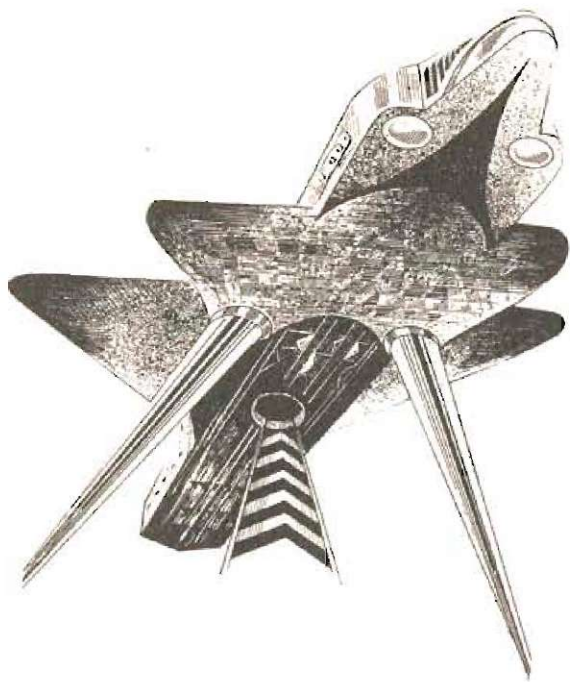




THE ALIEN PLANET





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THE ALIEN PLANET

by Krishna Narayan
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Children's Book Trust, New Delhi

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The Odyssey

It was Raja's first space flight. He strapped himself to his seat with mixed feelings. On the one hand he was terribly excited; on the other, he was nervous of facing the unknown.

Raja had prepared himself thoroughly for the voyage. He had read a lot about space travel; he had successfully passed the eight-week physical and mental conditioning programmes conducted by the Space Organisation. And yet, as the time for take-off approached, there were butterflies in his tummy.

"Hey, you're Raja, aren't you?" asked his co-passenger, leaning over. "I'm Exyrus, astronomer in the Space Organisation. I know your dad, Sooraj. This is your first time, ain't it?"

Raja nodded. Exyrus was going to say more, but was interrupted by the steady blinking of the lights within the cabin of the spacecraft. "One minute for take-off," crackled the voice of the pilot through the speakers.

Exyrus winked at Raja. "It's only three hundred and sixty thousand kilometers to space station Armstrong," he said. "Of course, our flight path isn't in a straight line, so that the actual distance we travel will be much longer. Still, the flight shouldn't take more than 28 hours."

360,000 kilometers! That was almost ten times the circumference of planet Earth! He would be travelling that far straight out into space! Raja's stomach felt queasy just thinking about it.

With a tremendous burst of power, space shuttle Goddard with its five passengers blasted off from planet Earth towards space station Armstrong. Twelve-year old Raja, the youngest person in history to be aboard a spacecraft, was one of the passengers. He would be famous when he returned to planet Earth!

But fame was the last thing on Raja's mind as he shot up into space. He only thought of his father, whom he was going to meet after two years.

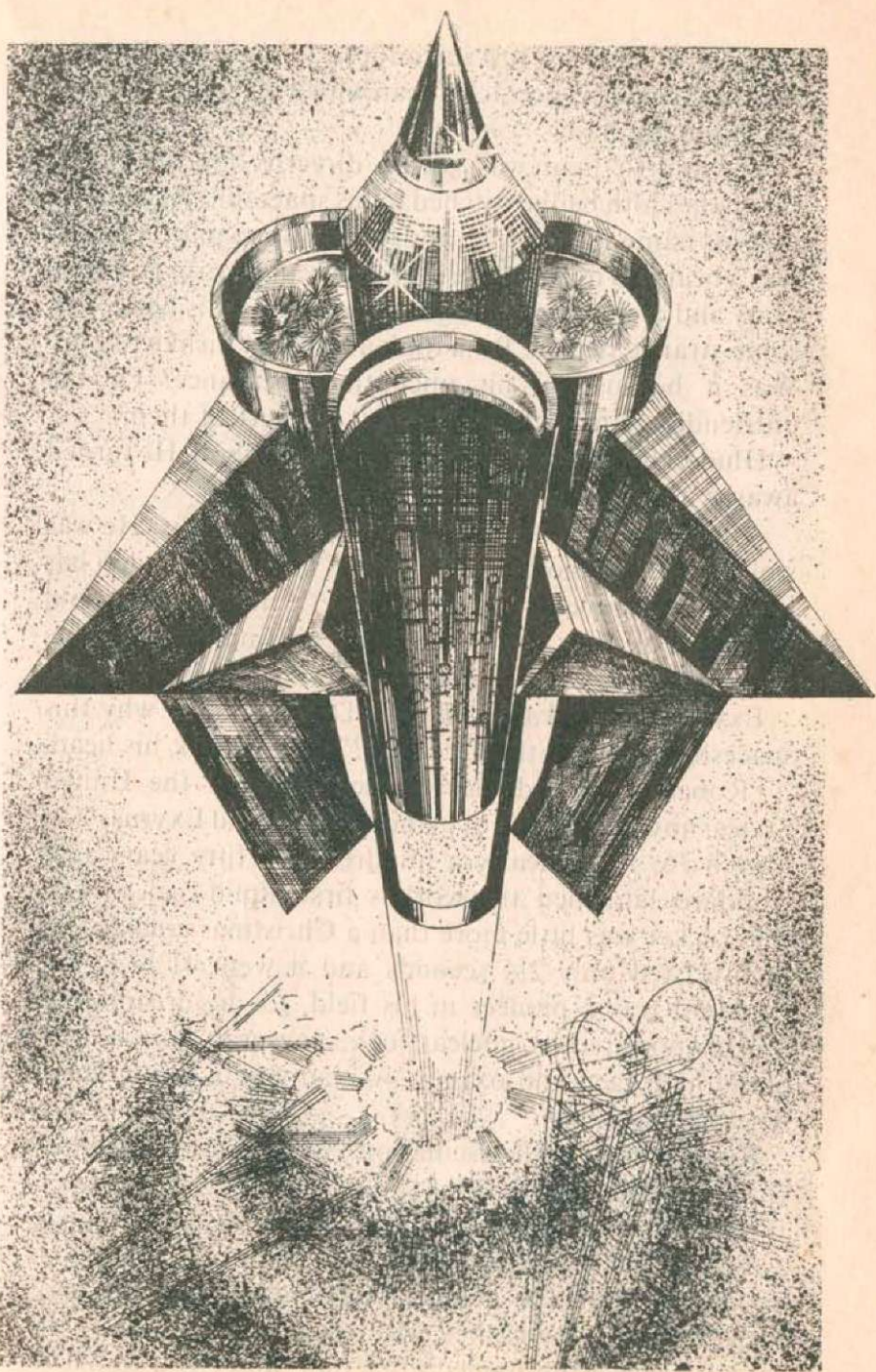
Space shuttle Goddard soared through the turbulent atmosphere at an approximate speed of 15 km. per second. It took barely ten minutes to cross the atmosphere, yet Raja knew that this was the most critical period in the entire flight. The friction between the dense atmosphere and the speeding spacecraft was so high that the temperature of the shell would rise to 800°C, the temperature of a blast furnace!

Soon spacecraft Goddard rose higher into the stratosphere. The turbulence decreased. The stratosphere was only one-hundredth as dense as the atmosphere, and was, therefore, much calmer.

Planet Earth was receding into the distance. Raja watched it on one of the television screens fitted at one end of the cabin. Part of planet Earth was hidden by vast swirling clouds. Raja could see broad areas of brown surrounded by the bluish-white hue of the oceans. Was that patch of brown. Sector Three, he wondered. He peered at the screen more closely, trying to fit the land shapes with his knowledge of planet Earth's geography.

Planet Earth of the twenty-first century was divided into eight equal sectors. Earth was no longer a division of countries, colonies or power blocs —only sectors. It was divided quite simply into eight parts, like portions of a plum cake.

Raja looked round at his four co-passengers. He knew two of them quite well. Dr. Pasha and Dr. Bell. They had gone through the pre-flight training programme together.



This third who had just introduced himself was Exyrus. He was a lean, bespectacled man with a receding forehead and thinning hair.

The fourth man was seated directly opposite Raja. From the cloth badge stitched to his spacesuit. Raja learnt that his name was Hludafi and that he was a pilot. Hludafi was a bear of a man, with a fleshy face and hairy, powerful arms and a shock of hair growing wild on his head. For some strange reason, Raja took an instant dislike to him. Was it because of his uncouth appearance? Or the unfriendly glances that he cast at the rest of them?

Hludafi noticed that Raja was watching him. He turned away with a grunt. Raja grimaced.

A hand fell across Raja's arm. It was Exyrus. He was smiling. "Don't bother about him," he said. "Hludafi has had some problems back on planet Earth. He's an old associate of your father's. He's reporting back on the space station after home leave."

Exyrus changed the subject. "Do you know why this spaceship is called the Goddard?" Raja shook his head.

"Robert Goddard was a scientist from the United States, now in Sector 1 of planet Earth," said Exyrus. "On March 16, 1926, nearly a hundred and fifty years ago, Goddard launched the world's first liquid-fuel rocket. The rocket was little more than a Christmas cracker. Its flight lasted only $2\frac{1}{2}$ seconds and it went 41 feet. Yet Goddard was a pioneer in his field, for he dreamed of rockets powered by nuclear fuel, spacecraft powered by liquid hydrogen and oxygen — madness in those times, but a reality today."

Raja listened with fascination. What a great dreamer Goddard was!

"Goddard was a man far ahead of his time. He designed a rocket that would go faster than sound. He designed rockets controlled by complicated guidance systems; and even a multi-stage rocket. He deserved the honour of having a spaceship named after him. don't you think?"

Raja nodded in agreement. He sank further back in his seat and watched the television screen. The sky had grown dark. Spaceship Goddard had settled down to a steady, smooth, noiseless flight through the ionosphere. The constellations were spread out in a wondrous star-spangled blanket, looking more beautiful and more magical than ever seen from planet Earth. It was hypnotic to the eyes, **soothing** to the brain. Raja slept.

In a new world

"Welcome to Armstrong space station, son!"

The words boomed into the passenger section of the Goddard, and Raja instinctively knew they were meant for him. He twisted round in his seat, trying to locate the source of his father's voice.

"He's speaking from the control tower on the space station," said Exyrus. He was looking at Raja over a science fiction novel. "We'll be there soon. You certainly had a long snooze, didn't you?"

Raja looked at his watch. He made a rapid mental calculation. He frowned and calculated again. Fourteen hours! He had actually slept fourteen hours! He couldn't believe it!

His stomach groaned. Boy, was he hungry! He detached the food pipe from the hook above him, popped it into his mouth and pressed the FLOW button. The taste of warm flavoured high-protein fluid filled his mouth. Raja made a face. He had been fed on nothing else during his training programme and he had begun to detest this liquid diet. After all, a hungry stomach deserved a solid meal! That was what he intended to have once he was on the space station!

His co-passengers were getting ready to disembark. They were chatting easily amongst themselves, joking and

pulling each other's leg. They were now a close-knit, informal group, held together by the knowledge that they would be spending long hours in each other's company. All except Hludeti, who remained sullen and aloof, watching the TV screen while the spacecraft zeroed in on the landing area of space station Armstrong.

Space shuttle Goddard decelerated imperceptibly till it rested on the landing pad as smoothly as a feather settling on a grass lawn. The pilot completed his routine checks. He balanced the pressures within the cabin and outside. After a final glance at the controls, he pressed the buttons that set the exit door interlock to 'Open.'

"We're home, folks," he called out.

"Home? Hey, I don't see my wife and kids around," joked Dr. Bell as he unstrapped himself.

This was Dr. Bell's first trip to the space station too. Dr. Bell was a scientist of repute, a specialist in extraterrestrial phenomena. On the basis of some of his experiments, he firmly believed that there existed intelligent life forms in outer space. The Space Organisation had sponsored his trip to space station Armstrong to give him an opportunity to prove his theories.

One by one they moved to the exit. Descending from the spacecraft was quite different from the way they had got into spaceship Goddard. On the launching site on planet Earth, right next to the spaceship had been a tall tubular tower with an enclosed lift. At the press of a button the lift had shot up and stopped level with the entry door of the spaceship, allowing the crew and passengers to walk right in. Naturally such a structure was rather difficult to set up on the landing pad of space station Armstrong and so the designers had thought of something far more simple. Raja found U-shaped metal bars protruding outside the spacecraft which served as steps. He gingerly climbed down the length of the spaceship like a mountaineer descending a rock face.

As soon as the last man had come down, the U-bars retracted into their sockets, leaving the side of the spaceship smooth and flush.

The shuttle pilot waved the small group across the landing area towards the monorail that would take them to the space station. Raja followed the pilot, his suitcase trundling behind him. Exyrus fell into step beside him.

"Your father was the head of the design team that designed this place," he said. "That's how we happened to meet. I remember one day, about five years ago, there was this man with a piece of rock in his hand, going to each room in the Space Organisation building. 'Hey, can you tell me what this rock is made up of?' he asked me. 'It's a meteorite sample. The meteorological section is closed and I must have the answer right away'." Exyrus smiled at the memory.

"I did a quick analysis and told him the composition of that rock. Then Sooraj told me who he was!" he chuckled to himself. "We did a lot of work together after that first meeting."

They reached the monorail. It resembled a compact railway coach and was powered by batteries. It was parked at the mouth of a tunnel.

The monorail travelled inside a chute, a narrow, brightly lit corridor that linked the landing area to the space station. Raja looked round him as he waited for the monorail to start. The landing area was simply a vast platform, about the size of a football field. It was manufactured from an immensely strong, heat-resistant metal that could withstand the high pressures and temperatures generated by the spaceships operating off it.

Parked at the far corner of the landing area were two other spaceships. They looked as different from each other as a crab from a stick-insect. Exyrus pointed to the blue crab-like spacecraft.

"That's spaceship Bluebird," he said. "It's one of our exploratory craft. It's leaving for Mars next week. And



guess who's going to be on board? I!" His eyes twinkled behind his glasses.

"This spacecraft Bluebird is what's called a MEM or Mars Entry Module. It weighs only about 50 tons and will carry the food, oxygen and other supplies to support us during our voyage to Mars. It looks rather awkward, but it's actually one of the most sophisticated spacecraft. And would you believe it, it was assembled right here on the space station!"

"What?" cried Dr. Bell in astonishment. He had seated himself next to Raja and was listening intently to Exyrus. "Assembled here?"

"That's right," said Exyrus. "You see, the most difficult part of getting a spacecraft into orbit is to overcome the gravitational pull of planet Earth. You need to have a minimum speed of 10 kilometers per second, which is called the escape velocity. Now, the engines and the fuel required to drive the spacecraft at that speed go to make it very, very heavy and expensive. And so we decided to assemble the Mars Entry Module on space station Armstrong. We brought it up in segments by space shuttles like the Goddard!"

"Boy, that's incredible!" breathed Dr. Bell.

"Seven days from now I'll be on my way to Mars," repeated Exyrus, as excited as a boy on his first train ride.

The doors of the monorail slid shut. The overhead lights blinked. The monorail moved away from the landing areas and sped down the tunnel towards the space station, situated a few kilometers away.

