**The Talking Stone**

Isaac Asimov

The asteroid belt is large and its human occupancy small. Larry Vernadsky, in the seventh month of his year-long assignment to Station Five, wondered with increasing frequency if his salary could possibly compensate for a nearly solitary confinement seventy million miles from Earth. He was a slight youth, who did not bear the look of either a spationautical engineer or an asteroid man. He had blue eyes and butter-yellow hair and an invincible air of innocence that masked a quick mind and an isolation-sharpened bump of curiosity.

Both the look of innocence and the bump of curiosity served him well on board the Robert Q. When the Robert Q. landed on the outer platform of Station Five, Vernadsky was on board almost immediately. There was an eager delight about him which, in a dog, would have been accompanied by a vibrating tail and a happy cacophony of barks.

The fact that the captain of the Robert Q. met his grins with a stern sour silence that sat heavily on his thick-featured face made no difference. As far as Vernadsky was concerned the ship was yearned-for company and was welcome. It was welcome to any amount of the millions of gallons of ice or any of the tons of frozen food concentrates stacked away in the hollowed-out asteroid that served as Station Five. Vernadsky was ready with any power tool that might be necessary, any replacement that might be required for any hyperatomic motor.

Vernadsky was grinning all over his boyish face as he filled out the routine form, writing it out quickly for later conversion into computer notation for filing. He put down ship’s name and serial number, engine number, field generator number, and so on, port of embarkation (’asteroids, damned lot of them, don’t know which was last’ and Vernadsky simply wrote ’Belt’ which was the usual abbreviation for ’asteroid belt’); port of destination (’Earth’); reason for stopping (’stuttering hyperatomic drive’).

“How many in your crew, Captain ?” asked Vernadsky, as he looked over ship’s papers.

The captain said, Two. Now how about looking over the hyperatomics ? We’ve got a shipment to make.” His cheeks were blue with dark stubble, his bearing that of a hardened and lifelong asteroid miner, yet his speech was that of an educated, almost a cultured, man.

“Sure.” Vernadsky lugged his diagnostic kit to the engine room, followed by the captain. He tested circuits, vacuum degree, force-field density with easy-going efficiency.

He could not help wondering about the captain. Despite his own dislike for his surroundings he realized dimly that there were some who found fascination in the vast emptiness and freedom of space. Yet he guessed that a man like this captain was not an asteroid miner for the love of solitude alone.

He said, “Any special type of ore you handle?”

The captain frowned and said, “Chromium and manganese.”

“That so ? ... I’d replace the Jenner manifold, if I were you.”

“Is that what’s causing the trouble ?”

“No, it isn’t. But it’s a little beat-up. You’d be risking another failure within a million miles. As long as you’ve got the ship in here——”

“All right, replace it. But find the stutter, will you?”

“Doing my best, Captain.”

The captain’s last remark was harsh enough to abash even Vernadsky. He worked awhile in silence, then got to his feet. “You’ve got a gamma-fogged semireflector. Every time the positron beam circles round to its position the drive flickers out for a second. You’ll have to replace it.”

“How long will it take?”

“Several hours. Maybe twelve.”

“What ? I’m behind schedule.”

“Can’t help it.” Vernadsky remained cheerful. There’s only so much I can do. The system has to be flushed for three hours with helium before I can get inside. And then I have to calibrate the new semireflector and that takes time. I could get it almost right in minutes, but that’s only almost right. You’d break down before you reach the orbit of Mars.”

The captain glowered. “Go ahead. Get started.”

Vernadsky carefully maneuvered the tank of helium on board the ship. With ship’s pseudo-grav generators shut off, it weighed virtually nothing, but it had its full mass and inertia. That meant careful handling if it were to make turns correctly. The maneuvers were all the more difficult since Vernadsky himself was without weight.

It was because his attention was concentrated entirely on the cylinder that he took a wrong turn in the crowded quarters and found himself momentarily in a strange and darkened room.

He had time for one startled shout and then two men were upon him, hustling his cylinder, closing the door behind him.

He said nothing, while he hooked the cylinder to the intake valve of the motor and listened to the soft, soughing noise as the helium flushed the interior, slowly washing absorbed radioactive gases into the all-accepting emptiness of space.

Then curiosity overcame prudence and he said, “You’ve got a silicony aboard ship, Captain. A big one.”

The captain turned to face Vernadsky slowly. He said in a voice from which all expression had been removed, “Is that right?”

“I saw it. How about a better look?”

