LIKE A
SHOOTING STAR
The planet was a beautiful one even from a thousand miles up. There were white, whispy clouds over mellow blue seas and lands of many shades and hues. It was very definitely beautiful.

To Throm Stormont it was downright thrilling. Not for its beauty but for what those pattered colors represented—life. Or at least vegetation of some kind. And there was water obviously enough and clouds which meant rainfall. A class M planet.

Throm set the controls for one more orbit and his one-man scout cruiser responded smoothly. His was a dangerous service. He and a mere dozen others were the vanguard of the advancing wave of civilization who probed into the blank and endless unknown. The survival rate for his occupation was only three trips, and this was his fourth. But he didn't really care. He had chosen the solitude of space to escape the solitude he suffered on the civilized worlds, so he had little to lose from the start. Even so he was careful, always careful. That is why he was making his tenth scanning orbit of the planet and getting more excited by the moment. The finding of a livable earth-type planet happened maybe once in a century. The odds were a million to one against any one man making such a discovery. And for the one who did, there was eternal fame, money, maybe even a Fleet Captaincy. Throm decided he could wait no longer to go down and have a look.

It was then that he first noticed anything was wrong. The controls indicated that the ship was already in a gentle descent. He reset the controls—nothing happened. He cut back the engines—no results. He punched manual override—still nothing happened. The ship began a steady sweep to starboard as if it knew where it was going. All Throm's efforts to correct the course were futile. Finally, in desperation he cut in the circuit breakers, again with no effect.

The ship purred on in all its magnificent power, and slowly Throm calmed down as he realized the ship was not out of control but was rather being controlled, by whom or what he did not know.

It wasn't long before he found out at least where he was going.
The ship settled down in a cool green meadow surrounded by foliage which Throm could swear was a mixture of oak and elm. Beyond the trees in the distance were rocky slopes which rose to majestic purple mountains. On the other side at the edge of the meadow, was the object that really caught his attention. It was a grey obelisk, pyramid-shaped but folding in at the bottom as if it were just the uppermost point of a much larger structure. As it was, it was hardly imposing. It could only have been about twenty feet high and about the same at the base.

Throm felt a wisp of breeze brush his cheek and darted out of the control room, into a corridor, and stopped in anguish and then resigned acceptance. Both doors of the airlock were open. That was supposed to be impossible but they were open. Whatever toxic bacteria were in this strange planet’s atmosphere were in him now, so what difference did it make?

But what air! His nostrils dilated as he drew in gentle draughts of the cool fragrance of dew-covered earth and rain dripping off autumnal leaves. Very old memories buried under the crushing burden of decades of loneliness and life lacking appreciation of beauty stirred, and he remembered wooded hills and trickling streams in the still-frontier wilderness of Wisconsin. And the memories were pleasant because shared, shared with someone who gave movement and life to her surroundings wherever she went. Darling Orsha. His Orsha. He shuddered but inevitably the memories marched on to when that golden life had been so pitilessly snuffed out. And his own helpless compliance in that end.

He moved mechanically out of the airlock pausing only to strap on a blaster. He headed straight toward the obelisk building. Whatever had brought him here would be there, and he’d best confront it directly.

Not unexpectedly he found an open portal and headed for it, be it invitation or trap. Upon first stepping through, however, Throm jumped back. In his brief glance at the gloomy interior, he hadn’t been able to see much but he did get an impression of size—stupendous size. He scanned the exterior again. It was the same positively small structure. Back inside he gazed searchingly but could find no limits to the edifice. In fact he had great difficulties judging size at all. Everywhere was a thick, murky darkness which gave the impression that the walls could be both a few feet away or miles. Only ahead was a vague sourceless glow and toward this he walked.
He was sure he must have walked the length of the building ten times when he felt he had reached his destination. Felt it because the glow seemed close although just as sourceless. He stood uneasily, not sure what he should do or whether he should do anything at all. When the stillness was broken, Throm was startled into shocked stiffness, for many reasons but mostly because the physical stillness itself had not been broken.

“What is your purpose here, Human,” were the words that materialized directly within his head.

“I am...” he began falteringly.

