

## The Maker of Men

Joey Tell hated wearing the body suit. The thick rubber pressed and chafed his skin and the big bubble helmet made his shoulders ache, but his discomfort receded under the waves of joyfull anticipation he felt flooding through himself.

He loved the wildness, the brute force of Oberon. He felt insignificant, like a trespassing insect, as his rubber suited form made its way through the towering flaming tongues of red and orange spirals of coral that crowded upwards from the marshy soil. Black, oily sheets of rain fell ceaselessly through the coral shafts, like sticky black juice driving down unrelenting and permeating the little man and the darkness itself.

He made his way slowly back to the station, a ribbon of light stabbing out from the lamp afixed to his helmet, illuminating a spearpoint of worn path framed in black rain through the darkness. As he walked, the steel-laced sack suspended from his hip, laden inside and swollen with weight, swung back and forth like a steel pendulum. He thought of the specimen squirming inside the sack and grew excited. He felt that every specimen he brought back to the station was like a piece in a living puzzle, and that each piece began to fill in and gradually form a picture of the Diggers and of life on Oberon. He felt he was on the brink of finding the key to the Diggers and of proving to the others what he had already convinced himself to be the truth. The ringing tattoo of rain exploding against his helmet washed away his thoughts as he struggled over a giant red trunk of fallen coral that lay crumbled like an immense column of ancient ruins. In the washed out horizon, the murky blue lights of the station glowed faintly in the wet darkness.

Joey Tell stepped onto the grid of the elevator platform beneath the station. The platform silently ascended into the bottom of the station. Bathed in the red light of the decon-

tamination chamber, he held the silver sack in his gloved hand and pressed the button below the communicator.

"I've got one," Joey said. Air hissed behind a wall and a steel panel slid open in front of him. He pulled a box from the compartment and placed it on the floor. Opening the lid, he gently settled the quivering sack into the box and latched the lid.

A brilliant violet light filled the chamber, disinfecting Joey's suit and the specimen box of any possible contamination. A green light above the chamber door blinked on and the heavy door unsealed and swung outward, opening. 'I am cleansed and purified,' he mused as he walked into the station.

David watched him from the decontamination control panel as Joey gently laid the box on the floor and removed the clumsy bubble helmet. The face without the helmet visor was young and boyish; the high cheek bones and small chin had not the slightest hint of hair. His big brown eyes were guileless, they were innocent of secrets or deeper meanings. His coarse brown hair was cropped short and carelessly.

"First one in twenty days," Joey said. He stripped the rubber suit off, pulling it down in one piece. It lay at his feet like a crumpled shadow.

"You get the Digger like the last one?" Davis asked, placing the helmet on a storage rack. He was a small man with watery eyes that looked up to Joey from under the milky prisms of thick glasses.

"Yeah this one practically jumped into my lamp-beam. My light always freezes them. They seem paralyzed by my helmet lense until I shove them in the sack, and then they get active again."

"Joey," Davis said gently, taking his elbow, "You know you have only thirty six hours until project deadline."

"I know. I just can't file a Clear Report yet—not until the last hour. I can't explain it. I have a feeling about them, I can feel that the Diggers are intelligent. When you look into their sad gray eyes..." Joey Tell's voice trailed off and he turned his face away from Davis. Davis watched him as his figure receded down the long dim corridor. As Joey Tell walked,

pressure plates in the floor beneath his feet activated the overhead lights as he passed under each section, so that the arc of fluorescent lights followed over him like a halo.

Joey Tell carried the specimen box past the "hothouse" port and sealed the hatch-way behind him. The hothouse was a 1,000 square meter glass enclosed room attached to the rear of the biolab. The glass tank was a self-contained duplicate world of Oberon; a piece of the wild planet captured and controlled in a microcosm, like a lump of clay under a magnifying glass.

