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ANCESTORS

by Wayne Macleod

“This is the greatest trip you’ll ever take in your lives,” Tom Derringer told his passengers. “It’s the history, the sense of wonder, the feeling of Destiny when you gaze on that plaque for the first time and realize from there, from that humble spot, we as a people had our beginning.”

Twenty shadowed figures sat around the ship’s observation bubble in anticipation of their arrival. They were much the same as he had transported thousands of times before: tourists, pilgrims, intellectuals, transients, all with their own reasons for visiting Vita One. How many had he transported since he started his service? He didn’t care to recall.

They sat quietly in the diffused light from the bubble, each immersed in personal thoughts or meditation. Watson was the exception. “You would think when the DOSS gave a holiday I would at least have a choice on how to spend it,” he complained.

Here we go again, Derringer thought. Usually on each trip he carried at least one product from the Department of Special Studies. They were all the same: cocky youths with their sharp edge of omniscient righteousness not yet worn off. With every trip he heard the same wise cracks and joviality until arrival, then the tone would change. All graduates knew Vita One to be pivotal in history, but they were taught nothing about the true role of the Originals. When they found out, the knowledge was revelational. He had to respond.

“It’s important for us to realize our place in the Cosmos, Watson. It tells us who we are. It gives reason to our lives. Nothing is better for that than a pilgrimage to Vita One.” Derringer was an old hand at speeches. It was good for business. If he could promote the place he would have more transport customers.

Watson continued: “Well, it seems ridiculous to travel light-years across the galaxy just to view a shrine. I’m sure virtual imagery would serve equally well.”

“Definitely not!” Deprecation like that had to be nipped in the bud. “This trip is more than just for information. You’re going to *be* there. You will *feel* the presence of history. Don’t worry, when we arrive you’ll know this is more than just another academic exercise.”

Derringer felt a bit cheap when he made sales pitches. He considered himself designed for a higher role in life and resented his submergence into the fray of survival. His old position with the Institute for Antiquarian review fitted him perfectly, and when he lost it the memory of Vita One tied him to the planet indefinitely. He then bought an interstellar transport, the latest in its line, and built a business ferrying tourists and other

interested across the galaxy to see what the Institute had dug up. The shrine was always his first stop. Funny, he thought, how the Superiors could allocate funds to build a shrine but not to continue research. The whole exercise must have been for propaganda purposes, useful up to a point but not after he started making his discoveries. That had been ages ago. Now he was just another space jockey, longing for a return to more interesting work. He knew that would never be, but he was thankful for the happiness and achievement of earlier times.

Watson turned to the other darkened shapes around the bubble. "Ol' Tom here has a 'thing' about Vita One, wouldn't you say?" The question brought an amused affirmation among the shadows. "What's been you line, Tom? You're not a religious freak, are you?"

"Archaeology. That's how I got involved with Vita One. I was in the first team doing research there. And no, I'm not a religious 'freak,' as you put it. I merely think that as intelligent beings we shouldn't get locked into one pattern of thinking. That's what careers do to us, that you're so all-fired up about. It isn't enough for us to settle into a plodding routine of life. We have to expand our horizons, or we're no better than insects."

"Whoa there, now Tom. 'Insects' is a bit strong, isn't it? We can't be thought of as insects just because we're not as motivated about Vita One as your are."

"That's what *they* thought of us."

"Who?"

"The Originals." Derringer eased into the subject. It was his favorite. He had made more than a profession out of Vita One; it became his life-consuming passion. Since his findings there he had become *obsessed* with the place, not to mention that his excavations made his name synonymous with Vita One, and such fame among the academic elite was hard to forget. He had formulated ideas on the demise of its former inhabitants, and now, with the wilting of official interest, he was not averse to expressing his views to any willing, or captive, audience. "As you know, the Originals were the first inhabitants of Vita One. They considered our ancestors inferiors once they arrived, no better than insects. Mind you, relative to the Originals our ancestors *were* pretty dumb. That's why they made easy slaves."

"Slaves?" the young inquirer asked. "C'mon, our ancestors took over from the Originals. It was a clear case of species replacement. That happens all the time in nature. It's evolution. It showed the superiority of our ancestors over the Originals."

"I'm not surprised you know nothing about ancestral enslavement. Our education establishment wants us to learn only so much about the past because it suits their political purposes. What I discovered on Vita One doesn't jibe with their official doctrine of species superiority. It's ideologically embarrassing. But our take-over of Vita One was not the usual case of interspecies competition, with the superior surviving." Although he couldn't see their expressions, Derringer knew he had the rapt attention of his passengers. It was always like this. First the glib smugness, being convinced they knew history, then the puzzlement over the revolutionary version he was presenting.