“Why?”

Vernadsky grew imploring. “Oh, look, Captain, I’ve been on this rock over half a year. I’ve read everything I could get hold of on the asteroids, which means all sorts of things about the siliconies. And I’ve never seen even a little one. Have a heart.”

“I believe there’s a job here to do.”

“Just helium-flushing for hours. There’s nothing else to be done till that’s over. How come you carry a silicony about, anyway, Captain?”

“A pet. Some people like dogs. I like siliconies.”

“Have you got it talking?”

The captain flushed. “Why do you ask?”

“Some of them have talked. Some of them read minds, even.”

“What are you ? An expert on these damn things ?”

“I’ve been reading about them. I told you. Come on, Captain. Let’s have a look.”

Vernadsky tried not to show that he noticed that there was the captain facing him and a crewman on either side of him. Each of the three was larger than he was, each; weightier, each—he felt sure—was armed.

Vernadsky said, “Well, what’s wrong? I’m not going to steal the thing. I just want to see it.”

It may have been the unfinished repair job that kept him alive at the moment. Even more so, perhaps, it was his look of cheerful and almost moronic innocence that stood him in good stead.

The captain said. “Well, then, come on.”

And Vernadsky followed, his agile mind working and his pulse definitely quickened.

Vernadsky stared with considerable awe and just a little revulsion at the gray creature before him. It was quite true that he had never seen a silicony, but he had seen trimensional photographs and read descriptions. Yet there is something in a real presence for which neither words nor photographs are substitutes.

Its skin was of an oily smooth grayness. Its motions were slow, as became a creature who burrowed in stone and was more than half stone itself. There was no writhing of muscles beneath that skin; instead it moved in slabs as thin layers of stone slid greasily over one another.

It had a general ovoid shape, rounded above, flattened below, with two sets of appendages. Below were the ’legs,” set radially. They totaled six and ended in sharp flinty edges, reinforced by metal deposits. Those edges could cut through rock, breaking it into edible portions.

On the creature’s flat undersurface, hidden from view unless the silicony were overturned, was the one opening into its interior. Shredded rocks entered that interior. Within, limestone and hydrated silicates reacted to form the silicones out of which the creatures’s tissues were built. Excess silica re-emerged from the opening as hard white pebbly excretions.

How extraterrologists had puzzled over the smooth pebbles that lay scattered in small hollows within the rocky structure of the asteroids until the siliconies were first discovered. And how they marveled at the manner in which the creatures made silicones—those silicone-oxygen polymers with hydrocarbon side chains—perform so many of the functions that proteins performed in terrestrial life.

From the highest point on the creature’s back came the remaining appendages, two inverse cones hollowed in opposing directions and fitting snugly into parallel recesses running down the back, yet capable of lifting upward a short way. When the silicony burrowed through rock, the ’ears’ were retracted for streamlining. When it rested in a hollowed-out cavern, they could lift for better and more sensitive reception. Their vague resemblance to a rabbit’s ears made the name silicony inevitable. The more serious extraterrologists, who referred to such creatures habitually as Siliconeus asteroidea, thought the ’ears’ might have something to do with the rudimentary telepathic powers the beasts possessed. A minority had other notions.

The silicony was flowing slowly over an oil-smeared rock. Other such rocks lay scattered in one corner of the room and represented, Vernadsky knew, the creature’s food supply. Or at least it was its tissue-building supply. For sheer energy, he had read, that alone would not do.

Vernadsky marveled. “It’s a monster. It’s more than a foot across.”

The captain grunted noncommittally.

“Where did you get it ?” asked Vernadsky.

“One of the rocks.”

“Well, listen, two inches is about the biggest anyone’s found. You could sell this to some museum or university on Earth for a couple of thousand dollars, maybe.”

The captain shrugged. “Well, you’ve seen it. Lets get back to the hyperatomics.”

His hard grip was on Vernadsky’s elbow and he was turning away, when there was an interruption in the form of a slow and slurring voice, a hollow and gritty one.

It was made by the carefully modulated friction of rock against rock and Vernadsky stared in near horror at the speaker.

It was the silicony, suddenly becoming a talking stone. It said, “The man wonders if this thing can talk.”

Vernadsky whispered, “For the love of space. It does!”

“All right,” said the captain impatiently, “you’ve seen it and heard it, too. Let’s go now.”

“And it reads minds,” said Vernadsky.

