

SPACE TRAILS
#5
THE OLD
ONE

These firemen set fires
and what they burn
is books!



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ONE
by

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THE OLD ONE

Mars was no longer dying. Mars was dead. The Old One, dragging his withered and cracked limbs across the red oxide sands of her dusty ocean-bottom, knew this all too well.

He had gone far since his home canal pool had finally dried up, leaving nothing but arid desert for miles around. For a long time he had lived there by that sweet pool, his lower limbs immersed in the cool clear water as the sun would sink beneath the low hills to the west. He would stand straight and tall, lifting his arms to catch the last rays of a sun too distant for life, and then last out the night made deliciously entertaining by the Wise One.

The Wise One was very very old; so old that he had lived in the times when the world, and her greatest race had been young, brimming with the vitality and eagerness to know of youth.

They had known many things then, which were even now lost to the Wise One's faltering memory. Then had the race lived in cities, built huge stone fortresses, and - best by far of all - had their fill of food and water.

But even they could not find a way to save the planet, or themselves. Although their instruments told them there were other livable worlds, the religion forbade such a thought; for they believed in their egotism that Mars was the chosen planet, and they the chosen life-form.

Even so, they could not have spanned the distance betwixt the spheres, for there was no way.

The stars, knowing and laughing, had shined down from above; no, no, that was wrong, the Old One remembered. Then they had twinkled. Now the pitiful atmosphere that clothed the dead world was barely enough to stave off the radiation of outer space.

And there were no other races. And very soon, if he could not quickly find water, there would be none at all....

Wearily he dragged himself forward. Since he had forsaken the first canal where he had been born, he had not seen a drop-let of water. His whole body was curiously wilted. Some of his limbs were cracked and bloated; and he knew they were dead, and that they had been closed off to husband the little moisture remaining in his body.

Suddenly he brightened. His sense perceptions told him that ahead was another canal. Perhaps this one....

He hurried forward as best he could, drawing his limbs over the coarse red dirt of the sea-bottom. Soon he was leaning over the canal's brink. There was water!

Only a small pool which too would dry out in time. But now it was salvation. Feeling curiously weak, the Old One made his way down the cavern steps at one side. It was cool water. Gratefully he immersed his lower body in the pool's clear depths.

The sun had disappeared beneath the deserts to the west, and all night beneath the softly glowing stars he stayed there, relaxing. He felt rested at last. Curiously rested, and not caring any more what happened. As if nothing could happen any more.

Strange thoughts persecuted his reason, now. He commenced to wonder many things.....was he the last emissary of that strange chemical reaction called life? Or did it exist elsewhere? These musings were disloyal to his God, to the God of ancient Mars, but the Old One no longer cared. The ancients had taught that the God had created but one world, and graced only it with life; that the Martians were the chosen, created in his own image. Was this egomania and naught else? For the first time the Old One doubted.

Would others someday come to this world, see its cities desolate and crumbling, and think, "Who was it who lived here, and died?" Would they understand the writings of the old race? Would they....

The Old One caught himself. This, he told himself, was more than futile speculation, it was disastrous to his peace of mind. There were no other races.

* *

A rocket ship blasted down out of the black sky. it came in near a canal for a neat landing, and blasted to a halt about fifty feet from the depression. Men got out, garbed not in space suits, but close woollen and plastic garments, with air masks. The air here was unbreatably thin and extremely cold.

The crew of the ship consisted of nine men and a pilot who was the Captain. All were specialists in some scientific field or other. They were coldly logical scientists.

But they were landing on Mars, the first humans to perform this astonishing feat. And it was cold.

"It's really colder than I would have believed," announced Scott.

Mayfield agreed. "I wish we could have a fire, or something."

"Can't use the rocket fuel," cautioned Bedford.

"There ought to be something."

"Nothing," said Mayfield glumly.

"Too much to hope that there's wood," said Scott.

Burton, the biologist, replied. "Can't tell. Mars is very similar to Earth. Surprisingly similar. Except for the acute lack of moisture, I would be inclined to think there might be multicellular vegetation of many kinds."

"What about old stuff?"

"Let's look around," answered Mayfield. "I shouldn't think decay bacteria would find this environment exactly healthy. Maybe there'll be something dead."

"Don't count on it," said the biologist. But the others paid no attention. An hour before they had been scientists. Now....

They fanned out, the Captain accompanying them. It was very cold, the thermo-insulation units hadn't functioned as well in the rigors of space as when they were tested under laboratory conditions. All during the long jaunt it had been either too hot or too cold mostly too cold. And they couldn't use too much energy here. They had quite a wait before Mars was in position again.

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ONLY A FEW
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Prison Planet

By WILSON TUCKER

cover design by Jack Wiedenbeck



"Look at this," said Mayfield. The others gathered around him. He was staring at the pool. "In the water, lying on the bottom. Looks like logs. Wood!"

"Well, what do y' know," exclaimed one of the men.

Another shivered bluey.

"What do you make of it,"

Mayfield inquired of the astonished Burton, who had been called over to witness the find.

Burton thought a minute.



Probably Mars was once covered with forests, and when the water supply diminished, the trees literally "followed" the sources of drink. That is, the young trees sprouting near the water thrived, and the others died. Then, only the ones living in the pool could get enough moisture. Finally something caused them all to die.

"Either it was recently, in which case we ought to find dead, dry trees scattered around away from the canal, or it was a long time ago, and some kind of preservative in the pool kept the wood from disintegrating."

