

Poul Anderson

THE BOOK OF WINGS AND CLAWS

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CONTENTS

Introduction to <i>Wings of Victory</i>	
	[02]
Wings of Victory	
	[03]
Introduction to <i>The Problem of Pain</i>	
	[10]
The Problem of Pain	
	[11]
How To Be Ethnic in One Easy Lesson	
(with <i>Introduction</i>)	
	[19]
The Season of Forgiveness	
(with <i>Introduction</i>)	
	[26]
Introduction to <i>Esau</i>	
	[31]
Esau	
	[32]
Introduction to <i>The Master Key</i>	
	[42]
The Master Key	
	[43]
A Little Knowledge	
(with <i>Introduction</i>)	
	[58]
Wingless	
(with <i>Introduction</i>)	
	[67]
Rescue on Avalon	
(with <i>Introduction</i>)	
	[71]
Last Words	
	[75]

INTRODUCTION TO *WINGS OF VICTORY*

To THOSE who read, good flight.

It is Hloch of the Stormgate Choth who writes, on the peak of Mount Anrovil in the Weathermother. His Wyvan, Tariat son of Lythran and Blawsa, has asked this. Weak though his grip upon the matter be, bloodpride requires he undertake the task.

Judge, O people. The father of Hloch was Ferannian and the mother was Rennhi. They held the country around Spearhead Lake. He was an engineer who was often in Gray, Centauri, and other towns, dealing with humans. They in their turn came often thither, for travel routes crisscrossed above and there was, too, a copper mine not far off. Hloch's parents were guest-free and would house whoever pleased them for days in line, giving these leave to roam and hunt. Moreover, as you well know, because of its nearness to populous Gray, our choth receives more humans into membership than most. Hence we younglings grew up friendly with many of this race and familiar with no few of the winds that blow on their souls.

Rennhi was a quester into the centuries, remembered for her scholarship and for the flame she kindled in those whom she saw fit to teach. High above all, she is remembered for writing *The Sky Book of Stormgate*. In this, as you well know, she traced and described the whole history of our choth. Of the ancestors upon Ythri; of the founders here upon Avalon; of the descendants and their doings unto her own years; of how past and present and future have forever been intermingled and, in living minds, ever begetting each other—of this does her work pursue the truth, and will as long as thought flies over our world.

God stooped upon her before she could begin the next chronicle. Already she had gathered in much that was needful, aided in small compass by her son Hloch. Then came the Terran War, and when it had passed by, ruined landscapes lay underneath skies gone strange. We are still raising our lives anew from the wreckage left by that hurricane. Hloch, who had served in space, afterward found himself upon Imperial planets, member of a merchant crew, as trade was reborn. Thus maychance he gained some further sight across the human species.

So did the Wyvan Tariat think of late, when Hloch had wearied of the void and returned to the winds. His word: "We have need to grasp the realness of those folk, both those who dwell among us and those who are of the Empire. For this, your mother knew, it is best to fly their ways and see through their eyes—ancestral still more than incarnate, that we may sense what is rising ahead of us in time. Hloch, write the book she did not live to write."

Therefore, behold these annals, from the Discovery and on through the World-Taking. They are garnered from different trees, and few of them will seem at once to grow toward the same sun. Yet they do, they all do. This is the tale, told afresh, of how Avalon came to settlement and thus our choth to being. This is the tale as told, not by Rennhi and those on whom she drew for the *Sky Book*, but by Terrans, who walk the earth. Hloch will seek to explain what is alien: though only by swinging your mind into that same alienness may you hope to seize the knowledge behind.

Then read.

—Hloch of the Stormgate Choth
The Earth Book of Stormgate

WINGS OF VICTORY

OUR PART in the Grand Survey had taken us out beyond the great suns Alpha and Beta Crucis. From Earth we would have been in the constellation Lupus. But Earth was 278 light-years remote, Sol itself long dwindled in invisibility, and stars drew strange pictures across the dark.

After three years we were weary and had suffered losses. Oh, the wonder wasn't gone. How could it ever go—from world after world after world? But we had seen so many, and of those we had walked on, some were beautiful and some were terrible and most were both—even as Earth is—and none were alike and all were mysterious. They blurred together in our minds.

It was still a heart-speeding thing to find another sentient race, actually more than to find another planet colonizable by man. Now Ali Hamid had perished of a poisonous bite a year back, and Manuel Gonsalves had not yet recovered from the skull fracture inflicted by the club of an excited being at our last stop. This made Vaughn Webner our chief xenologist, from whom was to issue trouble.

Not that he, or any of us, wanted it. You learn to gang warily, in a universe not especially designed for you, or you die; there is no third choice. We approached this latest star because every G-type dwarf beckoned us. But we did not establish orbit around its most terrestroid attendant until neutrino analysis had verified that nobody in the system employed atomic energy. And we exhausted every potentiality of our instruments before we sent down our first robot probe.

The sun was a G9, golden in hue, luminosity half of Sol's. The world which interested us was close enough in to get about the same irradiation as Earth. It was smaller, surface gravity 0.75, with thinner and drier atmosphere. However, that air was perfectly breathable by humans, and bodies of water existed which could be called modest oceans. The globe was very lovely where it turned against star-crowded night, blue, tawny, rusty-brown, white-clouded. Two little moons skipped in escort.

Biological samples proved that its life was chemically similar to ours. None of the microorganisms we cultured posed any threat that normal precautions and medications could not handle. Pictures taken at low altitude and on the ground showed woods, lakes, wide plains rolling toward mountains. We were afire to set foot there.

But the natives—

You must remember how new the hyperdrive is, and how immense the cosmos. The organizers of the Grand Survey were too wise to believe that the few neighbor systems we'd learned something about gave knowledge adequate for devising doctrine. Our service had one law, which was its proud motto: "We come as friends." Otherwise each crew was free to work out its own procedures. After five years the survivors would meet and compare experiences.

For us aboard the *Olga*, Captain Gray had decided that, whenever possible, sophonts should not be disturbed by preliminary sightings of our machines. We would try to set the probes in uninhabited regions. When we ourselves landed, we would come openly. After all, the shape of a body counts for much less than the shape of the mind within. Thus went our belief.

Naturally, we took in every datum we could from orbit and upper-atmospheric overflights. While not extremely informative under such conditions, our pictures did reveal a few small towns on two continents—clusters of buildings, at least, lacking defensive walls or regular streets—hard by primitive mines. They seemed insignificant against immense and almost unpopulated landscapes. We guessed we could identify a variety of cultures, from Stone Age through Iron. Yet invariably, aside from those petty communities, settlements consisted of one or a few houses standing alone. We found none less than ten kilometers apart; most were more isolated.

"Carnivores, I expect," Webner said. "The primitive economies are hunting-fishing-gathering, the advanced economies pastoral. Large areas which look cultivated are probably just to provide fodder; they don't have the layout of proper farms." He tugged his chin. "I confess being puzzled as to how the civilized... well, let's say the 'metallurgic' people, at this stage... how they manage it. You need trade, communication, quick exchange of ideas, for that level of technology. And if I read the pictures aright, roads are virtually nonexistent, a few dirt tracks between towns and mines, or to the occasional dock for barges or ships... Confound it, water transportation is insufficient."

"Pack animals, maybe?" I suggested.

"Too slow," he said. "You don't get progressive cultures when months must pass before the few individuals capable of originality can hear from each other. The chances are they never will."

For a moment the pedantry dropped from his manner. "Well," he said, "we'll see," which is the grandest sentence that any language can own.

*** *** ***

We always made initial contact with three, the minimum who could do the job, lest we lose them. This time they were Webner, xenologist; Aram Turekian, pilot; and Yukiko Sachansky, gunner. It was Gray's idea to give women that last assignment. He felt they were better than men at watching and waiting, less likely to open fire in doubtful situations.