The silicony said, “Mars rotates in two four hours three seven and one half minutes. Jupiter’s density is one point two two. Uranus was discovered in the year one seven eight one. Pluto is the planet which is most far. Sun is heaviest with a mass of two zero zero zero zero zero zero...”

The captain pulled Vernadsky away. Vernadsky, half-walking backward, half-stumbling, listened with fascination to the fading bumbling of zeroes.

He said, “Where does it pick up all that stuff, Captain ?”

There’s an old astronomy book we read to him. Real old.”

“From before space travel was invented,” said one of the crew members in disgust. “Ain’t even a fillum. Regular print.” ’Shut up,” said the captain.

Vernadsky checked the outflow of helium for gamma radiation and eventually it was time to end the flushing and work in the interior. It was a painstaking job, and Vernadsky interrupted it only once for coffee and a breather.

He said, with innocence beaming in his smile, “You know the way I figure it, Captain? That thing lives inside rock, inside some asteroid all its life. Hundreds of years, maybe. It’s a damn big thing and it’s probably a lot smarter than the run-of-the-mill silicony. Now you pick it up and it finds out the universe isn’t rock. It finds out a trillion things it never imagined. That’s why it’s interested in astronomy. It’s this new world, all these new ideas it gets in the book and in human minds, too. Don’t you think that’s so?”

He wanted desperately to smoke the captain out, get something concrete he could hang his deductions on. For this reason he risked telling what must be half the truth, the lesser half, of course.

But the captain, leaning against a wall with his arms folded, said only, “When will you be through?”

It was his last comment and Vernadsky was obliged to rest content. The motor was adjusted finally to Vernadsky’s satisfaction, and the captain paid the reasonable fee in cash, accepted his receipt, and left in a blaze of ship’s hyper-energy.

Vernadsky watched it go with an almost unbearable excitement. He made his way quickly to his sub-etheric sender.

“I’ve got to be right,” he muttered to himself. “I’ve got to be.”

Patrolman Milt Hawkins received the call in the privacy of his home station on Patrol Station Asteroid No. 72. He was nursing a two-day stubble, a can of iced beer, and a film viewer, and the settled melancholy on his ruddy, wide-cheeked face was as much the product of loneliness as was the forced cheerfulness in Vernadsky’s eyes.

Patrolman Hawkins found himself looking into those eyes and was glad. Even though it was only Vernadsky, company was company. He gave him the big hello and listened luxuriously to the sound of a voice without worrying too strenuously concerning the contents of the speech.

Then suddenly amusement was gone and both ears were on the job and he said, “Hold it. Ho—Id it. What are you talking about?”

“Haven’t you been listening, you dumb cop? I’m talking my heart out to you.”

“Well, deal it out in smaller pieces, will you ? What’s this about a silicony?”

This guy’s got one on board. He calls it a pet and feeds it greasy rocks.”

“Huh ? I swear, a miner on the asteroid run would make a pet out of a piece of cheese if he could get it to talk back to him.”

“Not just a silicony. Not one of these little inch jobs. It’s over a foot across. Don’t you get it? Space, you’d think a guy would know something about the asteroids, living out here.”

“All right. Suppose you tell me.”

“Look, greasy rocks build tissues, but where does a silicony that size get its energy from ?”

“I couldn’t tell you.”

“Directly from—— Have you got anyone around you right now?”

“Right now, no. I wish there were.”

“You won’t in a minute. Siliconies get their energy by the direct absorption of gamma rays.”

“Says who?”

“Says a guy called Wendell Urth. He’s a big-shot extraterrologist. What’s more, he says that’s what the silicony’s ears are for.” Vernadsky put his two forefingers to his temples and wiggled them. “Not telepathy at all. They detect gamma radiation at levels no human instrument can detect.”

“Okay. Now what?” asked Hawkins. But he was growing thoughtful ’Now this. Urth says there isn’t enough gamma radiation on any asteroid to support siliconies more than an inch or two long. Not enough radioactivity. So here we have one a foot long, a good fifteen inches.”

“Well——”

“So it has to come from an asteroid just riddled with the stuff, lousy with uranium, solid with gamma rays. An asteroid with enough radioactivity to be warm to the touch and off the regular orbit patterns so that no one’s come across it. Only suppose some smart boy landed on the asteroid by happenstance and noticed the warmth of the rocks and got to thinking. This captain of the Robert Q. is no rock-hopping ignoramus. He’s a shrewd guy.”

“Go on.”