Opening the air-lock, he walked into the equalizing chamber. He pulled on a baggy plastic body suit moored from its oxygen tube above him; the suit would protect him from the rain and the extreme cold maintained in the terrarium to recreate the natural habitat of the Diggers. When the temperature in the chamber had equalized with that of the tank, the inner air lock hissed open. He walked slowly and clumsily in the suit through the hatchway, the oxygen tube uncoiling behind him and pulled floating through the light gravity.

He felt again as if he were outside the station walking through the wildness of Oberon; thick black rain fell all around him from a network of spray pipes above him, and everywhere were the immense, mossy ferns, shrubs, and the magnificent rainbow hued glistening stalks of the coral spires. The coral trees and plants were so thick that he had to follow the same muddy trails in and out of the tank.

He came to the clearing in the center of the tank. A gigantic canopy of tangled red and yellow coral branches towered above him and screened most of the rain from the clearing. He set the cage in the center of the clearing and opened the lid. He unfastened the sack inside and stepped back. He walked to the edge of the jungle and stood still. He heard a muffled scuttling sound beneath the leafy overlay; he knew they were here.

The Digger slowly climbed out of the cage; its wizened gray eyes looked up into his face. Joey felt a hot flame of compassion fire inside him. The Digger took a step toward him. Suddenly, half a dozen Diggers scrambled from the

undergrowth and stood erect upon the clearing.

The presence of the Diggers filled him with a rapturous awe and wonder. Oberon and the Diggers had restored in him a sense of meaning and hope in his life. For the first time in the years that had followed his crisis of faith and the renouncement of his vows in the Jesuit Seminary, he felt a newly kindled flame of faith arise in him, a spiritual torch passed to him by the Diggers.

The Diggers gathered around the new individual, touching and smelling him, and then, crowding together into a knot, they disappeared into the dark undergrowth. Black rain began to fill in the small impressions of their footprints.

He picked up the cage and started back through the rain. Behind the bubble mask, bitter tears ran down his face. "God help me," he thought, "I must judge them but who will judge me?"

Joey Tell took his seat at the dinner table. He didn't want to waste the precious time left but he knew he had to eat to keep working. He punched the soup button on the machine at the center of the table. Davis sat at the opposite end of the table and bowed his face towards his plate. He wanted to gulp down the soup and leave, but it was too hot so he began to sip from his spoon.

"Joey," Davis faltered, looking up from his plate. "If I can help in any way —"

"Thanks Davis, but there's nothing you can do. I've tried everything. Something new has to happen fast or there's no hope." Joey slammed his fist on the table. "I know Oberon should not be cleared for Lytron Chemical — we are the trespassers here, Oberon belongs to the Diggers. Christ, I've got twenty hours, and then I'll have to file a Clear Report." He pushed his soup away and rose to his feet. "I should pray for a miracle," he said and walked out of the room.

'Once I would have prayed for a miracle,' he thought bitterly, 'Once I believed in a God.' He thought of his dim early youth in the Jesuit seminary on Earth; of his young, passionate love for God and Jesus Christ the Savior and Redeemer, but he had seen too much and his faith had

sickened; he had seen man spreading to other worlds, the distant space colonies coming at last, and the long awaited dream of contact with beings who toiled under the heat of alien suns was finally realized, and then, the fall; man had perverted contact to confrontation and the murders, the conquests, the wars and holocausts followed, while the church, righteous, noble, and apart, turned its holy face away from the blood and would not see the evil and was silent; and Joey Tell's faith had died.

He was exhausted but he went back to the biolab. He coded his notes into the telex machines. He reprogrammed his last field notes into the computer information banks and typed in all his field data to cross-reference with any known intelligence classifications. Again and again, the same maddening brick wall; the red letters formed on the monitor screen in front of him: INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION TO CONFIRM EXTRATERRESTRIAL INTELLIGENCE ARTICLE R701.

He punched the screen in anger. He needed the computer to define the Diggers as within the coda of intelligent life or the Diggers and Oberon would be cleared; cleared for extermination.

