

Shepherd of the Planets

Alan Mattox

The background of the lower half of the page is a green field filled with a complex, abstract pattern of blue lines and shapes. The pattern consists of various horizontal, vertical, and diagonal segments, some of which form larger geometric shapes like triangles and diamonds. The overall effect is a dense, maze-like or circuit-like structure.

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SHEPHERD OF THE PLANETS

By ALAN MATTOX

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

Renner had a purpose in life. And the Purpose in Life had Renner.

THE star ship came out of space drive for the last time, and made its final landing on a scrubby little planet that circled a small and lonely sun. It came to ground gently, with the cushion of a retarder field, on the side of the world where it was night. In the room that would have been known as the bridge on ships of other days, instrument lights glowed softly on Captain Renner's cropped white hair, and upon the planes of his lean, strong face. Competent fingers touched controls here and there, seeking a response that he knew would not come. He had known this for long enough so that there was no longer any emotional impact in it for him. He shut off the control panel, and stood up.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "that's it. The fuel pack's gone!"

Beeson, the botanist, a rotund little man with a red, unsmiling face, squirmed in his chair.

"The engineers on Earth told us it would last a lifetime," he pointed out.

"If we were just back on Earth," Thorne, the ship's doctor, said drily, "we could tell them that it doesn't. They could start calculating again."

"But what does it mean?" David asked. He was the youngest member of the crew, signed on as linguist, and librarian to the ship.

"Just that we're stuck here—where ever that is—for good!" Farrow said bitterly.

"You won't have to run engines anymore," Dr. Thorne commented, knowing that remark would irritate Farrow.

Farrow glared at him. His narrow cheekbones and shallow eyes were shadowed by the control room lights. He was good with the engines which were his special charge, but beyond that, he was limited in both sympathy and imagination.

Captain Renner looked from face to face.

"We were lucky to set down safely," he said to them all. "We might have been caught too far out for a landing. It is night now, and I am going to get some rest. Tomorrow we will see what kind of a world this is."

He left the control room, and went down the corridor toward his quarters. The others watched him go. None of them made a move to leave their seats.

"What about the fuel pack?" David asked.

"Just what he said," Farrow answered him. "It's exhausted. Done for! We can run auxiliary equipment for a long time to come, but no more star drive."

"So we just stay here until we're rescued," David said.

"A fine chance for that!" Farrow's voice grew bitter again. "Our captain has landed us out here on the rim of the galaxy where there

won't be another ship for a hundred years!"

"I don't understand the man," Beeson said suddenly, looking around him belligerently. "What are we doing out here anyway?"

"Extended Exploration," said Thorne. "It's a form of being put out to pasture. Renner's too old for the Service, but he's still a strong and competent man. So they give him a ship, and a vague assignment, and let him do just about what he wants. There you have it."

He took a cigar from his pocket, and looked at it fondly.

"While they last, gentlemen," he said, holding it up. He snipped the end, and lit it carefully. His own hair had grown grey in the Service, and, in a way, the reason for his assignment to the ship was the same as Renner's.

"I think," he said slowly, "that Captain Renner is looking for something."

"But for what?" Beeson demanded. "He has taken us to every out-of-the-way, backward planet on the rim. And what happens? We land. We find the natives. We are kind to them. We teach them something, and leave them a few supplies. And then Renner loses interest, and we go on!"

"Perhaps it is for something in himself," David offered.

"Perhaps he will find it here," Thorne murmured. "I'm going to bed."

He got up from his seat.

David stood up, and went over to one of the observation ports. He ran back the radiation screen. The sky outside was very black, and filled with alien stars. He could see absolutely nothing of the landscape about them because of the dark. It was a poor little planet. It hadn't even a moon.

In the morning they opened up the ship, and let down the landing ramps. It was a very old world that they set foot upon. Whatever mountains or hills it had ever had, had long ago been leveled by erosion, so that now there was only a vaguely undulating plain studded with smooth and rounded boulders. The soil underfoot was packed and barren, and there was no vegetation for as far as they could see.