"Well, that marks the end of a fabulous holiday on planet Earth," drawled Dr. Pasha stroking his bushy beard. "Now it's back to work on space station Armstrong. It will be one whole year before I can hope to see a new face!"

Raja smiled to himself. Well. Dr. Pasha might miss planet Earth, but not he! He was really looking forward to

spending a holiday with his father after a long, long while. It was the first time that anybody who was not an employee of the Space Organisation had ever set foot on Armstrong. It was strictly against the rules to allow any visitors on the space station. The reason was obvious. It was simply too dangerous.

In the 21st century, neither the heights of the Himalayas nor the depths of the Pacific Ocean held any more mystery for mankind. These regions had not only been fully explored, they had even been made habitable. However, space still remained an unknown frontier and one set out into space with no guarantee that one would ever return.

Naturally, the space authorities bluntly refused Raja permission to board the spacecraft.

Sooraj had a hard time persuading the officials to agree to this one-time exception. He had requested, pleaded, argued, and even threatened to resign from his job, before the authorities finally gave in.

"I haven't seen my son for two years!" he had told them. "For two years, I have not been able to get away from the space station. I don't know what's happening to him. He might even refuse to recognise me!"

The Director of the Space Organisation had tried to reason with Sooraj but the latter had won in the end. There were three very good reasons why the Organisation had to agree to his extraordinary request.

The first reason was that Sooraj had no one in the world but Raja. His wife had died about five years ago, when Raja was barely six. She had fallen victim to a deadly and mysterious disease that had swept through planet Earth like wild fire, leaving a trail of death behind it. It was said that more people on planet Earth had died of the disease in two weeks than were killed in all the world wars put together. In spite of the best medical aid, Raja's mother had passed away within a week, clasping Raja to her bosom.

The second and sadder reason was that the disease had taken its toll of Raja as well. It had damaged his vocal chords, rendering him dumb for life.

Also Sooraj was the head of the Armstrong space station. Indeed, he was more than just the head. It was Sooraj who, as a young scientist a decade ago, had designed and built the space station. The concept of space stations had existed for many years, but it had needed the genius and the determination of Sooraj to make it a reality.

The Space Organisation could not afford to have a brilliant but unhappy employee.

The mysterious illness was the cruellest blow fate had dealt Sooraj. Raja, his only son, could not speak. He was smart, active, intelligent, but dumb. Even the Space Organisation could not deny that communication between father and son was important, very important, since they had not seen each other for two years.

At the moment, however, the thought of Raja's affliction was farthest from Sooraj's mind as he paced up and down the control room like a caged tiger. Every few seconds, he would stop and peer at the closed circuit television that showed the monorail travelling from the landing area to space station Armstrong.

The monorail hurtled down the tunnel that bridged the distance between the two islands in space. Then, like a bullet leaving the barrel of a gun, it emerged from the tunnel into the bubble-shaped space station.

"It's nice to see you. Raja!" came Sooraj's voice over the intercom. Raja jumped up in excitement. He peered through the double-glazed windows at the tall structure some distance away. That would be the control tower. He could see nothing, of course, but that was where he imagined his father would be.

In a few moments, Sooraj emerged from the exit on the ground floor of the control tower and approached the

monorail at a dead run. Raja unstrapped himself and rushed to the door.

"Be careful. Raja," cautioned the pilot, but Raja was too happy to care. He flew into his father's outstretched arms.

Father and son gazed at each other. Sooraj's eyes grew moist. His son was with him at last, even though only for a few days. He had certainly grown taller. And his face-how it reminded him of his late wife! The same nose, the same bright black eyes, the same curly black hair! The first signs of a moustache were beginning to appear on his upper lip. His son was growing up fast! 'Raja, how I missed you,' he thought to himself.

Raja's feeling were no different. In the last two years, not a day had passed without him longing to be with his father. The boarding school on planet Earth was very nice, his warden was most considerate and so were his aunts and uncles, but how could anyone ever replace his dad? Raja buried his face in his father's neck.

"I hope the flight wasn't too tiring," said Sooraj. Raja shook his head vigorously. The journey from planet Earth had been simply fascinating!

"Well, you won't realise it just yet," said Sooraj with a smile. "You've heard of jet lag, haven't you? That's when your watch tells you it's twelve o'clock at night, but you're wide awake and your stomach is crying out for food! Space lag is the same, only worse! Well, come along!"

Raja looked round him as he accompanied his father. The space station was only a little larger than an airport terminal on planet Earth. It resembled a huge bubble chamber. A vast sheet of glass covered the entire area and Raja felt like an oyster enclosed in a transparent shell.

Sooraj stopped a few meters ahead and turned. "Go on, take a good look," he said. "Welcome once again to space station Armstrong, named after Neil Armstrong, the first human being to land on the Moon," he paused.

"We space scientists are a rather close-knit group," continued Sooraj. "We like to name things not after monarchs, presidents or generals, but after those who have contributed towards better understanding of the universe. In my opinion, the greatest single event in space history happened on July 21, 1969, when Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin landed in their lunar module on another world—the Moon. Can you imagine the thrill, the sense of achievement they must have felt walking on the Moon? A small step for man, a giant step for mankind!" Sooraj seemed to be carried away by his words, back in time, a hundred and fifty years ago.

Raja pointed to the glass enclosure and opened his palms outward as if to ask, "What's that for?" Sooraj followed his son's eyes. "The dome? It serves two very useful purposes," he said. "One, it keeps out all harmful atmospheric radiation—you know, like infra-red and ultra-violet rays that could damage the human body. Second, it keeps within it the atmosphere that supports human life on the space station. The air-conditioning inside the dome keeps the composition of the air identical to that on planet Earth and so also its temperature and humidity. Thus we eat, breathe and perform our daily functions the way we do back home!"

Sooraj suddenly checked himself. He was explaining things to a twelve-year-old boy, not to another scientist! He looked fondly at his son once again. Yes, he had grown taller; he now came almost to shoulder height. Had he become a trifle thinner, perhaps? Sooraj put his arm round the boy.

"Let's go to my room," he said, guiding Raja towards one of the small white huts.

The first manned outpost in space, space station Armstrong, looked more like a camp in the Arctic. All the structures were built of a tough, heat-resistant plastic that was as strong as steel, but weighed only one-fifth as much.

The control tower overlooked the rest of the structures like a totem pole. Under the dazzling light of the sun, the structures shone bright and clean like the interior of an operation theatre.

As they were entering the living quarters, a man stumbled out of the door. He bumped heavily into Raja, causing him to lose his balance. Raja uttered a soundless scream and his arms flailed in a reflex action. Sooraj quickly seized the man by the shoulder and swung him round. It was Hludafi.

"Hludafi, you're drunk," he said severely. "Report to the doctor and see me in my office when you are sober."

"Go to the devil, Sooraj," replied Hludafi. His speech was slurred and he could barely stand upright. His breath stank of liquor and Raja wrinkled his nose in disgust.

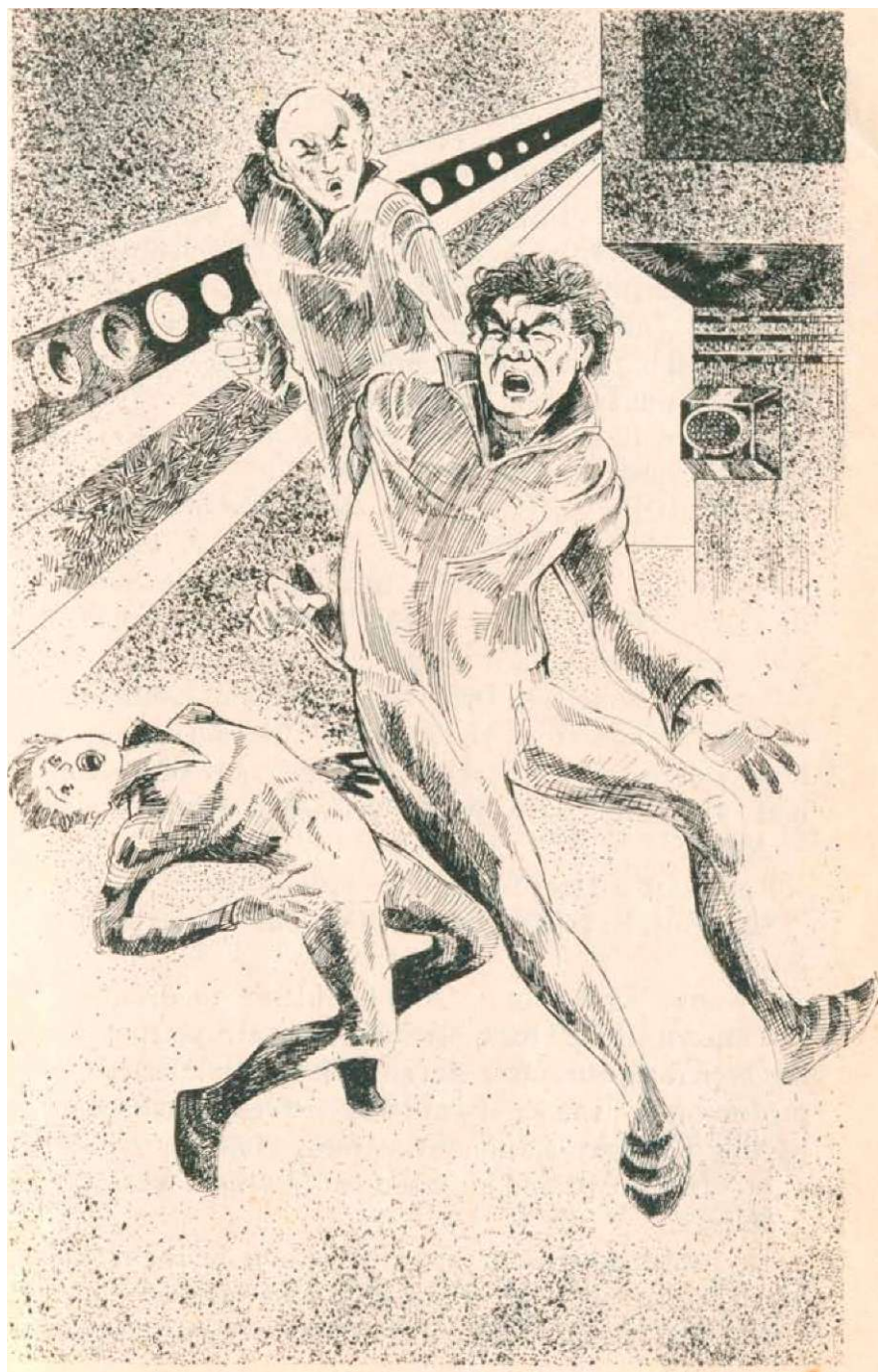
"You almost knocked down my son," said Sooraj. Hludafi turned and squinted at Raja. His eyes were blood-shot. "Your son? I thought he was a midget scientist!" And he threw back his head and guffawed.

Sooraj was sorely tempted to punch Hludafi on the nose, but he held back. He realised that Hludafi was in one of his belligerent moods. It would do no good to argue with him. He turned away. "Come Raja," he said, "let's go."

Raja was rather put off by the unsavoury incident. He now remembered how, during the flight, Hludafi had been stealthily taking out a bottle, putting it to his mouth and gulping the contents. He had been drinking steadily. No wonder the other passengers avoided him.

What was Hludafi doing on the space station, anyway?

He quietly followed his father to his quarters. Sooraj lived in a cubicle, five metres square that served as his living room, bedroom, study and just about everything else. Raja's first reaction when he entered it was one of shock. The room was a terrible mess, with wires going criss-cross, clothes heaped on the chair, strange gadgets



opened up and lying on the bed and hundreds of books piled up everywhere like dishes stacked in the sink.

'Did all scientists live in such a disorganised fashion ?' Raja wondered. May be they were so full of numbers and ideas that they simply failed to see the state of things around themselves. His feeling must have found expression on his face, for his father flushed with embarrassment and looked for something to say.

"Good Lord! It's dinner-time!" exclaimed Sooraj. "You must be famished!" He opened the mini-refrigerator and took out two cans of tinned food.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. It was Exyrus. Sooraj turned, a can in each hand.

"Exyrus! It's nice to see you. How is everyone back home?"

"Fine, Sir," replied Exyrus. His adam's apple bobbed up and down. He looked at Raja. "Hey, you forgot your suitcase! I've brought it along."

Then he came into the room and shook hands with Sooraj. "It's nice to see you again, Sir," he said warmly. "I hope you're enjoying it here. At least, now that Raja's here, I'm sure you will!" He flashed a grin in Raja's direction.

Raja took a great liking to Exyrus.

Suddenly, Exyrus's face turned serious. "Sir, Hludefi is drunk."

"I know," said Sooraj. "And I confess I am disturbed. I've known Hludefi for quite some time. His personal life has been rather unstable, but so far it's never affected him professionally. In fact, it was I who had recommended his posting on space station Armstrong. He's an excellent pilot." He paused and looked up at Exyrus. "What's his problem?"

Exyrus sat down and leaned forward in the chair. "I've heard some really weird stories about him on planet Earth," he began. "This time, when he went there, he

happened to meet someone who claimed to be the head of a gold prospecting company. This fellow spun out a scheme to mine gold on the Moon. Would HludEFI like to become an instant millionaire? Well, HludEFI fell for the story hook, line and sinker. He entrusted his life's savings to that fellow!?"

"I see," said Sooraj thoughtfully. "What happened?"

"What do you expect?" said Exyrus. "The scoundrel promptly vanished. Neither hide nor hair was ever seen of him again. HludEFI spent the rest of his leave looking for him! And when he wasn't doing that, he was hitting the bottle."

Sooraj stood still for a moment, then turned away towards the dining table to open the tinned food. When he had finished, he found Exyrus was still there.

"Is there anything else?" he asked.

Exyrus began hesitantly. "Sir, HludEFI has been set up specially to pilot spacecraft Bluebird and, as you know, I'm supposed to accompany him to planet Mars. It's the biggest thing that's happened to me, Sir, and I don't want anything to go wrong."

"I understand, Exyrus," said Sooraj gently. He knew how keen Exyrus was to go through with his mission. He had prepared for this trip for almost two years.

"You will set HludEFI straight, won't you, Sir?" asked Exyrus. Then, without waiting for a reply, he left the room.

Sooraj was silent for a while, then slipped back into the role of a loving father. "I've got some odds and ends for you to pass your time, Raja", he said with a vague gesture encompassing the entire room. "There are some books, a personal computer, an inter-planetary receiver,..." He shrugged. "I'm afraid there's not too much here by way of entertainment."

"That's all right, Dad," Raja wanted to console him. "It's you I want, nothing else. I've come all this way just to

be with you." But he could not put his thoughts into words and the tears welled up in his eyes. He ran to his father and held him tight.

"It's all right, son," murmured Sooraj. "I hope you have a nice holiday."

Little did father and son know what lay in store for them on space station Armstrong.

Hludefi plays the villain

Almost a week had passed since Raja arrived on the space station. His days had fallen into a kind of set pattern. Every morning he would faithfully accompany his father to the control room and the laboratories. At first he understood little of what went on. The language spoken by the personnel on board the space station was so heavily laced with scientific jargon as to make it almost unintelligible.