The site chosen was in the metallurgic domain, though not a town. Why complicate matters unnecessarily? It was on a rugged upland, thick forest for kilometers around. Northward the mountainside rose steeply until, above timberline, its crags were crowned by a glacier. Southward it toppled to a great plateau, open country where herds grazed on a reddish analog of grass or shrubs. Maybe they were domesticated, maybe not. In either case, probably the dwellers did a lot of hunting.

"Would that account for their being so scattered?" Yukiko wondered. "A big range needed to support each individual?"

"Then they must have a strong territoriality," Webner said. "Stand sharp by the guns."

We were not forbidden to defend ourselves from attack, whether or not blunders of ours had provoked it. Nevertheless the girl winced. Turekian glanced over his shoulder and saw. That, and Webner's tone, made him flush. "Blow down, Vaughn," he growled.

Webner's long, gaunt frame stiffened in his seat. Light gleamed off the scalp under his thin hair as he thrust his head toward the pilot. "What did you say?"

"Stay in your own shop and run it, if you can."

"Mind your manners. This may be my first time in charge, but I *am*—"

"On the ground. We're aloft yet."

"Please." Yukiko reached from her turret and laid a hand on either man's shoulder. "Please don't quarrel... when we're about to meet a whole new history."

They couldn't refuse her wish. Tool-burdened coverall or no, she remained in her Eurasian petiteness the most desired woman aboard the *Olga*; and still the rest of the girls liked her. Gonsalves's word for her was "*simpatico*."

The men only quieted on the surface. They were an ill-assorted pair, not enemies—you don't sign on a person who'll allow himself hatred—but unfriends. Webner was the academic type, professor of xenology at the University of Oceania. In youth he'd done excellent field work, especially in the trade route cultures of Cynthia, and he'd been satisfactory under his superiors. At heart, though, he was a theorist, whom middle age had made dogmatic.

Turekian was the opposite: young, burly, black-bearded, boisterous and roisterous, born in a sealant on Ganymede to a life of banging around the available universe. If half his brags were true, he was mankind's boldest adventurer, toughest fighter, and mightiest lover; but I'd found to my profit that he wasn't the poker player he claimed. Withal he was able, affable, helpful, well liked—which may have kindled envy in poor self-chilled Webner.

"O.K., sure," Turekian laughed. "For you, Yu." He tossed a kiss in her direction.

Webner unbent less easily. "What did you mean by running my own shop if I can?" he inquired.

"Nothing, nothing," the girl almost begged.

"Ah, a bit more than nothing," Turekian said. "A tiny bit. I just wish you were less convinced your science has the last word on all the chances. Things I've seen—"

"I've heard your song before," Webner scoffed. "In a jungle on some exotic world you met animals with wheels."

"Never said that. Hm-m-m... make a good yarn, wouldn't it?"

"No. Because it's an absurdity. Simply ask yourself how nourishment would pass from the axle bone to the cells of the disk. In like manner—"

"Yeh, yeh. Quiet, now, please. I've got to conn us down."

The target waxed fast in the bow screen. A booming of air came faint through the hull plates and vibration shivered flesh. Turekian hated dawdling. Besides, a slow descent might give the autochthons time to become hysterical, with possibly tragic consequences.

Peering, the humans saw a house on the rim of a canyon at whose bottom a river rushed gray-green. The structure was stone, massive and tile-roofed. Three more buildings joined to define a flagged courtyard. These were of timber, topped by blossoming sod, long and low. A corral outside the quadrangle held four-footed beasts, and nearby stood a row of what Turekian, pointing, called overgrown birdhouses. A meadow surrounded the ensemble. Elsewhere the woods crowded close.

There was abundant bird or, rather, ornithoid life, flocks strewn across the sky. A pair of especially large creatures hovered above the steading. They veered as the boat descended.

Abruptly, wings exploded from the house. Out of its windows fliers came, a score or better, all sizes from tiny ones which clung to adult backs, up to those which dwarfed the huge extinct condors of Earth. In a gleam of bronze feathers, a storm of wing-beats which pounded through the hull, they rose, and fled, and were lost among the treetops.

The humans landed in a place gone empty.

Hands near sidearms, Webner and Turekian trod forth, looked about, let the planet enter them. You always undergo that shock of first encounter. Not only does space separate the new-found world from yours; time does, five billion years at least. Often you need minutes before you can truly see the shapes around, they are that alien. Before, the eye has registered them but not the brain.

This was more like home. Yet the strangenesses were uncountable. Weight: three-fourths of what the ship maintained. An ease, a bounciness in the stride... and a subtle kinesthetic adjustment required, sensory more than muscular.

Air: like Earth's at about two kilometers' altitude. (Gravity gradient being less, the density drop-off above sea level went slower.) Crystalline vision, cool flow and murmur of breezes, souging in the branches and river

clangorous down in the canyon. Every odor different, no hint of sun-baked resin or duff, instead a medley of smokinesses and pungencies.

Light: warm gold, making colors richer and shadows deeper than you were really evolved for; a midmorning sun which displayed almost half again the diameter of Earth's, in a sky which was deep blue and had only thin streaks of cloud.

Life: wild flocks, wheeling and crying high overhead; lowings and cacklings from the corral; rufous carpet underfoot, springy, suggestive more of moss than grass though not very much of either, starred with exquisite flowers; trees whose leaves were green—from silvery to murky—whose bark—if it were bark—might be black, or gray, or brown, or white, whose forms were perhaps no odder to you than were palm, or ginkgo, if you came from oak and beech country, but which were no trees of anywhere on Earth. A swarm of midge-like insectoids went by, and a big coppery-winged "moth" leisurely feeding on them.

Scenery: superb. Above the forest, peaks shouldered into heaven, the glacier shimmered blue. To the right, canyon walls plunged roseate, ocher-banded, and cragged. But your attention was directed ahead.

The house was astonishingly big. "A flinking castle," Turekian exclaimed. An approximate twenty meter cube, it rose sheer to the peaked roof, built from well-dressed blocks of granite. Windows indicated six stories. They were large openings, equipped with wooden shutters and wrought-iron balconies. The sole door, on ground level, was ponderous. Horns, skulls, and sculptured weapons of the chase—knife, spear, shortsword, blowgun, bow and arrow—ornamented the facade.

The companion buildings were doubtless barns or sheds. Trophies hung on them, too. The beasts in the corral looked, and probably weren't, mammalian. Two species were vaguely reminiscent of horses and oxen, a third kind of sheep. They were not many, could not be the whole support of the dwellers here. The "dovecotes" held ornithoids the size of turkeys, which were not penned but were prevented from leaving the area by three hawklike guardians. "Watchdogs," Turekian said of those. "No, watchfalcons." They swooped about, perturbed at the invasion.

Yukiko's voice came wistful from a receiver behind his ear: "Can I join you?"

"Stay by the guns," Webner answered. "We have yet to meet the owners of this place."

"Huh?" Turekian said. "Why, they're gone. Skedaddled when they saw us coming."

"Timid?" Yukiko asked. "That doesn't fit well with their being eager hunters."

"On the contrary, I imagine they're pretty scrappy," Turekian said. "They jumped to the conclusion we must be hostile, because they wouldn't enter somebody else's land uninvited unless they felt that way. Our powers being unknown, and they having the wife and kiddies to worry about, they prudently took off. I expect the fighting males—or whatever they've got—will be back soon."

"What are you talking about?" Webner demanded.

"Why... the locals." Turekian blinked at him. "You saw them."

"Those giant ornithoids? Nonsense."

"Hoy? They came right out of the house there!"

"Domestic animals." Webner's hatchet features drew tight. "I don't deny we confront a puzzle here."

"We always do," Yukiko put in.

Webner nodded. "True. Nevertheless, facts and logic solve puzzles. Let's not complicate our job with pseudo-problems. Whatever they are, the fliers we saw leave cannot be the sophonts. On a planet as Earthlike as this, aviform intelligence is impossible."

