

SUPER SCIENCE STORIES

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WORLD OF NO RETURN

By
Bryce Wakton

IT WAS a white flame arching across the sky, a thin ribbon fluttering out across the dead sea-bottom. There was a faint glare of white and orange light, the sound of an explosion that barely reached the Watch Tower before it died.

Della sat stiffly. Marla leaned toward her fearfully and said, "That was a spaceship! An Earth ship!"

The memory of the dying flame was still in Della's eyes as she gazed over the endless wasteland of coral fronds and lichen and moss of the dead sea-bottom. "Yes," she whispered. "I'm sure it was an Earth ship!"

"Then report it quickly, Della! We've got to send in a report."

Della didn't move. "No. I'm going to investigate first, myself."

"What—oh, no! Della!" Marla retreated slowly, fearfully, across the interior of the observation dome. "The Council will find out. You know what that means. They'll send you to the Medics. They'll change you!"

Della got up quickly. "A small rocket, probably a man in it. He might still be alive. If I reported it, the Squadmen would pick him up and destroy him. This way, maybe I can talk with him—I'd gladly submit to change, Marla, if first I could only talk, be with someone like myself, if

only were free for a little while."

She locked the communications cabinet and dropped the key in the pocket of her brief tunic. "Now, Marla, you can't contact the Council while I'm gone."

Marla whispered. "It's just as bad to leave the Tower without permission. I don't want to be changed. I'll tell! I'll tell!"

Della said with almost savage intensity, "You'd better not. If you do, I'll give the Council the facts on how you burned out those condensers last year; I have proof. I lied for you, something no one else among the Colonists could do. You yourself aren't capable of lying, you'd be horrified at the thought, yet my lying saved you. But I have the evidence and I'll give it to them if you open your mouth about this."

"What's wrong with you, Della? What is this—difference of yours?"

"You wouldn't understand," Della said bitterly. "You couldn't be lonely or sad. You couldn't long for the arms of a lover night after night until it becomes unbearable. Until you'd rather be—destroyed than bear it! Not changed, destroyed! Immortality smashed—"

Della went out the panel, took the stairs that curved down to the base

Under the twin moons of Mars, Cliff, the Earthman, could not live. . . . And Della, poor misguided Della, could not die!



of the Tower. She walked with a tense expectancy toward the place where the rocket had crashed.

Through dense, head-high waste that stretched for thousands of miles across the expanse that had been a sea eons before, she walked, tearing her way through a forest of coral fronds, entwining lichen and pale green fungus and multicolored mosses. From the mountains toward the polar cap the wastes stretched. And there was no life here except the giant red beetles.

Finally her fingers spread back a filmy curtain of rusty lichen, and she bent forward breathlessly. The ship in the starshine was a lifeless silvery-gray shell, crushed, twisted and very still.

She watched for a long time for signs of movement from the shape huddled some distance from the wreckage. The larger moon joined the smaller and the stars paled slightly behind the overhead brilliance. The shadows about the ship shifted through veils of color to deep purple and orange lights.

She cried out softly as the shape got to its feet with slow, painful effort. It was a man. A man. He fell, got to his feet again. Earthman—one thing she knew: he would be a kindred spirit; he would have emotions as she had. That was the reason for the Law that said all Earth people were to be destroyed on sight.

"We broke away from them," the Law said. "Now we defy them. There can never be a synthesis. They are motivated by emotions, they are destruction and evil."

She thought, "He will know my feelings. There's no other living thing on this planet that could understand except a man, this man."

Yet she hesitated.

HER HANDS spread tautly at her sides. He was beautiful. He was tall and broad and his hair was the color of gold. He was taller than any one of the Colonials. He staggered. He was trembling and making odd sounds. Not words, but incoherent noises. Her heart went out to him. He seemed whole and strong on the outside, but maybe there was some kind of inner disruption.

She prayed fervently that this was not so. Only the Medics could repair, and it was so highly specialized that no one else could even attempt it. He might be incapacitated, and if so, she'd be helpless. She couldn't send in a report. They wouldn't fix him up, of course; they would destroy him!

The man swayed, then sank down. He looked up hopelessly at the hurtling larger moon as its flames shattered him with glittering shards of greenish pale light. He shook his head, then buried his face in his arms.

She moved from concealment, crept quietly toward him. Now his words were coherent, but odd. Once the Colonials and the Earth people had spoken the same way, but now there were differences, altered meanings, words she didn't understand. But the emotion he felt was plain to her.