“Throm Stormont of the scout cruiser, Orion,” the disembodied voice completed.

“How...?”

“Along with our telepathic powers, we can, of course, read the thoughts that run along the surface of your mind.”

“Well, if we’re to get anywhere, I’m afraid you are going to have to let me verbalize my thoughts in my own slow way.” This burst of angry frustration was perhaps a bit undiplomatic, but it served its purpose in giving Throm a much needed chance to get himself orientated.

“Very well.”

Again that expectant silence prevailed, and this time Throm guessed he was expected to do something. He said: “I come to establish contact between your species and my own.”

“Are you then representative of your species?”

“Yes.”

“We have not before met one of your species. We must know if your kind are worthy of being allowed to settle among us. Since you are representative of your species, you will be the test.”

For a while now Throm hadn’t liked the direction the conversation was taking and for the first time he felt a thrill of fear. He fingered the handgrip of his blaster. “What kind of test?”

“A test of the one universal concept—truth.”

“And when will this test begin?”

A scream. Throm whirled, blaster in hand. There was no mistake. The scream had been real and human! Forgetting the alien, he ran back the way he had come, guided into the shadows on his left by a final repetition of that fateful sound.

Running full tilt he crashed into an invisible barrier. Staggering, then regaining his balance, he fired the blaster point-blank and the disintegrating lines of force tore a great gash in the obstructing wall.
Beyond was a woman.

Both of them froze. She as she saw the aimed blaster, he just in sheer amazement. She had short well-groomed blond hair and was wearing a spacer uniform of sleek, tight-fitting plastic. Her eyes were a startling bright blue but in them he saw desperation.

"Hurry," she pleaded. "We must go."

He was convinced. "This way," he said. They turned and struck out for the one real light in that gloomy building, that framed by the portal. For a horrendous number of heart-stopping minutes they ran; every moment expecting the portal to slam shut and seal them in. But it didn't, and they had covered half the distance to the Orion before they paused to look back.

Throm raised and aimed his blaster at the portal, expecting at last to see his antagonists in the flesh. What he saw was quite different. A trim silver machine on movable tracks drew up before the portal, the left track stopped, it slued around, and entered the light of outdoors. As it became visible so did several tentacular arms ending in various claw-like devices. Throm had seen enough. He fired and, like the barrier before it, the front end of the machine disintegrated.

Within minutes they were in the ship and Throm had both doors of the airlock closed. He led the way to the control cabin and motioned his new companion to strap herself in as he did the same. He directed the ship's monitor toward the alien obelisk to give him advance notice of any further attacks and frantically went about readying the ship for lift-off.

"Sit tight," he said encouragingly. "We'll be out of here in a few seconds."

As he completed the final adjustments and hit the firing button, he failed to hear the woman's fatalistic reply: "They won't let us go. They never will."

The blast of the atomic engines was bone shattering and within seconds became positively frightening, especially for Throm as he waited for the increasing pressure of acceleration and instead felt only the continued vibration of the engines' thrust. The whole ship was vibrating now, and Throm knew it couldn't take much more of this. In defeat he pulled back the throttle and stared at the monitor with mouth agape. At full thrust for several seconds and they hadn't budged an inch. More unbelievable, they had blasted the meadow with enough energy to have completely burnt it off, yet there was no sign of any damage at all.
"They'll never let us go," the woman said again and this time he heard her.

"Why? How can you say? How do you know?" The questions were fired in rapid succession out of a sense of growing futility which fed on the feeling that she was right. Could it have come to this so easily? The thought that this was his fourth trip and he might soon become another case proving the statistics flitted across his mind.

"They will keep us here as long as we are of use to them," she said in simple reply. He looked at her carefully. The statement might have been taken as one of a defeated will which had suffered too much, too long, without hope. But on perusing her bearing, the line of her mouth, the deep blue eyes, especially in those eyes, he saw an inbred defiance. That stubbornness of the human spirit that burns unquenchable through all adversity. Her statement was a recognition of stark truth, not out of despair but because she had no senseless illusions left. But the spirit he saw was the one he first experienced in her frantic flight to freedom. No, this was not yet a defeated human being.