He straightened. "I suspect the inhabitants have barricaded themselves," he finished. "We'll go closer and make pacific gestures."

"Which could be misunderstood," Turekian said dubiously. "An arrow, or javelin, can kill you just as dead as a blaster."

"Cover us, Yukiko," Webner ordered. "Follow me, Aram. If you have the nerve."

He stalked forward, under the eyes of the girl. Turekian cursed and joined him in haste.

They were near the door when a shadow fell over them. They whirled and stared upward. Yukiko's indrawn breath hissed from their receivers.

Aloft hovered one of the great ornithoids. Sunlight struck through its outermost pinions, turning them golden. Otherwise it showed stormcloud-dark. Down the wind stooped a second.

The sight was terrifying. Only later did the humans realize it was magnificent. Those wings spanned six meters. A muzzle full of sharp white fangs gaped before them. Two legs the length and well-nigh the thickness of a man's arms reached crooked talons between them. At their angles grew claws. In thrust after thrust, they hurled the creature at torpedo speed. Air whistled and thundered.

Their guns leaped into the men's hands. "Don't shoot!" Yukiko's cry came as if from very far away.

The splendid monster was almost upon them. Fire speared from Webner's weapon. At the same instant, the animal braked—a turning of quills, a crack and gust in their faces—and rushed back upward, two meters short of impact.

Turekian's gaze stamped a picture on his brain which he would study over and over and over. The unknown was feathered, surely warm-blooded, but no bird. A keelbone like a ship's prow jutted beneath a strong neck. The head was blunt-nosed, lacked external ears; fantastically, Turekian saw that the predator mouth had lips. Tongue and palate were purple. Two big golden eyes stabbed at him, burned at him. A crest of black-tipped white plumage rose

stiffly above a control surface and protection for the backward-bulging skull. The fan-shaped tail bore the same colors. The body was mahogany, the naked legs and claws yellow.

Webner's shot hit amidst the left-side quills. Smoke streamed after the flameburst. The creature uttered a high-pitched yell, lurched, and thrashed in retreat. The damage wasn't permanent, had likely caused no pain, but now that wing was only half useful.

Turekian thus had time to see three slits in parallel on the body. He had time to think there must be three more on the other side. They weirdly resembled gills. As the wings lifted, he saw them drawn wide, a triple yawn; as the downstroke began, he glimpsed them being forced shut.

Then he had cast himself against Webner. "Drop that blaster, you clotbrain!" he yelled. He seized the xenologist's gun wrist. They wrestled. He forced the fingers apart. Meanwhile the wounded ornithoid struggled back to its companion. They flapped off.

"What're you doing?" Webner grabbed at Turekian.

The pilot pushed him away, brutally hard. He fell. Turekian snatched forth his magnifier.

Treetops cut off his view. He let the instrument drop. "Too late," he groaned. "Thanks to you."

Webner climbed erect. He was pale and shaken by rage. "Have you gone heisenberg?" he gasped. "I'm your commander!"

"You're maybe fit to command plastic ducks in a bathtub," Turekian said. "Firing on a native!"

Webner was too taken aback to reply.

"And you capped it by spoiling my chance for a good look at Number Two. I think I spotted a harness on him, holding what might be a weapon, but I'm not sure." Turekian spat.

"Aram, Vaughn," Yukiko pleaded from the boat.

An instant longer, the men bristled and glared. Then Webner drew breath, shrugged, and said in a crackly voice: "I suppose it's incumbent on me to put things on a reasonable basis, if you're incapable of that." He paused. "Behave yourself and I'll excuse your conduct as being due to excitement. Otherwise I'll have to recommend you be relieved from further initial-contact duty."

"I be relieved—?" Turekian barely checked his fist, and kept it balled. His breath rasped.

"Hadn't you better check the house?" Yukiko asked.

The knowledge that something, anything might lurk behind those walls restored them to a measure of coolness.

Save for livestock, the steading was deserted.

Rather than offend the dwellers by blasting down their barred door, the searchers went through a window on grav units. They found just one or two rooms on each story. Evidently the people valued ample floor space and high ceilings above privacy. Connection up and down was by circular staircases whose short steps seemed at variance with this. Decoration was austere and nonrepresentational. Furniture consisted mainly of benches and tables. Nothing like a bed, or an *o-futon*, was found; did the indigenes sleep, if they did, sitting or standing? Quite possibly. Many species can lock the joints of their limbs at will.

Stored food bore out the idea of carnivorousness. Tools, weapons, utensils, fabrics were abundant, well made, neatly arranged. They confirmed an Iron Age technology, more or less equivalent to that of Earth's Classical civilization. Exceptions occurred; for example, a few books, seemingly printed from handset type. How eagerly those pages were ransacked! But the only illustrations were diagrams suitable to a geometry text in one case and a stonemason's manual in another. Did this culture taboo pictures of its members, or had the boat merely chanced on a home which possessed none?

The layout and contents of the house, and of the sheds when these were examined, gave scant clues. Nobody had expected better. Imagine yourself a nonhuman xenologist, visiting Earth before man went into space. What could you deduce from the residences and a few household items belonging to, say, a European, an Eskimo, a Congo pygmy, and a Japanese? You might have wondered if the owners were of the same genus.

In time you could learn more. Turekian doubted that time would be given. He put Webner in a cold fury by his nagging to finish the survey and get back to the boat. At length the chief gave in. "Not that I don't plan a detailed study, mind you," he said. Scornfully: "However, I suppose we can hold a conference, and I'll try to calm your fears."

*** *** ***

After you had been out, the air in the craft smelled dead and the view in the screens looked dull. Turekian took a pipe from his pocket. "No," Webner told him.

"What?" The pilot was bemused.

"I won't have that foul thing in this crowded cabin."

"I don't mind," Yukiko said.

"I do," Webner replied, "and while we're down, I'm your captain." Turekian reddened and obeyed. Discipline in space is steel hard, a matter of survival. A good commander gives it a soft sheath. Yukiko's eyes reproached Webner; her fingers lay on the pilot's arm. The xenologist saw. His mouth twitched sideways before he pinched it together.

"We're in trouble," Turekian said. "The sooner we haul mass out of here, the happier our insurance companies will be."

"Nonsense," Webner snapped. "If anything, our problem is that we've terrified the dwellers. They may take days to send even a scout."

"They've already sent two. You had to shoot at them."

"I shot at a dangerous animal. Didn't you see those talons, those fangs? And a buffet from a wing that big—ignoring the claws on it—could break your neck."

Webner's gaze sought Yukiko's. He mainly addressed her: "Granted, they must be domesticated. I suspect they're used in the hunt, flown at game, like hawks, though working in packs, like hounds. Conceivably the pair we encountered were, ah, sicced on us from afar. But that they themselves are sophonts—out of the question."

Her murmur was uneven. "How can you be sure?"

Webner leaned back, bridged his fingers, and grew calmer while he lectured: "You realize the basic principle. All organisms make biological sense in their particular environments, or they become extinct. Reasoners are no exception—and are, furthermore, descended from nonreasoners which adapted to environments that had never been artificially modified."

"On nonterrestroid worlds, they can be quite outré by our standards, since they developed under unearthly conditions. On an essentially terrestroid planet, evolution basically parallels our own because it must. True, you get considerable variation. Like, say, hexapodal vertebrates liberating the forelimbs to grow hands and becoming centauroids, as on Woden. That's because the ancestral chordates were hexapods. On this world, you can see for yourself the higher animals are four-limbed."

"A brain without some equivalent of hands is useless in the wild. Nature would never produce it. The inhabitants are bound to be bipeds, however different from us in detail. A foot which must double as a hand, and vice versa, would be too grossly inefficient in either function. Natural selection would weed out any mutants of that tendency, fast."