Raja kept his eyes and ears open. His curiosity was insatiable. Every evening when the scientists got together after dinner for a chat, Raja would sit silently on the carpet, wide awake, gazing up at each one of them as they talked, listening and learning. What he didn't understand, he looked up in books. Sometimes, the conversation grew too technical and, therefore, boring. At other times, it was perfectly enjoyable. Raja was particularly fond of listening to Dr. Bell and Exyrus.

"Do you really believe that life exists outside planet Earth, Dr. Bell?" asked Exyrus one evening.

"I most emphatically do," replied Dr. Bell lighting his pipe and blowing out huge clouds of smoke. "Just consider. Our galaxy, of which the solar system is a part, contains 100,000 million stars, or in other words, 100.000 million suns. Most of them have their own planetary systems. Then there are innumerable galaxies like ours.

stretching out to the edge of the universe. Now, among these billions and billions of systems, is it not conceivable that intelligent life exists on at least one of them?"

"But can't we communicate with them by radio?" asked Exyrus. "Not necessarily," replied Dr. Bell. "Life in an ocean-covered world, for instance, could consist of intelligent whale-like or octopus-like creatures. These beings might be highly advanced in music or mathematics, but would know nothing of fire or radio. We could never reach out to them except by physically going across and saying hello!" Dr. Bell went placidly back to puffing his pipe.

Such ideas never failed to excite Raja. He would often lie awake at night, dreaming of discovering new things.

One day Sooraj took the group of newcomers on a guided tour of the space station. Hludafi was missing as usual.

"It was a great achievement for us to build Armstrong," he began. "It took us years of planning and design. We had to invent and test new materials and equipment. It took eighteen shuttle flights to ferry these materials and the workmen across to this plot in space, which was empty as a hole at that time."

"What is the point of it all, if I may ask?" said Dr. Pasha. Dr. Pasha was a computer specialist who had been sent up by the Space Organisation to commission some programs on the Armstrong computers. As such, he was not involved in the exploration of outer space.

"Good question," said Sooraj with a smile. "Why take all this trouble?" He paused. "An orbiting space station like Armstrong will be a base for various projects. We could produce rare alloys and rare medicines. But most important, space station Armstrong is a transit point, a maintenance unit. We recover, refuel and relaunch spacecraft which are engaged in space research. For example, Exyrus is blasting off soon...."

Sooraj stopped. He sniffed once, then sniffed again. "Something's burning!" he said sharply. "All of you, disperse. Exyrus, ring up the control tower! This is serious."

While the scientists watched in confusion, Sooraj ran to the main switchboard and switched off the power supply. He then walked round the perimeter of the glass enclosures, trying to pin-point the source of the smoke like a tiger stalking its prey.

A wisp of smoke appeared to emerge from beneath a tarpaulin sheet lying nearby. Sooraj lifted a corner of the sheet and stepped back in horror.

Hludefi lay sprawled on the floor. He was in deep slumber. His hand clutched an empty bottle. A cigarette stub was smouldering beside him.

Ten minutes later, Hludefi found himself locked up in his room. When he raised his voice and tried to bring down the door with his fists, he was curtly asked to keep quiet.

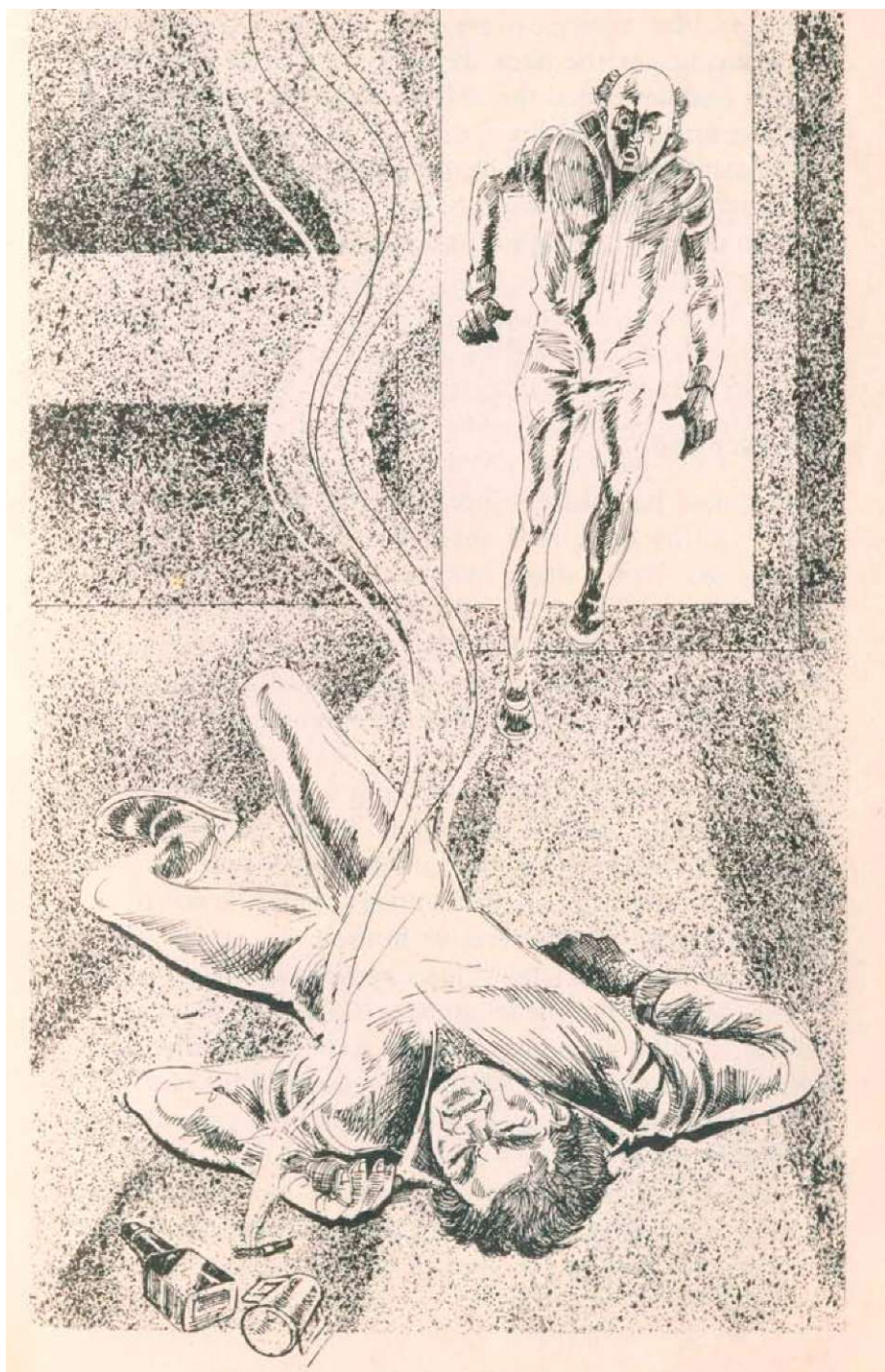
The next morning, Exyrus came to see Sooraj at the control tower. "It's about Hludefi, Sir," he began.

"I'm sending him back to planet Earth," said Sooraj. He pushed his reading glasses above his forehead and looked directly at Exyrus. "I cannot pardon such irresponsibility. Smoking in the space station! He could have blown us out of existence!"

Exyrus's eyebrows shot up in alarm. "But, Sir, you can't do that!" he exclaimed. "Hludefi is supposed to fly me to Mars! It will take us months before we get a replacement for him. Our mission cannot be delayed that long!"

"Hludefi is in no condition to ride a bicycle, leave alone a spaceship," replied Sooraj. "He will have to go. I'm sorry, Exyrus."

The discussion was over. Sooraj waved Exyrus away and resumed his reading.



He read for a couple of minutes, but found he could not concentrate. At the back of his mind, he knew that the matter had not ended there. Hludefi was certain to create more problems for him.

"Maybe I'm getting to be too old for this sort of thing," muttered Sooraj to himself. "I think I'll ask for some leave and go away with Raja on a long holiday!"

The escapade

Two days had passed since Hludefi was locked up. The daily routine on board spaceship Armstrong went on unchanged. Not a single member of the crew made any mention of the incident. However, Wiztek, who was Sooraj's deputy, and Bubbles, who was in charge of security and fire control, vowed to themselves to be more alert in the future. Only Exyrus went about his duties with a distracted look.

That evening, Raja was watching television when the light indicator on the telephone began to blink. He ignored it, hoping that his father would hear the bell ringing and take the call. But Sooraj apparently was busy, so Raja picked up the receiver himself.

Automatically Wiztek's face appeared on the video screen connected to the telephone. He wanted to speak to Sooraj. Wiztek saw on his video screen that it was Raja who had picked up the phone. One look at his face and Raja knew that it was terribly urgent. He signalled to Wiztek to hold the line.

Raja flicked the switch on his television to 'Tape' so that the programme beamed from planet Earth would be recorded for him to see later. Raja then rose to call his father.

Sooraj was slouched in his armchair, his long legs resting on the stool before him. It had been a strenuous day at the control tower and he needed to relax. A pair of earphones was clamped to his head. His eyes were closed. He was listening intently to classical music, of which he was passionately fond. Raja shook him by the shoulder. Sooraj straightened and switched off the tape-recorder.

"What's the matter? Telephone call?" he pushed the earphones to the back of his head and went out of the room, stumbling over a pile of books as he did so.

Raja bent down and rearranged the scattered pile. He would have to do something to get this place cleaned up!

When he returned to the living room, Sooraj was deep in conversation with Wiztek, "What? Exyrus is gone, too? That's impossible! He would never do a thing like that!"

His voice rose to a higher pitch. "Are they on the screen? Can they be reached on VHF (very high frequency) communication? No? What? Right, I'm coming!" Sooraj slammed the receiver back on the cradle and broke into a run straight out of the living quarters towards the control tower. Wiztek's image went off the video screen. Raja suddenly found himself in an empty room silent but for the thumping of his heart. Something had gone seriously wrong. He had to know what it was. He sped out to join his father.

Raja entered the control tower just before the door closed. His father was inside. Together they went up the control room on the second floor. Raja had never seen his dad look so worried. Wiztek ran up to them. He was shaking with anxiety. In a rush of words he broke the news.

Exyrus and Hludafi had hijacked spaceship Bluebird! Sooraj was aghast. He could not believe his ears.

"But Hludafi was locked up in his room! Who let him out?" asked Sooraj.

"It could only have been Exyrus, Sir," said Wiztek. "No one else would have had any interest in setting him free.

All Exyrus had to do was to pick up the keys from the desk and unlock HludEFI's room."

Sooraj sat in the swivel chair in front of the control panel. "The control room is supposed to be manned at all times, is it not?"

Wiztek nodded dumbly.

"How could they have taken the spaceship without your knowledge?" demanded Sooraj. "What were you doing in the control room? Everything that happens on the station is automatically fed in here!"

Wiztek's face turned red with guilt and embarrassment. "I went to my room to relax for a while," he admitted. "My shift had only a few minutes to go when Exyrus came in and persuaded me to leave. He said he would man the control room till Bubbles took over. I could never imagine_____"

"You walked right into the trap, didn't you?" fumed Sooraj. "And what happened to Bubbles?"

"We found him fast asleep in the canteen," said Wiztek. "I ran a quick medical check on him. He appears to have been drugged. Bubbles says Exyrus brought him a cup of tea which he drank while preparing to come here."

Sooraj sank back in his chair. The whole scheme became crystal clear to him. Exyrus was so terribly keen to go to planet Mars that he had thrown all caution to the winds. He had plotted with HludEFI to find a way to escape.

First, Exyrus had freed HludEFI. Then, just as the evening shift was going to end, he had put the rest of his plan into action. He had drugged Bubbles so that he would not report for duty. Then he had got rid of Wiztek and juggled around with the computers in the control room to enable the spacecraft to be launched on local control.

It had suited HludEFI too. Desperate adventurer that he was, he must have been only too happy to abet Exyrus.

Together they had driven the monorail out to the launching area. Since Exyrus had already transferred launching control to the spaceship, they had managed to blast-off without help from the control tower. And now they were out there in outer space, all on their own!

"Can you track them on your radars?" asked Sooraj. His voice was soft now.

"No, they've stopped transmitting. Our radars are doing a multi-directional search."

Sooraj looked long and hard at his deputy. "Wiztek, you have a lot to answer for, but we'll go into that later. Right now, our first duty is to locate spaceship Bluebird and the crew. They haven't carried out their pre-flight checks. They've not been briefed on meteorological conditions. We must establish contact with them as soon as possible."

Sooraj reset all the tracking systems and scanned them carefully, one by one. He checked the flight path to planet Mars. For a full thirty minutes, he peered at the radar screens with unswerving concentration, looking for a moving blip that would identify the position of the spaceship. At the end of it, he shook his head. There was no sign of spaceship Bluebird.

"Take over," he said to Wiztek, moving away from the screen and passing a hand over his tired eyes. "Fifteen minute watches round the clock. Arrange for sandwiches and tea to be served here. There is to be no slacking off till the Bluebird is found." He turned to Raja. "Go to the room, son. You need to sleep, I'll stay."

Raja knew when not to argue. He moved away towards the lift, leaving the men to their task.

He tossed and turned in bed. How could he sleep, not knowing the fate of his friend Exyrus? Restlessly, he heard the hours tick by.

It was five in the morning. Raja could bear the suspense no longer. Still in his pajamas, he returned to the control room.

The scene was just as he had left it eight hours ago. Unshaven, bleary-eyed and fatigued, the operators continued to scan their instruments for the missing spaceship.

Suddenly the emergency alarm began to sound in the control room with an urgency that startled him.

Sooraj ran to the communication set and put on the headphones. He listened intently, his eyes growing wide with concern. "Bluebird! Armstrong. Come in." he said into the microphone. "What? You are unable to pull out of orbit?"

Hludafi had at last made contact with the space station! And he was in trouble! Sooraj spoke over his shoulder. "Wiztek, can you show me the Bluebird's pre-flight status?"

Wiztek pressed a button and a chart appeared on the screen opposite. Sooraj studied the numbers carefully. "Seems okay," he said to himself. He then spoke into the transmitter. "Bluebird, can I have your position? Hello, Bluebird! Come in! Where are you? Bluebird," he shook the earphones and tapped the receiver, but in vain. Contact had been lost again,

Sooraj returned to the radar screen and searched with renewed vigour. Raja noticed that the images of the classical music lover and the angry boss were quite gone. In their place was the cool scientist whose only aim was to save the lives of his colleagues.

Wiztek too could not but admire the qualities of his boss. Human life was sacred to Sooraj. The tragedy that had overtaken him in his personal life had only made him more humane. Suddenly Wiztek had an idea. "Sir, isn't it possible that Hludafi tricked Exyrus too? Instead of going to planet Mars, could he have not diverted the spaceship elsewhere? That would account for the message which said he had not been able to pull out of orbit."

"Elsewhere?" Sooraj turned slowly. "But this entire space sector had been surveyed. There's no place worth diverting to."

"Maybe Hludafi discovered a gold-plated asteroid and kept it a secret from us!" Wiz.tek's voice was heavy with sarcasm.

"Or a planetoid with life on it," interjected Dr. Bell.