"Lousy ship, lousy luck. The devil with it. A guy crazy enough to test one of Jeffer's experimental drives deserves this. No, that's not right. Starving and freezing to death, that wouldn't be so bad. But nobody deserves getting picked up by these Colonial freaks. The way they kill a guy—"

She thought, he knows he'll be destroyed if caught.

No one knew much about the past, either of the Tribe before it revolted and fled from Earth to Mars, or of the reason behind it all. The past, the his-

tory of the revolt and the times before it, were to be forgotten, conditioned out of memory. Think of today, of tomorrow. But the past was a harmful thing.

There was fear of him. Always she had been taught to be afraid, and to destroy. But slowly the fear was conquered by the other stronger, starved desires. Fear flickered and fought and finally died into a vague spark, and the spark finally seemed to go out.

As she stepped nearer her feet ripped through tendrils of lichen and the man jerked his head up. He slid back, came to his hands and knees, staring. His face seemed to change color, grow paler, and that was odd. His eyes widened. His mouth dropped open. His head bent to either side, and then he jumped to his feet frantically and stood with his knees bent, his hands in front of him.

Afraid, of her! Fear, he shared that emotion in common with all the Colonists, though they could have no other. She understood it thoroughly. But she was hurt that he should be afraid of her, when she felt only love, a hungry trembling yearning for him. She reached out. He backed away.

"Don't be afraid, please!" she said.

His lips trembled. "Where—where did you come from?" His voice was shaky.

She motioned. "Over there. I'm a Watcher, and the Tower is over there a way. You can't see it. I saw your crash."

She moved toward him. This time he didn't back away, but stared at her with wide, wary eyes.

Suddenly he said, "Get it over with! Kill me right now. What do you use, your bare hands? You don't seem to have a weapon." He looked all around. "There are others with you then, hiding?"

She shook her head. "No one else. Just you and I, Earthman."

She leaped forward and gripped his arms and drew him close to her. She noticed that his face was wet, that his face was turning an odd gray color.

"Please don't be afraid," she pleaded. "I saw your ship crash, but I didn't report it. We are forbidden to leave the tower without orders, but I left it. Please, please try to understand!"

"What? Understand what?" he whispered. He jerked free from her. "My ship's wrecked, finished. I can't defend myself, no weapons. No food, no water. I'll starve, freeze in a few nights. Or if not that, I know what you freaks will do to me. What else is there to understand? What are you talking about?"

She said, "A year after I was assigned as a Watcher in the Tower, I learned that I was different from all the others. I can feel emotions, love, longing, loneliness. You understand? Love needs another before it's really love. Someone else who can feel emotion. You're the only one besides me. There's just you and me. I need you. You need me, and—"

His mouth twisted and he mumbled something.

"I need you, Earthman, and I want you," she said simply. She moved toward him again. He backed falteringly toward the wrecked ship. He held up his hands.

"This is crazy!" he cried. "A delusion. I know what you people are. You're trying to pull some damn sadistic game or other! Look here, if you're going to kill me—"

"Oh no, no! Come with me back to the Tower. But we must hurry! I can explain there, but we must hurry! Listen—I'm different from the others here. I'm more—like you. We're just alike, aren't we? We look the same?"

"Yes," he muttered. "But that doesn't make sense. Back on Earth we've been taught what you people are, not much, but enough. No emotions, cold as space, heartless. But you do look like any other woman, only better, much better. And I don't understand it. I was told that any man landing on Mars would be killed, tortured, dissected, treated like a guinea pig—"

She interrupted. "The others here are like that. But I'm different. Now and then they get one like me, a sudden flood of memory that breaks through the mental barriers. Emotions return, feelings, longings come back. When such a thing happens, that one is changed. Emotions are evil, they say, destructive. I don't want that. I want to keep my secret from them—but this difference of mine—it will drive me to madness unless you help me. And you'll also be helping yourself. Just you and I, we'll belong to each other! I'll never report that you're here. That way, you won't be destroyed! Can't you see it now?"

The smaller moon dropped out of sight, and the larger moon plunged toward the mountains leaving scattered threads of indigo. In the thickening shadows, his eyes narrowed as he watched her, listened to her. The night wind cried coldly through the coral fronds. A giant crimson beetle crawled blindly toward the fading moonlight.

"It's crazy," he said. "But maybe there's some truth in it. Maybe you're really here, and feeling this way. Maybe I'm insane."

After a while he touched her shoulder. His fingers felt of her arms, her shoulders, her throat, moved around over her face and down the shining length of her hair. He said in a low voice, "Lovely enough to be my

last dream. Peel or not—lovely."