"What could yonder ornithoids use for hands?"

"The claws on their wings?" Yukiko asked shyly.

"Fraid not," Turekian said. "I got a fair look. They can grasp, sort of, but aren't built for manipulation."

"You saw how the fledgling uses them to cling to the parent," Webner stated. "Perhaps it climbs trees also. Earth has a bird with similar structures, the hoactzin. It loses them in adulthood. Here they may well become extra weapons."

"The feet," Turekian scowled. "Two opposable digits flanking three straight ones. Could serve as hands."

"Then how does the creature get about on the ground?" Webner retorted. "Can't forge a tool in midair, you know, let alone dig ore and erect stone houses."

He wagged a finger. "Another, more fundamental point," he went on. "Fliers are too limited in mass. True, the gravity's weaker than on Earth, but air pressure's lower. Thus admissible wing loadings are about the same. The biggest birds which ever lumbered into Terrestrial skies weighed some fifteen kilos. Nothing larger could get aloft. Metabolism simply can't supply the power required. We've established that local biochemistry is close kin to our type. Hence it is not possible for those ornithoids to outweigh a maximal vulture. They're big, yes, and formidable. Nevertheless, that size has to be mostly feathers, hollow bones—spidery, kitelike skeletons anchoring thin flesh."

"Aram, you hefted several items around this place, such as a stone pot. Or consider one of the buckets, presumably used to bring water up from the river. What would you say the greatest weight is?"

Turekian scratched in his beard. "Maybe twenty kilos," he answered reluctantly.

"There! No flier could lift that. It was always superstition about eagles stealing lambs, or babies. They weren't able to. The ornithoids are similarly handicapped. Who'd make utensils he can't carry?"

"M-m-m," Turekian growled rather than hummed. Webner pressed the attack:

"The mass of any flier on a terrestroid planet is insufficient to include a big enough brain for true intelligence. The purely animal functions require virtually all those cells. Birds have at least lightened their burden, permitting a little more brain, by changing jaws to beaks. So have those ornithoids you called 'watch-falcons.' The big fellows have not."

He hesitated. "In fact," he said slowly, "I doubt if they can even be considered bright animals. They're likely stupid... and vicious. If we're set on again, we need have no compunctions about destroying them."

"Couldn't he, she, it simply have been coming down for a quick, close look at you—unarmed as a peace gesture?" Yukiko whispered.

"If intelligent, yes," Webner said. "If not, as I've proven, positively no. I saved us some nasty wounds. Perhaps I saved a life."

"The dwellers might object if we shoot at their property," Turekian said.

"They need only call off their, ah, dogs. In fact, the attack on us may not have been commanded, may simply have been brute reaction after panic broke the order of the pack." Webner rose. "Are you satisfied? We'll make thorough studies till nightfall, then leave gifts, withdraw, hope for a better reception when we see the indigenes have returned." A television pickup was customary among such gifts.

Turekian shook his head. "Your logic's all right, I suppose. But it don't smell right somehow."

Webner started for the air lock. "Me, too?" Yukiko requested. "Please?"

"No," Turekian said. "I'd hate for you to be harmed."

"We're in no danger," she argued. "Our side arms can handle any fliers that may arrive feeling mean. If we plant sensors around, no walking native can come within bowshot before we know. I feel caged."

The xenologist thawed. "Why not?" he said. "I can use a level-headed assistant." To Turekian: "Man the boat guns yourself if you wish."

"Like blazes," the pilot grumbled, and followed them.

*** *** ***

He had to admit the xenologist knew his business. The former cursory search became a shrewd, efficient examination of object after object, measuring, photographing, commenting continuously into a minirecorder. Yukiko helped. On Survey, everybody must have some knowledge of everybody else's specialty. But Webner needed just one extra person.

"What can I do?" Turekian asked.

"Move an occasional heavy load," the other man said. "Keep watch on the forest. Keep out of the way."

Yukiko was too fascinated by the work to chide him. Turekian rumbled in his throat, stuffed his pipe, and slouched around the grounds alone, blowing furious clouds.

At the corral he gripped a rail and glowered. "You want feeding," he decided, went into a barn—unlike the house, its door was not secured—and found a haymow and pitchforks which reminded him of a backwoods colony on Hermes that he'd visited once, temporarily primitive because shipping space was needed for items more urgent than modern agromachines. The farmer had had a daughter... He consoled himself with memories while he took out a mess of cinnamon-scented red herbage.

"You!"

Webner leaned from an upstairs window. "What're you about?" he called.

"Those critters are hungry," Turekian replied. "Listen to 'em."

"How do you know what their requirements are? Or the owners? We're not here to play God, for your information. We're here to learn and, maybe, help. Take that stuff back where you got it."

Turekian swallowed rage—that Yukiko should have heard his humiliation—and complied. Webner was his captain till he regained the blessed sky.

Sky... birds... He observed the "cotes." The pseudo-hawks fluttered about, indignant but too small to tackle him. Were the giant ornithoids kept partly as protection against large ground predators? Turekian studied the flock. Its members dozed, waddled, scratched the dirt, fat and placid, obviously long bred to tameness. One threshed the air toward a nest, clumsy as a chicken. Both types lacked the gill-like slits he had noticed...

A shadow. Turekian glanced aloft, snatched for his magnifier. Half a dozen giants were back. The noon sun flamed on their feathers. They were too high for him to see details.

He flipped the controls on his gray unit and made for the house. Webner and Yukiko were on the fifth floor. Turekian arced through a window. He had no eye, now, for the Spartan grace of the room. "They've arrived," he panted. "We better get in the boat quick."

Webner stepped onto the balcony. "No need," he said. "I hardly think they'll attack. If they do, we're safer here than crossing the open."

"Might be smart to close the shutters," the girl said.

"And the door to this chamber," Webner agreed. "That'll stop them. They'll soon lose patience and wander off—if they attempt anything. Or if they do besiege us, we can shoot our way through them, or at worst relay a call for help via the boat, once *Oлга* is again over our horizon."

He had re-entered. Turekian took his place on the balcony and squinted upward. More winged shapes had joined the first several; and more arrived each second. They dipped, soared, circled through the wind, which made surf noises in the forest.

Unease crawled along the pilot's spine. "I don't like this half a bit," he said. "They don't act like plain beasts."

"Conceivably the dwellers plan to use them in an assault," Webner said. "If so, we may have to teach the dwellers about the cost of unreasoning hostility." His tone was less cool than the words, and sweat beaded his countenance.

Sparks in the magnifier field hurt Turekian's eyes. "I swear they're carrying metal," he said. "Listen, if they are intelligent—and out to get us after you nearly killed one of 'em—the house is no place for us. Let's scramble. We may not have many more minutes."

"Yes, I believe we'd better, Vaughn," Yukiko urged. "We can't risk... being forced to burn down conscious beings... on their own land."

Maybe his irritation with the pilot spoke for Webner: "How often must I explain there is no such risk, yet? Instead, here's a chance to learn. What happens next could give us invaluable clues to understanding the whole ethos. We stay." To Turekian: "Forget about that alleged metal. Could be protective collars, I suppose. But take the supercharger off your imagination."

The other man stood dead still. "Aram." Yukiko seized his arm. "What's wrong?"

He shook himself. "Supercharger," he mumbled. "By God, yes."

Abruptly, in a bellow: "We're leaving! This second! They *are* the dwellers, and they've gathered the whole countryside against us!"

"Hold your tongue," Webner said, "or I'll charge insubordination."

Laughter rattled in Turekian's breast. "Uh-uh. Mutiny."

He crouched and lunged. His fist rocketed before him. Yukiko's cry joined the thick smack as knuckles hit—not the chin, which is too hazardous—the solar plexus. Air whoofed from Webner. His eyes glazed. He folded over, partly conscious but unable to stand. Turekian gathered him in his arms. "To the boat!" the pilot shouted. "Hurry, girl!"