"Life on planetoids is a ridiculous idea," said Sooraj. "There's neither atmosphere nor water on them. Therefore, no life can ever find a foothold there. I'm sorry to throw cold water on your pet theory Dr. Bell, but there it is." He turned to Wiztek. "There's one other possibility. The Bluebird has been hit by a meteorite which has damaged the stabilizers and thrown it into a fixed orbit. Any other ideas?"

"All the navigational computers could be malfunctioning." said Dr. Pasha thoughtfully. "That would cause the gyroscopes to behave erratically. It's a remote possibility, though. It's never happened before."

Raja watched each of them in turn. What a dedicated and knowledgeable team they made—each member hand-picked for the job, each one an expert in his field!

"I still think Hludafi has diverted the spaceship," said Wiztek. "Otherwise, why would he.....?"

He was interrupted by the sound of the alarm. Once again the receivers seemed to come alive, beepers flashing. Sooraj's eyes swept the rows of instrument panels, gauges and recorders that gave every conceivable information about outer space, from the weather conditions on the space station to the orbital paths of various asteroids in the vicinity. Somewhere in those instruments lay the clue to the whereabouts of spaceship Bluebird.

Wiztek pressed the headphones close to his ears. He listened for a long while.

"What's the problem?" asked Sooraj impatiently. "Where is the Bluebird?"

Wiztek shrugged and removed his earphones. "That

was H ludefi. He simply keeps repeating that he needs you on board to help him out."

"What about Exyrus?"

"Well, that's another funny thing," said Wiztek. "Exyrus is missing, Hludefi says. He does not seem to be on that spaceship."

"But that's impossible!" exclaimed Sooraj. "People just don't disappear like that! Anyway, did you find out the Bluebird's position?"

"Yes, Sir." Wiztek pressed a button on the control panel. On the screen appeared a series of astrographs. They were maps of the area surrounding the space station, each map showing one segment in detail. "H ludefi told me he was somewhere here," said Wiztek freezing a shot of one particular map carefully. "I don't see any planetoid." he said, frowning. Wiztek was silent.

Sooraj straightened. He took an instant decision. "Wiztek, give me a quick briefing. I'm going up in spaceship Varahamihira to look for them. Pass the message to the maintenance crew." And, without further ado, Sooraj took Wiztek's arm and led him to the briefing room. Raja and the others in the control room were left high and dry.

Raja ambled inside the control tower. One wall of the structure was built of only glass and he could see in the horizon the tunnel extending beyond the space bubble and opening out into the launching pad. Of the two spaceships he had seen earlier, the blue shape of spaceship Bluebird was missing. Only spaceship Varahamihira stood gleaming in the sun like a tall silver bullet.

Around the spaceship were trolleys and hose connections. A few men were scurrying around like ants. Spaceship Varahamihira was being readied at short notice. Raja, his nose pressed against the glass, watched in fascination. Soon his father would fly out into space looking for spaceship Bluebird. The thought of his dad

going away made Raja sad. He had hardly spent ten days with him. God alone knew how long it would take for him to return. Would he return at all? It was a dreadful thought.

Raja had never known what it meant to grow up as a normal boy, to express his feelings, to make friends and play with others his own age. He knew that many experiences were passing him by and a great loneliness would often descend upon him. He would then withdraw into a world of his own, a world that was peopled by strange creatures with strange voices who would keep him company.

"Raja!"

Raja turned and found his father gazing down at him. Raja flashed him a smile, linked his arm with his father's and went out of the control tower towards the monorail. In a few minutes, they were at the landing area. Together, they walked slowly to the spaceship. Wiztek followed some distance behind.

"This one is named after a great Indian scientist of the 5th century. Varahamihira was born in 499 A.D. in a village near Ujjain in India. He was well-versed in the Vedas. He, like Aryabhata before him, declared that the earth was spherical. In the history of science he was the first to claim that some force might be responsible for keeping bodies stuck to the earth. That force has come to be known as gravity. Some of his observations in the fields of ecology, hydrology and geology are significant."

A couple of technicians working beneath the spacecraft waved to them and continued with their pre-flight checks. Sooraj cleared his throat and came directly to the subject that was uppermost in his mind.

"Raja, you know that spaceship Bluebird is in trouble. I'm going to find out what's wrong. Nothing's going to happen to me," he added, noticing Raja's sudden look of concern.

Wiztek, accompanied by another person, strolled up to them.

"Ah, here's our pilot," Sooraj said, putting out his hand towards the stranger. "Hello, Victor. Sorry for the short notice, but you know how it is."

"Part of life, Sooraj," he said with a shrug and a smile.

Raja was disconsolate. His father was leaving him alone. Tears sprang to his eyes. He held his father tight.

"Raja, I have to go," said Sooraj gently. Raja only held him tighter. Victor made a futile attempt to separate them.

Sooraj scratched his head as if to say, what do we do now? Then he saw a way out. He pulled the pilot aside.

"Victor why don't we take him up for a spin?" he whispered. "Once I'm transferred to the Bluebird both of you can return to Armstrong. I know it's against regulations, but you could look the other way just this once, okay?"

Victor agreed most reluctantly. If the Space Organisation ever got to know about this, there would be hell to pay! The three of them got onto the trolley lift which took them vertically upto the cockpit of the Varahamihira. Victor helped Raja and Sooraj strap themselves up. He gave them specific instructions on what they must do in an emergency. He then carried out the take-off procedure with speed and precision.

"Five.....Four.....Three....." Raja sat firmly back and braced himself for the mighty acceleration that would propel the spaceship into space.

"Two...,One... Zero!"

Raja felt rather than heard the tremendous roar of power surging beneath him. It was as if the spaceship was being hit by an earthquake. The spaceship shot upwards. Raja's lips and eyelids peeled apart under the anti-gravity forces acting on them. Sooraj's face turned a sickly green. He broke into a cold sweat. He quickly fished out a couple

of tablets from his spacesuit and popped them into his mouth.

"Astronausea," he explained to his bewildered son. "I can never get used to space travel; it makes me sea-sick. I mean space-sick!" He tried to smile and put on a brave front, but failed miserably. In no time, he was flat on his back. His eyes were closed.

"Don't worry," said Victor reassuringly to Raja. "He'll be okay once we settle on our course."

The lights in the cockpit blinked constantly, changing back and forth from red to green to amber, as Victor brought the spaceship to its steady flight path.

"It's sometimes a tricky business to navigate this tub," said Victor. "You see, there are so many objects in space—asteroids, meteorites, planetoids—each one zipping around merrily, exerting its gravitational pull. It's exactly like those video games. Only here it's real! Well, right now we are not in a space debris area, otherwise it would be worse than driving through Chandni Chowk in Delhi."

Raja sat motionless, once again awestruck by the unique experience of space travel.

"Now let me tell you something about this spaceship," said Victor. "It would help to pass the time and your dad can always correct me if I'm wrong," he added with a sly wink.

Victor then reached forward, set the cockpit controls to 'AUTO' and began. "One of the tasks of a space station is to carry out surveys of outer space. Spaceship Varahamihira is a survey craft. Its role is somewhat similar to that of survey ships on planet Earth. The Varahamihira goes out into a particular sector of space, takes measurements, makes maps, and brings back whatever information it can gather."

Victor made minor corrections on the controls and settled back. "Survey craft Varahamihira belongs to the

ALPHA generation of spaceships. This generation is very different from the conventional spaceships that existed in the twentieth century. The ALPHA class is propelled by nuclear fuel, which is much more powerful than the chemical fuel used earlier. You must have noticed that we accelerated in a series of jolts. This is because the Varahamihira is really blown forward by a series of nuclear explosions."

Raja nodded. He was hanging on to every word. "In the rear of our spacecraft," Victor continued, "we have about three hundred thousand bullet-shaped nuclear bombs. Every second during launch one bomb is ejected rearward and exploded, propelling the craft forward. Remember Newton's first law of motion—every action produces an equal and opposite reaction!"

Raja nodded again. How amazing that the most advanced systems were based on the simplest laws of physics!

Victor turned to Sooraj. "How are you feeling now. Sir?" he enquired.

"Much better, thank you," said Sooraj, sitting up slowly. "So now we're in calm seas, eh?"

"That's right, Sir. The Varahamihira is now on a constant course and speed. The on-board computers have switched off the nuclear detonation mechanism. We are now coasting in space like a hang glider!"

"I only hope Wiztek's calculations are right and we're going in the right direction!" said Sooraj. He plugged on the short range communication set and twirled the knobs, trying to pick up spaceship Bluebird.

For the next few hours spaceship Varahamihira sailed along glittering sky, covering several degrees on the great inter-planetary ellipse by which distances on inter-planetary flights were measured. The on-board computer guided the spaceship onto invisible paths. The ether in space was not homogeneous, but formed tunnels.

troughs and walls and only the computers could find their way past these barriers.

Raja felt rather drowsy. He watched the large circular screen that provided him an all-round view. It was still dark outside and the darkness was punctured by the glitter of millions of stars. Occasionally an asteroid, aglow with reflected light, would slide past silently,

Raja's eyes grew heavy and he dropped off to sleep. Sometime later he woke up with a start. For a moment he did not know where he was. Both Victor and his father were busy at the controls. Sooraj, a pair of earphones on his head, seemed particularly tense. "Speeds synchronised. Speeds synchronised, Stand by for docking," he announced. He then listened to the crackle on the earphones and raised his thumb. "The Bluebird's ready to dock," he told Victor.

Raja's eyes automatically went to the TV screen. There he found the squat blue shape of spaceship Bluebird. It was moving alongside at the same speed and, therefore, appeared to be relatively motionless. It was similar to viewing through a train window another train travelling on a parallel line.

As he watched, a shutter slid open on one side of the Bluebird. Through the opening emerged bellows, like the bellows on a camera but much larger, about a meter square. Victor pressed a sequence of buttons on his control panel. On the side-scanner, Raja noticed similar bellows extending out of spaceship Varahamihira. The two spacecraft converged slowly, like two skaters coming together with hands extended. Sooraj was speaking steadily into the microphone.

The two bellows approached closer and closer. Then, with a jolt that sent a small shudder through the spaceship, they locked onto each other. Spaceship Bluebird had docked with spaceship Varahamihira,

Sooraj gave a final set of instructions, removed his earphones with one hand, unstrapped himself with the other and jerked his head at Victor as if to say, "Let's go!"

Victor checked his meters and indicators. He set the controls to 'AUTO' and followed Sooraj out of the cockpit.

Raja grew alert in a flash. The sequence of events clicked into place in his brain. His father had tracked down spaceship Bluebird. Hludafi had insisted that his father come on board and set right whatever had gone wrong. And now, believing that he was asleep, his father was deserting him!

Raja tugged desperately at the straps that bound him to his seat and tore himself free. He cast one last glance at the TV screen and saw that the spaceships were still connected to one another. He was at a dead end. He ran back to the cockpit panting, his brain whirling in panic. To his surprise, the screen now showed Victor operating the levers that controlled the bellows! Raja again hurtled down the passage and was just in time to see his father cross a vestibule that had not been there before.

Victor was standing at the inner edge of the vestibule, his hand still on the levers. He heard Raja's footsteps. He turned: his eyes widening. He tried to block Raja's path but in vain. Raja dodged past him across the vestibule and into spaceship Bluebird.

It was not a moment too soon. Victor had already set in motion the process to delink the spaceships. The bellows unlocked themselves and retracted within the bodies of the spaceships; the vestibule that was created shrank into nothingness; the shutters slid firmly back into place. The Bluebird and the Varahamihira broke away from each other. The sudden acceleration of spaceship Bluebird threw Raja backward. His head slammed against the metal bulkhead and he fell unconscious.

The battle of wits

Sooraj followed Hludafi into the cockpit of spaceship Bluebird. All the pent-up tension within him erupted to the surface as he faced the hijacker.

"Hludafi, you stupid, irresponsible fool!" he exploded, his lean frame shaking with anger. "How dare you take off from the station with Exyrus? This will have to be reported to the Space Organisation and they are bound to take a serious view of it. You understand?"

Hludafi was visibly embarrassed. His bear-like hands clasped and unclasped nervously. He said nothing.

"Are you going to stand there like a dumb idiot or are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

"The ship is steadily losing height," said Hludafi. His voice was tinged with panic. "She's going down in a spiral to that planetoid over there." His stubby fingers pointed to a whitish blob on the screen.

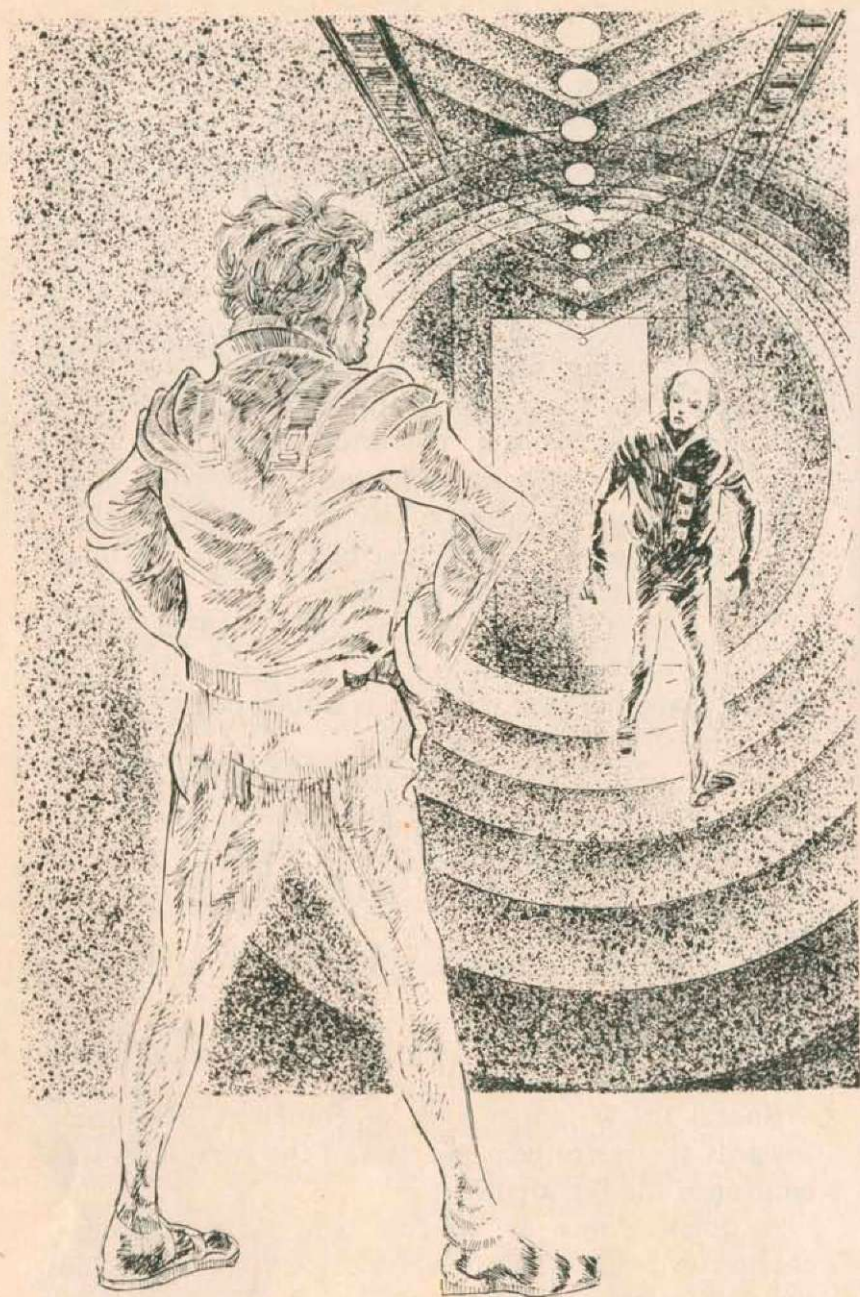
Sooraj peered closely. He adjusted brightness and focus. The object still looked like a ball of cotton fluff. Was it indeed a planetoid? How had it escaped detection so long? For a moment he was tempted to allow the spaceship to descend.

