

Plaything



Larry Niven

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PLAYTHING

Man is the meanest, toughest, orneriest creature in the Known Universe. Of course, the Known Universe isn't very extensive yet...

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THE children were playing six-point Overlord, hopping from point to point over a hexagonal diagram drawn in the sand, when the probe broke atmosphere over their heads. They might have sensed it then, for it was heating fast as it entered atmosphere; but nobody happened to look up.

Seconds later the retrorocket tired.

A gentle rain of infrared light bathed the limonite sands. Over hundreds of square miles of orange martian desert, wide-spaced clumps of black grass uncurled their leaves to catch and hoard the heat. Tiny sessile things buried beneath the sand raised fan-shaped probes.

The children hadn't noticed yet, but their ears were stirring. Their ears sensed heat rather than sound; unless they were listening to some heat source, they usually remained folded like silver flowers against the children's heads. Now they uncurled, flowers blooming, showing black centers; now they twitched and turned, seeking. One turned

and saw it.

A point of white light high in the east, slowly setting.

The children talked to each other in coded pulses of heat, opening and closing their mouths to show the warm interiors.

Hev.!

What is it? Let's go see!

They hopped off across the limonite sand, forgetting the Overlordgame, racing the meet the falling thing.

IT WAS down when they got there and

still shouting-hot. The probe was big, as big as a dwelling, a fat cylinder with a rounded roof above and a great hot mouth beneath. Black and white paint in a checker-board pattern gave it the look of a giant's toy. It rested on three comically splayed metal legs ended in wide, circular feet.

The children began rubbing against the metal skin, flashing pulses of contentment as they absorbed the heat.

The probe trembled. Motion in-side. The children jumped back, stood looking at each other, each ready to run if the others did. None wanted to be first. Suddenly it was too late. One whole curved wall of the probe dropped

outward and thudded to the sand.

A child crawled out from underneath, rubbing his head and flashing heat from his mouth: words he shouldn't have learned yet. The wound in his scalp steamed briefly before the edges pulled shut.

The small, intense white sun, halfway down the sky, cast opaque black shadow across the opening in the probe. In the shadow something stirred.

The children watched, awed.

ABEL paused in the opening, then rolled out, using the slab of re-entry shielding as a ramp. ABEL was a cluster of

plastic and metal widgetry mounted on a low plat-form slung between six balloon tires. When it reached the sand it hesitated as if uncertain, then rolled out onto Mars, jerkily, feeling its way.

The child who'd been bumped by the ramp hopped over to kick the moving thing. ABEL stopped at once. The child shied back.

Suddenly an adult stood among them.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING? Nothing, one answered.

Just playing, said another.

WELL. BE CAREFUL WITH IT. The

adult looked like the twin of any of the six children. The roof of his mouth was warmer than theirs but the authority in his voice was due to more than mere loudness.

SOMEONE MAY HAVE GONE TO GREAT TROUBLE TO BUILD THIS OBJECT.

Yes sir.

Somewhat subdued, the children gathered around the Automated Biological Laboratory. They watched a door open in the side of the drum-shaped container that made up half of ABEL's body. A gun inside the door fired a weighted line high into the air.

That thing almost hit me. Serves you right.

The line, coated with sand and dust, came slithering back into ABEL's side. One of the children licked it and found it covered with something sticky and tasteless.

Two children climbed onto the slow-moving platform, then up onto the cylinder. They stood up and waved their arms, balancing precariously on flat triangular feet. ABEL swerved toward a clump of black grass, and both children toppled to the sand. One picked himself up and ran to climb on again.

The adult watched it all dubiously.

A second adult appeared beside him.

YOU ARE LATE. WE HAD AN APPOINTMENT TO XAT BNORNEN CHIP. HAD YOU FOR-GOTTEN?

I HAD. THE CHILDREN HAVE FOUND SOMETHING. SO THEY HAVE. WHAT IS IT DOING?

IT WAS TAKING SOIL SAMPLES AND PERHAPS TRYING TO COLLECT SPORES. NOW IT SHOWS AN INTEREST IN GRASS. I WONDER HOW ACCURATE ITS INSTRUMENTS ARE.