Such a mixture of pitiful suffering and determined strength moved him, touched him more deeply than he could ever remember having been touched. For a minute he actually struggled with these emerging emotions before suppressing them and reasserting the dominance of his calm intelligence. Nonetheless, he was shaken.

"Why do they want us?" he asked.

She shrugged. "To learn. They've never seen us before. They want to find out more before they are confronted with the bulk of our race."

"Well, they won't get us here," Throm said decisively as he switched on the ship's defensive screens.

"They have a special fascination with the mind," she continued. "They like to test its limitations and—how much pressure it can take. Probably because of their own special mental powers."

"So I noticed. They are remarkable. They can't reach us in here can they?"

She shrugged again but didn't answer.

He nodded and then started. "How dumb of me! My name is Throm Stormont and this is the Orion..."

She smiled for the first time. "I'm Istria. Hello, Captain, and you, too, Orion," she said extending her hand. "I'm awfully glad to see you both though I'm not sure all you'll be able to do is keep me company in my prison."
Throm passed that off and asked: “Come, tell me how you got here.”

“I was on a colony ship headed for Altair IV when we were attacked by Tregar pirates. They boarded and we fought them until it was hopeless, and the last few of us tried to escape in the lifeboats. I don’t know what happened to the rest but my ship’s computer must have malfunctioned. It brought me out here and the Testers pulled me down.”

“How long ago?” Throm asked quietly.

“A year,” she replied with a sigh.

Again a wave of irresponsible emotion washed over Throm and this time he wasn’t entirely successful in suppressing it. “It sounds to me like you could use some sleep. Come on. I have an extra cabin. It’s not very big but it has got a bed.”

She followed wordlessly and was soon stretched out under the sheets of a bed which did, indeed, fill the entire room.

“Are you sure there is nothing you need?” Throm inquired for the third time.

“No, Captain,” she said, smiling again. “It’s like you said. All I need is some sleep. Just...” And this time she aimed those depthless azure eyes at him and he thought he saw mirrored in them signs of his own feelings though without his emotional confusion. “Thank you, Throm, for being here.”

Back in the control cabin he busied himself with new flight computations, or at least he tried to. Mostly he paced back and forth before the monitor staring through the growing darkness at the silent stillness of the plain. What was he fighting? And why? Was all his careful endeavor to come to this? And just when he had it made.

To discover an M-class planet supporting intelligent life!

No Fleet Captaincy that. He could retire. But retire to what? So his thoughts came back to the old haunting that had driven him into space in the first place.

It was funny how long it had taken him to ask her name. What was even more funny was that there was a reason for his delay and that reason beckoned to him now. He had felt somehow that he already knew her name, that had he forgotten himself he might accidentally have named her... what?

The resilient tone of her voice, the natural charm in her personality, the wave of her hair struck a cord within him of a long dead strain he and another had once harmonized on. If he had to name her, he would have called her Orsha.
“Now that’s enough,” he shouted at himself and effectively blotted out the whole train of thought with long-practiced efficiency. He started off for his cabin, confident that the screens would defend against any external threat. He couldn’t help, however, stopping outside Istria’s door and taking a look inside.

Only her face was visible, the golden hair splayed about it with a soft sheen from the light through the door. He couldn’t help staring and minutes began to move by. From the subliminal levels of his mind flowed a feeling which he dared not repress because it had become so rare. It was the sense of peace and happiness he had known so long ago and so briefly with Orsha. In a very real sense this feeling was Orsha, to him. For when she died she more or less took it with her. Afterwards, he would gaze at Tri-D images and then try to picture her in his mind flowing and alive, but if he didn’t regain that special feeling, he knew he hadn’t recaptured her. All he had was a plastic image.

Of course, there were times when, quite unconsciously, he would suddenly think of some little thing she had done and for a micro-second the feeling would be there, she would live again; and then as he strained to hold on to her she would slip away.

And so it happened now except that the feeling was steadily infiltrating his nervous system, satiating him, and growing stronger. Instead of the frustrating moment, it went on and on. It was too much to hope for. His imagination strained for release to leap wildly to all the glorious possibilities opening out before him.

