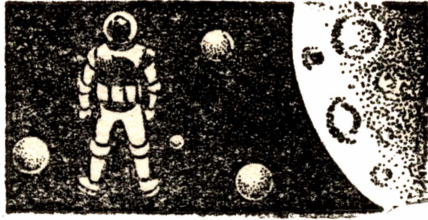
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*Cover by A. Leslie Ross, symbolizing the threat of "Doomsday's Color-Press"  
Interior Illustrations by Luross and Orban*

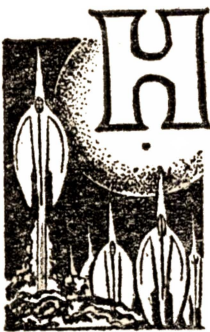
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# WE ARE ALONE

By Robert Sheckley

**They came not as conqueror or pilferers, but seekers of companionable intelligences . . .**



**H**AD THE LANDING been on Earth, or any of the planets of Sol system, Magglio would have guided the ship down with studied, offhand ease. But since they were out in the big, unknown galaxy, somewhere around Altair, he gripped the throttle in a bonecrushing

embrace, ready to pour on the power if anything happened. Anything—what?

Perspiration poured down his thin, tight face as he remembered the spaceman's legends he had laughed at. Mirage-planets, where landing distances are dangerously deceptive; living planets, planets of death. It didn't ease his mind any to know that none of these wonders had ever been discovered, since theirs was the first ship

to venture into interstellar space. Such might be there—and that was enough.

Salzman, the navigator, was trying the impossible stunt of reading six dials with one eye, while focusing the other on the red planet rushing up to meet them. He had a hand on the auxiliary power control, in case something happened to the main drive—or to Magglio. If he had had a third eye, it would have been watching Oliver, the engineer.

Oliver was manning the big atomic cannon, in case of attack. He had it centered on the planet, all safeties off, and his finger was dangerously taut on the instigator-switch. He had partially convinced himself, during the last few days, that an alien space armada was waiting for them, hovering just out of sight around the curve of the planet. Should he fire, just in hopes of scaring them off?

As they came nearer, Salzman could make out the rolling contour of the land; the red of the planet resolved itself into a forest of pink, red and purple. Scattered through the forest were black dots which grew into towns and villages as they screamed down through the thickening atmosphere. He noted their positions automatically; he was still too busy reading dials for them to register properly on his consciousness.

Magglio had perspiration in his right eye, but he didn't dare release a control to wipe it, or even to blink. The surface of the planet was looming beneath them, stretched as far as he could see. Perhaps it would split into a gigantic mouth, like the kid-derers on Pluto-base always said. Or perhaps—he tightened at the controls, waiting for something to happen.

The ship screamed through the atmosphere as it decelerated—

—but on the whole it was an uneventful landing.

Magglio regained control of himself, found an open patch and set the ship down in an elegant skid. Oliver talked himself out of his fears long

enough to switch the cannon over to safety. Shakily, Salzman raised his hand and looked at the imprint of the throttle across his palm. It was all right, no hordes of attackers, no monsters—yet; no seventy-foot dragons or green-eyed ghouls. Only the red forest, a trifle singed where the ship ploughed across the treetops, but still peaceful.

After a moment's silence they began pounding each other on the back, shouting from sheer release of anxiety. Salzman picked up little Magglio, grinned in his face, and tossed him to Oliver. The engineer grunted when he caught him, looked puzzled for a moment, then decided his dignity was shot for the rest of the trip anyhow, and tossed him back to Salzman.

"Easy, you apes," Magglio said, regaining his feet and smoothing back his hair, "or I'll turn you over to the Ufangies."

**S**ALZMAN mussed the pilot's hair again, grinning. He knew all about the Ufangies. They were a tribe of orange and black flying reptiles with fins for underwater work, who subsisted solely on human eyeballs.

They were also an interesting example of legend-making, a part of the complex 'natural' history of space. The first men on Mars had been disappointed at not finding any intelligent life, so they spun yarns about Visties and Serbens, and scared grown men with tales of what was lurking on the Jovian moons. The Jovian explorers didn't find any intelligence either—monstrous or human—so they added the eyeball-eating Ufangies, and pushed them to Saturn.