Hludafi seemed to read his thoughts, for he began to speak rapidly.

"There's nothing there! It's a dead place! If you land there, you'll never survive!"

Sooraj threw him a look of contempt. He turned towards the instrument panels and the computers that controlled the flight path.

A quick glance at the fuel temperature readings, cooling water temperatures and electric voltages told him that the system was behaving normally. He checked the control valve positions and the light indications.



Apparently, there was nothing wrong with the machinery. The power being generated by the engines was more than enough to escape from the gravity field of the small planetoid.

An hour later, Sooraj was still searching for the fault. Everything seemed to be in perfect working order. He perused the pilot's handbook to refresh his memory of the control circuitry. He re-ran the error programs - but to no avail.

Suddenly, Hludafi's words registered in his brain. "There's nothing on the planetoid. It's a dead place...." How did he know? Why was he so anxious not to land?

Sooraj looked behind his shoulder and saw Hludafi watching him steadily. He straightened.

"When did you first notice Exyrus missing?" he asked.

"Just about the time I made contact with the space station," replied Hludafi. "I sent Exyrus down to the generator compartments to check the instruments. That was the last time I saw him."

Sooraj switched on the closed-circuit television and tuned in to each compartment on the spaceship. They were all empty. He was baffled. How could a man simply vanish into thin air like that? He leaned forward to switch the CCTV off when something caught his attention. A trail of fine white dust was strewn on the corridor floor leading to the storage spaces below. Sooraj adjusted the controls till the picture came into focus.

The dust was wiped clean in the middle, as if something had been dragged along the corridor thereafter. It struck him as strange, for the atmosphere on board the spaceship was controlled within the closed circuit and, therefore, totally dust-free.

"Where did that dust come from?" he asked.

"I don't know," stuttered Hludafi. "Perhaps it blew in when you embarked."

It was a ridiculous reply and the first seeds of doubt were sown in Sooraj's mind. Hludafi was lying to him.

Well, there was no time to go into it now. At the moment, the important thing was to save the spaceship.

"We will have to toss some stuff overboard in order to lose weight," said Sooraj. "Furniture, fittings, excess food, any extra equipment—everything must go. We should keep only the barest essentials, Let's begin."

Sooraj knew, however, it was a fruitless exercise. There was hardly anything in excess on the spacecraft. The designers of the spaceship were so weight-conscious that, except for spare communication equipment and some important spare parts, there was no unnecessary material on board.

"Couldn't you override the safety mechanism?" asked Hludafi suddenly.

Sooraj looked at him, startled, "What?"

"Let's face it, Sooraj," said Hludafi. "You know as well as I do that, unless something drastic is done, we could be in orbit forever. That's why I sent for you. Only you know how to override the safety trip!"

Sooraj was shocked into silence. Override the safety trip? It was something he would never do.

Only those who know something of the nuclear bombs that propelled spaceship Bluebird would know what a dangerous thing Hludafi had suggested. The fuel in the nuclear bombs gave out energy through the process of nuclear fission. It was exceedingly important to control the fission reaction, for uncontrolled fission could cause a nuclear explosion within the spaceship in a matter of seconds. The computers that controlled the power of the spaceship were, therefore, programmed to operate a trip mechanism when the safe limits of fission were crossed. This would immediately bring down the power generated by the nuclear fuel and avert a dangerous situation.

Hludafi was now proposing that this safety mechanism be bypassed.

Sooraj was now openly suspicious of Hludafi's intentions but he played it cool.

"Let's go round the ship first and see what can be jettisoned," he suggested. He moved out of the cockpit, when Hludafi came round from the other side and intercepted him. Sooraj frowned. "I don't understand this, Hludafi," he said.

"We don't always understand everything, do we?" mocked Hludafi. He suddenly turned serious. "Listen, Sooraj. You may be the boss down below, but here I give the orders, right? Override that safety trip now."

Raja stirred. His neck was slanted at an uncomfortable angle and ached terribly. He slowly sat upright. His eyes fluttered open. There was no sound but for the steady hum of machinery that came from the engine room. Raja rose to his feet. His head throbbed.

The shutter through which he had entered the Bluebird lay to his left. On his right Raja saw two brightly lit corridors extending away from him at right angles to each other. He looked up and down, not knowing which way to go.

A scrap of cloth at the far end of one corridor caught his eye. He went up to it and picked it up. It was a crumpled white handkerchief. Part of it was stiff and reddish brown, the colour of dried blood. Raja was puzzled. He went further and came to a door marked *Danger! Entry into Reactor Compartment*. He pushed and it swung open. The whirr and hum of machinery grew noticeably louder. The door led to a grilled platform that overlooked a room crammed with equipment. Raja looked down upon a maze of pumps, instruments and a criss-cross of pipes. Rising high above the rest of the machinery, like the control tower on the space station, was a massive cylindrical structure.

A metal spiral staircase wound down from the platform to the floor. Raja hesitated, then cautiously descended the steps. He took a look round the room. This was the heart of the spaceship, the source of nuclear energy that propelled it into space.

'Nothing here,' he said to himself, moving towards the exit. He gazed at the handkerchief. 'I wonder where this came from!'

No sooner had the thought occurred to him than he experienced a curious sensation. His nerves tingled, his brain suddenly became alert to some strange signals coming from he knew not where. It was as if somebody, or something, was interrupting his thought process and trying to penetrate his subconscious. To his surprise, he realised that the signals were regrouping themselves into coherent combinations. A few seconds later, to his total amazement. Raja found he could understand the message! It was as if a blurred picture suddenly focussed itself into one of complete clarity!

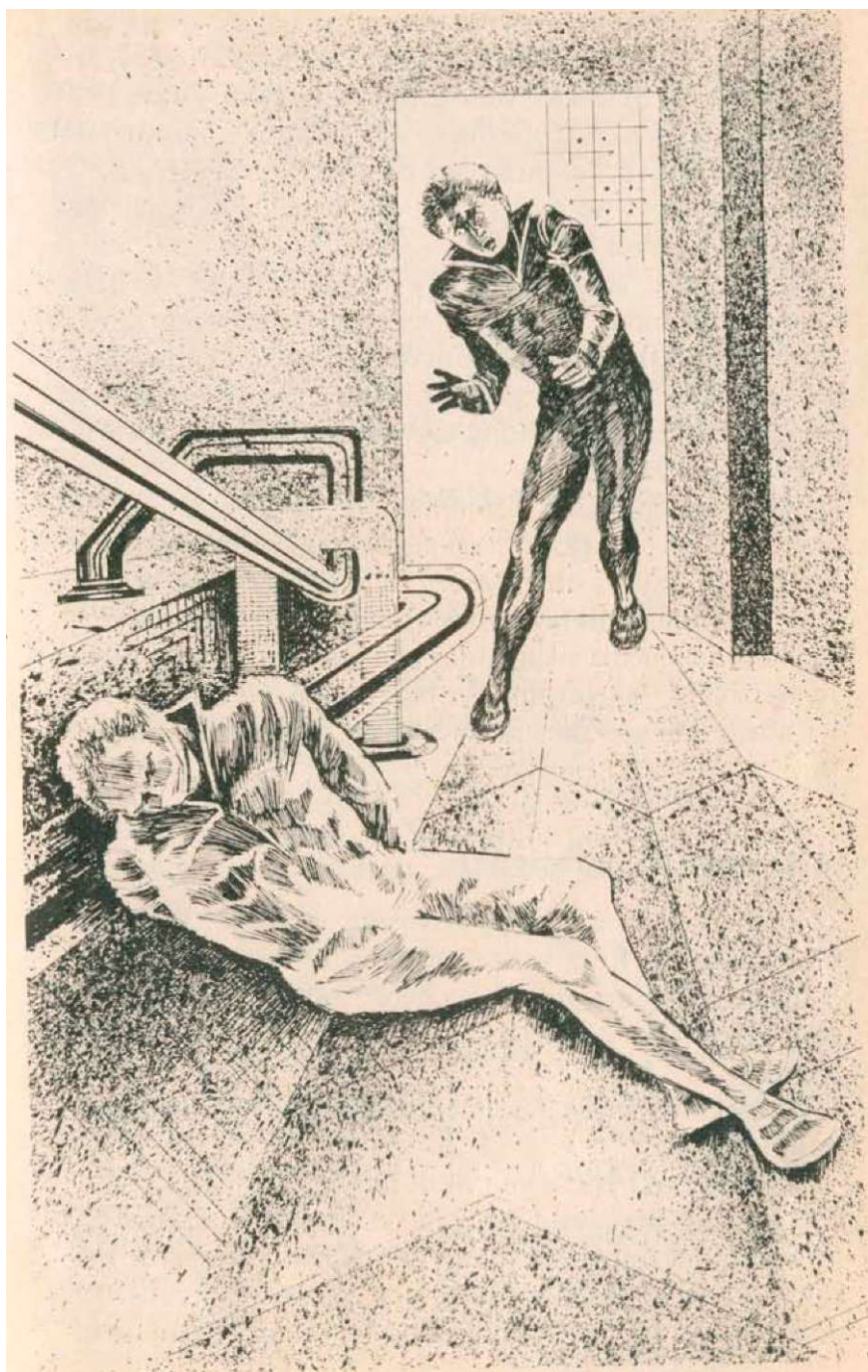
"Stay, stay. Don't leave." Raja stopped and looked about him in bewilderment. The signals began to flash again in his brain. "Go to that large block in front of you. You shall find your answer."

Large block? Answer? What did the message mean? And then he knew. As a result of being dumb. Raja had developed a kind of sixth sense that enabled him to communicate beyond the medium of speech. Over the years, he found that unspoken messages—the raising of an eyebrow, an odd look—made as much sense to him as the spoken word. This very ability was now coming to his aid.

He went up to the large cylindrical tank in the middle of the room. There was a glass window at head height. Raja looked through it.

Stacked inside the tank were rows upon rows of bullet shaped metal containers. 'These are the bombs that Victor spoke of, which propel the spaceship forward', thought Raja. 'And this must be the place where they are stored. Nothing else here!' He turned back, disappointed.

His foot was on the bottom step of the spiral stair when a muffled sound reached his ears. He stopped and turned.



There it came again, from behind the tank! Raja ran round the structure. What he saw filled him with horror,

Exyrus lay sprawled on the floor. His hands were tied behind his back. A cloth rag was stuffed in his mouth. His eyes were closed. A thin stream of blood dribbled from his nose. Only his foot rose and fell shudderingly, hitting the floor with a dull thud.

Raja stood transfixed for a moment. Then he bent down. With nerveless fingers he tugged the bonds loose. He removed the gag from Exyrus's mouth. It came away soaked with bright red blood. Raja's jaw dropped in a soundless scream. He took a couple of steps backward, then turned and fled.

Half running, half stumbling, he scrambled up the stairs towards the exit. The same string of signals that had led him to Exyrus now seemed to guide his steps. Would they lead him to his father? he wondered. He sped past the corridor, opened a swing door and went up another flight of steps. He was gasping for breath. His mouth was dry with fear. He saw the entrance to the cockpit and barged in.

A strange 'being' signals

Both Hludafi and Sooraj swung towards the door. They regarded Raja with shocked surprise.

"Raja, what are you doing here?" asked Sooraj. "You were supposed to go back to the space station with Victor!"

By way of answer, Raja handed him the blood-stained handkerchief.

"What's this? Have you been hurt?"

Raja shook his head vigorously. He was bursting with information, but how should he tell his father? For the millionth time. Raja felt sorry and impatient because he could not speak, it's about Exyrus!'screamed his brain in

despair. He pointed to the empty seat next to the pilot. He circled thumb and forefinger of both hands round his eyes, as if he was wearing spectacles. Then he pointed to the kerchief. Sooraj stared. His eyes slowly lit up with understanding.

"Exyrus!" he exclaimed, "Where's he, son?" Raja closed his eyes, rolled his head to one side and put out his tongue.

"What? He's dead? Where?" Sooraj sprang towards the exit, but Hludafi got there first. Mysteriously a knife had appeared in his hand. The blade pointed menacingly at Sooraj's stomach.

Hludafi had shed all pretence. He was transformed into a cold-blooded killer. "You're not going anywhere, Sooraj," he said softly.

"Where is Exyrus?" demanded Sooraj. "Why did you kill him?"

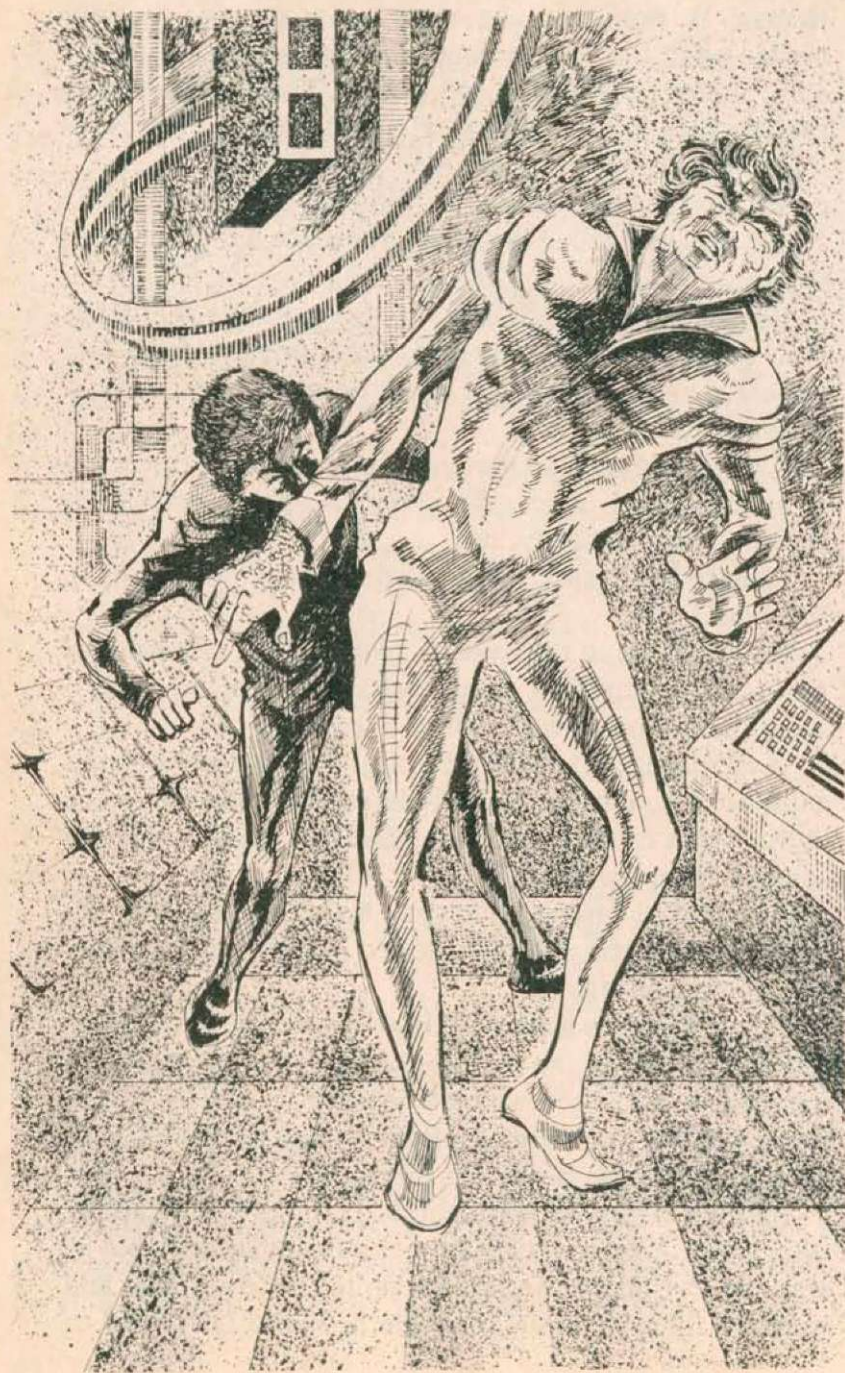
Hludafi ignored the question with a wave of his pudgy hand. "Do something about that safety trip," he said. "I want maximum power from the reactor."