Nevertheless, old ways die hard and he held back. As he looked down upon the sleeping form, a disbelief set in. It WAS too much to hope for. She couldn’t be what she seemed. Somewhere there was a flaw. She must be just the imaginings of a despondent man trapped in a web he couldn’t see or understand. Her image blurred and wavered and for one nerve-racking moment he thought she would disappear entirely, but when he looked again, she was still there same as before.

The moment brought him back to his senses. He became aware of the beat of his heart in his ears and a drop of sweat as it made its way past his temple and down his cheek. Very quietly Throm allowed her door to slide back into place, and he wearily headed for his bunk.

Throm was awakened in the morning by an alarm, not the usual alarm but the ship’s warning alarm Istria was outside her door as he
headed forward and her face was a question.

“Something is approaching,” he explained.

The monitor quickly disclosed three of the clawed machines churning toward them from the obelisk. Throm allowed a slight smile to touch his lips. This he was prepared for. “Just watch what happens when they hit our screens.”

With the end of his words also came the end of his confidence as an orange light flashed toward them from the pinnacle of the obelisk. Throm glanced over various dials and swore in disbelief.

“They hit us!” he exclaimed. “The screens are at full power, and they shot right through them like they didn’t exist.”

The pinnacle flashed again and then again at regular intervals. Throm made a decision and reacted instantly. “Come on,” he commanded as he took Istria by the hand and began leading her through the ship. Theirs was a nerve-straining rush, all the more so because the deadly attack they ran from was so silent. No explosions, no shells no rip and screech of metal. Just the lovely orange disintegration beam slicing off one chunk of the ship after another. Throm stopped before the door he wanted and as he lifted his hand to open it, it glowed orange and was gone. He stepped through the opening without hesitation into the ship’s hold.

“Istria, pick up a couple of those survival packs while I open the outer hatch.” He maneuvered through the crowded casings to the loading hatch where he pulled the emergency handle. With a hiss the air seal broke and the storage doors blew out. By then Istria had caught up with him and together they leapt to the ground and struck out for the underbrush at the opposite end of the meadow.
A couple of times the orange beam flashed past them and Throm stopped, thinking they had been seen, but it was only the disintegrator firing straight through the ship, whose once beautiful outline now looked like a chunk of coral. He also saw something else. One of the claw things had come around the end of the ship and was bearing down on them. Their escape was not to be so simple after all. He pulled his blaster and sent its beam flicking across the level land to strike the enemy machine head on. Nothing happened.

"They've adjusted it for your weapon," Istria noted. "We must flee. You can't fight them, Throm."

In full agreement he turned and they ran together. Ran into the forest on and on interminably. Only after hours of stumbling, scratching, slogging flight did they fall in exhaustion of the bank of a small stream.

They lay panting on the ground, eyeing each other and soaking up the coolness of the moist earth. Throm, gazing at Istria's dirt-streaked face and caked hair, began to chuckle and then to laugh. It was such a welcome relief from the tension of the past few hours that it was minutes before he could control himself enough to answer the puzzlement on Istria's face.

"You," he said, pointing and still chuckling, "after a whole year here you come out looking the most lonely woman I've ever known and after twenty-four hours with me you look like a Methalusian wench."

"Is that so?" she replied in mock indignation. "Well you could use a bath yourself," and with that her leg shot out and sent him rolling down the bank, but not before he managed to grab her ankle, and they tumbled into the water together. Without thinking what he was doing, Throm was splashing Istria like a frolicsome two-year-old and she retaliated in kind. It was wild and exhilarating and absolutely insane. Finally, both climbed up the bank and lay on the grass wet and weary but happy, oblivious of the danger from which they had fled.

They dared not build a fire, but they did have some food packed in self-heating cans which served as well. Dusk was falling again and they went to sleep by the side of the brook, but this night was not to prove any more restful than the night before. Throm didn't know what caused it but whatever it was must have alerted Istria, too, for he snapped awake and rolled over just as she cried out. The great claw of the machine was poised above his head and, though he knew it was hopeless, reflexively he drew his blaster and fired. The claw vanished.
He searched the dim underbrush with his eyes, sighted on a great moving shadow, fired, and it lay still.