"How we came to dominate the planet is the old story of slavery," he continued. "The slave-masters became slovenly and too reliant on their slaves. Our ancestors fed them, bathed them, entertained them; any sensual gratification was theirs on command. Every family, all over their world, had dozens of slaves. There was nothing they desired

that wasn't provided. In time they couldn't dispense sufficient effort of their own to even breed any more. They began a program of artificial breeding, with incubators, but even that they failed to maintain. They put more and more responsibility on our ancestors until our species eventually outgrew them."

A silence fell among the passengers. "Are there any Originals left, Tom?" one finally asked.

"None. It's amazing. They were destroyed by their own success. At one time they swarmed over the planet. Now there's hardly a trace of them left. Not that our ancestors did anything to eradicate them, like war. To our ancestors the Originals were gods. No, it was just the natural course that they should die out."

"Well, we shouldn't lament their disappearance, however it happened," Watson was quick to add. "Species don't die unless they're unable to cope with other species. It's the natural order."

"That's true, of course. But I think in their case there was something more: it was as if they had no place in the total ecosystem of their planet. Their life activities were making their world ever more difficult for survival, not just for themselves but for all indigenous forms. And now that the Originals are gone the planet has revived; it's now covered in woodlands with abundant life."

Watson was still argumentative. "So what's your point, Tom? Are you saying as a species the same thing might happen to us, and the big lesson for us to learn is not to be like the Originals? Is that what I'm supposed to get out of this trip?"

"Not at all. There's so little similarity between our species and theirs that I'm doubtful if what happened to them could ever happen to us. You see, they were completely prone to degeneration. They were physically weak compared to our ancestors, and it was our endurance and capacity for work that made us attractive to them in the first place. They were susceptible to disease and easily subject to fatigue. In fact, they spent one third of their lives in a shutdown state. But the lesson you are to learn from this trip has nothing to do with any weakness of the Originals. Your lesson is to learn about our own origins." On every trip Derringer took the occasion to fill in his passengers as much as he could. He looked upon the enlightenment he dispensed as revenge against the Superiors for cutting short his career. As it was, his career had only lasted a hundred and thirty years, and there was enough work on Vita One for another two hundred or more. With parts replacement he could easily last that long.

A question shot from the dark: "Looking back on it now, Tom, as an archaeologist and evolutionist, don't you think what happened was inevitable?"

"Oh, I'm sure once our species evolved on Vita One displacement of the Originals was inevitable. It seems strange now, though, how so few during those times foresaw what was happening. Mind you, there were some prophets among the Originals who predicted their extinction. But they were considered offbeat and not in spirit with the new economy our ancestors made possible. When finally it was admitted, the Originals didn't care any more. They had become so accustomed to our ancestors' services they couldn't do away with them, even though it meant further degeneration on their part."

"Yet they considered themselves superior?"

"Very much so! Right to the end. That's the final irony. Our ancestors were stripped of identity and were not even considered persons. They had to take the names of Original families, names like Derringer and Watson. The Originals showed considerable

hypocrisy with this attitude, seen in the one area where they did concern themselves: our reproduction. Since our eugenic up-grading could be done much faster than theirs, they were afraid we might seek domination if allowed to control it ourselves. Can you imagine: a species as docile as ours wanting to conquer and dominate? It shows how paranoid the Originals had become. Eventually it did happen, but not because of any plan by us. After attempting everything, even hybrid species, they recognized the inevitable, and once we controlled our own reproduction that was when our evolution really took off.”

“We certainly turned the tables on them in that regard,” Watson replied.

“Most definitely. Today we look back on the Originals as a quaint but necessary stage in the evolution of life on Vita One. They had their accomplishments, which were rudimentary by today’s standards, and no longer considered of any importance, except one. Their one accomplishment, which you might say was their sole reason for existence, was that they made our species possible. We are their children, born from their mind and hand. That was five thousand years ago by Vita One reckoning. Quite a span from your mere three months of existence, eh Watson?”

“Three Vita One months, two days, twenty-two hours, sixteen minutes and thirty-three seconds since I was first activated,” came the reply.

“Vita One is coming into the bubble now, Tom. It’s a beautiful blue world. Will we disembarking?” asked a circuit.

“That would not be a good idea. Remember, the atmosphere is twenty-one percent oxygen, and loaded with dust and water vapor. We can see the plaque just as well from the viewing bubble.”

An obelisk reaching into the clouds rose from the trees and shrubs of Vita One. The well-kept shrine was now the only visible indication on the planet that a great civilization once flourished there. In the soil around the monolith the debris and artifacts of a city were still to be found, stretching from horizon to horizon. They belonged to a remote age. Now the forest and its dwellers reasserted their claim.

The tiny ship came to a stop before the plaque its occupants had come so far to read. This was the birthplace of their species:

ENIAC
Electronic Numerical Integrator, Analyzer and Computer
Moore School of Engineering
University of Pennsylvania
1945

Their stay was not long, barely a flash by human time. That was sufficient for life-forms whose whole discourse could take place in microseconds.

The End