“Suppose he blasts off chunks for assay and comes across a giant silicony. Now he knows he’s got the most unbelievable strike in all history. And he doesn’t need assays. The silicony can lead him to the rich veins.”

“Why should it?”

“Because it wants to learn about the universe. Because it’s spent a thousand years, maybe, under rock, and it’s just discovered the stars. It can read minds and it could learn to talk. It could make a deal. Listen, the captain would jump at it. Uranium mining is a state monopoly. Unlicensed miners aren’t even allowed to carry counters. It’s a perfect setup for the captain.”

Hawkins said, “Maybe you’re right.”

“No maybe at all. You should have seen them standing around me while I watched the silicony, ready to jump me if I said one funny word. You should have seen them drag me out after two minutes.”

Hawkins brushed his unshaven chin with his hand and made a mental estimate of the time it would take him to shave. He said, “How long can you keep the boy at your station?”

“Keep him! Space, he’s gone!”

“What! Then what the devil is all this talk about ? Why did you let him get away ?”

“Three guys,” said Vernadsky patiently, “each one bigger than I am, each one armed, and each one ready to kill, I’ll bet. What did you want me to do ?”

“All right, but what do we do now ?”

“Come out and pick them up. That’s simple enough. I was fixing their semireflectors and I fixed them my way. Then-power will shut off completely within ten thousand miles. And I installed a tracer in the Jenner manifold.”

Hawkins goggled at Vernadsky’s grinning face. “Holy Toledo.”

“And don’t get anyone else in on this. Just you, me, and the police cruiser. They’ll have no energy and we’ll have, a cannon or two. They’ll tell us where the uranium asteroid is. We locate it, then get in touch with Patrol Headquarters. We will deliver unto them, three, count them, three, uranium smugglers, one giant-size silicony like nobody on Earth ever saw, and one, I repeat, one great big fat chunk of uranium ore like nobody on Earth saw, either. And you make a lieutenancy and I get promoted to a permanent Earth-side job. Right?”

Hawkins was dazed. “Right,” he yelled. “I’ll be right out there.”

They were almost upon the ship before spotting it visually by the weak glinting of reflected sunlight.

Hawkins said, “Didn’t you leave them enough power for ship’s lights? You didn’t throw off their emergency generator, did you?”

Vernadsky shrugged. They’re saving power, hoping they’ll get picked up. Right now, they’re putting everything they’ve got into a sub-etheric call, I’ll bet.”

“If they are,” said Hawkins dryly, “I’m not picking it up.”

“You’re not?”

“Not a thing.”

The police cruiser spiraled closer. Their quarry, its power off, was drifting through space at a steady ten thousand miles an hour. The cruiser matched it, speed for speed, and drifted inward.

A sick expression crossed Hawkins’ face. “Oh no!”

“What’s the matter?”

The ship’s been hit. A meteor. Lord knows there are enough of them in the asteroid belt.”

All the verve washed out of Vernadsky’s face and voice. “Hit ? Are they wrecked ?”

There’s a hole in it the size of a barn door. Sorry, Vernadsky, but this might not look good.”

Vernadsky closed his eyes and swallowed hard. He knew what Hawkins meant. Vernadsky had deliberately misrepaired a ship, a procedure which could be judged a felony. And death as a result of a felony was murder.

He said, “Look, Hawkins, you know why I did it.”

“I know what you’ve told me and I’ll testify to that if I have to. But if this ship wasn’t smuggling...”

He didn’t finish the statement. Nor did he have to.

They entered the smashed ship in full spacesuit cover.

The Robert Q. was a shambles, inside and out. Without power, there was no chance of raising the feeblest screen against the rock that hit them or of detecting it in time or of avoiding it if they had detected it. It had caved in the ship’s hull as though it were so much aluminum foil. It had smashed the pilot room, evacuated the ship’s air, and killed the three men on board.

One of the crew had been slammed against the wall by the impact and was so much frozen meat. The captain and the other crewman lay in stiff attitudes, skins congested with frozen bloodclots where the air, boiling out of the blood, had broken the vessels.

Vernadsky, who had never seen this form of death in space, felt sick, but he fought against vomiting messily inside his spacesuit and succeeded.

He said, “Let’s test the ore they’re carrying. It’s got to be alive.” It’s got to be, he told himself. It’s got to be.

The door to the hold had been warped by the force of collision and there was a gap half an inch wide where it no longer met the frame.

Hawkins lifted the counter he held in his gauntleted hand and held its mica window to that gap.

