

Chapter Three

The Cosmos Takes Off

Our ship was now ready for take-off.

With the help of pulleys and cables, it was erected inside Doctor Omega's new hangar, the roof of which had been removed for the occasion.

The Doctor had spent the last few days closeted in his study, performing arcane calculations in his notebook, or writing equations on his blackboard.

"Are you concerned that you may have made a mistake?" I inquired.

"Not in the least, young man," he replied. "But the most delicate task of all still remains to be performed. Without that outer shell of stellite, my new craft could not travel outside the four dimensions. But that is not enough. We need a steering mechanism.

"So, I've adapted a guidance system from my old ship. But if my calculations are wrong, we risk drifting aimlessly outside the continuum. That's why I keep rechecking my figures, you see?"

I shuddered at the thought of being condemned to float outside of space and time for all eternity, like the Flying Dutchman of legend. But the Doctor, ever the pragmatic one, reassured me that we would run out of air long before we reached the end of eternity!

Little did I know how prophetic his comment would turn out to be!

The next day, the Doctor locked himself in his laboratory, and spent several hours performing some mysterious tasks.

When he came out, he carried with him two devices which he later identified as a *temporal rotor* and a *vector generator*. To me, they looked like those convoluted African sculptures I had seen at the Paris World Fair, except that they were made of metal and glass instead of equatorial wood, or at least something that looked like metal and glass.

At the Doctor's request, I accompanied him to the bridge of our new ship. There, he asked me to hold on to the two devices, while he crawled on the floor under the steering wheel.

I soon heard the buzz of that strange screwdriver of his, and a few seconds later, he gestured to me to pass him the *temporal rotor* (which is how I learned its name), then the *vector generator*.

The moment he finished installing the two machines, I noticed that the entire craft came to life. I cannot find other words to describe it. It was the oddest of feelings.

One minute, we stood inside an inanimate metal hulk, no different from the French battleships I had once visited in the harbor of Brest; the next, we were inside a ship that vibrated in tune with what I thought were the harmonics of the universe itself.

I imagined that if one of Jonathan Swift's fabled Lilliputians could have stood inside my Stradivarius while it was being played by the great Paganini, he would have felt just as I did now.

It certainly was a wonderful sensation.

"Well, well," said the Doctor getting up, rubbing his hands and looking pleased with himself. He obviously had anticipated the phenomenon, and considered it a proof of his success.

"If only my colleagues from the Academy could see this," he muttered.

Then, he placed his hand on my arm in a fatherly gesture.

"You're lucky, Borel. You're going to become part of history. And not just of French history, eh?"

I was about to ask him what he meant by this when Fred walked in to tell us that the final supplies had just been loaded into the store room.

"I must ask you again, Fred," said the scientist. "Do you still want to come with us? The trip could be more dangerous than you think. Wouldn't you prefer to stay behind?"

The big man became indignant.

“Doctor! How can you say that? When you and Mademoiselle Susanne pulled me from that hell hole in Cayenne, I told you that I would never be able to repay your generosity. Now I can, and I will. Don’t even think of leaving without me. I’ll sleep aboard if it comes to that!”

The Doctor could not hide his pride at the fierce loyalty shown by his assistant.

“Besides, who’s going to cook for you while you’re on board? This gentleman from Paris? Ha! I wouldn’t trust him near one of my skillets if my life depended on it!”

“He’s right, Doctor. I’m a terrible cook,” I said.

“And what if you’re attacked by savages from the Moon? We don’t know what kind of creatures live up there...”

“We’re not going to the Moon, Fred,” said the Doctor, smiling. “We’re going to Mars. As far as the cosmos goes, it’s a very different place.”

“The Moon, Mars, the cosmos, it’s all the same to me, Doctor. What if you’re attacked by the marsupials?”

“They’re called Martians.”

“Martians, then. Do you think the two of you can defend yourselves against them? Not a chance! With me, at least you’ve got a chance. I’m very strong. That’s why I’m coming, and that’s all there is to it!”

Looking at Fred’s huge hands and his broad shoulders, I agreed with him and was delighted that he was indeed coming. I had no fighting experience at all, and did not doubt that his experience would be essential during our journey.

“Thank you, Fred. I couldn’t ask for a better friend,” said the Doctor, shaking the big man’s hand.

“We’ll say no more of it then.”

The day of our departure had been fixed by Doctor Omega for the morning of the following day: April 18th, 1905. A Tuesday.