But the climate seemed mild and pleasant, the air warm and dry, with a soft breeze blowing. It was probable that the breeze would be always with them. There were no mountains to interfere with its passage, or alter its gentle play.

Off to one side, a little stream ran crystal clear over rocks and gravel. Dr. Thorne got a sample bottle from the ship, and went over to it. He touched his fingers to the water, and then touched them to his lips. Then he filled the sample bottle from the stream, and came back with it.

"It seems all right," he said. "I'll run an analysis of it, and let you know as soon as I can."

He took the bottle with him into the ship.

Beeson stood kicking at the ground with the toe of his boot. His head was lowered.

"What do you think of it?" Renner asked.

Beeson shrugged. He knelt down and felt of the earth with his hands. Then he got out a heavy-bladed knife and hacked at it until he had pried out a few hard pieces. He stood up again with these in his hands. He tried to crumble them, but they would not crumble. They would only break into bits like sun-dried brick.

"It's hard to tell," he said. "There seems to be absolutely no organic material here. I would say that nothing has grown here for a long, long time. Why, I don't know. The lab will tell us something."

Renner nodded.

For the rest of the day they went their separate ways; Renner to his cabin to make the entries that were needed when a flight was ended, even though that ending was not intentional; Beeson to prowling along the edge of the stream and pecking at the soil with a geologist's pick; and Farrow to his narrow little world of engines where he worked at getting ready the traction machines and other equipment that would be needed.

David set out on a tour of exploration toward the furthestmost nests of boulders. It was there that he found the first signs of vegetation. In and around some of the larger groups of rocks, he found mosses and lichens growing. He collected specimens of them to take back with him. It was out there, far from the ship, that he saw the first animate life.

When he returned, it was growing toward evening. He found that the others had brought tables from the ship, and sleeping equipment, and set it up outside. Their own quarters would have been more comfortable, but the ship was always there for their protection, if they needed it, and they were tired of its confinement. It was a luxury to sleep outdoors, even under alien stars.

Someone had brought food from the synthesizer, and arranged it on a table. They were eating when he arrived.

He handed the specimens of moss and lichen to Captain Renner, who looked at them with interest, and then passed them on to Beeson for his study.

"Sir?" David said.

"What is it, David?" Captain Renner asked.

"I think there are natives here," David said. "I believe that I saw one."

Renner's eyes lit up with interest. He laid down his knife and fork.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"It was just a glimpse," David said, "of a hairy face peering around a rock. It looked like one of those pictures of a cave man one used to see in the old texts."

Renner stood up. He moved a little way away, and stood staring out into the growing dark, across the boulder-studded plain.

"On a barren planet like this," he said, "they must lack so many things!"

"I'd swear he almost looks happy," Dr. Thorne whispered to the man next to him. It happened to be Farrow.

"Why shouldn't he be?" Farrow growled, his mouth full of food. "He's got him a planet to play with! That's what he's been aiming for—wait and see!"

The next few days passed swiftly. Dr. Thorne found the water from the little stream not only to be potable, but extremely pure.

Farrow got his machinery unloaded and ready to run. Among other things, there was a land vehicle on light caterpillar treads capable of running where there were no roads and carrying a load of several tons. And there was an out-and-out tractor with multiple attachments.

Beeson was busy in his laboratory working on samples from the soil.

David brought in the one new point that was of interest. He had been out hunting among the boulders again, and it was almost dark when he returned. He told Renner about it at the supper table, with the others listening in.

"I think the natives eat the lichen," he said.

"I haven't seen much else they could eat," Beeson muttered.

"There's more of the lichen than you might think," David said, "if you know where to look for it. But, even at that, there isn't very much. The thing is, it looks like it's been cropped. It's never touched if the plants are small, or half grown, or very nearly ready. But just as soon as a patch is fully mature, it is stripped bare, and there never seems to be any of it dropped, or left behind, or wasted."