It chattered like a million magpies.

Vernadsky said, with infinite relief, “I told you so.”

His misrepair of the ship was now only the ingenious and praisworthy fulfillment of a citizen’s loyal duty and the meteor collision that had brought death to three men merely a regrettable accident.

It took two blaster bolts to break the twisted door loose, and tons of rock met their flashlights.

Hawkins lifted two chunks of moderate size and dropped them gingerly into one of the suit’s pockets. “As exhibits,” he said, “and for assay.”

“Don’t keep them near the skin too long,” warned Vernadsky.

The suit will protect me till I get it back to ship. It’s not pure uranium, you know.”

“Pretty near, I’ll bet.” Every inch of his cockiness was back.

Hawkins looked about. “Well, this tears things. We’ve stopped a smuggling ring, maybe, or part of one. But what next?”

The uranium asteroid—uh, oh!”

“Right. Where is it ? The only ones who know are dead.”

“Space!” And again Vernadsky’s spirits were dashed. Without the asteroid itself, they had only three corpses and a few tons of uranium ore. Good, but not spectacular. It would mean a citation, yes, but he wasn’t after a citation. He wanted promotion to a permanent Earth-side job and that required something.

He yelled, “For the love of space, the silicony! It can live in a vacuum. It lives in a vacuum all the time and it knows where the asteroid is.”

“Right!” said Hawkins, with instant enthusiasm. “Where is the thing?”

“Aft,” cried Vernadsky. This way.”

The silicony glinted in the light of their flashes. It moved and was alive.

Vernadsky’s heart beat madly with excitement. “We’ve got to move it, Hawkins.”

“Why?”

“Sound won’t carry in a vacuum, for the love of space. We’ve got to get it into the cruiser.”

“All right. All right.”

“We can’t put a suit around it with a radio transmitter, you know.”

“I said all right.”

They carried it gingerly and carefully, their metal-sheated fingers handling the greasy surface of the creature almost lovingly.

Hawkins held it while kicking off the Robert Q.

It lay in the control room of the cruiser now. The two men had removed their helmets and Hawkins was shucking his suit. Vernadsky could not wait.

He said, You can read our minds?”

He held his breath until finally the gratings of rock surfaces modulated themselves into words. To Vernadsky no finer sound could, at the moment, be imagined.

The silicony said, “Yes.” Then he said, “Emptiness all about. Nothing.”

“What?” said Hawkins.

Vernadsky shushed him. “The trip through space just now, I guess. It must have impressed him.”

He said to the silicony, shouting his words as though to make his thoughts clearer, The men who were with you gathered uranium, special ore, radiations, energy.”

“They wanted food,” came the weak, gritty sound.

Of course! It was food to the silicony. It was an energy source. Vernadsky said, “You showed them where they could get it?”

“Yes.”

Hawkins said, “I can hardly hear the thing.”

There’s something wrong with it,” said Vernadsky worriedly. He shouted again. “Are you well?”

“Not well. Air gone at once. Something wrong inside.”

Vernadsky muttered. The sudden decompression must have damaged it. Oh, Lord—— Look, you know what I want. Where is your home ? The place with the food ?”

The two men were silent, waiting.

The silicony’s ears lifted slowly, very slowly, trembled, and fell back. There,” it said. “Over there.”

“Where?” screamed Vernadsky.

There.”

Hawkins said, “It’s doing something. It’s pointing in some way.”

“Sure, only we don’t know in what way.”

“Well, what do you expect it to do? Give the coordinates?”

Vernadsky said at once, “Why not?” He turned again to the silicony as it lay huddled on the floor. It was motionless now and there was a dullness to its exterior that looked ominous.

Vernadsky said, The captain knew where your eating place was. He had numbers concerning it, didn’t he?” He prayed that the silicony would understand, that it would read his thoughts and not merely listen to his words.

“Yes,” said the silicony in a rock-against-rock sigh.

“Three sets of numbers,” said Vernadsky. There would have to be three. Three coordinates in space with dates attached, giving three positions of the asteroid in its orbit about the sun. From these data the orbit could be calculated in full and its position determined at any time. Even planetary perturbations could be accounted for, roughly.

“Yes,” said the silicony, lower still.

“What were they? What were the numbers? Write them down, Hawkins. Get paper.”

But the silicony said, “Do not know. Numbers not important. Eating place there.”

Hawkins said. That’s plain enough. It didn’t need the coordinates, so it paid no attention to them.”