IF IT WERE SENTIENT IT WOULD SHOW INTEREST IN THE

CHILDREN.

PERHAPS.

ABEL stopped. A box at the front lifted on a telescoping leg and began a slow pan of the landscape. From the low dark line of the Mare Acidalium highlands on the north-eastern horizon, it swung around until its lens faced straight backward at the empty orange desert of Tracus Albus. At this point the lens was eye to eye with the hitchhiking child. The child flapped his ears, made' idiot faces, shouted nonsense words, and flicked at the lens with his long tongue.

THAT SHOULD GIVE THEM
SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

WHO WOULD YOU SAY SENT IT?

EARTH, I WOULD THINK. NOTICE THE SILICATE DISC IN THE CAMERA, TRANSPARENT TO THE FREQUENCIES OF LIGHT MOST LIKELY TO PENETRATE THAT PLANET'S THICK ATMOSPHERE.

AGREEMENT.

The gun fired again, into the black grass, and the line began to reel back. Another box retracted its curved lid. The hitchhiker peered into it, while the other children watched admiringly from below.

One of the adults shouted, GET BACK.

YOU YOUNG PLANT-BRAIN.!

The child turned to flap his ears at him. At that moment ABEL flashed a tight ruby beam of laser light just past his ear. For an instant it showed, an infinite length of neon tubing against the navy blue .sky.

The child scrambled down and ran for his life.

EARTH IS NOT IN THAT DIRECTION, an adult observed.

YET THE BEAM MUST HAVE BEEN A MESSAGE. SOME-THING IN ORBIT, PERHAPS?

The adults looked skyward. Presently their eyes adjusted.

ON THE INNER MOON. DO YOU SEE IT?

YES. QUITE LARGE . . . AND WHAT ARE THOSE MIDGES IN MOTION ABOUT IT? THAT IS NO AUTOMATED PROBE. BUT A VEHICLE. THINK WE MUST EXPECT VISITORS SOON.

WE SHOULD HAVE INFORM-ED THEM OF OUR PRESENCE LONG AGO. A LARGE RADIO-FREQUENCY LASER WOULD HAVE DONE IT.

WHY SHOULD WE DO ALL THE WORK WHEN THEY HAVE ALL THE METALS, THE SUN-LIGHT. THE RESOURCES?

Having finished with the clump of grass. ABEL lurched into motion and rolled toward a dark line of eroded ring wall. The children swarmed after it. The lab fired off another sticky string, let it fall, and started to reel it back. A child picked it up and pulled. Lab and martian engaged in a tug of war which ended when the string broke. Another child poked a long, fragile finger into the cavity and withdrew it covered with something wet. Before it could boil away, he put the linger in his mouth. He

sent out a pulse of pleasure and stuck his tongue in the hole, into the broth intended for growing martian microorganisms.

STOP THAT! THAT IS NOT YOUR PROPERTY!

The adult voice was ignored. The child left his tongue in the broth, running alongside the lab to keep up. Presently the others discovered that if they stood in front of ABEL it would change course to crawl around the "obstruction."

PERHAPS THE ALIENS WILL BE SATISFIED TO RETURN HOME WITH THE INFORMATION GATHERED BY THE PROBE.

NONSENSE. THE CAMERAS HAVE SEEN THE CHILDREN. NOW THEY KNOW THAT WE EXIST.

WOULD THEY RISK THEIR LIVES TO LAND, MERELY BE-CAUSE THEY HAVE SEEN DITHTA? DITHTA IS A HOMELY CHILD, EVEN TO MY OWN EYE, AND I AM PERHAPS HIS PARENT.

LOOK WHAT THEY ARE DOING NOW.

By moving to left and right of the lab, by forming moving "obstructions", the children were steering ABEL toward a cliff. One still rode high on top, pretending to steer by kicking the metal

flanks.

WE MUST STOP THEM. THEY WILL
BREAK IT.

YES . . . DO YOU REALLY EXPECT
THAT THE ALIENS WILL LAND A
MANNED VEHICLE?

IT IS THE OBVIOUS NEXT STEP.

WE MUST HOPE THAT THE
CHILDREN WILL NOT GET HOLD
OF IT.