"If that's all they have to live on," Thorne said, "they have it pretty thin!"

The natives began to be seen nearer to the camp. At first there were just glimpses of them, a hairy face or head seen at the edge of a rock, or the sight of a stocky figure dashing from boulder to boulder. As they grew braver, they came out more into the open. They kept their distance, and would disappear into the rocks if anyone made a move toward them, but, if no attention was paid them, they moved about freely.

In particular, they would come, each evening, to stand in a ragged line near one of the nests of boulders. From there, they would watch the crewmen eat. There were never more than twelve or fifteen of them, a bandy-legged lot, with thick, heavy torsos, and hairy heads.

It was on one of these occasions that Dr. Thorne happened to look up.

"Oh, oh!" he said. "Here it comes!"

Renner turned his head, and rose to his feet. The other men rose with him.

Three of the natives were coming toward the camp. They came along at a swinging trot, a sense of desperation and dedicated purpose in their manner. One ran slightly ahead. The other two followed behind him, shoulder to shoulder.

Farrow reached for a ray gun in a pile of equipment near him, and raised it.

"No weapons!" Captain Renner ordered sharply.

Farrow lowered his arm, but kept the gun in his hand.

The natives drew near enough for their faces to be seen. The leader was casting frightened glances from side to side and ahead of him as he came. The other two stared straight ahead, their faces rigid, their eyes blank with fear.

They came straight to the table. There they reached out suddenly, and caught up all the food that they could carry in their hands, and turned and fled with it in terror into the night.

Somebody sighed in relief.

"Poor devils!" Renner said. "They're hungry!"

There was a conference the following morning around one of the tables.

"We've been here long enough to settle in," Renner said. "It's time we started in to do something for this planet." He looked toward Beeson. "How far have you gotten?" he asked.

Beeson was, as usual, brisk and direct.

"I can give you the essentials," he said. "I can't tell you the whole story. I don't know it. To be brief, the soil is highly nitrogen deficient, and completely lacking in humus. In a way, the two points tie in together." He looked about him sharply, and then went on. "The nitrates are easily leached from the soil. Without the bacteria that grow around certain roots to fix nitrogen and form new nitrates, the soil was soon depleted.

"As to the complete lack of organic material, I can hazard only a guess. Time, of course. But, back of that, probably the usual history of an overpopulation, and a depleted soil. At the end, perhaps they ate everything, leaves, stems and roots, and returned nothing to the earth."

"The nitrates are replaceable?" Renner asked.

Beeson nodded.

"The nitrates will have formed deposits," he said, "probably near ancient lakes or shallow seas. It shouldn't be too hard to find some."

Renner turned to Farrow.

"How about your department?" he asked.

"I take it we're thinking of farming," Farrow said. "I've got equipment that will break up the soil for you. And I can throw a dam across the stream for water."

"There are seeds in the ship," Renner said, his eyes lighting with enthusiasm. "We'll start this planet all over again!"

"There's still one thing," Beeson reminded him drily. "Humus! Leaves, roots, organic material! Something to loosen up the soil, aerate it. Nothing will grow in a brick."

Renner stood up. He took a few slow paces, and then stood looking out at the groups of boulders studding the ancient plain.

"I see," he said. "And there's only one place to get it. We'll have to use the lichens and the mosses."

"There'll be trouble with the natives if you do," Thorne said.

Renner looked at him. He frowned thoughtfully.

"You'll be taking their only food," the doctor pointed out.

"We can feed them from the synthesizer," Renner answered. "We know that they will eat it."

"Why bother?" Farrow asked sourly.

Renner turned on him.

"Will the synthesizer handle it?" he asked.

"I guess so," Farrow grumbled. "For a while, at least. But I don't see what good the natives are to us."