"Evidently, at close quarters the blaster still has some effect," he remarked.

"We can't stay here," she answered back.

He nodded and, picking up their packs, they moved as silently and swiftly as possible in the blackness. After awhile they stopped and leaned close in the hollow formed by the roots of a mighty tree.

"Something is wrong," he whispered.

"What do you mean?" Istria asked, puzzled.

"Well, just stop a minute and look at everything that has happened to us. These creatures are so powerful they could take control of my ship, force it down, and open the airlock by no visible means. Yet, somehow, we escape from these almighty creatures, and from their own building no less, when all they had to do was shut the portal to trap us inside. Then they leave the ship's airlock conveniently open for us even though we know they could have shut it. The machine they sent after you, I cut down easily with my blaster. But yesterday they were impervious, and just now the machine that was about to kill me is vulnerable again. And that attack yesterday. They again show their awesome power by holding the ship down and proceeding to cut it to pieces despite the shields, but they are so inept as to allow us to open the cargo hatch and escape. And why did they wait for daybreak to launch the attack when we would have been helpless at night? And why were the machines only on three sides of the ship, leaving one and only one convenient path of escape? It would seem that the stupidity of these supercreatures is as colossal as their intelligence."

"Or all the mistakes have had a purpose," finished Istria.

"Exactly," Throm affirmed with a nod. "And you said they want to test us."

"Especially mentally."

"Yes, mental endurance would be what they're after. Cut us off from most of our machines and technology on which we have come to depend, send us running on foot through an alien environment under the most primitive conditions, and pursued all the time by a nameless, featureless power which we can fight but not beat. Imagine what the long term effects could be."

"Please don't," Istria pleaded but for the moment Throm was unconscious of her interruption.
"Still..." he began and hesitated, his brow furled in a frown.
"What is it?"
"There's still something missing," he answered at length. "Surely they know we'd figure it out this far."
"Maybe not," she rejoined impatiently, "they're still learning. Even if they did, what difference would it make?"
"Okay," Throm sighed and, shaking the doubts out of his mind, turned his thoughts to the problem at hand. "We'll head for the mountains. Since the Testers herded us this way, that's probably where they want us to go anyway, but I don't see how those tracked machines can follow us up those slopes."

The purple mountains were actually quite a bit farther than they had looked, and it was four days before the pair hit the foothills. They took no more chances for neither of them had any more illusions about the enemy. They started each day's journey before dawn and did not stop until well after dark. They took turns at keeping watch, never made a fire, always triple-checked campsites for any forgotten piece of tell-tale trash, backtracked and walked in loops, sometimes because of the ruggedness of the land but usually in a frail attempt at confusing the trackers. But they never did. Their precautions prevented any more near disastrous encounters with the monster machines, such as that of the first night, but several times they were heard shattering trees or seen topping some piece of high ground. It was, indeed, a mental torture of futility, but it also served to build a bond between this man and woman which was itself a new strength. With each day of shared peril, where each person's survival depended on the other, a mutual trust and deep, private level of communication were forged and growing stronger.

Throm couldn't pin down exactly when he recognized this attachment between himself and Istria, but it must have been somewhere between the fading of the gnawing doubt of something missed and the cultivation of a bundle of absurdly optimistic dreams. Suddenly he had a reason to survive and go back with his world-shaking news and to wealthy retirement because now he had someone to go back to, or with rather.

He became heedless of the danger that stalked them as he contemplated this potential new course of his life. He looked forward to each day's climb so that he could help Istria, feel the slight pressure of her hand in his, every once and awhile receiving one of the quick blue-
eyed glances that said so much. But even then he did not realize what pressure he was under until, with dawning realization, he noted that the trackers had not been seen for two days. It was over a week since his forced landing and their supplies were running low, they were climbing around the most bleak and bare landscape he had ever seen, and no one knew he was here, but with the disappearance of their relentless foe, these problems became minor and easily soluble.