Now that the solar system was Earth's backyard—albeit a wild and lonely one—the horrors had supposedly fled to deep space. They might, the stories ran, be lurking anywhere, ready to pounce upon the unwary spaceman.

Salzman wondered just how much

Magglio believed in the things; he knew that the pilot wore a little charm on his wrist specifically designed to ward off aliens. Or, for that matter, how much Oliver believed in the hordes of attackers waiting to blast their ship.

Or how much he himself believed in them. Salzman realized that he wasn't immune, even though he knew that, in essence, all the stories said the same thing—there *is* intelligent life out there, just a bit farther than we've gone. That, he knew, was Earth's hope. *Any* sort of intelligence, just so that we're not alone in the immensity of space.

They had landed early in the morning, and by the time they were organized for land reconnaissance it was noon. Salzman and Oliver finished the last of the atmosphere tests, while Magglio read a comic-book he had smuggled on board.

"It's O.K.," Salzman said, squeezing into the operating chamber. "Breathable, without enough deviation from Earth-normal to matter. Anyone show up?"

Magglio shook his head. He had been watching the front vision plate for any sign of curious natives.

"Then we'll visit them. Full armor, sidearms, breather and radio."

"Who you gonna talk to on the radio?" Magglio asked, then immediately said, "Oh, no!"

"Yes," Salzman replied, smiling pleasantly as he unpacked a blaster. "You'll cover us."

"No," Magglio said. "I wanna explore. I'm a hero too, see?"

"No," Salzman said, and that ended it. "I'll take you out tomorrow, if everything goes right. But now—full security."



Salzman and Oliver moved out through the hatch and climbed down the ladder curving around the side of the ship. Oliver was first; he put his foot down gingerly, half expecting the

earth to open up under it, even though the snip was resting solidly enough.

When they were both on the ground they waved to Magglio, and moved toward the forest. They were breathing the air of the planet, but aside from their faces, they were completely enclosed in light, radiation-proof armor.

"Let me lead," Salzman said to Oliver. The engineer was fingering his sidearm nervously as they approached the forest. Following the rough direction he had noticed from the air, Salzman started toward the nearest town.

In the forest both men were prepared for any eventuality. Oliver kept his hand on the butt of his blaster, preparing himself for savages to come swarming out from behind the trees. Salzman, with more imagination, was ready for things to come dropping out of the sky, thrusting through the ground, materializing suddenly out of thin air, and a dozen other possibilities, simultaneously or one by one.

The wind rustled the red branches; nothing happened.

**T**HE TOWN turned out to be a small village, and a silent one. Its wide, stone-paved streets were bare. Not an animal showed itself, not a bird flew overhead. Weapons ready, the two men explored one of the houses. It was built of white stone and pink woods, and showed a high degree of craftsmanship. Within there were chairs and couches, tables and stands.

"They must be humans!" Oliver cried, when the shape of the furniture struck him. He started to sit down, then leaped up. "Might be booby trapped," he muttered eyeing the chair accusingly.

"It would be more logical to booby trap the doorway," Salzman commented. He lowered himself into the chair. Oliver released his breath when it didn't explode.

"Built for something about our size," he said. Suddenly, irrationally, he felt like Goldilocks, sitting in the little bear's chair—the one that fitted just right. He laughed out loud, but didn't bother explaining to Oliver. The literal-minded engineer would think he had cracked up.

They walked to the next room, separated by an arched doorway, and stopped short. On the walls were paintings—with human subjects!

"Oh brother!" Oliver shouted. "They *are* human! Humans!" He slapped Salzman on the back so hard he almost stumbled into a wall.

"But where in hell are they?" Salzman asked, moving quickly from painting to painting. The subjects were blondes, brunettes and redheads, male and female. They seemed entirely human, except for a pale, ethereal look that could have been the artist's technique.

They hurried on through the house, barely noting the other rooms. Urns, garments, vases, writing instruments, all would be of interest later. Right now they wanted to find people.

In the rear of the house they found a kitchen, with food still hot. The wood fire beneath the pots was smouldering feebly. "Someone sure left in a hurry," Salzman said.

Quickly they searched five more houses, and found them about the same. Some of the others were less orderly. Clothes were strewn around, sandals left in the middle of rooms. In two houses food had been spilled over the floor.