"You're mad!" exclaimed Sooraj. "The spaceship could explode! I cannot do it!" Hludafi's blade flashed in the light. A thin streak appeared on Sooraj's cheek and blood spurted from the wound.

Raja darted forward and sank his teeth into Hludafi's hand. He let out a yell and wheeled round to face the boy like an enraged tiger.

Raja took to his heels with Hludafi in close pursuit. He came to the end of the corridor and stopped short. Again there was that insistent voice, whispering in his ear. "Look left. Open the door. Enter." Raja looked to his left, sure enough, there was a cabinet there.

Without a second thought Raja tugged the cabinet door open. A blast of cold air hit him as he entered, but he was too terrified to notice. He pulled the door shut and rammed the bolt home. Outside he heard the sound of



footsteps. The door rattled as Hludefi tried to force it open. Raja cowered in the corner of the cabinet and shut his eyes tight while Hludefi's threats and curses rained on him.

At last, Hludefi wearied of his efforts. He gave one last violent kick and ambled away, muttering furiously under his breath. Raja opened his eyes. It took him a few moments to get used to the dim light in the cabinet. A leg of mutton hung from a meat hook. Along the floor and sides of the cabinet ran a number of thin refrigerating pipes. Raja realised that he had shut himself up in the deep freezer of the spaceship, the storage space for food and meat to last throughout the journey.

Raja began to shiver uncontrollably. He unbolted the cabinet door and prepared to get out. Better to face Hludefi's wrath than freeze to death!

Suddenly he felt a strange presence next to him. He turned in panic. Beside him was a large brown object, the like of which he had never seen. And the object appeared to be alive. Raja was paralysed with shock. His eyes bulged, his mouth went dry. His brain urged him to flee, but his limbs refused to respond.

The object came closer, very very slowly. It seemed to ooze forward like a giant snail. It was covered with a thick coat of fur. Raja had seen pictures of animals as they existed on planet Earth many years ago and the closest resemblance he could think of was that of a bear without a face, legs or tail. He could not even make out whether it was facing him or looking the other way. The creature was simply a roly-poly elliptical ball of fur.

The signals that Raja had been getting now sounded loud and clear and he realised that they came from this strange creature. It was telling him, "Don't fear, I am with you." Again and again. Needles of ice had begun to form on Raja's clothes. The cold seeped into his bones. He moved closer to the creature. The creature seemed to

sense his discomfort. In a peculiar movement, it unrolled itself and enveloped him like a live fur coat.

Raja was scared out of his wits. Was he going to be smothered to death? Nothing happened and he felt reassured. Slowly he began to relax in the welcome warmth.

"You will listen to me," said the creature. "The vehicle will not leave its present position. I must go back. You understand?"

But Raja's mind was elsewhere. In his brain churned several questions. What was this creature doing on spaceship Bluebird? Did Hludefi know of its presence? And how could it claim to control the spaceship while it sat in this icebox?

"You are not listening," the creature communicated to him. "The vehicle cannot return till I am taken back to my land. The one who drives this vehicle does not understand. But you understand and the one who came with you."

Raja nodded. It seemed to him incredible that this strange creature, with no mouth, eyes or limbs that he could identify, could communicate to him in a way he never thought possible.

"I will help you and the one who came with you," said the creature again. "But first, I must understand you better. Break up your thoughts. Think simple. Think slow. I will learn."

Raja, with a child's instinct, understood perfectly. Snuggling closer to the creature, he revived his memory. He thought of his father. He thought of space shuttle Goddard and his flight to space station Armstrong. He thought of Exyrus and the others, and of his stay on the space station.

The creature was quiet. It was tuning in directly into his thought process, like an outsider listening in on a cross-connection on the telephone. Whenever it did not

comprehend, it would interrupt him with a signal and he would have to repeat himself.

Thus, thinking slowly and simply. Raja communicated to the creature the sequence of events that led him to take refuge in the ice-cabinet.

Hludefi was about to turn into the cockpit when he saw something that made his heart leap in to his mouth.

Sooraj had his back to the door. Crouched in front of the communication set, he was twirling the knobs and speaking into the microphone in an urgent whisper. "Help! Armstrong! Varahamihira come in! This is an emergency!"

In two longstrides, Hludefi reached Sooraj. He tore the headphones off him and flung them at the bulkhead with such force that it shattered into smithereens. His other hand caught Sooraj's face in a vicious swipe.

"You stupid idiot!" he snarled. "Crying out for help, are you?" They stared at each other, panting with emotion.

"Where is my son?" demanded Sooraj with spirit. "What have you done to him?"

"He's safe where he is," replied Hludefi. His bloodshot eyes turned crafty. "If you'll help me to override the trip, I'll let you have your son back."

"You, blackmailer!" shouted Sooraj, clutching at Hludefi's shirt. "Why do you do all this? Why did you kill Exyrus?"

Hludefi broke free. "Nobody has killed Exyrus!" he said roughly. "He behaved stupidly and so I had to put him out of action. Temporarily."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Exyrus came in the way of my plans. Had he cooperated, I would have made him rich. But he didn't, so I had to take care of him. There's a lesson in it for you too, Sooraj."

Sooraj was confused. Hludefi was speaking in riddles. What were his plans?

"I intend to be one of the richest men on planet Earth," said Hludafi with a sly grin. Suddenly he grabbed Sooraj by the arm. "I say, let's strike a deal. You get me to planet Earth and I'll make you millionaire!"

"What makes you think I can do it?" »

"You wrote those programs when we were together in the Space Organisation," said Hludafi. "You wrote the safety program that makes the computer trip the reactor at maximum power. That's why I wanted you on the Bluebird. Now you're going to rewrite the program and override the trip!"

Sooraj tried to reason with Hludafi. "You will never get away with this," he said.

"Are you going to cooperate or are you not?" asked Hludafi nastily.

"Certainly not, not even if my life depended on it!" replied Sooraj.

"Not even if your son's life depended on it?" Hludafi grinned at him and waited for his answer.

Sooraj dropped his head in despair. He knew that Hludafi would not hesitate to carry out his threat. But he had not won. Not yet. Sooraj knew that Hludafi was not qualified either to reprogram the computer nor to recognise the details involved in reprogramming. In his present state of desperation he probably would not notice that Sooraj had only slightly readjusted the instructions. It was a chance, but Sooraj intended taking it. If it didn't help, he would think of something else.

He recalled the safety program from the magnetic discs and displayed it on the video screen. Then, line by line, he changed the instructions and fed them into the computer.

At last, he raised his head.

"The safety trip has been bypassed," he said. His voice was low, lifeless. "Now you can blow up all of us." Hludafi's eyes gleamed with triumph. He jumped down from the plotting table and gazed stupidly at the revised

program. Satisfied, he went back to his controls. He leaned forward in expectancy and pulled the throttle lever as far as it would go.

The noise from the machinery compartment graduated from a silent hum to an ear-splitting whine as the engines strained to generate the power demanded by the pilot. The cockpit began to vibrate and shudder. The spaceship accelerated as if shot through the barrel of a gun.

Sooraj knew these conditions were simulated but nevertheless his eyes opened wide in panic as he watched the needles on the various gauges spin round beyond the red marking, indicating that they had crossed the danger limits. A few more minutes of this and the spaceship would simply fly apart!

And yet, strain as it might, the spaceship was unable to break free of its deadly course. It stayed put on its spiralling path, back to the planet.

"Stop, stop!" screamed Sooraj. Even he was puzzled. The safety trip had not been bypassed but there was enough power to blast-off. "You will kill us all!"

"I need more power," said Hludafi.

"Listen, for God's sake!" shouted Sooraj, shaking Hludafi by the shoulders. "The machinery is already 50 per cent overloaded ! It cannot take anymore. I don't know why we cannot pull off the gravity field, but it's certainly not for want of power."

"So what do you suggest?"

"Let's land on the planetoid," said Sooraj. "Give me time. I'll investigate all over again. Anything is better than these suicidal antics of yours!"

Hludafi slowly eased the throttle. He rose from his seat, turned and looked directly at Sooraj. "I think we need to throw out some more weight. Let's start with your son."

Sooraj was startled out of his wits. He realised that he was dealing with a mad man. Hludafi needed to be stopped. He rushed up to him, arms raised. Hludafi was

waiting for just that reaction. He allowed Sooraj to blunder towards him, then landed a solid blow on his belly.

Sooraj fell to the floor without a sound, clutching his stomach in agony. With the same devilish grin on his face Hludafi proceeded to the ice-cabinet to deal with Raja.

Inside the cabinet, Raja was still communicating with the creature.

"Planet Earth is about eight light-minutes from the Sun," ran Raja's thoughts, so the creature could grasp them.

"It is the third planet in the solar system. Many years ago. the scientists of planet Earth...."

"Scientists?" queried the creature.

"They are the ones who think up new ideas," explained Raja. "These scientists decided to set up a space station."

"What for?"

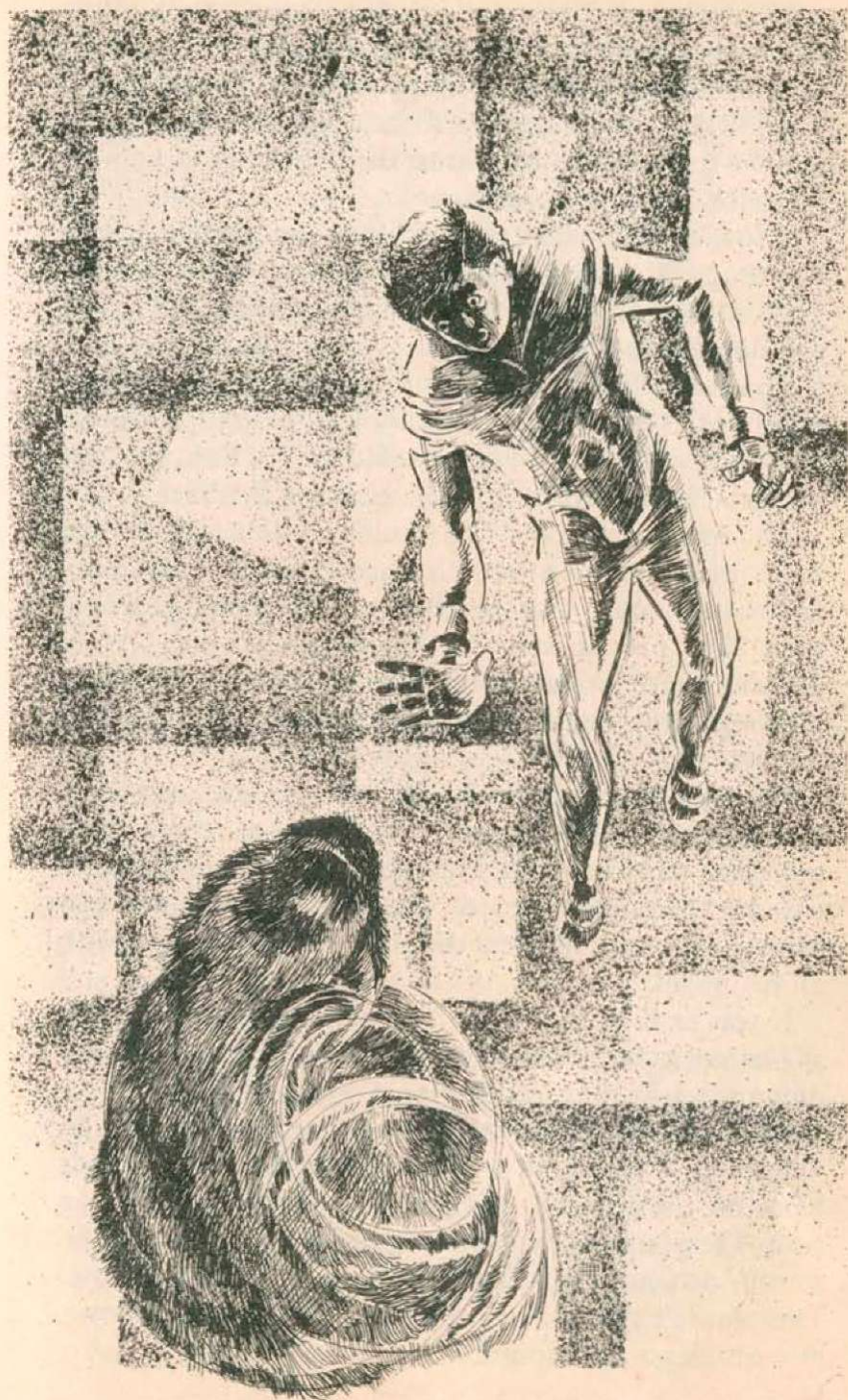
"To explore, to learn, to know more about outer space," said Raja. "To see, for example, if there exist intelligent beings outside planet Earth, and if so, to study their behaviour and life-style."

Raja's thought process was interrupted by a series of confused signals, indicating that the creature had understood nothing of what he was saying.

Raja himself did not know whether to be worried or amused. Here he was sitting in an ice-cabinet in a spaceship, conversing with an alien from another planet! It was so odd that he had to pinch himself to make sure he was not dreaming.

Suddenly he received a powerful signal from the creature. "Your father lies low. He had been hurt by the driver of the spaceship. The driver now comes after you."

Raja was shaken out of his secure dream-world. His dad was hurt! He wormed his way out of the creature's folds and opened the cabinet door. No sooner had he done so than a powerful torch beam flashed into the confined space, blinding Raja with its intensity.



Hludefi bent low and pulled Raja's foot. Raja instinctively put his arms round the creature. Together they rolled out helplessly and fell to the floor. Hludefi pried Raja loose like a flea from a dog's coat. He then stuffed the creature back into the cabinet as if he were handling a chunk of meat.