"If we take their food," Renner said, "we're going to feed them. At least until such time as the crops come in, and they are able to feed themselves!"

"Are you building this planet for us, or for them?" Farrow demanded.

Renner turned away.

They put out cannisters of food for the natives that night. In the morning it was gone. Each evening, someone left food for them near their favorite nest of rocks. The natives took it in the dark, unseen.

Gradually, Captain Renner himself took over the feeding. He seemed

to derive a personal satisfaction from it. Gradually, too, the natives began coming out into the open to receive it. Before long, they were waiting for him every evening as he brought them food.

The gathering of the lichen began. They picked it by hand, working singly or in pairs, searching out the rocks and hidden places where it grew. From time to time they would catch glimpses of the natives watching them from a distance. They were careful not to get close.

On one of these occasions, Captain Renner and David were working together.

"Do they have a language?" Captain Renner asked.

"Yes, sir," David answered. "I have heard them talking among themselves."

"Do you suppose you can learn it?" Renner asked. "Do you think you could get near enough to them to listen in?"

"I could try," David offered.

"Then do so," Renner said. "That's an assignment."

Thereafter David went out alone. He found that getting close to the natives was not too difficult. He tried to keep out of their sight, while still getting near enough to them to hear their voices. They were undoubtedly aware of his presence, but, with the feeding, they had lost their fear of the men, and did not seem to care.

Bit by bit he learned their language, starting from a few key roots and sounds. It was a job for which he had been trained.

Time passed rapidly, and the work went on. Captain Renner let his beard grow. It came out white and thick, and he did not bother to trim it. The others, too, became more careless in their dress, each man following his own particular whim. There was no longer need for a

taut ship.

Farrow threw a dam across the little stream, and, while the water grew behind it, went on to breaking up the soil with his machines. Beeson searched for nitrate, and found it. He brought a load of it back, and this, together with the moss and lichen, was chopped into the soil. In the end, it was the lichen that was the limiting factor. There was only so much of it, so the size of the plot that they could prepare was small.

"But it's a start," Renner said. "That's all we can hope for this first year. This crop will furnish more material to be chopped back into the soil. Year by year it will grow until the inhabitants here will have a new world to live in!"

"What do you expect to get out of it?" Farrow asked bitinglly.

Renner's eyes glowed with an inner light.

Renner's beard grew with the passing months until it became a luxuriant thing. He let his hair go untrimmed too, so that, with his tall, spare figure, he took on a patriarchal look. And, with the passing months, there came that time which was to be spring for this planet. The first green blades of the new planting showed above the ground.

The natives noticed it with awe, and kept a respectful distance.

That evening, when it was time for the natives' feeding, the men gathered about. Little by little the feeding had become a ritual, and they would often go out to watch it. It was always the same. Renner would step forward away from the others a little way, the load of food in his hands. The natives would come to stand before him in their ragged line, their leader a trifle to the front. There they would bow, and begin a chant that had become a part of the ritual with the passing time.

With the first green planting showing, there was a look of deep satisfaction in Renner's eyes as he stepped forward this night. His hair had grown quite long by now, and his white beard blew softly in the constant wind. There was a simple dignity about him as he stood there, his head erect, and looked upon the natives as his children.

The natives began their chant. It became louder.

"Tolava—" they said, and bowed.

As usual, Farrow was nettled.

"What does the man want anyway?" he asked out loud. "To be God?"

Renner could not help but hear him. He did not turn his head.

"David!" he said.

"Sir?" David asked, stepping forward.

"You understand their language now, don't you?" Renner asked.

"Yes, sir," David said.

"Then translate!" Renner ordered. "Out loud, please, so that the others may hear!"

"Tolava—" the natives chanted, bowing.

"Tolava—our father," David said, following the chant. Suddenly he swallowed, and hesitated for a moment. Then he straightened himself, and went sturdily on. "Tolava—our father—who art from the heavens—give us—this day—our bread!"

THE END

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