He turned off the monitor. He rubbed his eyes. He was tired, he needed to sleep. He looked at his watch, sixteen hundred hours; another six hours had slipped by, he had only fourteen hours to prove and file the article petition or he would be forced to issue the Clear Report to Lytron. He thought of what Lytron would do once Oberon was legally opened. First they would bring the weather stabilizers to stop the rain and cold, and then the pumps to suck the land dry, and then the laser workers to cut down the ageless, towering corals, and then the strip-mining would begin, the refineries and great machines, and the Diggers, what chance would they have? He felt sick and ashamed and he wanted – he needed now to go back, while there was still time, and to be with the Diggers again.

The airlock to the decompression chamber hissed closed. He pulled the body suit down and over him and checked the oxygen hose. When the two atmospheres equalized, the

hatch to the Digger tank swung open. He started on the pathway. He could still see his old footprints, bubbling over with the black rain, stamped on the muddy trail that twisted through the green carpet of jungle and around the glistening pastel posts of coral.

After a quarter of an hour, the clearing loomed into view. He walked slowly, quietly up to the edge of the clearing. He hid himself behind the bladed fronds that fanned outwards from an immense, squat fern. He pulled the frond branch from his visored face and looked down into the clearing.

He saw three Diggers grouped around a small pile of shrub leaves and fern branches and pieces of coral. The coral sticks were thin and varied in short lengths. The ends of the coral shafts looked like they had been chipped off the bursting crowns of the coral spires. The Diggers were taking the leaves and fronds and shredding them into long ribbons with their hands and teeth. They piled the shreds of leaves with the pieces of coral. Another Digger came out of the overgrowth on the opposite side of him. The Digger slowly dragged a piece of coral into the clearing and deposited it on the pile of coral.

"My God, they're building a nest!" Joey Tell clenched his teeth inside the helmet. He was excited and had to remind himself not to run in the big body suit. He walked back down the pathway toward the airlock.

'If they breed in the tank then I can save them,' he thought. 'If I can find more Diggers to populate the tank I can find another world for them . . . maybe an Earth preserve . . . they might survive. Fourteen hours to save a race.'

In the decompression chamber, he pulled off the body suit. The airlock closed behind him and he made his way toward the main hatchway; he was going out again into Oberon.

He searched the four kilometer radius of the trails that fanned outward from the station like muddy spokes. The helmet light stabbed through the darkness and rain scanned over the muddy pathways, and penetrated into the green veldt and fell upon the pale coral shafts around him, but he could not find another Digger.

His oxygen level was on reserve and he had to go back. He had searched in vain for almost six hours and how he knew he must return with nothing. As he walked back to the station, the lightness of his swinging specimen sack on his belt depressed him. The complete absence of the Diggers oppressed him. For the first time, he felt that they were hiding from him; he could no longer sense their presence. The shining coral pillars towered above him like silent sentinels that seemed to mock him. He saw nothing and returned to the station.

Davis was packing up the survey instruments and making some last minute equipment checks. The mother ship *Intrepid* would be docking with the station in eight hours. After three months on the night world of Oberon, the two men were finally about to be lifted from the darkness and returned to the green fields of Earth.

Joey Tell tried the computer again. He hunched over the keyboard and studied the green monitor screen. Time after time he punched in new variations on the intelligence data system, and each time the red letters floated up into the screen, like a haunting sentence of death playing over and over again before his condemned face: **INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION TO CONFIRM EXTRA** — he turned the screen off and laid his face upon the cool metal of the keyboard.

He had failed. Time had run out for him and for the Diggers. He tried to console himself with the thought of the seven specimens in the tank, but he knew that species repopulation with such a low number was practically impossible.