His grav unit wouldn't carry two, simply gentled his fall when he leaped from the balcony. He dared not stop to adjust the controls on Webner's. Carrying his chief, he pounded across the flagstones. Yukiko came above. "Go ahead!" Turekian bawled. "Get into shelter."

"Not till you can. I'll cover you."

The scores above had formed themselves into a vast revolving wheel. It tilted. The first fliers peeled off and roared downward. The rest came after.

Arrows whistled ahead of them. A trumpet sounded. Turekian dodged, zigzag over the meadow. Yukiko's gun clapped. She shot to miss, but unlike the flashes put those archers—and, now, spearthrowers—off their aim. Shafts sang wickedly around.

Yukiko darted to open the boat's air lock. While she did, Turekian dropped Webner and straddled him, blaster drawn. The leading flier hurtled close. Talons of the right foot, which was not a foot at all but a hand, gripped a scimitar. For an instant, Turekian looked into the golden eyes, knew a brave male defending his home, fired to miss.

In a brawl of air, the native sheered off. The valve swung wide. Yukiko flitted through. Turekian dragged Webner, then stood in the lock chamber till the entry was shut.

Missiles clanged on the hull. None would pierce. Turekian let himself join Webner for a moment of shuddering before he went to Yukiko and the raising of his vessel.

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When you know what to expect, a little, you can lay plans. We next sought the folk of Ythri, as the planet is called by its most advanced culture, a thousand kilometers from the triumph which surely prevailed in those mountains. Approached with patience, caution, and symbolisms appropriate to their psyches, they welcomed us rapturously. Before we left, they'd thought of sufficient inducements to trade that I'm sure they'll have spacecraft of their own in a few generations.

Still, they are as fundamentally territorial as man is fundamentally sexual, and we'd better bear that in mind.

The reason lies in their evolution. It does for every drive in every animal everywhere. The Ythrian is carnivorous, aside from various sweet fruits. Carnivores require larger regions per individual than herbivores or omnivores do, in spite of the fact that meat has more calories per kilo than most vegetable matter. Consider how each antelope needs a certain amount of space, and how many antelopes are needed to maintain a pride of lions. Xenologists have written thousands of papers on the correlations between diet and genotypical personality in sophonts.

I have my doubts about the value of those papers. At least, they missed the possibility of a race like the Ythrians, whose extreme territoriality and individualism—with the consequences to governments, mores, arts, faiths, and souls—come from the extreme appetite of the body.

They mass as high as thirty kilos; yet they can lift their own weight in the air or, unhampered, fly like demons. Hence they maintain civilization without the need to crowd together in cities. Their townspeople are mostly wing-clipped criminals and slaves. Today their wiser heads hope robots will end that need.

Hands? The original talons, modified for manipulating. Feet? Those claws on the wings, a juvenile feature which persisted and developed, just as man's large head and sparse hair derive from the juvenile or fetal ape. The forepart of the wing skeleton consists of humerus, radius, and ulnar, much as in true birds. These lock together in flight. Aground, when the wing is folded downward, they produce a "knee" joint. Bones grow from their base to make the claw-foot. Three fused digits, immensely lengthened, sweep backward to be the alatan which braces the rest of that tremendous wing and can, when desired, give additional support on the surface. To rise, the Ythrians usually do a handstand during the initial upstroke. It takes less than a second.

Oh, yes, they are slow and awkward afoot. They manage. Big and beweaponed, instantly ready to go aloft, they need fear no beast of prey.

You ask where the power comes from to swing this hugeness through the sky. The oxidation of food, what else? Hence the demand of each household for a great hunting or ranching demesne. The limiting factor is the oxygen supply. Turekian first understood how that is increased. The Ythrian has lungs, a passive system resembling ours. He also has his supercharger, evolved from the gills of an amphibian-like ancestor. Worked in bellows fashion by the flight muscles, leading directly to the bloodstream, those air-intake organs let him burn his fuel as fast as necessary.

I wonder how it feels to be so alive.

I remember how Yukiko Sachansky stood in the curve of Aram Turekian's arm, under a dawn heaven, and watched the farewell dance the Ythrians gave for us, and cried through tears: "To fly like that! To fly like that!"

THE END

INTRODUCTION TO *THE PROBLEM OF PAIN*

THIS HAPPENED early in the course of starflight. The tale is in *Far Adventure* by Maeve Downey, the autobiography of a planetologist. Aside from scientific reports which the same expedition rendered, it appears to be the first outside account of us.

You well know how the Discovery gale-seized those peoples who had the learning to see what it meant, so that ere long all Ythri could never again speak in full understanding, through books and songs and art, with the ancestors. The dealings with Terrans as these returned, first for study and later for trade; the quest and strife which slowly won for us our own modern technics; the passion of history through life after life: these are in many writings. What is less known than it should be is how the Terrans themselves were faring meanwhile.

Their Commonwealth had been formed out of numerous nations. A few more came into being and membership afterward. To explain the concept "nation" is stiffly upwind. As a snatching at the task—within a sharply defined territory dwell a large number of humans who, in a subtle sense which goes beyond private property or shared range, identify their souls with this land and with each other. Law and mutual obligation are maintained less by usage and pride than by physical violence or the threat thereof on the part of that institution called the government. It is as if a single group could permanently cry Oherran against the entire rest of society, bring death and devastation wherever it chose, and claimed this as an exclusive right. Compliance and assistance are said to be honorable, resistance dishonorable, especially when one nation is at war with another—for each of these entities has powers which are limited not by justice, decency, or prudence, but only by its own strength.

You well know how most humans on Avalon still maintain a modified form of government. However, this is of sharply limited force, both in practice and in law. It is merely their way. You cannot mind-grasp the modern Terran Empire without knowing what a nation truly is.

To curb these inordinate prerogatives of a few, whose quarrels and mismanagement threatened to lay waste their native planet, the Commonwealth was finally established, as a nation of nations. This did not happen quickly, easily, or rationally. The story of it is long and terrible. Nevertheless, it happened: and, for a time, the Commonwealth was on the whole a benign influence. Under its protection, both prosperity and freedom from demands flourished ever more greatly.

Meanwhile exploration exploded throughout this part of the galaxy. Human-habitable worlds which had no intelligent life of their own began to be settled. Our species, in slow youngling wise, began to venture from its nest, at first usually in a flock with Terrans.

The same expedition which made the Discovery of Ythri had chanced upon Avalon. Though rich prey for colonists, at the time it lay too far from Sol and remained nameless. The season came at last for taking real knowledge of it. Because Ythrians were also a-wing in this, there happened an incident which is worth the telling here. Rennhi found the account, transcribed from a recording made on Terra, in the archives of the University of Fleurville upon the planet Esperance. It was originally part of a private correspondence between two humans, preserved by the heirs of the recipient after his death; a visiting historian obtained a copy but never published it. God hunted down all persons concerned so long ago that no pride will be touched by planting the story here.

The value of it lies in the human look upon us, a look which tried to reach down into the spirit and thereby, maychance, now opens for us a glimpse into theirs.

—Hloch of the Stormgate Choth
The Earth Book of Stormgate

THE PROBLEM OF PAIN

MAYBE ONLY a Christian can understand this story. In that case I don't qualify. But I do take an interest in religion, as part of being an amateur psychologist, and—for the grandeur of its language if nothing else—a Bible is among the reels that accompany me wherever I go. This was one reason Peter Berg told me what had happened in his past. He desperately needed to make sense of it, and no priest he'd talked to had quite laid his questions to rest. There was an outside chance that an outside viewpoint like mine would see what a man within the faith couldn't.