"Give me a hand here," said Mayfield, immersing a hand into the water and grasping the end of a log. The others grappled with the rest of the tree-trunks and dragged them up out of the water onto the dry land. The liquid flowed down from them, running out of the wood's pores, and trickled back toward the main pool, sinking into the parched land before reaching it.

An icy breeze came out of the west, and the men shivered. A couple looked longingly at the ship, which loomed against the sky like a huge out-of-place whale. Because of complications enroute, the heat units would last only one-half of the time of their stay.

"Can't we hurry?" complained Bedford.

Scott said, "Get a torch, so we can cut these logs into length." One of the men obeyed, running for the ship. "And leave the heat units alone," Scott yelled after him.

He looked down at the logs. "They're wet," he murmured.

"They'll dry," said Caldwell, looking down greedily at them. Cold had transformed these twentieth-century scientists into savages as surely as hunger or thirst.

"I wish Fowler would hurry with that torch," one of the men complained.

Another raised his voice: "POW-W-W-W-LER-ER-ER-R-R-R!"

"Take it easy," said Captain Corrigan, silent up to now.

"He's probably at the heat——" began the other.

"I said take it easy." He took it easy.

"Here he comes," announced Mayfield.

Caldwell got a look at the lessened blue pallor of his face. "He was at the heat," he complained. Corrigan heard and kicked him in the leg for quist.

"Got it, Captain," said Fowler, handing over the acetylene torch to the other. "Had to look a bit," he alibied.

"Hurry up," said Bedford, rattling his teeth together.

Corrigan turned on the torch, which was brought along in case of repairs such as meteorite perforations, and its sharp flame cut through the thick wood like butter, hissing steadily.

"It's full of water," said Mayfield, moving closer to the torch to get a little of the heat. It was true. Droplets of water oozed from the cut sides of the sections.

"It won't burn," yelled Burton crazily. "It's too wet!"

"Use some fuel, Captain," yelled another. "That'll make it go."

"Quiet, you men," warned Corrigan. "I'm running this."

"He wants it for himself. He kill—" screamed one of the group, but his neighbor in the crowd slammed a bare fist against his chin. He gasped and fell to the ground, not unconscious, but stunned.

Corrigan went on severing foot long lengths from the log.

But it was very very wet. It had lain in the pool a long time, and the fluid had completely saturated it. If only they had some dry wood, Corrigan thought....

"Mayfield, go out of the canal and around the spaceship; look around and see if you can find any dry wood. There might be some."

Mayfield glanced suspiciously at his superior, but he went.

"Captain," Burton's voice came next to his ear; "Captain, I doubt if there'll be any dry wood. There's a preservative in that water. Exolaite. It's the best preservative of living material we know of, but fatal to any life if taken internally."

"That must have been what killed these then."

"Probably," the biologist acknowledged. "The water evaporated and evaporated as time went on, until the dilution of Exolaite in the water became too high for the continued existence of these. So they died."

"Odd to find these here on Mars," commented the Captain, still severing the lengths of wood.

"Not so. Against probability, but by no means impossible. Naturally, they're not in any manner related to Terrestrial trees. In fact there is much about these lower sections which leads me to believe they could move."

"Bosh!"

"They might even have been intelligent to some degree."

"Impossible."

"Not quite, Captain. You can't tell what's impossible and what isn't on an alien planet. Here anything might go."

"Well, may—"

He was interrupted by a yell from Scott. The other men had left, wandering around, searching for more material.

Corrigan switched off the torch. "What is it?"

"We've found something, Captain. Another tree."

"Oh," murmured Corrigan.

"This one's above water. Come over here."

The two men, Burton and Corrigan, left the sodden mass of piled-up logs, which did not freeze in spite of the sub-zero temperature, because of the Exolaite dissolved in the water.

They joined the others.

Mayfield came down to report no sign of any dry logs, and found the group standing near another tree.

"What's this?" he queried.

"Another one," said Corrigan. "This one looks as if it just died a few days ago or so. It hasn't even had time to fall over into the pool. It's practically dry."

He bent over, switched on the torch again. While the others took a firm grip on the tree, he severed it at the water's rim. Then they carried it over to where the ship stood. There he burnt it into smaller strips.

As he made the last cut with the flame, the wood caught fire. He fed smaller strips to the embryo blaze, which the others had broken from the other pieces.

It grew and grew, feeding brilliantly on the pieces of a dead Martian. Over it the sodden pieces were dried, and took



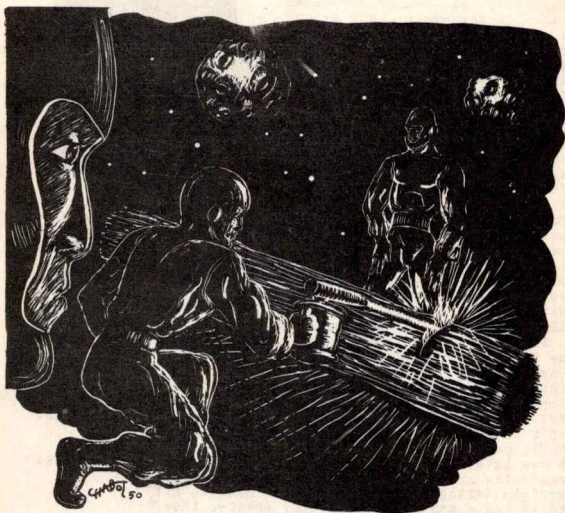
fire themselves.

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The Old One did not mind. It was according to his religion to go up on a funeral pyre like this. And anyway, his body had succumbed to the poison that night as he meditated.

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"Put more wood on, Captain," asked Fowler.
The Captain put more wood on.



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