"They left in a *hell* of a hurry," Oliver said finally, as they stood in the street.

"That's for sure," Salzman said. He pushed back his hood and scratched his blond, balding head. He wasn't sure what to do next. His orders from the Foundation had been general. To survey the planets of a number of G-76 suns, in a specific sector, looking for Earth-type planets. If he found an inhabited one, to make contact with the natives if possible,

and if they could be approached peacefully.

He wasn't sure if this constituted unpeaceful behavior or not. Oliver trailed behind him as he walked slowly up the street, wondering why the inhabitants could have fled.

"I suppose they fled because of us," Oliver said, paralleling his trend of thought.

"Probably. These people are civilized, but not necessarily sophisticated. Who knows what they thought when they saw this ball of fire appear in the skies? The devil descending to the earth, perhaps."

"That's by *our* standards," Oliver objected, "how do we know they have superstitions of that sort?"

"We don't. But they're similar to us in development, which argues a like nervous system. Like inventions argue a like mentality. I know that's dubious, but I'll keep it for a working hypothesis until I find something better."

"I wonder why they didn't leave a rear-guard," Oliver mused. "Or arrange an ambush of some sort. Just leaving their homes that way... Well, now what?"

"We track them," Salzman said, coming to a decision. "We show them what we look like. We make peaceful gestures, and try to get them to talk."

Oliver nodded, and they started to the other end of the village.

**T**HE UNDERBRUSH was trampled and torn, showing the direction in which the exodus had gone. They had no trouble following it; it was big enough to have been made by a bulldozer. On the way, Salzman called Magglio and brought him up to date.

"If you capture a small blonde," Magglio told them, his voice crackly in the earphones, "throw her over your shoulder and bring her back to me. But if they're a tribe of twenty-foot Serbens, remember, I warned you!"

"Right," Salzman said cheerfully, and signed off.

As they moved through the forest, something kept nagging at Salzman's mind, bothering him. He looked around at the big, silent red trees, the slightly waving branches. Nothing wrong there. But the feeling continued, just beyond recognition. He glanced at Oliver. The big engineer was plodding along beside him, kicking up dirt with his boots. He couldn't quite put his finger on it—and then he had it.

"Notice something funny?" he asked Oliver.

"What?" Oliver said, feeling automatically for his blaster.

"No animals. No birds. No nothing."

"Perhaps they haven't evolved," Oliver said, after due thought.

"They must have," Salzman told him. "The humans and plants can't be the only things on this planet. Nature was never *that* selective."

"They're hiding, then. Timid, like people."

Salzman nodded, but that didn't seem to cover it. The forest was too quiet; it seemed to be waiting for something to happen. His imagination started to play tricks on him again, weaving fantastic but plausible reasons for everything. Perhaps the forest is one big entity, he thought, and the animals and humans are symbiotes. Nuts, he told himself. Why did they build villages then?

They walked on, sweating copiously inside their plastic armor, following the spoor of the villagers. In an hour they were out of one part of the forest, following the trail across a narrow valley. It tightened, climbing between stubby mountains, heading steadily up. Both men were winded, but they pushed on. Finally they rounded a bend in the trail and found themselves facing a blockade. It was made of piled branches and rocks, and stood about twelve feet high. On either side of it were smooth, towering boulders.

"We could blast it down," Oliver said.

"Hmm." Salzman touched the nearest boulder wall, then glanced at the sun. It was low on the horizon, and long shadows were stretching across the red land.

"Too late." He licked on his radio. "Magglio?"

"Yeah?"

"Haul out the scouter and bring us in. No blondes today." He signed off and turned to Oliver. "We'll try another village tomorrow. I don't think it'll be too hard to find *some* one."



Five days later, Salzman decided he had been too optimistic. With the scouter rocket-plane they covered every village and town in a fifty mile radius—a total of twelve. In each, it was the same. Deserted streets, empty houses—with still-burning fires to show that the natives had detected them minutes before they arrived. By air they caught tantalizing glimpses of human shapes, diving into concealment in the red forest. When they landed, even the glimpse was gone.

On the fourth day they returned to the first village. It showed unmistakable signs of having been re-inhabited while they were away. But again, the natives had managed to find out just when they were coming, and to get out perhaps half an hour before the Earthmen arrived.