His other reason was simple loneliness. We were on Lucifer, as part of a study corporation. That world is well named. It will never be a real colony for any beings whose ancestors evolved amidst clean greenery. But it might be marginally habitable, and if so, its mineral wealth would be worth exploiting. Our job was to determine whether that was true. The gentlest-looking environment holds a thousand death traps until you have learned what the difficulties are and how to grip them. (Earth is no exception.) Sometimes you find problems which can't be solved economically, or can't be solved at all. Then you write off the area or the entire planet, and look for another.

We'd contracted to work three standard years on Lucifer. The pay munificent, but presently we realized that no bank account could buy back one day we might have spent beneath a kindlier sun. It was a knowledge we carefully avoided discussing with teammates. About midway through, Peter Berg and I were assigned to do an in-depth investigation of a unique cycle in the ecology of the northern middle latitudes. This meant that we settled down for weeks—which ran into months—in a sample region, well away from everybody else to minimize human disturbances. An occasional supply flitter gave us our only real contact; electronics were no proper substitute, especially when that hell-violent star was forever disrupting them.

Under such circumstances, you come to know your partner maybe better than you know yourself. Pete and I got along well. He's a big, sandy-haired, freckle-faced young man, altogether dependable, with enough kindness, courtesy, and dignity that he need not make a show of them. Soft-spoken, he's a bit short in the humor department. Otherwise I recommend him as a companion. He has a lot to tell from his own wanderings, yet he'll listen with genuine interest to your memories and brags; he's well read too, and a good cook when his turn comes; he plays chess at just about my level of skill.

I already knew he wasn't from Earth, had in fact never been there, but from Aeneas, nearly 200 light-years distant, more than 300 from Lucifer. And, while he'd gotten an education at the new little university in Nova Roma, he was raised in the outback. Besides, that town is only a faroff colonial capital. It helped explain his utter commitment to belief in a God who became flesh and died for love of man. Not that I scoff. When he said his prayers, night and morning in our one-room shelterdome, trustingly as a child, I didn't rag him nor he reproach me. Of course, over the weeks, we came more and more to talk about such matters.

At last he told me of that which haunted him.

We'd been out through the whole of one of Lucifer's long, long days; we'd toiled, we'd sweated, we'd itched and stunk and gotten grimy and staggered from weariness, we'd come near death once: and we'd found the uranium-concentrating root which was the key to the whole weirdness around us. We came back to base as day's fury was dying in the usual twilight gale; we washed, ate something, went to sleep with the hiss of storm-blown dust for a lullaby. Ten or twelve hours later we awoke and saw, through the vitryl panels, stars cold and crystalline beyond this thin air, auroras aflame, landscape hoar, and the twisted things we called trees all sheathed in glittering ice.

"Nothing we can do now till dawn," I said, "and we've earned a celebration." So we prepared a large meal, elaborate as possible, breakfast or supper, what relevance had that here? We drank wine in the course of it, and afterward much brandy while we sat, side by side in our loungers, watching the march of constellations which Earth or Aeneas never saw. And we talked. Finally we talked of God.

"—maybe you can give me an idea," Pete said. In the dim light, his face bore a struggle. He stared before him and knotted his fingers.

"M-m, I dunno," I said carefully. "To be honest, no offense meant, theological conundrums strike me as silly."

He gave me a direct blue look. His tone was soft: "That is, you feel the paradoxes don't arise if we don't insist on believing?"

"Yes. I respect your faith, Pete, but it's not mine. And if I did suppose a, well, a spiritual principle or something is behind the universe—" I gestured at the high and terrible sky—"in the name of reason, can we confine, can we understand whatever made that, in the bounds of one little dogma?"

"No. Agreed. How could finite minds grasp the infinite? We can see parts of it, though, that've been revealed to us." He drew breath. "Way back before space travel, the Church decided Jesus had come only to Earth, to man. If other intelligent races need salvation—and obviously a lot of them do!—God will have made His suitable arrangements for them. Sure. However, this does not mean Christianity is not true, or that certain different beliefs are not false."

"Like, say, polytheism, wherever you find it?"

"I think so. Besides, religions evolve. The primitive faiths see God, or the gods, as power; the higher ones see Him as justice; the highest see Him as love." Abruptly he fell silent. I saw his fist clench, until he grabbed up his glass and drained it and refilled it in nearly a single savage motion.

"I must believe that," he whispered.

I waited a few seconds, in Lucifer's crackling night stillness, before saying: "An experience made you wonder?"

"Made me... disturbed. Mind if I tell you?"

"Certainly not." I saw he was about to open himself; and I may be an unbeliever, but I know what is sacred.

"Happened about five years ago. I was on my first real job. So was the—" his voice stumbled the least bit—"the wife I had then. We were fresh out of school and apprenticeship, fresh into marriage." In an effort at detachment: "Our employers weren't human. They were Ythrians. Ever heard of them?"

I sought through my head. The worlds, races, beings are unknowably many, in this tiny corner of this one dust-mote galaxy which we have begun to explore a little. "Ythrians, Ythrians... wait. Do they fly?"

"Yes. Surely one of the most glorious sights in creation. Your Ythrian isn't as heavy as a man, of course; adults mass around twenty-five or thirty kilos—but his wingspan goes up to six meters, and when he soars with those feathers shining gold-brown in the light, or stoops in a crack of thunder and whistle of wind—"

"Hold on," I said. "I take it Ythri's a terrestroid planet?"

"Pretty much. Somewhat smaller and drier than Earth, somewhat thinner atmosphere—about like Aeneas, in fact, which it's not too far from as interstellar spaces go. You can live there without special protection. The biochemistry's quite similar to ours."

"Then how the devil can those creatures be that size? The wing loading's impossible, when you have only cell tissue to oxidize for power. They'd never get off the ground."

"Ah, but they have antibranchs as well." Pete smiled, though it didn't go deep. "Those look like three gills, sort of, on either side, below the wings. They're actually more like bellows, pumped by the wing muscles. Extra oxygen is forced directly into the bloodstream during flight. A biological supercharger system."

"Well, I'll be a... never mind what." I considered, in delight, this new facet of nature's inventiveness. "Um-m-m... if they spend energy at that rate, they've got to have appetites to match."

"Right. They're carnivores. A number of them are still hunters. The advanced societies are based on ranching. In either case, obviously, it takes a lot of meat animals, a lot of square kilometers, to support one Ythrian. So they're fiercely territorial. They live in small groups—single families or extended households—which attack, with intent to kill, any uninvited outsider who doesn't obey an order to leave."

"And still they're civilized enough to hire humans for space exploration?"

"Uh-huh. Remember, being flyers, they've never needed to huddle in cities in order to have ready communication. They do keep a few towns, mining or manufacturing centers, but those are inhabited mostly by wing-clipped slaves. I'm glad to say that institution's dying out as they get modern machinery."

"By trade?" I guessed.

"Yes," Pete replied. "When the first Grand Survey discovered them, their most advanced culture was at an Iron Age level of technology; no industrial revolution, but plenty of sophisticated minds around, and subtle philosophies." He paused. "That's important to my question—that the Ythrians, at least of the Planha speaking *choths*, are not barbarians and have not been for many centuries. They've had their equivalents of Socrates, Aristotle, Confucius, Galileo, yes, and their prophets and seers."

After another mute moment: "They realized early what the visitors from Earth implied, and set about attracting traders and teachers. Once they had some funds, they sent their promising young folk offplanet to study. I met several at my own university, which is why I got my job offer. By now they have a few spacecraft and native crews. But you'll understand, their technical people are spread thin, and in several branches of knowledge they have no experts. So they employ humans."

He went on to describe the typical Ythrian: warm-blooded, feathered like a golden eagle (though more intricately) save for a crest on the head, and yet not a bird. Instead of a beak, a blunt muzzle full of fangs juts before two great eyes. The female bears her young alive. While she does not nurse them, they have lips to suck the juices of meat and fruits, wherefore their speech is not hopelessly unlike man's; what were formerly the legs have evolved into arms bearing three taloned fingers, flanked by two thumbs, on each hand. Aground, the huge wings fold downward and, with the help of claws at the angles, give locomotion. That is slow and awkward—but aloft, ah!

