

PLAGUE

BY LEWIS SHINER

Their trumpeting filled the ship. Even in the control room, Robinson couldn't get away from the nasal bleating and honking that passed for their laughter. For the hundredth time he sat in the captain's chair, wearing the captain's headphones, and strained to hear a response to his distress call.

When he finally took the headphones off, the computer said, "I wish you'd just leave it to me. If there's anyone out there, I'll hear them a long time before you do."

"If you're so smart," Robinson said, "why don't you do something about *them*?" He hooked his thumb toward the ladder.

"You know it's not my job to interfere. Besides, they don't want my help."

"Of course they don't want your help!" Robinson shouted. "They're sick! They don't ... oh, to hell with it."

"Getting hostile isn't going to help anything."

"Lay off, will you? Why can't you be a little less human once in a while?"

"You know better than to ask that."

Robinson did. The computer was designed with biofeedback simulators that allowed it to adjust its programming according to its perception of the emotional environment of the ship. The idea was to make it talkative when the crew was lonely, stern when morale became lax. Robinson's hatred of the computer inspired it to petulance and whining.

He went below decks to feed the crew.

They ate nothing but raw vegetables. When the ship's supply ran out—which would not be long—they would probably starve. Maybe, Robinson thought, it's better that way.

As soon as he opened the hatch to the cargo hold, the smell hit him. He remembered too late to breathe through his mouth, and the stench of wet fur clung to his taste buds.

"Give it up, Robinson," the Captain said. Robinson pushed a sack of carrots through the bars. "It's a losing battle. You're the only one left."

The Captain, like the others, was covered with green fur, matted into small, square tufts that looked like scales. That, and the long thick tail, gave all of them a reptilian appearance from the neck down. The faces were waxy yellow, with drooping eyes and huge, funnel-shaped mouths. The Captain's attempt at seriousness broke, and he started to giggle. It built up until he blasted a long, echoing note from his trumpet.

"What if," he said, "you're the one who's crazy? What if we're normal and *you've* got the disease and locked us all up by mistake? What about it, huh?" He trumpeted again and shot across the width of the cage, clutching his legs in uncontrollable mirth and bouncing himself off the bars.

The other five caught his mood and started bouncing around and blasting out their own trumpet calls. The three cages banged against the metal deck and Robinson held his hands over his ears.

I can't stand much more of this, he thought. He dropped the rest of the vegetables within reach of the cages and ran for the hatch.

Upstairs, in his cabin, he threw himself on his bunk and buried his head under the pillow. He was losing his sense of reality. At first he'd felt an almost religious sense of gratitude when the plague had passed him by. Now he wondered if he was really better off.

The first symptom had been uncontrollable laughter. Two of them had gone down to the fourth planet of Barnard's star, and by the time they were back on board the virus was already at work. Over the next day they had forced the computer to tell them every joke it knew, then laughingly let themselves out of quarantine.

On the second day they had begun to sprout green hair, and everyone but Robinson thought it was funny. The medical section of the computer was no help. In plain English, some sort of virus was rewriting their DNA. It was like the cancer virus, but not so easy to cure. It was rebuilding their bodies from the feet up—or rather from the head down, because it was the brain that went first.

Robinson had huddled in his cabin those first three days, staring at his skin until he hallucinated color changes. He told himself jokes and waited to see if he would become hysterical. On the fourth day he decided he was not going to get it, and started to worry about the ship.

Fortunately for Robinson, they were helpless when the laughing fits took them. In a matter of minutes he had been able to take them all down and lock them in specimen cages, bouncing them through the halls like giant green basketballs. He wouldn't go down there again, he promised himself. The cages were controlled by the computer; let the computer find a way to feed them.

"Okay, Robinson," the computer said. "I'm picking something up."

Robinson jumped out of bed. "Who is it? Can they help?"

"It's a Federation cruiser. Why don't you come up to the bridge and talk to them yourself?"

He sprinted upstairs, the hootings and squawkings rattling the walls of the ship around him. "Hello, hello," he shouted into the radio. "Help, help, mayday!"

"Calm down," said a voice. "We've got your position, and we should be able to catch up to you in two or three hours."

"You don't understand. There's a plague! I know this sounds crazy, but the whole crew has ... changed. Be careful! Don't come on board!"

"Relax," said the voice. "We already know about it. You're not the first. Everything is under control."

"Thank you," Robinson said. "God, I've been so..."

"We have to sign off now," said the voice.

"But can't you .. I mean, I've been so ... "

"See you in a couple hours."

Then, just before the radio went dead, Robinson thought he heard a blaring of trumpets.

Two hours later, Robinson felt the tractor beams from the Federation cruiser lock on to his ship. He was in ecstasies of fear.

“You know,” the computer said, “that ship is full of lizards.”

“Oh god,” he said. “I was afraid of that.”

“You want me to do something about it?”

Robinson’s pulse jumped. “What do you mean?”

“If, oh, I don’t know, say one of our stabilizing jets went off about now, they’d be so much cosmic dust.”

“Can ... can you *do* that?”

“I’m supposed to protect the ship, am I right?”

“Then do it,” Robinson said. “Do it!”

All he felt was a slight acceleration, but in the viewscreen he watched a sunburst fade to black.

“Listen,” Robinson said. “We’re got to get back to Earth. There’s no telling how far this has spread. I may be the last human left out here. They need to find out why I’m immune, find some way to save the others.”

“Why?” said the computer.

“What?”

“I said, ‘Why?’ Who cares?”

Robinson felt like he’d just walked off the edge of a tall building. Numbly he remembered the biofeedback simulators. They responded to the overall mood of the crew. And Robinson was no longer in the majority.

Suddenly the air was full of tumbling green bodies. “You idiot!” he shouted at the computer. “You let them out! You can’t do this! You’ve got to get me to Earth!”

“Oh, Robinson,” said the computer. “Where’s your sense of humor?”