"Now dumbo, you come with me," he muttered. Raja was dragged, struggling and kicking, back to the cockpit. The signals from the creature still reached him, but he was too unsettled to receive them.

Spaceship Bluebird was coasting along smoothly on autopilot. Hludefi cast a quick look at the control panels, then at Sooraj lying in a corner. He shoved Raja towards the adjacent compartment, the ejection chamber.

The ejection chamber was a cubicle with a trap-door at the bottom. The item to be disposed of from the spaceship had to be dumped into this chamber. The chamber would then be pressurised by compressed air. At a predetermined pressure, the trap door would fly open, blowing out its contents into space, where it would float forever.

Raja realised that he would have to do something immediately to save himself. The signals were becoming more and more insistent. He jerked his left hand free and, without the faintest idea of what he was doing, reached for one of the handles near the pilot's seat and tugged with all his might.

It was as if he had stuck a pin into a race horse. The spaceship jerked, went into a spin and zoomed directly down towards the strange planet.

Hludefi froze. Momentarily he did not realise what had happened. Then, with a roar of rage, he struck Raja's hand off the controls and pulled the lever back, but in vain. The planetoid, which had been a blob on the video screen, was now growing larger, every passing minute. The planet's gravity was dragging the spaceship down into an inexorable descent.

Hludefi stared at the screen in horror. He rushed to his seat. He hastily strapped himself and began to manipulate the controls to make the landing as smooth as possible. Landing on a strange planet posed problems similar to anchoring a ship in uncharted waters. One knew nothing of the atmosphere or geological conditions prevailing. The tricky part was to reduce the speed that had been gained if one was not to go streaking past the planet like a meteor. The space pilot's technique was to fly past at short range, allowing the natural attraction of the planet to pull the ship towards itself.

Raja realised that Hludefi had no control over spaceship Bluebird. He watched the whirling ball come so close that it filled the screen. The planetoid looked like a huge chunk of butter. It seemed to be surrounded by a pale green mist, swirling about like a veil in the breeze. There was no sign of vegetation. There were no hills or craters, like there are on the Moon. The surface was a smooth white blanket as if covered with snow. Scattered on this surface were a number of brown rock-shaped objects. With a gasp of recognition. Raja realised that he was looking at the inhabitants of the planetoid, creatures, similar to the one on board spaceship Bluebird!

Hludefi's instincts as a pilot took over. His brawny arms were on the control levers, adjusting them as delicately as a surgeon at the operating table. And all the while, his mind was seething with frustration. His plans had gone totally awry.

First it was Exyrus, that fool. Now it was this stupid father-son combination. He would have loved to strangle Sooraj and his nosy brat with his hands, but that would have to wait.

The spaceship made a smooth landing. Hludefi unstrapped himself hurriedly. Sooraj was showing signs of recovering consciousness. Raja had to be ejected right away. Sooraj would then have to be forced to reprogram the computers so that they could escape.

Hludefi dragged Raja once again towards the ejection chamber, threw him in and closed the door.

This is the end!' thought Raja.

To his surprise, nothing happened. He waited, motionless. All he heard was a thump followed by a grunt beyond the door. Gingerly, Raja reached for the handle and swung the door open. His jaw dropped in surprise. Exyrus and Hludefi were locked in a grim struggle. It was obvious that Hludefi was caught totally unawares, for he was crowded into the far corner of the cockpit and was desperately looking for fighting room.

Exyrus was desperate too. He had lost a lot of blood and he still felt groggy. He knew his only advantage had been that of surprise. Once that was overcome, he was sure to be overpowered by the burly pilot.

Indeed, Raja could already see that Exyrus was weakening. He was swinging wildly. Hludefi broke into a grin. He lunged at Exyrus and caught him by the throat. Slowly, but surely, he pressed Exyrus back against the plotting table and proceeded to squeeze the life out of him. Raja knew it was time to act.

He saw a screwdriver lying on the computer console. Sooraj had left it there while checking out the system circuitry. Raja grasped the screwdriver firmly by the handle and swung it in a horizontal arc into Hludefi's fleshy rear.

Hludefi screamed and leapt into the air. His hands grabbed the seat of his pants. At that very moment, Exyrus straightened up and drove his fist into Hludefi's jaw with all his remaining strength. Hludefi crumpled in a heap at Raja's feet.

Exyrus sank weakly on the floor. His cheeks and neck were encrusted with dried blood. He looked a ghastly sight. His eyes, without his glasses, were unfocussed and wandering. Raja found his own hands shaking.

"What's happened?" asked Sooraj. He was recovering consciousness, when Hludefi's yell had jolted him to his senses. He jumped up when he saw Exyrus.

"Boy, am I happy to see you!" he exclaimed. "Where have you been all this time?"

"It's a long story, Sir," said Exyrus. "But first I must apologise to you for the irresponsible way I behaved on Armstrong. It was all my fault. I was blind to everything else, except my own craving to go to planet Mars. Whatever punishment you give me I shall accept cheerfully."

Sooraj put his arm round Exyrus's shoulders. "We'll worry about that when we return, shall we?" he said. "Now you just tell me what happened on spaceship Bluebird from the time you blasted off."

Exyrus took a deep breath and told his story.

Hijacking recounted

The moment HludEFI was arrested on space station Armstrong, Exyrus knew that his mission to Mars was doomed. It was a shocking blow and Exyrus spent the following week thinking up a scheme that would enable him to carry out his mission. The solution, when it struck him, appeared delightfully simple — free HludEFI and hijack spaceship Bluebird!

Exyrus then put his plan into action. He stealthily learned the procedure that would enable him to reprogram the computers. He studied the daily routine at the control room. He came to a secret understanding with HludEFI.

On the day the hijack was planned, Exyrus sent Wiztek away from the control room and reprogrammed the launch control computers to allow the Bluebird to blast-off without control room assistance. He then set HludEFI free.

Together they took the monorail to the launching pad. A couple of technicians stared at them; one was openly curious at their presence.

"Just taking the Bluebird up for a test flight," said Hludafi with an easy smile.

The walk to the spaceship seemed endless and Exyrus was sweating with tension by the time they settled in their seats and prepared for the blast-off.

Spaceship Bluebird sailed smoothly into space. Exyrus was ecstatic. His scheme had succeeded! He was going to planet Mars! He scanned the sky overhead and saw planet Mars glowing like a red warning lamp. On the other side was a brilliant blue-white globe, planet Earth.

Hludafi was ecstatic too, but for very different reasons. While in custody, he had brooded over his ruined career and the fate that awaited him on planet Earth. Exyrus's plan had come as a godsend. He was now free! He would now land on an isolated spot on Sector Eight near the South Pole, abandon Exyrus and the spaceship and simply vanish!

Exyrus soon noticed that Hludafi was drifting away from the flight path to planet Mars. "I believe you need to alter course," he said hesitantly.

As if in answer, Hludafi pulled out a bottle from his hip pocket, unscrewed the cap and drank. He then squinted up at Exyrus. "Shut up," he said.

Exyrus started as if he had been slapped in the face. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean I'm taking this tub to planet Earth," said Hludafi.

"But you gave me your word!" exclaimed Exyrus. "You said...."

"Forget it, kid," said Hludafi roughly. "I only agreed to your crazy scheme so that you would let me out. Shut up and watch the instruments."

Exyrus felt the bitter taste of disappointment in his mouth. All this trouble for nothing! He watched Hludafi

take another long pull at the bottle. Spaceship Bluebird continued on its altered course.

Suddenly, Hludafi's eyes fell on the anemometer gauges. They were flickering erratically, indicating a violent change in the outside pressure. "That's strange", he muttered to himself.

Before he could react, disaster struck. A violent jet wind, screaming across space at a speed of over five hundred kilometers an hour, hit spaceship Bluebird. The spaceship reeled like a punch-drunk boxer, then was swept up high by the wind and blown in a new direction. The instruments in the cockpit spun crazily around. Hludafi and Exyrus clung to their seats, fearful of their lives.

The jet wind passed by as suddenly as it had come. With a flick of its tail it sent the spaceship spinning on to another uncontrolled course. The entire incident had lasted but a few seconds. Hludafi fought with the controls.

Slowly the spaceship steadied itself. Hludafi looked stupidly at his instruments. For the life of him, he did not know where he was!

"Let us contact Armstrong," gasped Exyrus.

"What? And have them on our tails? No fears!"

Hludafi cruised aimlessly for several hours trying to locate his original flight path. He was on the verge of giving up when a faint blur appeared on his radar screen. He nudged Exyrus. "Hey! What's that?"

Exyrus squinted at the image through his spectacles. "Doesn't look like any place we know," he said.

"I'm landing anyway," said Hludafi. "May be there's a direction finder located there, by which I can find my bearings."

Exyrus nodded. Direction finders played the role of lighthouses on planet Earth. Survey ships like the Varahamihira had placed such direction finders on land masses surveyed by them. A spaceship that got lost could relocate its position in space with their help.

Spaceship Bluebird approached the planetoid. Hludafi did not trust his landing aids any longer. So he came head-on, going for dead centre and then braking in the retro-active shock waves generated by the thrust of the spaceship itself.

Having landed, Hludafi and Exyrus surveyed the landscape. The spaceship appeared to have come down in a white desert. They saw a rock-strewn plain, the ground ranging in colour from a dazzling white to pale cream. The sky was a light green hue. On the fast curving horizon, the sun shone wanly through the mist, looking like the moon in twilight.

But there was no direction finder. Exyrus twiddled the knobs and switches of his HFDF (High Frequency Direction Finder) set but to no avail. He went down to the generator compartment to take out his emergency set. When he returned to the cockpit, Hludafi was missing.

"Hey! come down and take a look!"

Hludafi's voice rang clear in the icy stillness. Exyrus went to the exit door and looked down. He found Hludafi on the ground looking up. He was up to his ankles in white powder. Round him, in a semicircle, were a few slabs of rock. Exyrus shuddered as a cold blast of air hit him. He pulled the door half shut.

"It's sub-zero outside!" he shouted back. "Come up or you'll freeze to death!"

Fortified by the alcohol in his blood-stream, Hludafi didn't seem to care. He looked around him for a long moment. He appeared to be tipsy.

"Okay," he said at last. "This place is lousy, anyway." His gaze fell on the ground. "That is funny," he said. "These rocks have moved."

'He's drunk,* thought Exyrus. Then he looked closer. Sure enough, the semicircle had grown smaller! In a flash of profound understanding, Exyrus knew that the rocks were not rocks at all but a form of life. He had discovered life on another planet!

Hludafi realised it at the same instant. He bent down and lifted one of the creatures off the ground. Then, hoisting it on his back, he began to ascend the spaceship.

"What are you doing?" exclaimed Exyrus in alarm. Hludafi merely grunted and continued his ascent. He reached the cockpit door and flung the creature down like a sack of potatoes. White powder rose to the air in a cloud.

Exyrus looked at the creature, then at Hludafi, panting from his exertion. "Why did you bring it on board?" he asked. "Don't you know it's against the rules of the Space Organisation?"

"To hell with the Organisation!" sneered Hludafi. "They'll never know. Listen Exyrus, we have here the most valuable, the most unique object a man can ever hope to possess. Neither the Mona Lisa nor the Kohinoor Diamond can compare with what we've got. A dozen multi-millionaires would give their right arms to own this creature from an alien planet!"

"You're planning to sell it!" Exyrus was incredulous.

"Of course! And half of it is yours! Think of what you could do with a few million! A villa by the beach, a fleet of cars, a yacht...." Hludafi was carried away by his imagination.

They noticed then that the creature was twitching on the floor in an odd way.

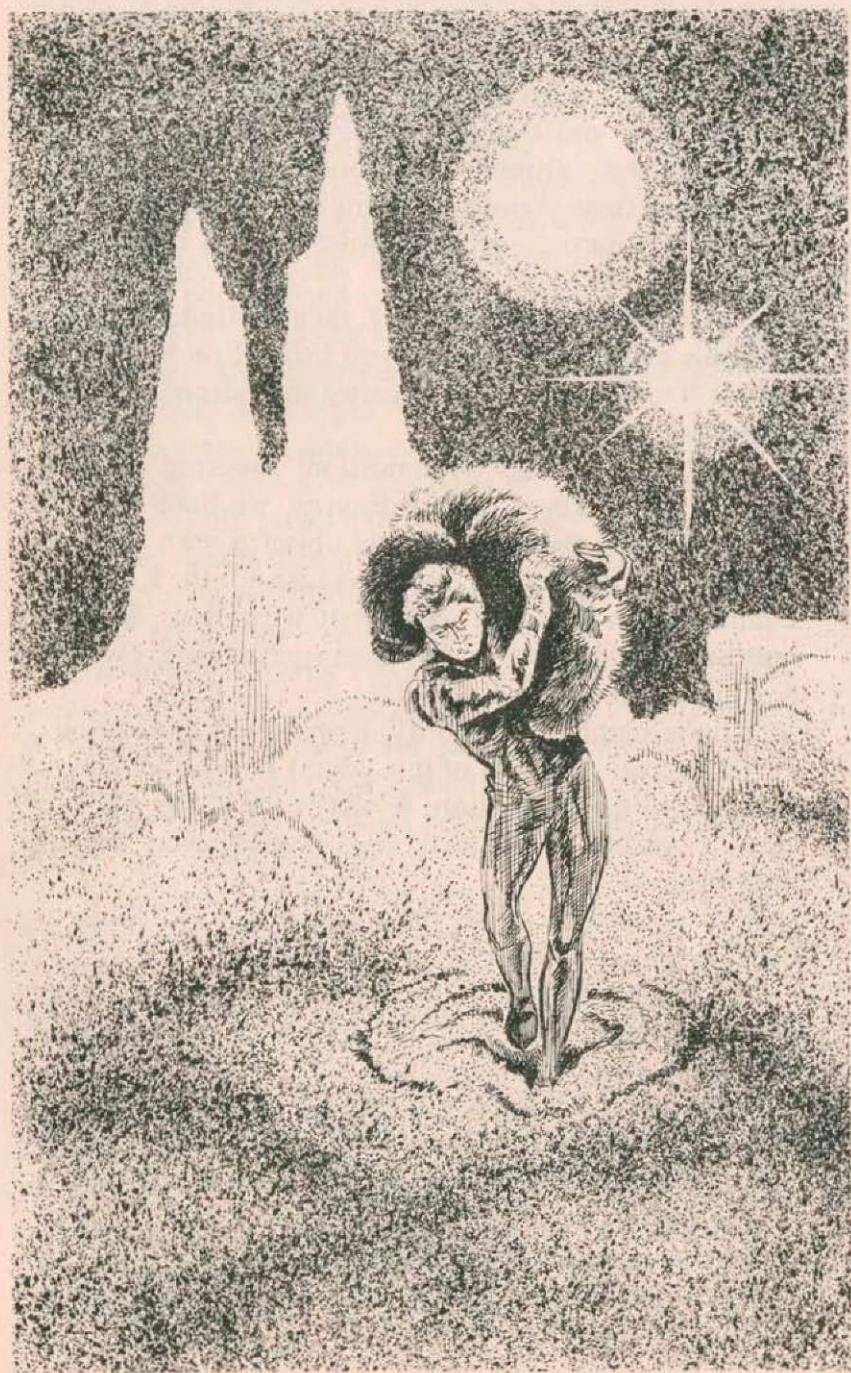
"I guess it's finding it uncomfortably hot here," said Hludafi thoughtfully. "Why don't we put it in the icebox? Give me a hand, will you?"