The night before, morbid thoughts again preyed on my mind. I wondered whether this might be the last night of my life I would spend on God’s Earth. I began questioning the wisdom of my going with the Doctor on his journey as my resolve weakened.

I turned over in my bed, and ceaselessly argued with myself.

At one point, I almost got up to tell the Doctor that I had changed my mind and decided to stay home after all, but I felt too ashamed to go through with that cowardly last minute gesture.

In the morning, I got up, took my bath, and dressed in my best country clothes, as if I was going hunting.

The time had come to take my leave of the world on which I had been born to embrace the heavens.

As I reached the hollow, I could see the craft shining softly in the morning light. A small crowd of villagers had already gathered around it.

The Doctor was pacing, rechecking some final calculations, writing in what looked like a pocket diary. Once in a while, he would raise his eyes to the sky, as if he could see Mars, or beyond, from where he stood.

“Perfect,” he finally said to himself, pocketing the notebook.

He then walked to a small platform that had been erected at the foot of the ship to make access to its circular entrance easier.

Fred and I joined him.

The crowd had now grown to about fifty folks, including my own Marcel and Pierre, who had insisted on accompanying me so far.

I was pleasantly surprised when a few of the villagers pulled out some musical instruments and began playing a few bars from *La Marseillaise*.

“What are they doing that for?” asked the Doctor.

“Why, Doctor, it is played in the honor of men who put their lives at risk in the service of *la belle France*,” I explained, genuinely moved.

“Harrumph.”

“What’s her name?” shouted someone in the crowd.

“What?”

“What’s the ship’s name? What is she called?”

“He’s right, Doctor,” I said. “You haven’t baptized our craft.”

The old scientist looked taken aback as if such a notion had never occurred to him.

“How about the *Cosmos*, Doctor?” suggested Fred.

“Yes, the *Cosmos*! That’s a good idea!” I added.

“Well then, the *Cosmos* it is,” said the Doctor, smiling.

“*Vive le Cosmos! Vive le Cosmos!*” shouted the crowd.

The Doctor looked at his watch.

“The time has come, I think,” he said.

“*Alea jacta est*,” I thought.

My heart was thumping furiously in my chest. I must have looked very pale. I might as well admit it here: I was very frightened.

The Doctor activated a hidden lock (which I hoped would work better than the one on his hangar), and the round door slid away, revealing the ship’s narrow, central shaft.

Fred went in first... I was supposed to follow.

But I hung desperately to those last few minutes of fresh air and Normandy blue sky, filled with so much vibrant life.

I pretended to wave at Marcel and Pierre, like a man who said he would kill himself at noon on the dot waits for all the clocks of the city to toll their last before firing the fatal bullet.

“I’m waiting, Borel,” said the Doctor testily.

For a fleeting moment, I thought of turning and running away, but I met the scientist’s eyes, those penetrating, timeless eyes that had so transfixed me before, and again I became helpless before them.

I stepped into the craft, immediately followed by Doctor Omega.

The sound of the crowd cheering was abruptly cut off to barely a low mumble as the Doctor shut the door behind us and locked it.

We quickly climbed up to the bridge, where Fred had already harnessed himself in a chair to the Doctor’s right.

I took the chair to the left, while the Doctor sat in the pilot’s chair.

We were inclined at almost ninety degrees, parallel to the ship’s axis. In front of me, and to my left and right, I could see perfect blue sky through the front and side portholes.

I looked at Doctor Omega. He seemed very calm and sure of himself, like a King reclaiming a throne to which he was born. An odd idea crossed my mind. This, I thought, was not the face of a man leaving, but of a man going home...

I also looked at Fred, who seemed happy and cheerful, and not in the least worried.

With a single flick of a switch, the Doctor activated one of the mysterious devices he had installed under the steering column, and a weird whistling sound filled the cabin, like that of an arrow wheezing past one’s ear.

“It’s a success! We’ve gone,” said the scientist.

The blue sky outside had suddenly disappeared, and the bridge was now lit only by the cold glare of the electric lights.

Through the portholes, I could see a field of stars and, to starboard, what could only be—Earth!

We were the first men in the entire history of mankind to view our world thus, from space. It floated like a magical blue balloon, streaked with white clouds, against the velvety blackness of airless space.

I could make out the contours of the continents: the Americas stretching from pole to pole, Dark Africa, and the Asiatic land mass...