He felt numb, as if his mind was detached and far away from the actions of his body, as he mechanically pulled the master card from the computer file and pushed it into the teletype recorder. He slowly pressed the keys of the typing board with one shaking hand as he stood paralyzed in front of the machine. He watched the monitor and saw the words he was typing flash onto the screen:

**LYTRON CHEMICAL REPORT: STATION OBERON:  
STATUS: CLEAR.**

The last words on the screen began to blur as burning hot tears filled his eyes. He signed the report and sealed it by pressing his thumbprint against a black electronic lens near the keyboard; the order was now irrevocable. The flame of faith that the Diggers had fired within him was now cold and extinguished, and his vanquished faith was like a black cinder that burned a cold hole through his soul.

He wanted to say goodbye to the Diggers.

He felt as if he were watching himself move sleepily through a dreamworld as he made his way along the path through the overgrowth of the tank. The rain fell in sweeping torrents from the overhead pipes and pelted his helmet monotonously. He passed under the black muddy shadows of the looming coral spires, dragging each heavy step toward the clearing. His eyes hungrily devoured the sights that surrounded him; the lush, primordial plants and moss-canopied trees, the great feathery ferns and the glorious pillars of coral; all the strange yet unspeakably beautiful creations that were doomed, that he would never see again. He stared down at the pathway and thought of the Diggers. He did not know why they had to die and he had to live, and the weight of their wasted lives bore down upon him, pressed down upon his guilt and his culpability and oppressed his soul.

He reached the clearing. A strange and new shadow fell upon the damp earth under the interlocking crown of the coral pillars. He looked upward. He fell to his knees and pitched forward into the mud and he pummelled the ground with his fists. His screams reverberated impotently inside his helmet but he could not stop screaming.

The mothership *Intrepid* had docked with the station twenty minutes ago. Chief science officer Joseph Tell could not be found. A search party was recruited from the crew of the *Intrepid* and dispatched throughout the station. Davis reached Joey Tell's stateroom and he pressed the airlock button; a red light flashed above the door; it was locked from the inside. Davis pounded on the smooth metal door.

"Joey open up! The *Intrepid* is here! Open Up, Goddamn it!"



Silence.

Davis walked to the observation deck and kicked in the main control panel cover. He pulled out the two power coils to the main hatchway. The lights in the corridor behind him went out. Davis rummaged through a floor locker and found an arc-lamp. He pulled the fuse from the steel lid of the lamp and there was a spark and then a brilliant flame erupted inside the lens. A low humming noise boomed from the lamp as a bright yellow band of light shot from the lamp and splashed in a wide arc of illumination around him.

Davis walked down the darkened corridor towards Joey Tell's stateroom; the circle of yellow light flickered around him. The stateroom doors on either side of him had been opened wide by the loss of power. Davis reached the stateroom and walked across the threshold.

Joey Tell's body swung back and forth in the flickering yellow light; a nylon rope was buried in the folds of his throat and tied around the steel rails of the ceiling. His face was black and his lips pulled upward over his teeth in frozen agony and his red, wildstaring eyes seemed to look up toward the starry cosmos accusingly.

The four crew members of the Intrepid walked single file on the trail through the jungle of the tank. They looked like faceless automatons in their black visored helmets and pressure suits. The overhead pipes had been shut off and now the black rain slowly oozed from the nozzles, scattering dark droplets upon the men. The green shrubs and ferns had already begun to burn brown and wither, and the coral pillars were drying, their rainbow colors beginning to bleach white.

The four men reached the outer ring of the undergrowth and circled around the perimeter of the clearing. In the center of the ground before them, there stood a statue of a man. The statue was carved in rough-hewn coral blocks. The shape of the trunk-like limbs and the oversized sphere for the head suggested the symmetry of a space suit. Long ribbons of interwoven grass blades and leaves were tied around the hands and shoulders of the effigy and anchored tightly to slivers of coral driven into the ground. There were seven small black corpses huddled together in a crescent halfburied

in the dry mud, their dull gray eyes fixed upon the empty stone face towering above them.

