

## Stone Heads

Century Smith climbed down the ladder from the hatch in the side of the towering silver rocket. The heat from the now silent engines had turned the ground beneath the ship into glass, their atomic fire melting the sandy Martian surface. Smith was happy for his insulated boots. The ground remained hot enough to boil water. As was common on the red planet, the plain where they had landed stretched almost flat to the horizon in all directions, sandy and evenly strewn with fist sized rocks. There was no canal nearby, not even a dry one. But the plain did have a very notable feature; it was home to a bewildering number of cyclopean stone heads, most well over one hundred feet high.

Smith approached the nearest head. A minor sand storm was blowing and the Martian air was gritty and uncomfortably hot. His spaceman's worn leathers protected his body from the abrasive wind but his cheeks were already feeling sore from the stinging particles. He tugged a scarf up over his face and his goggles down over his eyes.

Weathered by eons of sand blasting winds, the carven face before him was extremely worn but still discernible. Smith turned around slowly, looking at the more distant heads surrounding the ship and receding towards the horizon. They all bore a similar face. There were so many that counting them all would be pointless. They reminded him of pictures he'd seen of Easter Island back on Earth. He'd never been to Earth to see the Easter Island heads first hand, no living human had. Tourists and merchant spacemen alike tend to stay away from destinations that are radio-active.

Smith walked in a circle around the giant head. While the face was humanoid, he did not recognize the features as belonging to any known race in the solar system. Perhaps there was a hint of Venusian in the sunken cheeks, Martian in the almond shaped eyes but the overall countenance was something unrelated to the blue natives of Venus or the ghostly and frail surviving Martians. There was something vaguely unnatural perhaps, something unrelated to most of the other sentient beings from the nine planets. Was this the face of the Ancient Race he wondered; the legendary first beings to arrive across the gulf of space from the distant stars? The humanoid and other races of the solar system all shared similar legends about the Ancient Race but some sort of unspoken taboo lay on any sharing of remembrance of these long ago first people that most Earth men dismissed as a fantasy. Something in the back of Smith's mind told him his guess was correct and he felt the nape of his neck tingle with that thought.

Behind him a human head, course featured and black with grease, poked out of the hatch on the side of the silver rocket. It was O'Hara. "Nix the sight-seeing Smith! See to those damned O rings! I'd like to get the repairs finished sometime this year!"

"Keep your shirt on O'Hara. I'll get to it as soon as the ground cools enough for me to only get second degree burns," Smith shouted above the wind.

As he returned to his work, the image of the heads stayed in his mind. When the repairs were finished, the Captain was eager to lift off so Smith didn't get a chance to look at the heads again. With

the crew strapped into their launch chairs, the atomic engines roared to life and the rocket lifted up and into the dusty orange sky.

Later in orbit, while Smith was stowing his tool belt in his locker, he found himself thinking more about the heads. He couldn't get over how they were all carved in the same way, looking upwards as if beseeching the heavens. But that wasn't what gave Smith a chill up his spine. It was the expression that had been carved by those ancient craftsmen on all of the weathered faces. It was an expression that could only be described as one of stark terror. That desolate Martian plain seemed, for the entire world, to be screaming up at the stars.