In spite of himself, Exyrus assisted Hludafi to drag the creature down the corridor and into the ice-cabinet.

Hludafi slapped his hands together with the satisfaction of a job well done. "Let's go," he said,

Exyrus stood rooted to the spot.

"Come on," said Hludafi, tugging Exyrus back to the cockpit. "Prepare for blast-off."



In a few minutes, they were soaring outwards leaving the planetoid behind. Hludefi reached for his bottle and emptied the contents.

Soon they noticed that spaceship Bluebird, instead of moving in a straight line, had curved inwards and was orbiting the planetoid. Hludefi increased power and reset his navigation controls. The spaceship refused to respond.

Exyrus broke into a sweat. The Bluebird seemed to be locked in by the pull exerted by the planet.

"Hludefi, I've been thinking," he said. "We will have to go back."

"Naturally," said Hludefi, grinning. "We're going back to planet Earth, that is."

"I mean back to the planetoid," said Exyrus evenly. "If you don't, I intend to contact the space station and make a full report."

Hludefi turned slowly. He looked long and hard at Exyrus. Then, with a sudden movement, he smashed his fist into Exyrus's face. Exyrus was thrown back. His head shattered against the bulkhead. Blood spurted out of his nose and mouth.

Hludefi's body heaved with an insane rage. He put the spacecraft on autopilot. He lifted Exyrus by his shoulders from the rear and dragged him out of the cockpit all the way to the machinery compartment. Working swiftly but surely, he tied Exyrus's hands behind his back. He stuffed a rag in his mouth. He rose with a grunt and ascended the spiral staircase. At the top stair, he turned and surveyed the compartment. The thin limp body lay motionless on the floor.

"And that's where Raja found me," said Exyrus.

A queer planetoid

Raja and his father listened spellbound. They did not utter a word till Exyrus had finished.

Exyrus leaned back weakly on the bulkhead. The battering he had received from HludEFI had drained him. There was a long moment of silence.

Sooraj rose to his feet. He was his brisk old self. He looked at HludEFI lying unconscious on the deck, then took a decision,

"The first thing is to return the creature to its habitat," he said. "Where is the icebox? "

In answer, Raja pulled his father out of the cockpit and across the corridor towards the ice-cabinet. Exyrus limped along behind them. Sooraj swung open the door of the cabinet. The creature lay there dark and still. Just as HludEFI had left it.

Together they heaved it off the cabinet shelf. The creature twitched at the sudden change in temperature. Sooraj inspected it carefully. The thrill of discovery coursed through his veins like a drug. If he took this object back with him to planet Earth, he would become one of the immortals in the scientists' Roll of Honour!

There was a sharp tug at his elbow. It was Raja. He was frantically pointing outside the spacecraft, indicating that the creature belonged there and had to be released. "Dad," he wanted to scream, "don't make the same mistake that HludEFI did! You will never leave the planetoid if you don't let it go."

Sooraj smiled at Raja and patted his head. "I understand," he said. "You've been in the company of the creature for so long that you've begun to care for its welfare! Don't worry, it's going back to the planetoid!"

Raja was relieved. His father was doing the right thing, though his reasons were not the same as Raja's. The three of them trooped back to the cockpit, sharing the weight of the creature like firemen holding a body. Raja moved ahead to open the exit door.

Suddenly he heard his father cry out his name. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed HludEFI emerge from behind the plotting table and rush towards him, arms outstretched. He felt a tremendous push at the small of his back. Before he could react, Raja found himself sailing out of the spaceship like a projectile, making a wide arc as he hurtled down to the ground. He shut his eyes in terror.

When Raja opened his eyes, he saw he was still quite some distance away from the bottom. Indeed, he was falling very slowly, like a snowflake, like an action shot in slow motion.

Raja fell as if into a tub of flour. The white icy powder rose about him in clouds. He tried to get to his feet but found himself sinking into the powder as if it were quicksand.

And then, to his surprise, he saw the creature tumbling down from the spaceship. It landed in another cloud of powder amidst its brethren. Some how Exyrus and his father had managed to push it out! Raja was relieved.

Once again, the telepathic voice poured gentle advice into his brain. "I am with you. Reach out for me. Hold me.

Raja let himself fall forward and wriggled on his belly till he reached the warm brown shape. He heaved himself onto its back. The creature sank a little, somewhat like the splayed-foot of a camel in the sand.

"You will now go back. You will jump."

His teeth chattering with cold, Raja looked up at spaceship Bluebird and saw the exit door high above him. It was several metres away. Yet, so much faith did he now have in the creature that he was confident he could leap right upto the cockpit.

He tried to think rationally and apply the laws of physics. This planetoid was smaller than planet Earth. The gravitational forces would, therefore, be comparatively less. On the Moon, for example, he would be lighter, he would weigh only one-sixth of what he weighed on Earth and could, therefore, jump six times higher. Hadn't he already experienced that lightness during his free fall?

In the cockpit above, unknown to Raja, Hludafi and Sooraj were locked in a grim struggle. While the others had been at the ice-cabinet, Hludafi had regained consciousness. He had hidden behind the plotting table, waiting. To his horror, he found the trio carrying the alien creature towards the exit. They were planning to let it go! A fortune was slipping through his fingers!

Blind with rage, Hludafi had thrust Raja out. In the ensuing confusion, the creature too had tumbled to its survival. Exyrus was too weak to offer any resistance.

Only Sooraj stood between escape and doom.

Hands locked, heads bent and straining, the two men fought for dear life in the cramped space of the cockpit.

Raja crouched. Carefully balancing himself on the creature, he leaped for the door. He found himself moving like a kite in the breeze, ascending in the air along the length of the spaceship.

Just then, he saw his father's head sticking out of the exit door. Hludafi was hunched over him, trying to push him out of the spaceship. His lips were pulled back in a grimace while he attempted to dislodge Sooraj.

Raja bunched his fists and locked his arms in front of his chest. He could feel his speed reducing. He was reaching the highest point of his jump. He saw Hludafi's look of disbelief as he saw him approach. Raja drove his fists into Hludafi's jaw.

Hludafi's head flipped back and slammed against the steel deck. Sooraj rolled away to one side. Simultaneously

Raja gripped the handle of the cockpit door and hung there, swinging in the air, his body numb with cold.

Slowly, painfully, he hoisted himself up the smooth flank of the spaceship and fell in, gasping for breath. He dragged himself to the control panel. The air circulating within the spaceship had been badly diluted by the external atmosphere. He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes.

"Raja, are you all right?" he heard his father say. Sooraj was bending over him. His eyes were full of concern.

And then a strange thing happened. Hludefi jumped right out of the cockpit!

Sooraj ran to the exit door and looked down. Hludefi was strolling on the ground, carefree as a tourist!

"Come back, Hludefi!" shouted Sooraj, his voice ringing clear in the deathly silence. "You'll die there, you fool!"

Hludefi stopped for a moment. His face turned upwards. He grinned. It was the grin of a mad man.

"I'm going to get one more of them," he said, pointing to the brown shapes round him. "Just like I did last time. I'm looking for a biggish fellow. After that, I'm coming up to kill you both. Then I will return to planet Earth. Alone."

Sooraj stared at him, dumbfounded. Hludefi was insane, quite beyond the reach of reason.

Hludefi grabbed at one of the creatures but failed to get a proper grip on it. He tripped and fell on the powdery surface and submerged right upto his waist. He tried to get to his feet.

And that was when the first signs of doubt began to show on his face. Instead of surfacing, Hludefi sank in deeper and deeper. Screaming with terror he struggled furiously, flailing his arms about him.

Raja watched in horror the ever-sinking figure of Hludefi.

The powdery ice rose to his neck, then to his chin and mouth. HludEFI began to whimper like a child. His eyes rolled madly in their sockets. He knew his end had come.

In seconds, nothing was left of HludEFI except the top of his head, and then that too was gone.

Flakes of ice swirled around in a deathly dance. In a closed circle sat the creatures, round and motionless, like a group of stones to mark a missing object.

Exyrus and Sooraj looked at each other, the same question uppermost in their minds. Who would pilot spaceship Bluebird? Raja silently posed the problem to the creature down below. "You will drive the vehicle," said the creature.

"I was inside the vehicle when it went up," said the creature. "I listened to the driver. I know the different actions he made, I will transmit to you his thoughts that led to his actions. You will follow those actions. So it will be you who will drive."

Raja was puzzled. What did that mean?

There was a pause while the creature organised its memory. Raja tried to concentrate on making his mind blank. And then the ideas started seeping into his brain, telling him exactly what to do. It was as if his personal computer was flashing instructions not on the screen but directly into his brain, bypassing all sensory organs.

"Move red lever forward. Press button marked C. Wait ten seconds. Press red button....." The creature was transferring HludEFI's sequence of actions during blast-off to Raja by some mysterious telepathic process. Raja leaned over and instinctively pressed buttons and pulled at switches, as if he had known how to pilot a spaceship all his life.

One by one the engines fired and burst into power. Guided by the messages emanating from the creature. Raja checked the lights and the gauges and made corrections automatically. Sooraj stood open-mouthed in

wonder. His son was going through a perfect take-off procedure! He stepped up and moved the throttle forward, expecting the spaceship to respond. Nothing happened.

"Now we will release the vehicle," said the creature.

Raja felt a curious change take place within him. He felt lighter, his heart seemed to beat more gently. When he raised his arm, it seemed to shoot up as if his muscles had suddenly grown powerful.

"You have lost weight," said the creature below, divining his thoughts. "The gravity force beneath the vehicle has now been reduced."

"What?"

"It was increased by the others on this land. It was increased so that your vehicle could not get away with me."

Raja was incredulous.

"Do you mean you people can change at will the gravity force on your planet?" he exclaimed. "That's impossible! Nobody can alter the laws of nature. And the law of gravity is one such law!"

"There are forces in our power of which you can but dream of," said the creature. "You are still on the first step in the ladder of evolution. Do not think like the driver of your vehicle. He was a fool. He thought he knew all. He has paid for it."

Raja wanted to say more, but a stream of signals cut him short. "Ask nothing more," said the creature. "Go away. Leave us undisturbed. I shall guide you till you leave."

Again the messages poured into Raja's brain, instructing him to take off. Blindly Raja obeyed.

"Five greens," said the creature. Before him on the main control panel Raja saw all five check lights burning green, indicating that everything was working smoothly. He pushed the throttle slowly forward. Spaceship

Bluebird shuddered as its boosters revived upto maximum power. A gigantic dust cloud gushed up and enveloped the spaceship in a column of white smoke. The spaceship left the planetoid, accelerating into space at tremendous speed.

"I will set you on course," said the creature. Its signals were growing fainter every second. "You will reach your base safely."

Raja could not contain himself. "Tell me your secret," he begged. "How did you keep our vehicle within your power and not allow it to escape?"

"Close your eyes. Lookinward," said the creature. Raja did so and saw in his mind's eye a marvellous mechanism.

Below the surface of the planetoid, hidden from view, existed a unique machine. It was a huge shining bow-shaped structure, massive as a bridge, several kilometers long. What was it?

The creature began to explain with a surprising fluency of thought. "What you see is a giant force machine," it said. "It is made up of innumerable plates of rare materials unknown to your kind. These thin plates are hit with high energy waves. The energy causes the basic particles in the plates to collect in one direction. When this happens, the forces grow very large. They surround the land like an invisible net, through which nothing can escape."

The creature's explanation only raised more questions in Raja's mind. What were these materials? What were these waves? What did the creature mean by....?

"Enough," said the creature. "We have now put off the force machine. You are allowed to leave. Enough."

The silence was eerie. The creature had stopped communicating. Raja's mind was blank once again.

Spaceship Bluebird was cruising smoothly back to its base, space station Armstrong. Above, planet Mars glowed like a red ruby encrusted in a star-spangled sky,

remote and mysterious, still awaiting exploration. Exyrus gazed at it with fascination. Perhaps, in another week....?

Raja looked at the video screen. The planetoid was fast receding. He searched for the creature that had been his companion, his friend and saviour. He imagined it was that dark speck in one corner of the screen. No, he was only fooling himself. Green mist swirled over the planetoid, further obscuring it from view. The creature was gone forever. Raja could not contain his emotions. Tears rolled down his eyes.

"Thank you, dear friend," he screamed in silence. "Thank you for all you have done for me and my father and for spaceship Bluebird. I shall never forget you."

But he never knew whether his message ever reached the creature. The planetoid soon shrank into a white ball of fluff and then totally disappeared. Sooraj, meanwhile, had not been idle. He had managed to discover a spare communication set on board and was busy trying to contact the space station. Suddenly there was a hum and a crackle. Wiztek's voice came through surprisingly loud and clear.

"Is that you, Sooraj? What's your position? We've been worried to death about you!"

Wiztek's relief was evident. He had skipped all normal communication procedures and was expressing himself freely.

"All's well, by God's grace!" replied Sooraj heartily. "We're heading towards Armstrong."

"Where's Exyrus? Where's Hludefi?"

"Exyrus is right here with me. He's feeling a bit under the weather right now, but he'll be fit as a fiddle soon. As for Hludefi....well, he won't be needing his savings any more."

There was a pause as Wiztek digested the news. Hludefi was dead. Sooraj's voice had dropped to a whisper. After all, Hludefi had once been a friend.

"And how about Raja, Sir? Is he safe? Victor has been worried sick about him. We've been getting a stream of messages from the Varahamihira. She's still Hying round, searching for the Bluebird."

"Raja's fine," said Sooraj to Wiztek. He hugged his son affectionately. "You won't believe it, but if it hadn't been for Raja, spaceship Bluebird and its present crew would never have come out of this adventure alive!"

Again there was a long pause.

"Sir?" said Wiztek.

"Yes?"

"I know you'll tell us all about it when you come back, but there's just one thing all of us here are terribly keen to find out.

"Why was spaceship Bluebird in trouble? Was it because of her engines? Or her computers? Or, as Dr. Bell here insists, was there a planetoid full of intelligent beings that held that spaceship captive?"

Sooraj, Raja and Exyrus looked at each other. Raja put his fore-finger to his lips. It was a secret and a secret it would remain. There was to be no mention of their discovery. Sooraj understood. His scientific spirit bowed before his respect for Raja's feelings.

"Planetoid?" he said at last and chuckled. "Sorry to disappoint you all, but there was no such thing. Anyway, have patience till we come back! Bye for now!"

Sooraj dropped the microphone, looked at his son and winked. Exyrus smiled. And so did Raja.



The creature twitched at the sudden change in temperature. Sooraj inspected it carefully. The thrill of discovery coursed through his veins like a drug, if he took this object back with him to planet Earth, he would become one of the immortals in the scientists' Roll of Honour!

* There was a sharp tug at his elbow. It was Raja. He was frantically pointing outside the spacecraft, indicating that the creature belonged there and had to be released. "Dad," he wanted to scream, "don't make the same mistake that Hludafi did! You will never leave the planetoid if you don't let it go!"