

Saucer Men

The Venusian waitress brought another round to the table. Century Smith and O'Hara sat slumped and exhausted, still wearing their worn spacemen's leathers. Smith dug out some zinc coins and paid the girl. O'Hara caught her eye and motioned over to a table in the corner of the bar.

"What's with them? I don't ever see their sort coming into a dump like this." The engineer was half drunk but not yet getting belligerent as was his routine after several months in space.

The waitress glanced over at the table in question and rolled her silver eyes. "Them been here all day. Them drink distilled water but nothin else. Boss go to kick them out but they pay more for water than you Earth men pay for whiskey so him say them can stay."

O'Hara's attitude started to build. "Saucer Men give me the creeps." He was addressing Century Smith now. The waitress, seeing she was once more being ignored, gathered up the coins and empty glasses and slid behind the bead curtain leading to the back room. "What are they doing here anyway?" O'Hara continued. "I thought they never touched the surface. I thought they always stayed in space. We've delivered cargo to enough of them up there."

Smith glanced casually at the corner table. Around the table sat five humanoids. They wore tight, rubbery red space suits with black gloves. Only their pale green heads were exposed. Each looked identical to his (or her?) companions; average human height and thin with small faces, blank expressions, no ears, yellow eyes and a somewhat bulging head. They weren't talking to each other that he could see. All they did was occasionally raise a glass of water to their thin lips.

O'Hara's usual post-voyage aggravation had found its target for the night. "Green bastards paid us half of what we agreed on for that Titan cargo. Claimed we let it get exposed to gamma rays!"

"We did," said Smith.

"That's beside the point."

Smith remained laconic, resigned to the inevitable.

"They're clones you know," said O'Hara.

"You don't know that."

"Just look at them! Clones!"

"Because they look the same doesn't mean they're clones necessarily."

"I hate clones!"

"You hate anyone that rubs you wrong the first night down planet."

O'Hara pushed his chair back and rose to his feet, glaring at the Saucer Men who seemed oblivious to the coming fight. "You got my back Smith?" asked O'Hara without looking at Smith.

"Don't be an ass O'Hara", said Smith, knowing he was wasting his breath.

"I hate clones!"

O'Hara was making his way over to the corner table. The waitress emerged from behind the beaded curtain to watch the coming performance. Smith got up and dropped a few more coins and exited the bar. He could hear O'Hara's bellicose voice rising behind him. Smith began to wind his way into the crowded street, thronging with blue natives and varied races from the other planets. There was a faint sound of breaking glass back in the bar.

The shore patrol brought O'Hara, unconscious, back to the rocket the next day. Smith went to see the engineer. There was no physical damage to O'Hara's body but he slept straight through the next three days. When he awoke he was a different man. Smith asked him about the fight. O'Hara, in a barely audible voice, said, "There wasn't any fight." When Smith pressed for details, O'Hara remained silent. The bellicose, hard drinking spaceman was gone; replaced by a sullen, untalkative stranger with a haunted look in his eyes. He remained engaged with his duties but that haunted look remained for the rest of the time Century Smith knew O'Hara.

Seven months later, O'Hara was scalded to death in the engine room by a jet of radio-active steam. The Chief Engineer said that O'Hara had deliberately opened the valve.