She felt strangely weak. She closed her eyes. It was like a bursting forth of flame, of imprisoned fires released from long bondage. As from a long way off she heard him whispering: "' . . . a savage place! As holy and enchanted as e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted by woman wailing for her demon lover!"

He smiled thinly. "What can I lose? The name's Cliff. Cliff Bailey."

"And I'm Della."

"I don't understand, Della. I don't. But I'm trying. Meanwhile, I've got to figure out what it means. We're told that you people are completely unlike us, that we could never get together. And you're told the same thing. Yet here we are, the same."

She shook his hand. "Please, we can talk about it later, but we have to get back to the Tower. Marla, my Tower companion, is afraid. She's liable to run away from the Tower and report your landing."

She kept his hand as he walked beside her. Now and then he looked back. He sighed as the ship disappeared behind the curtains of the silent waste.

INSIDE the Tower, she saw him stare in awe at the mechanical perfection of the hard glittering steel, the almost silently moving machinery. She opened a panel into a dark room.

"Hide in there, Cliff, for a while, until I settle things with Marla. I'll be back with you very soon. I've locked the Communications cabinet, but Marla might run away. There's another Tower twenty miles distant. If she reached that, the Squadmen would be back here within minutes."

A sound twisted her about. Marla, standing on the spiral silver stairs! Her body was bent in a posture of

frozen terror. She screamed and ran down the fragile stairs toward the exit panel.

Della cried out. "Cliff, help me stop her!"

Della blocked the exit and battered Marla's body back with hard solid blows of her fists. Marla struck back desperately and Della felt the stunning frantic power of her efforts.

"Cliff—"

Then she saw his face behind Marla's straining shoulders. A twisted face, distorted, and with glaring eyes. head.

He brought it down, hard. head. He brought it down, hard.

Marla sagged back and collapsed in a shivering heap. Cliff dropped the bar and leaned against the wall, gasping, making odd choking sounds that were meaningless to Della.

Marla struggled to rise, her eyes flickering in terror at Cliff.

Della grabbed up the bar and stood over her with the metal upraised. She said savagely, "Do you want to be destroyed?"

Marla cringed. "No—No—"

"Then don't try to report this to anyone."

Marla managed to get to her hands and knees, then, weakly, to her feet. She backed slowly away onto the stairs.

"Della—something's wrong with me. I'll have to report that. And if I do—"

"You'll report nothing, do you hear? Nothing!"

Marla turned and dragged herself up the stairs.

"What will they do if they find out?" Cliff asked harshly. "To you, I mean. I know they'll kill me. But will they kill you?"

"Oh, no. We can't die unless something happens so that the Medics wouldn't help us. No, as I've said,

they would change me. Wipe out memory, recondition me, destroy the emotions. We are to have no emotions except fear of the Law which assures obedience."

He sat down and wiped his hands across his face. She ran her fingers through his golden hair. She moved into his arms. "Cliff— I'll find a way to shut Marla up. And then there's a chance they'll never find out about us. Cliff—"

And his lips were pressing hard against her lips. Memories, long buried, flooded her, surging and swirling . . .

IT WAS night.

She ran down the stairs into the living room of the Tower. Her cry was desperate with fear.

"Cliff! Marla's escaped from the Tower. An hour ago. I just found out and it's impossible to overtake her now. The Squadmen will be here soon!"

The moons had risen, plunged through veils of tattered indigo, risen and plunged again. The red winds had whirled their ancient dust over the dead seabottoms many times since Cliff had come to the Tower. And the sun had warmed the Tower's metal and the icy nights had chilled it repeatedly since Cliff had found love and life where, by all odds, he should have been dead.

He lay on a couch against the far wall in half-darkness. Their love had been intense, but there was something wrong, something the matter with him. Daily he went out into the dead seabottoms and came back with dragging feet, his eyes feverishly bright. The color seemed to be leaving the outside of him. His hair was lusterless. And now he lay quietly against the wall, his eyes following her movements, deep

feverish hollows in sagging pockets. That was wrong, and she didn't understand, and he never explained.

"Cliff—listen to me! Marla has escaped!"

He flattened back against the wall. "Yes," he said weakly.

"She'll report everything, Cliff! The Squadmen will be here soon!"

"Yes," he said weakly. His eyes burned with that feverish yellow brightness.

"Cliff! What's the matter?"

He sat up slowly and brushed his lips. "What— I don't really know. Something had to happen, it couldn't go on . . . Della, I don't know what it is but I'm going crazy. Maybe it's just suggestion, you see—we've been conditioned all our lives to believe that we're somehow alien—evil and different—and maybe that lifetime of education has poisoned our minds for each other, in spite of anything we can do. I don't know—"

"We've got to act for ourselves, Cliff. Even if we know they'll get us eventually, we've got to fight somehow. We've got to go on as though it would be forever."