"They become more alive, flying, than we ever do," Pete murmured. His gaze had lost itself in the shuddering auroras overhead. "They must: the metabolic rate they have then, and the space around them, speed, sky, a hundred winds to ride on and be kissed by... That's what made me think Enherrian, in particular, believed more keenly than I could hope to. I saw him and others dancing, high, high in the air, swoops, glides, hoverings, sunshine molten on their plumes; I asked what they did, and was told they were honoring God."

He sighed. "Or that's how I translated the Planha phrase, rightly or wrongly," he went on. "Olga and I had taken a cram course, and our Ythrian teammates all knew Anglic; but nobody's command of the foreign tongue was perfect. It couldn't be. Multiple billion years of separate existence, evolution, history—what a miracle that we could think as alike as we did!"

"However, you could call Enherrian religious, same as you could call me that, and not be too grotesquely off the mark. The rest varied, just like humans. Some were also devout, some less, some agnostics or atheists; two were pagans, following the bloody rites of what was called the Old Faith. For that matter, my Olga—" the knuckles stood forth where he grasped his tumbler of brandy—"had tried, for my sake, to believe as I did, and couldn't."

"Well. The New Faith interested me more. It was new only by comparison—at least half as ancient as mine. I hoped for a chance to study it, to ask questions and compare ideas. I really knew nothing except that it was monotheistic, had sacraments and a theology though no official priesthood, upheld a high ethical and moral standard

—for Ythrians, I mean. You can't expect a race which can only live by killing animals, and has an oestrous cycle, and is incapable by instinct of maintaining what we'd recognize as a true nation or government, and on and on—you can't expect them to resemble Christians much. God has given them a different message. I wished to know what. Surely we could learn from it." Again he paused. "After all... being a faith with a long tradition... and not static but a seeking, a history of prophets and saints and believers... I thought it must know God is love. Now what form would God's love take to an Ythrian?"

He drank. I did too, before asking cautiously: "Uh, where was this expedition?"

Pete stirred in his lounge. "To a system about eighty light-years from Ythri's," he answered. "The original Survey crew had discovered a terrestroid planet there. They didn't bother to name it. Prospective colonists would choose their own name anyway. Those could be human or Ythrian, conceivably both—if the environment proved out.

"Offhand, the world—our group called it, unofficially, Gray, after that old captain—the world looked brilliantly promising. It's intermediate in size between Earth and Ythri, surface gravity 0.8 terrestrial; slightly more irradiation, from a somewhat yellower sun than Earth gets, which simply makes it a little warmer; axial tilt, therefore seasonal variations, a bit less than terrestrial; length of year about three-quarters of ours, length of day a bit under half; one small, close-in, bright moon; biochemistry similar to ours—we could eat most native things, though we'd require imported crops and livestock to supplement the diet. All in all, seemingly well-nigh perfect."

"Rather remote to attract Earthlings at this early date," I remarked. "And from your description, the Ythrians won't be able to settle it for quite a while either."

"They think ahead," Pete responded. "Besides, they have scientific curiosity and, yes, in them perhaps even more than in the humans who went along, a spirit of adventure. Oh, it was a wonderful thing to be young in that band!"

He had not yet reached thirty, but somehow his cry was not funny.

He shook himself. "Well, we had to make sure," he said. "Besides planetology, ecology, chemistry, oceanography, meteorology, a million and a million mysteries to unravel for their own sakes—we must scout out the death traps, whatever those might be.

"At first everything went like Mary's smile on Christmas morning. The spaceship set us off—it couldn't be spared to linger in orbit—and we established base on the largest continent. Soon our hundred-odd dispersed across the globe, investigating this or that. Olga and I made part of a group on the southern shore, where a great gulf swarmed with life. A strong current ran eastward from there, eventually striking an archipelago which deflected it north. Flying over those waters, we spied immense, I mean immense, patches—no, floating islands—of vegetation, densely interwoven, grazed on by monstrous marine creatures, no doubt supporting any number of lesser plant and animal species.

"We wanted a close look. Our camp's sole aircraft wasn't good for that. Anyhow, it was already in demand for a dozen jobs. We had boats, though, and launched one. Our crew was Enherrian, his wife Whell, their grown children Rusa and Arrach, my beautiful new bride Olga, and me. We'd take three or four Gray days to reach the nearest atlantis weed, as Olga dubbed it. Then we'd be at least a week exploring before we turned back—a vacation, a lark, a joy."

He tossed off his drink and reached for the bottle. "You ran into grief," I prompted.

"No." He bent his lips upward, stiffly. "It ran into us. A hurricane. Unpredicted; we knew very little about that planet. Given the higher solar energy input and, especially, the rapid rotation, the storm was more violent than would've been possible on Earth. We could only run before it and pray.

"At least, I prayed, and imagined that Enherrian did."

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Wind shrieked, hooted, yammered, hit flesh with fists and cold knives. Waves rumbled in that driven air, black and green and fang-white, fading from view as the sun sank behind the cloud-roil which hid it. Often a monster among them loomed castle-like over the gunwale. The boat slipped by, spilled into the troughs, rocked onto the crests and down again. Spindrift, icy, stinging, bitter on lips and tongue, made a fog across her length.

"We'll live if we can keep sea room," Enherrian had said when the fury first broke. "She's well-found. The engine capacitors have ample kilowatt-hours in them. Keep her bow on and we'll live."

But the currents had them now, where the mighty gulfstream met the outermost islands and its waters churned, recoiled, spun about and fought. Minute by minute, the riptides grew wilder. They made her yaw till she was broadside on and surges roared over her deck; they shocked her onto her beam ends, and the hull became a toning bell.

Pete, Olga, and Whell were in the cabin, trying to rest before their next watch. That was no longer possible. The Ythrian female locked hands and wing-claws around the net-covered framework wherein she had slept, hung on, and uttered nothing. In the wan glow of a single overhead fluoro, among thick restless shadows, her eyes gleamed topaz. They did not seem to look at the crampedness around—at what, then?

The humans had secured themselves by a line onto a lower bunk. They embraced, helping each other fight the leaps and swings which tried to smash them against the sides. Her fair hair on his shoulder was the last brightness in his cosmos. "I love you," she said, over and over, through hammerblows and groans. "Whatever happens, I love you, Pete, I thank you for what you've given me."

"And you," he would answer. *And You*, he would think. *Though You won't take her, not yet, will You? Me, yes, if that's Your will. But not Olga. I'd leave Your creation too dark.*

A wing smote the cabin door. Barely to be heard through the storm, an Ythrian voice—high, whistly, but resonant out of full lungs—shouted: "Come topside!"

Whell obeyed at once, the Bergs as fast as they could slip on life jackets. Having taken no personal grav units along, they couldn't fly free if they went overboard. Dusk raved around them. Pete could just see Rusa and Arrach in the stern, fighting the tiller. Enherrian stood before him and pointed forward. "Look," the captain said. Pete, who had no nictitating membranes, must shield eyes with fingers to peer athwart the hurricane. He saw a deeper darkness hump up from a wall of white; he heard surf crash.

"We can't pull free," Enherrian told him. "Between wind and current—too little power. We'll likely be wrecked. Make ready."

Olga's hand went briefly to her mouth. She huddled against Pete and might have whispered, "Oh, no." Then she straightened, swung back down into the cabin, braced herself as best she could and started assembling the most vital things stored there. He saw that he loved her still more than he had known.

The same calm descended on him. Nobody had time to be afraid. He got busy too. The Ythrians could carry a limited weight of equipment and supplies, but sharply limited under these conditions. The humans, buoyed by their jackets, must carry most. They strapped it to their bodies.