The remaining hours of the fourth day were spent in the village, looking for some sign of electrical equipment. It seemed that the natives had some system of keeping informed on their exact movements, almost down to the minute. But the only mechanical device in the village was a wheel. Smoke signals and drums were obviously out. Magglio suggested carrier pigeons, but they still hadn't seen any birds.

Before sunrise on the fifth day they took the scouter to the far side

of the continent. Oliver estimated they covered four thousand miles in something like five and a half hours. They roared down to a village full-jet, decelerating so rapidly in the last few hundred feet that they were almost plastered against the scouter's walls. All in all, from the time they appeared as a dot in the sky to the time they landed in the middle of the village, not more than three minutes could have elapsed.

But the natives had had their usual fifteen-minute-plus head start.

**THEY DIDN'T** stop to figure out how, this time. In line with a plan they had arranged the night before, Salzman and Oliver set out after the trail of the fleeing natives. Magglio took the scouter up again and circled around, trying to spot the bunch.

"They're about a mile and a half ahead," Magglio's voice said, sharp in the earphones. "Bear a little more right—that's good!"

Salzman grunted as he climbed the mountain slope. He paused on a ledge and gave Oliver a hand up. The weeks in free-fall hadn't been very good for their muscles, he thought. In the sky he could see the little scouter Magglio was piloting, hovering overhead. Stretched beneath them was red forest, broken here and there by ragged mountains.

"They're still going in a straight line," Magglio told them. "A couple hundred of them, heading toward another section of forest."

The two men moved on. It seemed to Salzman that two grown men should be able to move faster than an entire village—with old men and women, and children. But they seemed unable to overtake the natives, or even come close.

"Hey chief," Magglio radioed. "I spotted a way you can cut them off. Take a right at the next cut—"

Another hour passed as they labored through the winding shortcut. Magglio's ship hovered overhead,

careful not to give away their position. The sun beat down on the plastic as they scrambled over rocks and between trees.

"This is a hell of a note," Oliver grumbled. He had run out of swear words, having called the natives everything he could think of—except human beings. "I could have stayed in Montana and done this. My lord, we push a tin can across sixteen light years of space, just to find someone not from Earth to talk to. We just went to be friends, and this suspicious bunch of—"

"Hey chief," Magglio called. "They must have spotted you! They're bearing away again, relative to your position!"

"Spotted us!" Salzman shouted into the earphone. "Again? How could they?"

"I don't know," Magglio's voice said in his ears. "I can swear not a person has left the main bunch."

"You sure there aren't a few of them you can't see?" Salzman asked, sitting down on the ground.

"Sure as sure," Magglio told him. "The forest is thin around here. I could spot a cat. As far as I... Chief, are you and Oliver sitting down?"

"Yes, why?"

"Because the whole bunch of them sat down a moment ago!" Magglio said.

Salzman jumped to his feet, pulled Oliver up, and started again on a run.

"They just got up again," Magglio told them. "They're running—now they've stopped—they're sitting again."

Salzman had sat down again.

"That ties it," he said to Oliver in a quiet voice. "Either they've got scanners built into every tree—or they're telepathic!"

Magglio picked them up in the scouter and brought them back to the ship. Oliver sat quietly, looking as though his best friend had kicked him in the teeth. Salzman was cursing steadily, beating one fist into his thigh. It was all he could do to keep

from hitting Oliver or Magglio. To come so far, and find a pack of telepathic rabbits masquerading as human beings!

By the time they reached the ship he had regained his calm completely. He was determined to keep it from now on, no matter what happened. The trees could start running away, he felt, and he wouldn't be surprised any more.

**A**FTER SUPPER that evening the three men stretched out on the purple grass around the ship. They had discarded the plastic armor, since there was nothing to arm against, but kept their blasters as a safety measure.

"I noticed something else," Magglio told them. "I saw what looked like animals—they bolted like mad too, whenever you came inside of about a mile or two of them. Also a few birds. Not a living thing stayed less than a mile away."

"Everything's probably telepathic on this planet," Salzman said. "It ties in. But if they're telepathic—if they can read our minds—then why do they run? They know we're just here to establish communication." He paused. "Have you been thinking about their women?" he accused Magglio.