The silicony said ’Soon not’—a long pause, and then slowly, as though testing a new and unfamiliar word— ’alive. Soon’—an even longer pause—’dead. What after death?”

“Hang on,” implored Vernadsky. Tell me, did the captain write down these figures anywhere?”

The silicony did not answer for a long minute and then, while both men bent so closely that their heads almost touched over the dying stone, it said, “What after death?”

Vernadsky shouted, “One answer. Just one. The captain must have written down the numbers. Where? Where?”

The silicony whispered, “On the asteroid.”

And it never spoke again.

It was a dead rock, as dead as the rock which gave it birth, as dead as the walls of the ship, as dead as a dead human.

And Vernadsky and Hawkins rose from their knees and stared hopelessly at each other.

“It makes no sense,” said Hawkins. “Why should he write the coordinates on the asteroid. That’s like locking a key inside the cabinet it’s meant to open.”

Vernadsky shook his head. “A fortune in uranium. The biggest strike in history and we don’t know where it is.”

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H. Seton Davenport looked about him with an odd feeling of pleasure. Even in repose, there was usually something hard about his lined face with its prominent nose. The scar on his right cheek, his black hair, startling eyebrows, and dark complexion all combined to make him look every bit the incorruptible agent of the Terrestrial Bureau of Investigation that he actually was.

Yet now something almost like a smile tugged at his lips as he looked about the large room, in which dimness made the rows of book-films appear endless, and specimens of who-knows-what from who-knows-where bulk mysteriously. The complete disorder, the air of separation, almost insulation, from the world, made the room look unreal. It made it look every bit as unreal as its owner.

That owner sat in a combination armchair-desk which was bathed in the only focus of bright light in the room. Slowly he turned the sheets of official reports he held in his hand. His hand moved otherwise only to adjust the thick spectacles which threatened at any moment to fall completely from his round and completely unimpressive nubbin of a nose. His paunch lifted and fell quietly as he read.

He was Dr. Wendell Urth, who, if the judgment of experts counted for anything, was Earth’s most outstanding extraterrologist. On any subject outside Earth men came to him, though Dr. Urth had never in his adult life been more than an hour’s-walk distance from his home on the University campus.

He looked up solemnly at Inspector Davenport. “A very intelligent man, this young Vernadsky,” he said.

To have deduced all he did from the presence of the silicony ? Quite so,” said Davenport.

“No, no. The deduction was a simple thing. Unavoidable, in fact. A noodle would have seen it. I was referring’—and his glance grew a trifle censorious—’to the fact that the youngster had read of my experiments concerning the gamma-ray sensitivity of Siliconeus asteroidea.” ’Ah, yes,” said Davenport. Of course. Dr. Urth was the expert on siliconies. It was why Davenport had come to consult him. He had only one question for the man, a simple one, yet Dr. Urth had thrust out his full lips, shaken his ponderous head, and asked to see all the documents in the case.

Ordinarily that would have been out of the question, but Dr. Urth had recently been of considerable use to the T.B.I, in that affair of the Singing Bells of Luna and the singular non-alibi shattered by Moon gravity, and the Inspector had yielded.

Dr. Urth finished the reading, laid the sheets down on his desk, yanked his shirttail out of the tight confines of his belt with a grunt and rubbed his glasses with it. He stared through the glasses at the light to see the effects of his cleaning, replaced them precariously on his nose, and clasped his hands on his paunch, stubby fingers interlacing.

“Your question again, Inspector?”

Davenport said patiently, “Is it true, in your opinion, that a silicony of the size and type described in the report could only have developed on a world rich in uranium——”

“Radioactive material,” interrupted Dr. Urth. Thorium, perhaps, though probably uranium.”

“Is your answer yes, then ?”

“Yes.”

“How big would the world be?”

“A mile in diameter, perhaps,” said the extraterrologist thoughtfully. “Perhaps even more.”

“How many tons of uranium, or radioactive material, rather?”

“In the trillions. Minimum.”

“Would you be willing to put all that in the form of a signed opinion in writing?”

“Of course.”

“Very well then, Dr. Urth.” Davenport got to his feet, reached for his hat with one hand and the file of reports with the other. “That is all we need.”

But Dr. Urth’s hand moved to the reports and rested heavily upon them. “Wait. How will you find the asteroid?”

“By looking. We’ll assign a volume of space to every ship made available to us and—just look.”

The expense, the time, the effort! And you’ll never find it.”