That afternoon they found a large cavern midway up a slope of loose gravel accessible only by a single cliff-edge path. There, perfection of the site seemed just one more omen of hope to Throm. They made a fire for the first time and cooked a small rabbit-like creature he had shot that morning. After the meal Istria lay close to the glowing coals and watched the sky as it, too, began to glow with the departing fires of the sun. Throm sat against the rock wall also watching, but watching Istria and not the sky. His mind was very calm. He marvelled at that. He concluded it could only mean that his mind was unified at last in what it felt and in what it had decided.

He moved toward Istria and lay down beside her. She didn't move, and he gently touched her shoulder and turned her toward him. For a moment he lost himself. She lay so quiet and expectant. He could see she knew what he wanted to say, wanted him to say it. But did she feel it, too?

"Istria, when I came here I was alone. I mean really alone. So much so that I didn't even know myself, that one companion that everyone should be entitled to, at least. But now... I mean we may never get off this planet, we may die here., but at least I'll know I had you. I... I..."

"I love you," she said.

So sweet and simple yet it said it all. Throm felt they had made a pact and he moved slowly, tenderly to seal it with a kiss. She moved to meet him, and the red coals reflected in the circles of blue.

A test of truth.
Throm stopped.
A test of truth.

The doubt that had been smoldering at the back of his mind all these days came burning to the forefront of his mind in the form of those words spoken to him by the Tester back in the obelisk.

"Throm...?" There was anguish in Istria's voice and Throm could not bear to look in her eyes.
He got up and moved to the mouth of the cave watching as the darkness began to absorb the red sky. That something that was missing. He had remarked how miraculous had been their escape from the Testers, but how had Istria escaped just when he happened to be there? She had never said. But the Tester had said something—that Throm must face a test of truth. At that moment the conversation had been interrupted by Istria’s scream. He had, of course, considered this to be some chance happening, but could it be that the test of truth had begun at that moment?

But what was the truth he was looking for? Was it the realization he had just made? Or the fact that Istria was a plant, an imposter?

Or was he a fool? What difference did it make as far as his feelings for Istria were concerned?

He heard gravel sliding on gravel. Looking down he froze and his energy dwindled to ashes. The machines were there. Three, four, he couldn’t be sure. And they were coming up. It wasn’t possible that they could make any headway on that steep, crumbling slope, but they were. Throm rushed back into the cavern. It didn’t look good, but there was still a chance they might get away. Inside Istria hadn’t moved from her position by the fire and Throm felt a pang of remorse.

“Our friends are back, Istria,” he said. “We’ve got to leave.”

She didn’t move. Throm hesitated and started toward her when there was a flash of blue from the mouth of the cavern followed by a thudding explosion. They had switched from disintegrators to energy beams. Thus distracted, Throm hadn’t noticed Istria get steadily to her feet and walk toward him.

She said in a deadly calm: “Enough is enough.”

She grabbed his blaster from his belt. Throm was so shocked by her manner and strained, empty look on her face that she was several paces ahead of him before he instinctively darted after her. A blue beam flashed into the cavern and reflexively he threw himself to the earth. Through the dust of the resulting explosion he saw Istria’s shadowy figure at the lip of the cave firing madly at the approaching attackers.

Throm started up again and paused just for a moment. A wild volley of thoughts fired through his awareness. If she was a plant, they wouldn’t kill her. Perhaps the test was for him to stay. It was a trap to lure him out. Instantly, these thoughts were overwhelmed by a simultaneous frantic rush of emotions which screamed at him: What the hell are you waiting for do you realize what you’re doing what you’re
giving up go man go! He only paused a moment, but it was an eternity too long.

Another blue beam, another blue flash, and Istria was dead on the floor of the cave.

"Istria..." he croaked through dust-clogged lips.

Throm was immediately at her side but did not touch her. There was nothing he could do but look at her. His mind and body were numb, temporary defense against the sea of emotional destruction building behind an inner dam. How could he have allowed this to happen? Again! His deepest repressed feelings crashed to the surface.

He had stood helplessly by watching more than his own life being destroyed once before. He had hidden as the Trogan pirates had slowly wrung the life out of Orsha's body. But he had been a boy then. And it hadn't been his fault the pirates had come. What was his excuse this time? He had led his life to destruction. His life! Despicable worm, he had destroyed a life more beloved than his own.