"Who me?" Magglio was highly indignant. "Not on your life. I been thinking about my girlfriend at home; I'm faithful, see?"

"If they can read our minds," Salzman went on, more to himself than to the others, "then they know we want to be friends. We're not here to colonize, we're not going to rob them—since we can't carry five pounds extra weight on the ship. We're here, damn it, to bridge the gap between the stars. To *talk*. What's wrong with them?"

"Maybe they just want to be left alone," Oliver offered.

"Then why run? Why not ignore us? No, I think they must be afraid of something."

"Monsters," Magglio said.

"I thought of that—but not if they can read our minds. We're not angels, but our intentions *are* good." Salzman remained deep in thought, his head bent forward on his chest.

"Tomorrow," he said at last, "we're rounding up a native. I hadn't thought of the telepathy angle before, but I think this'll work." Briefly, he told them what they were to do.

"Now go to bed," he finished shortly.



In his bunk, Salzman tried to fit the pieces together. It was no use. But he was sure he could clear it up tomorrow. Once they could talk to the natives... Intelligent life! That was the important thing. He had been excited by the idea since childhood; otherwise he wouldn't be out in space, spending his manhood in a metal spheroid.

Sleep wouldn't come at once. Salzman rolled and tossed for an hour or more, trying to get comfortable. Finally he dozed off fitfully, thinking of Serbens and Visties, Magglio's Ufangies and Oliver's hordes of aliens.

He was in the forest. Only it had altered. Instead of the soft reds, pinks and purples of the day, everything was a bloody crimson. Blood dripped from the leaves, and the roots and branches oozed blood. He was being chased, by a horrible mangled thing that screamed and moaned and crashed through the underbrush after him, now racing upright on two legs, now down on all fours like a dog, and constantly coming closer, until—he awoke, cursing.

"What's up?" Oliver asked, from the next bunk.

"Nightmare," Salzman answered. "Overexcited, I guess." It annoyed him. It was his first dream in years, and his first nightmare since child-



hood. Were Magglio's monster stories getting him down, he wondered?

Finally sleep came again.

**T**HE NEXT morning was as hot as the previous ones. The men piled into the scouter quickly.

"Think pleasant thoughts," Magglio reminded them mockingly, as he poured on the jets. "Think about having a pint of beer with the chief's daughter. If they've got a chief, and if he's got beer and a daughter."

"No wonder they're running, if they're reading *your* thoughts," Oliver said. Magglio grinned and winked.

Salzman watched the red forest pass beneath them, they sped toward the area he had selected. He wondered what he would say when they rounded a native up. What right had they, to force these people out of their homes, run them through the woods like foxes, track them down and make them talk?

What right, he asked himself—plenty of right! They had crossed sixteen light years of space to make contact with intelligent life. All Earth was waiting to hear the results of their mission. They had given their lives to the job, as a lab of love. What right—why, the right of intelligence—to make contact with other intelligences, to exchange information to better both races.

And the silly fools ran like stampeded cattle, he thought bitterly. Wasn't there a brave man among them?

"Here we are," Magglio said as they shot over a village. "And there they are."

"Let's round them up," Salzman said tightly.

The scouter dipped over the tree-tops, then swung low over the natives. They were running in blind panic, and Salzman could see that the men were racing ahead of the women and children, in a hysterical effort to escape.

"Land Oliver in front of them," Salzman said. The scouter passed the

crowd, and, a few hundred yards further, Oliver parachuted out.

Immediately the natives reversed, and started in the opposite direction.

"Now me on the flank," Salzman said. He parachuted out. Spilling air out of his 'chute he landed in a clear space. Quickly he chucked the harness and started forward.

"I'm landing on the other side," Magglio said over the earphones. "We've got them on three sides, and they've got a sheer wall to their backs." This was the maneuver they had planned at night. The scouter dipped and swung, herding the natives like sheep. Salzman ran, tearing his way through the underbrush, toward the crowd. He could hear them, panting and moaning, only a few hundred yards ahead.

As he ran he cleared his sidearm—just in case.

Suddenly he came to an abrupt halt.

"Oliver—Magglio—over to me!" he called over the radio. "One of them's coming!"