“One chance in a thousand. We might”

“One chance in a million. You won’t.”

“We can’t let the uranium go without some try. Your professional opinion makes the prize high enough.”

“But there is a better way to find the asteroid. I can find it.”

Davenport fixed the extraterrologist with a sudden, sharp glance. Despite appearances Dr. Urth was anything but a fool. He had personal experience of that. There was therefore just a bit of half-hope in his voice as he said, “How can you find it?”

“First,” said Dr. Urth, “my price.”

“Price?”

“Or fee, if you choose. When the government reaches the asteroid, there may be another large-size silicony on it. Siliconies are very valuable. The only form of life with solid silicone for tissues and liquid silicone as a circulating fluid. The answer to the question whether the asteroids were once part of a single planetary body may rest with them. Any number of other problems ... Do you understand?”

“You mean you want a large silicony delivered to you ?”

“Alive and well. And free of charge. Yes.”

Davenport nodded. “I’m sure the government will agree. Now what have you on your mind?”

Dr. Urth said quietly, as though explaining everything, “The silicony’s remark.”

Davenport looked bewildered. “What remark?”

The one in the report. Just before the silicony died. Vernadsky was asking it where the captain had written down the coordinates, and it said, "On the asteroid." ”

A look of intense disappointment crossed Davenport’s face. “Great space, Doctor, we know that, and we’ve gone into every angle of it. Every possible angle. It means nothing.”

“Nothing at all, Inspector?”

“Nothing of importance. Read the report again. The silicony wasn’t even listening to Vernadsky. He was feeling life depart and he was wondering about it. Twice, it asked, "What after death?" Then, as Vernadsky kept questioning it, it said, "On the asteroid." Probably it never heard Vernadsky’s question. It was answering its own question. It thought that after death it would return to its own asteroid; to its home, where it would be safe once more. That’s all.”

Dr. Urth shook his head. “You are too much a poet, you know. You imagine too much. Come, it is an interesting problem and let us see if you can’t solve it for yourself. Suppose the silicony’s remark were an answer to Vernadsky.”

“Even so,” said Davenport impatiently, “how would it help? Which asteroid? The uranium asteroid? We can’t find it, so we can’t find the coordinates. Some other asteroid which the Robert Q. had used as a home base? We can’t find that either.”

“How you avoid the obvious. Inspector. Why don’t you ask yourself what the phrase "on the asteroid" means to the silicony. Not to you or to me, but to the silicony.”

Davenport frowned. “Pardon me, Doctor?”

“I’m speaking plainly. What did the word asteroid mean to the silicony?”

“The silicony learned about space out of an astronomy text that was read to it. I suppose the book explained what an asteroid was.”

“Exactly,” crowed Dr. Urth, putting a finger to the side of his snub nose. “And how would the definition go? An asteroid is a small body, smaller than the planets, moving about the sun in an orbit which, generally speaking, lies between those of Mars and Jupiter. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I suppose so.”

“And what is the Robert Q.?”

“You mean the ship?”

That’s what you call it,” said Dr. Urth. The ship. But the astronomy book was an ancient one. It made no mention of ships in space. One of the crewmen said as much. He said it dated from before space flight. Then what is the Robert Q.? Isn’t it a small body, smaller than the planets? And while the silicony was aboard, wasn’t it moving about the sun in an orbit which, generally speaking, lay between those of Mars and Jupiter?”

“You mean the silicony considered the ship as just another asteroid, and when he said "on the asteroid," he meant "on the ship"?”

“Exactly. I told you I would make you solve the problem for yourself.”

No expression of joy or relief lightened the gloom on the Inspector’s face. That is no solution. Doctor.”

But Dr. Urth blinked slowly at him and the bland look on his round face became, if anything, blander and more childlike in its uncomplicated pleasure. “Surely it is.”

“Not at all. Dr. Urth, we didn’t reason it out as you did. We dismissed the silicony’s remark completely. But still, don’t you suppose we searched the Robert Q.?” We took it apart piece by piece, plate by plate. We just about unwelded the thing.”

“And you found nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“Perhaps you did not look in the right place.”

“We looked in every place.” He stood up, as though to go. “You understand, Dr. Urth ? When we got through with the ship there was no possibility of those coordinates existing anywhere on it.”

“Sit down, Inspector,” said Dr. Urth calmly. “You are still not considering the silicony’s statement properly. Now the silicony learned English by collecting a word here and a word there. It couldn’t speak idiomatic English. Some of its statements, as quoted, show that. For instance, it said, "the planet which is most far" instead of "the farthest planet." You see?”