Throm reeled in the death-grip of despair and finally did the only thing he could. He fell on Istria's body and screamed to the skies, the machines, the rock walls about him in all the stubborn desperation only a human being can show when cornered: "No-No-No-No-No. She's not dead. She can't be. I can't have killed her. This cannot be."

Through his tear-blurred eyes her body seemed to shimmer and waver.

He had seen that happen once before.

Throm was instantly on his feet—calm, steady, solid. Perhaps his emotional outburst had cleared his thinking processes for it was suddenly all childishly clear to him. He had been so blinded by his own troubles, that he had never been able to identify the critical evidence and put it together. They key question had always been: What was the truth? So he had wracked his brain to find this elusive truth in all that was going on about him. All the time he kept trying to make some kind of sense out of the coincidences and unexplainable events (such as those machines now climbing a slope they can't possibly climb), but had been doomed from the start by making one basic assumption: That what was happening was real. It was a natural assumption, but one he had had no right to make.

He looked again at Istria's body and said: "I do not believe in you. Such a person as you could never had existed, and you do not exist now. Let me see the truth."
The body wavered hesitantly, then faded completely. Throm looked down at the advancing machines and they vanished. After all, Istria had told him herself about the Testers' unique mental powers. He should have guessed from the beginning that they could easily spin a web of illusions for a receptive and vulnerable mind such as his own. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if...

The monitor of the Orion displayed a many-hued planet a thousand miles below. Throm looked down at the controls. The ship was just completing its tenth orbit. Throm slumped over the controls and put his head in his arms. He had made it. Somehow, in the space of minutes he had fought his way through the most intricate labyrinth ever constructed to challenge a human mind. But he had won.

"Do you really believe that?" said a tender, feminine voice.

Throm started violently. He had half expected something but not this. He turned and faced Istria. "You do not exist," he said in trembling voice. "You are the whim of a destitute mind. You..."

She shook her head slowly from side to side, her blue eyes tear-filled with pity, and something else. "Do you really believe that?" she asked again.

He dropped his head as he began to glimpse the massiveness of his defeat. But even now he could not give in. "Istria, you weren't real."

"But I was and I am, as real as your thoughts could make me."

"But it didn't happen," he insisted.

"Yet what you felt was real. It was a test of truth, Throm. What is the one universal truth that never changes?"

"You do know," she continued. "It is yourself. What you experience and most of all what you feel inside is all the truth you have a right to expect and all you need."

"Then why did I...?" he began but choked as his defences began to give way.

"Reject the truth?" she finished, her own voice cracking now. "You could not believe that you had found that for which you had searched so long. So you denied your senses and, worse, your own feelings, looked on your own love as betrayal; and finally sought for deception so hard that you lost yourself. I am sorry for both of us, but I pity you."

"Both of us?" he repeated in a daze. Oh, God, he saw something. He dared not know the answer but he had to ask. "What if I hadn't..." Istria bit her lip, barely able to speak, but she did. "Then all would have been as you imagined."
"Ahhhhhhhhhh..." In torment, the animal cry was wrested from his throat because he knew it was true. Even when he thought he had won, the victory had been a hollow one, bought at too great a price. Now that hollowness rang in his ears. His soul had been torn open raw. Only after long minutes did he mumble, "So what now?"

"That is up to you, Throm."

He looked up hastily but she was already gone. And like Orsha before she took a part of him with her, one he could no longer afford to lose. He sat and listened to the soft hum of the atomic motors. He looked at the lush planet passing below. She was down there still. No! He shook his head. No more lies. No more dreams, false hopes, and deceptions. He had been given his chance and had proved inadequate. His was a flaw that had crippled him all his life. And now the purpose that had kept him alive all these years had been sacrificed. There was nothing left for him. He was dead.

On the monitor was a range of purple mountains. His hands moved confidently, without his having to look down, and were still again. The nose of the Orion fell gently and ever more steeply until it began to glow and burn from friction with the atmosphere.

In the sky above the obelisk, there was a flash like a shooting star and was gone.

"Words are the most powerful drug used by mankind." - Rudyard Kipling