The native staggered toward Salzman, slipping and falling, and picking himself up again. He didn't resemble any of the portraits—not now. As he got closer, Salzman could see that the man's face was twisted and contorted; his body was jerking uncontrollably, in a series of nerve and muscle spasms that threatened to tear his bones apart. His skin was pallid and splotched in spots, cancerous looking. He resembled a corpse more than a living creature.

Magglio and Oliver came up abruptly, then stopped, a few paces behind Salzman.

Salzman felt something *itch* his mind, as the native came up to ten feet of him. Then, when it stopped, Salzman felt a thought.

"Go away."

"Why?" Salzman asked out loud.

"You are killing our minds. Take anything, but go away."



"We come as friends," Salzman said soothingly. "We mean no harm, we did not mean to break any of your taboos. If you are sick, we have medicine on our ship—we can cure—"

The native slumped to his knees. "You are making our minds crazy."

"Good Lord!" Oliver gasped. "Could we have brought some disease?"

"No," the native thought at them. "It is your thoughts. They are powerful, evil thoughts—too horrible to stand. Your minds have—diseases—which we catch, if we come into contact—"

"Thoughts?" Salzman echoed. He looked back at Oliver and Magglio. Was it possible that one of them had a pathological mind? Could he have it? Quickly he discounted the possibility. They had been screened too carefully for sanity and stability before leaving Earth. Nothing like that could have slipped by.

The native was losing strength, but he caught the thought.

"No," he said. "All your thoughts. The thoughts behind."

Behind. Now what could that mean, Salzman wondered, staring at the panting native on the ground.

"You are monsters," the native's weakening thought said. "You have hideous things in your minds. Things which eat eyeballs—horrible terrors—and other things."

"Space legends!" Oliver gasped. "You've got us all wrong, friend. Those are only—"

"No!" the native thought angrily. "Not those. The things behind! The horrors in the night. The secret things that you do not yourselves think about, for they would drive you insane too, and kill you. The blood-red forest—"

Salzman had guessed it a few seconds back, but he didn't want to believe it. Now he had no choice. "He means our subconscious minds," he said heavily.

"Yes," the native said. "That is the right thought. The things you cannot let yourselves think about, for they would make you sick. But we—we must think them, when you are near."

He tried to tell them something else, but his weakening control snapped. For a moment there was nothing—and then a babbling lunacy of thoughts, driving the Earthmen back by their sheer intensity. There were all Magglio's monsters, screaming and gibbering, coming out of that mad mind. The Ufangies were there, orange and black and scaly, and Oliver's hordes of invaders swept on, hacking their way through the bleeding forest that Salzman had dreamed of, led by a faceless thing that screamed its hate for all living creatures. And behind them, from deeper

in the Earthmen's minds, were tremendous, slimy creatures compounded of all the insecurities and fears that infect young boys growing up in Earth's superstition-infested dark-nesses. The things that crawl out of the black mouths of alleys were there, and the horrors that grin from open closet doors at night, when the family is asleep. And behind that, from the deep in babies' memories, leering blindly—

The Earthmen ran, sobbing and tripping blindly, and madness pursued them all the way to the scouter. Magglio shoved the little ship viciously into the air, with Oliver still climbing through the doorway. Salzman managed to drag him the rest of the way in, as they roared up into the clean air.

**F**OR A WHILE it didn't seem as though Oliver was going to come around. He wouldn't talk or move, but just stared blankly into space. Lacking knowledge of psychiatry, Salzman tried a home remedy. He

threw a pan of water in the engineer's face, then knocked him flat on his back. It was crude shock-therapy, but it worked.

"You O.K.?" Salzman asked.

"They couldn't let us get near them," Oliver said finally, "they couldn't stand our monstrous, horrible thoughts—the ones we don't dare think out loud." He pulled himself to his feet, holding Salzman's arm for support. "Even the animals couldn't stand it."

"Forget it," Salzman said steadily. "It isn't our fault."

"Just think," Oliver went on in the same dull voice. "The glimpse we got of our subconscious was enough to jar our sanity, they got it full force."

"Forget it."

"I feel so dirty!"

"Shut up!" Magglio screamed.

The engineer looked blank for a moment, then tried to smile. Magglio whistled tunelessly as they prepared for takeoff. "Shall we try another G-type sun, chief? Another planet?"

"I wonder if we should," Salzman said.