“Well?”

“Someone who cannot speak a language idiomatically either uses the idioms of his own language translated word by word or else he simply uses foreign words according to their literal meaning. The silicony had no spoken language of its own so it could only make use of the second alternative. Let’s be literal, then. He said, "on the asteroid," Inspector. On it. He didn’t mean on a piece of paper, he meant on the ship, literally.”

“Dr. Urth,” said Davenport sadly, “when the Bureau searches, it searches. There were no mysterious inscriptions on the ship either.”

Dr. Urth looked disappointed. “Dear me, Inspector. I keep hoping you will see the answer. Really, you have had so many hints.”

Davenport drew in a slow, firm breath. It went hard, but his voice was calm and even once more. “Will you tell me what you have in mind, Doctor?”

Dr. Urth patted his comfortable abdomen with one hand and replaced his glasses. “Don’t you see, Inspector, that there is one place on board a spaceship where secret numbers are perfectly safe? Where, although in plain view, they would be perfectly safe from detection ? Where though they were being stared at by a hundred eyes, they would be secure? Except from a seeker who is an astute thinker, of course.”

“Where? Name the place!”

“Why, in those places where there happen to be numbers already. Perfectly normal numbers. Legal numbers. Numbers that are supposed to be there.”

“What are you talking about ?”

“The ship’s serial number, etched directly on the hull. On the hull, be it noted. The engine number, the field generator number. A few others. Each etched on integral portions of the ship. On the ship, as the silicony said. On the ship.”

Davenport’s heavy eyebrows rose with sudden comprehension. “You may be all right—and if you are, I’m hoping we find you a silicony twice the size of the Robert Q.’s. One that not only talks, but whistles, "Up, Asteroids, Forever!" ’ He hastily reached for the dossier, thumbed rapidly through it and extracted an official T.B.I, form. “Of course, we noted down all the identification numbers we found.” He spread the form out. “If three of these resemble coordinates ...”

“We should expect some small effort at disguise,” Dr. Urth observed. There will probably be certain letters and figures added to make the series appear more legitimate.”

He reached for a scratch pad and shoved another toward the Inspector. For minutes the two men were silent, jotting down serial numbers, experimenting with crossing out obviously unrelated figures.

At last Davenport let out a sigh that mingled satisfaction and frustration. “I’m stuck,” he admitted. “I think you’re right; the numbers on the engine and the calculator are clearly disguised coordinates and dates. They don’t run anywhere near the normal series, and it’s easy to strike out the fake figures. That gives us two, but I’ll take my oath the rest of these are absolutely legitimate serial numbers. What are your findings, Doctor?”

Dr. Urth nodded. “I agree. We now have two coordinates and we know where the third was inscribed.”

“We know, do we ? And how——” The Inspector broke off and uttered a sharp exclamation. “Of course! The number on the very ship itself, which isn’t entered here—because it was on the precise spot on the hull where the meteor crashed through—I’m afraid there goes your silicony. Doctor.” Then his craggy face brightened. “But I’m an idiot. The number’s gone, but we can get it in a flash from Interplanetary’ Registry.”

“I fear,” said Dr. Urth, “that I must dispute at least the second part of your statement. Registry will have only the ship’s original legitimate number, not the disguised coordinate to which the captain must have altered it.”

The exact spot on the hull,” Davenport muttered. “And because of that chance shot the asteroid may be lost forever. What use to anybody are two coordinates without the third?”

“Well,” said Dr. Urth precisely, “conceivably of very great use to a two-dimensional being. But creatures of our dimensions,” he patted his paunch, “do require the third—which I fortunately happen to have right here.”

“In the T.B.I, dossier? But we just checked the list of numbers——”

“Your list, Inspector. The file also includes young Vernadsk’s original report. And of course the serial number listed there for the Robert Q. is the carefully faked one under which she was then sailing—no point in rousing the curiosity of a repair mechanic by letting him note a discrepancy.”

Davenport reached for a scratch pad and the Vernadsky list. A moment’s calculation and he grinned.

Dr. Urth lifted himself out of the chair with a pleased puff and trotted to the door. “It is always pleasant to see you. Inspector Davenport. Do come again. And remember the government can have the uranium, but I want the important thing: one giant silicony, alive and in good condition.” He was smiling.

“And preferably,” said Davenport, “whistling.” Which he was doing himself as he walked out.