"I don't know! I don't know!" He rocked back and forth, his head in his hands.

She said tensely, "Cliff, we may have only a short time left together. And it has to be beautiful, you understand? If we can escape into the waste—"

"Yes — yes — beautiful," he said wildly. "Beautiful . . . I don't know what it is . . . you're beautiful, your voice, the way you look at me, it's all beautiful! But something terribly wrong—little thing. I can't explain it—can't grasp it. Those pills you live on—they haven't done anything for me! I need food, bulk food, and I need lots of water to drink! I had to go out

there every day and grub around—I've had to eat—"

He suddenly stopped talking. His lips twitched and his fingers shook as he wiped them across his mouth.

"Cliff, we've got to leave the Tower. They'll be coming for us. They'll be sending a Squadplane, but we can run away!"

She lifted him up and held him tightly. She felt him trembling against her. He seemed thinner, less substantial, as though he were a dream melting away, like something unreal. Momentary panic hit her, and she whispered:

"We can have each other a while longer this way. It will take them a while, maybe a long while, to find us if we run away. We can lose ourselves in the wastes."

He nodded quickly, desperately, his eyes flickering and burning. "Yes, yes, all right, anything, anything at all. Run away into the wastes—"

She led him out of the Tower. It was dusk. The sun was dropping through a red curtain above the mountains. Its dying arms fondled the endless plains of coral fronds and lichen with shifting, merging hues of brilliant colored light.

They ran. They kept on running. And behind her, Cliff stumbled, lurched, made gasping frantic sounds as she gripped his hand. She gripped it tightly, half dragging him. As they plunged into the thicker and thicker growth, a dark speck grew rapidly larger in the sky and finally settled on the Tower.

"A Squadplane," she cried. "They'll be after us at once. Run, Cliff, run—"

"I'm—trying—" His voice seemed faint, far away. "I'm too weak— I don't seem to have any strength left—a man has to have food—"

She held his hand and kept on running, hurling herself into the thickening

barrier of the wasteland. She didn't take time to look back. She held his hand and fought forward. She used her free arm to cut a swath ahead of them. The lichen entangled them and she fought free, again and again.

SHE HAD BEEN running and holding his hand for a long time, fighting deeper and more deeply into the denser depths of the waste. A faint painful cry stabbed into her mind. She turned. "Cliff, what's wrong?"

He was bent in an arc, his toes dragging, his back bent, his head hanging loosely. His feet and legs were bruised and strange lines of red marked them. She realized then that she had been dragging him, that he hadn't been moving under his own power at all.

When she released his hand, his body dropped on its face and he lay there twisting weakly. Odd disrupted sounds came out of him. She cried and kneeled down and lifted his head. "Cliff! Cliff!"

He didn't answer. She kissed him wildly on the mouth and face and neck. She kissed his eyes and they opened slowly. A twisted smile struggled wearily across his face.

And then he whispered faintly, "I'm dying . . ."

"Cliff, they haven't found us yet, haven't touched you. What do you mean, you're dying?"

He struggled to rise, but sank back. Fear flickered in his eyes, making them glow with an intense hot brightness.

He said feebly, "On Earth, they say you Colonials are — immortal — that much I heard. I thought it was—a myth or something—maybe not. Anyway, I couldn't live on those pills, and the pulp I found outside the Tower—no good either. I didn't want to tell you, I was afraid—well, none of it

made any sense from the beginning—but I guess I love you, Della, I guess that's real enough."

She stared down at his face and realized now how much he had changed. His face was thin, hollow, with an odd bluish color. His hands were shaking as he lifted them and gripped her arms and then slid his grip down to her hands.

"Maybe your people and mine are right," he whispered faintly. "Love, need, hunger, that isn't enough. There's a barrier between us—invisible—but there. These—Squadmen of yours don't worry me. I'm dying anyway—but you, Della—"

He sagged limply and his lips moved without forming words. His hands flexed and his fingers dug into her hands.

"They'll change me, that's all," she said softly. "Memories buried, emotions traced down and wiped out. But it will be the same as being destroyed." She looked up as the faint droning sound came from across the wastes. "They won't destroy me, none of us are ever destroyed. Yet, you can die because of something within yourself. And that's odd too, isn't it? Why shouldn't we be able to—die, sometime?"

He tried to lift his head, and sank back with a rattling sigh. She could barely hear his words. "I—I wouldn't know. . . . I'll never find out now—and maybe that's just as well."