I could hardly repress my excitement.

"Earth! This is Earth! This is our world!"

Fred was also looking at that incredible sight, not believing his eyes.

I had seen that look at the *Musée Grévin* during some of the more amazing tricks performed by its prestidigitators. Was this but a fantastic illusion as well?

But in our hearts and minds, we knew it was no such thing. This was real.

In spite of the thickness of the hull and the electric heating, we began feeling the infinite coldness of space seep in through the shell of our vehicle.

Fred went down to the supply room, and quickly returned with fur-lined jackets, which were very welcome.

"What now, Doctor?" I asked.

"We're in orbit. The first step of our journey has been a success. But the greatest step remains to be taken. We're still in normal space. We must now leave this continuum."

"Couldn't we have done it from the surface?"

"In my old ship, yes, Borel. But this is only a prototype. It's as clumsy and primitive as a Roman galley would be when compared to one of your transatlantic liners..."

"There are factors to be considered, such as the rotation of the planet, of the stars... Without the help of advanced calculating machines that you don't have, I couldn't take the risk. It was safer to use the stellite to propel us first to outer space before making the big jump... Are you ready, gentlemen?"

Both Fred and I nodded in concert.

The Doctor pushed another switch.

Suddenly, there was a loud moaning sound, and I felt as if we were falling.

At the World's Fair, I had amused myself on the *montagnes russes*, and remembered the sensation of plunging forward as the little chariots rolled down their mechanical slopes. It was the same feeling here, except that it seemed like we would never hit bottom.

Then, abruptly, it stopped.

Now, we felt as if we were entirely motionless, perfectly standing still. Yet, a quick look through the portholes quickly dispelled that illusion.

The stars had not gone, but they were now rotating around us, twirling around clouds of light and nebulae made of ever-changing colored matter. We were in a kaleidoscopic tunnel made of pure aether, cutting through the celestial fabric of the universe like a knife through butter.

Not for the first time, I admired the genius of Doctor Omega, and of his mysterious people, who had learned to navigate the ultimate sea that surrounded all of God's creation, like the Wright Brothers had liberated us from the gravity that tied us to the ground.

The Doctor got up to stretch his legs, and we did the same.

I stepped closer to the stellite-plated porthole and totally lost myself in the contemplation of the vortex-like patterns that gyrated outside the ship.

I did not even hear the Doctor appear behind me.

"Exhilarating, isn't it, Borel? Once you've walked in eternity, you can no longer be the same man as you were before, no more than a sailor or an aviator would," he said, again divining the nature of the emotions that filled my soul.

For once, I was speechless, and just nodded in complete agreement.

Suddenly, the Doctor leaned forward, and brought his face very close to the glass.

I looked in the direction he was looking, and noticed a very small point of light, at first no bigger than a pinhead, but which appeared to grow larger with every passing moment.

Quickly, it became a bluish, phosphorescent ball that seemed to be headed right at us.

"What is it, Doctor?" I asked.

"I don't know yet," he replied testily.

He continued to peer at the incoming phenomenon with growing concern. I was standing right behind him, also looking at the ball of blue fire that had now grown to the size of a balloon.

Suddenly, the Doctor turned around, his face an expression in shock and surprise.

“What is it?” I exclaimed.

“A helix, Borel! A very nasty thing! That fireball is one of the most dangerous things that exist outside the continuum. It’s attracted to us like St. Elmo’s fire is attracted to the mast of a ship during a storm. It’s rushing straight at us. We can’t avoid it!”

Fred and I looked at each other.

“Do you mean?...” I asked.

“Yes. When it hits us, we’ll be completely annihilated! We’ll become a scattering of atoms randomly spread throughout creation.”

Then, aware of the responsibility he had shouldered when he had asked us to join him on this experimental journey, he added:

“My poor friends... I am so very sorry...”

If any of my readers ever have the misfortune of finding themselves on a sinking ship, they will recognize the fear one feels when being told to rush to the lifeboats and prepare to evacuate the vessel. It is a deep abiding fear, barely relieved by the sight of the tiny boats to which one will entrust one’s life on the hostile ocean.

How much more terrifying was our situation, for we were in a ship lost on a sea that no humans had ever navigated, with no lifeboats to give us that momentary sense of having narrowly escaped death.

Our death was coming right at us. We saw it approach at astonishing speed, and there was nothing we could do to avoid it...

The *Cosmos* was doomed!