His voice faded. She shook him. She cried and shook him wildly. She shook him harder and harder, but his eyes remained closed.

She gripped his shoulders and shook him violently, up and down, back and forth, harder and harder. He had to be alive, for nothing had destroyed him. To stop functioning, something had to destroy you. What is this thing,

death? You can be changed. But just to stop functioning without reason! When the ship crashed! That was it! Something had been disrupted inside of him.

Cliff! Cliff!

She stood up. She lifted his body. She held it high in the air. The larger moon hurtled into the sky, casting long purple shadows across the wastes. A group of giant red beetles circled toward her, attracted by the sound, and the scent of warmth.

She shook his body frantically. His arms and legs and head jerked and flopped and danced. His legs gyrated, and his arms went round and round. His head lolled and bounced.

Overhead, she heard the descending sound of the Squadplane.

She cried out desperately, "Cliff, say something! I love you, don't die, you can't die. We still have a chance. Cliff, face them with me, side by side, together—"

She held his body out with one hand. She ran her other hand over him. His eyes were wide, unblinking, glazed with a texture like plastic, she thought. He didn't move anywhere, nothing moved. His body seemed—cold!

The sound of the Squadplane stopped. They had landed near!

She ran. She held his body under one arm, and ran as quietly as she could. She used her other arm like a sharp weapon, cutting an opening ahead of her. She finally broke through a high wall of thick fungus and dragged him beneath an overhanging ledge of rust-colored stone.

She crouched over him, trying to understand what was wrong. Something had happened to him, inside of him. Maybe it was something simple, something that could be repaired quickly.

But how could she know what was

wrong, simple though it might be? She was no specialist. But try, try! Yes, she could try, try something, anything. Cliff, I'll try. I love you and need you and I can't face them alone.

She could hear the Squadmen moving through the high coral fronds. They moved steadily, not anxiously, with forceful certainty.

"Cliff, maybe it's in here!"

She twisted his head around. Unscrew the head and look inside. She twisted it round and round. It came off. Something tore loose, and the head came off in her hands.

She screamed shrilly. The sound reverberated against the rust-red stone, and drifted off through the wastes. The dry cold wind from the glacial cap carried the sound out and away until it was no sound at all.

The thick red liquid sprayed warmly over her, dripping from her face and arms. His legs twitched and jerked. She dropped the head and grabbed the legs, held them down. It was the wrong kind of movement and finally it stopped. She hadn't fixed anything. She had done something wrong. Not a specialist—

Put the head back on! She tried, but it didn't fit, nothing seemed to fit. She had watched them take heads off, unscrew them, put them back, when they wanted to make repairs. But nothing like this—this red liquid, this warm red steam, this other stuff, the sticky oozing clinging things—

Look inside, see what's wrong. She dug her fingers into the torso, ripping and spreading apart and peering inside. Couldn't see anything. A red flood poured out, over her hands and arms, over him, over the ground. More redness, more oozing warmth belching up around her hands and arms.

She knelt beside whatever it was that was dead. She knelt over whatever

death was. She murmured and looked at her dripping hands. She hardly noticed the four Squadmen watching her as the smaller moon drifted into the sky. Their shadows slipped across her like bars of steel.

THE SQUAD lieutenant motioned. The other three lifted her. She didn't resist.

"Cliff," she said. "What are you?"

The lieutenant said, "They made us exactly like them, appearance, everything, except that there had to be mechanical differences, and that we are immortal. They gave us emotion like theirs, too. Disgusting!"

He turned to one of the Squadmen. "Open her switch. Remove her head. Take the brain-coil directly to the Medics."

She felt the Squadman's fingers on the back of her neck beneath the long gleaming strands of hair, feeling for the tiny switch.

"Cliff," she whispered. "What are you?"

The lieutenant said, "We've kept it buried as much as possible. Memory

sometimes seeps through. The nature of our past, the slavery, the subordination—it lowers efficiency and introduces psychological blocks to effort. This thing's ancestors made us to serve them. I can tell all of you this, and the Medics can change you and you will not remember. We officers can function in spite of the knowledge; certain leaders must retain all knowledge. But the others will someday remember nothing of this humiliating past, when we served. This thing is—or was—human."

The word recalled associations. She looked up at the sky and screamed. She was still screaming when the Squadman pressed the disconnecting switch and the sounds immediately were cut off. They unscrewed her head, crated it and her body. They crated the brain-coil separately in a special case. And then they shipped the parts off to the Medics.

The giant beetles settled hungrily on the remains under the ledge of rust-colored rock. And the moons plunged across the sky, filling the thin cold air with an icy and metallic brilliance.