When they re-emerged, the boat was in the shoals. Enherrian ordered them to take the rudder. His wife, son, and daughter stood around—on hands which clutched the rails with prey-snatching strength—and spread their wings to give a bit of shelter. The captain clung to the cabin top as lookout. His yelled commands reached the Bergs dim, tattered.

"Hard right!" Upward cataracts burst on a skerry to port. It glided past, was lost in murk. "Two points starboard—steady!" The hull slipped between a pair of rocks. Ahead was a narrow opening in the island's sheer black face. To a lagoon, to safety? Surf raged on either side of that gate, and everywhere else.

The passage was impossible. The boat struck, threw Olga off her feet and Arrach off her perch. Full reverse engine could not break loose. The deck canted. A billow and a billow smashed across.

Pete was in the water. It grabbed him, pulled him under, dragged him over a sharp bottom. He thought: *Into Your hands, God. Spare Olga, please, please*—and the sea spewed him back up for one gulp of air.

Wallowing in blindness, he tried to gauge how the breakers were acting, what he should do. If he could somehow belly-surf in, he might make it, he barely might... He was on the neck of a rushing giant, it climbed and climbed, it shoved him forward at what he knew was lunatic speed. He saw the reef on which it was about to smash him and knew he was dead.

Talons closed on his jacket. Air brawled beneath wings. The Ythrian could not raise him, but could draw him aside... the bare distance needed, and Pete went past the rock whereon his bones were to have been crushed, down into the smother and chaos beyond. The Ythrian didn't get free in time. He glimpsed the plumes go under, as he himself did. They never rose.

He beat on, and on, without end.

He floated in water merely choppy, swart palisades to right and left, a slope of beach ahead. He peered into the clamorous dark and found nothing. "Olga," he croaked. "Olga. Olga."

Wings shadowed him among the shadows. "Get ashore before an undertow eats you!" Enherrian whooped, and beat his way off in search.

Pete crawled to gritty sand, fell, and let annihilation have him. He wasn't unconscious long. When he revived, Rusa and Whell were beside him. Enherrian was further inland. The captain hauled on a line he had snubbed around a tree. Olga floated at the other end. She had no strength left, but he had passed a bight beneath her arms and she was alive.

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At wolf-gray dawn the wind had fallen to gale force or maybe less, and the cliffs shielded lagoon and strand from it. Overhead it shrilled, and outside the breakers cannonaded, their rage aquiver through the island. Pete and Olga huddled together, a shared cloak across their shoulders. Enherrian busied himself checking the salvaged material. Whell sat on the hindbones of her wings and stared seaward. Moisture gleamed on her grizzled feathers like tears.

Rusa flew in from the reefs and landed. "No trace," he said. His voice was emptied by exhaustion. "Neither the boat nor Arrach." Through the rust in his own brain, Pete noticed the order of those words.

Nevertheless... He leaned toward the parents and brother of Arrach, who had been beautiful and merry and had sung to them by moonlight. "How can we say—?" he began, realized he didn't have Planha words, and tried in Anglic: "How can we say how sorry we both are?"

"No necessity," Rusa answered.

"She died saving me!"

"And what you were carrying, which we needed badly." Some energy returned to Rusa. He lifted his head and its crest. "She had deathpride, our lass."

Afterward Pete, in his search for meaning, would learn about that Ythrian concept. "Courage" is too simple and weak a translation. Certain Old Japanese words come closer, though they don't really bear the same value either.

Whell turned her hawk gaze full upon him. "Did you see anything of what happened in the water?" she asked. He was too unfamiliar with her folk to interpret the tone: today he thinks it was loving. He did know that, being creatures of seasonal rut, Ythrians are less sexually motivated than man is, but probably treasure their young even more. The strongest bond between male and female is children, who are what life is all about.

"No, I... I fear not," he stammered.

Enherrian reached out to lay claws, very gently and briefly, on his wife's back. "Be sure she fought well," he said. "She gave God honor." (Glory? Praise? Adoration? His due?)

Does he mean she prayed, made her confession, while she drowned? The question dragged itself through Pete's weariness and caused him to murmur: "She's in heaven now." Again he was forced to use Anglic words.

Enherrian gave him a look which he could have sworn was startled. "What do you say? Arrach is dead."

"Why, her... her spirit..."

"Will be remembered in pride." Enherrian resumed his work. Olga said it for Pete: "So you don't believe the spirit outlives the body?"

"How could it?" Enherrian snapped. "Why should it?" His motions, his posture, the set of his plumage added: Leave me alone.

Pete thought: *Well, many faiths, including high ones, including some sects which call themselves Christian, deny immortality. How sorry I feel for these my friends, who don't know they will meet their beloved afresh!*

They will, regardless. It makes no sense that God, Who created what is because in His goodness he wished to share existence, would shape a soul only to break it and throw it away.

Never mind. The job on hand is to keep Olga alive, in her dear body. "Can I help?"

"Yes, check our medical kit," Enherrian said.

It had come through undamaged in its box. The items for human use—stimulants, sedatives, anesthetics, antitoxins, antibiotics, coagulants, healing promoters, et standard cetera—naturally outnumbered those for Ythrians. There hasn't been time to develop a large scientific pharmacopoeia for the latter species. True, certain materials work on both, as does the surgical and monitoring equipment. Pete distributed pills which took the pain out of bruises and scrapes, the heaviness out of muscles. Meanwhile Rusa collected wood, Whell started and tended a fire, Olga made breakfast. They had considerable food, mostly freeze-dried, gear to cook it, tools like knives and a hatchet, cord, cloth, flashbeams, two blasters and abundant recharges: what they required for survival.

"It may be insufficient," Enherrian said. "The portable radio transceiver went down with Arrach. The boat's transmitter couldn't punch a call through that storm, and now the boat's on the bottom—nothing to see from the air, scant metal to register on a detector."

"Oh, they'll check on us when the weather slacks off," Olga said. She caught Pete's hand in hers. He felt the warmth.

"If their flitter survived the hurricane, which I doubt," Enherrian stated. "I'm convinced the camp was also struck. We had built no shelter for the flitter, our people will have been too busy saving themselves to secure it, and I think that thin shell was tumbled about and broken. If I'm right, they'll have to call for an aircraft from elsewhere, which may not be available at once. In either case, we could be anywhere in a huge territory; and the expedition has no time or personnel for an indefinite search. They will seek us, aye; however, if we are not found before an arbitrary date—" A ripple passed over the feathers of face and neck; a human would have shrugged.

"What... can we do?" the girl asked.

"Clear a sizeable area in a plainly artificial pattern, or heap fuel for beacon fires should a flitter pass within sight—whichever is practicable. If nothing comes of that, we should consider building a raft or the like."

"Or modify a life jacket for me," Rusa suggested, "and I can try to fly to the mainland."

Enherrian nodded. "We must investigate the possibilities. First let's get a real rest."

The Ythrians were quickly asleep, squatted on their locked wing joints like idols of a forgotten people. Pete and Olga felt more excited and wandered a distance off, hand in hand.

Above the crag-enclosed beach, the island rose toward a crest which he estimated as three kilometers away. If it was in the middle, this was no large piece of real estate. Nor did he see adequate shelter. A mat of mossy, intensely green plants squeezed out any possibility of forest. A few trees stood isolated. Their branches tossed in the wind. He noticed particularly one atop a great outcrop nearby, gaunt brown trunk and thin leaf-fringed boughs that whipped insanely about. Blossoms, torn from vines, blew past, and they were gorgeous; but there would be naught to live on here, and he wasn't hopeful about learning, in time, how to catch Gray's equivalent of fish.

"Strange about them, isn't it?" Olga murmured.

"Eh?" He came, startled, out of his preoccupations.

She gestured at the Ythrians. "Them. The way they took poor Arrach's death."

"Well, you can't judge them by our standards. Maybe they feel grief less than we would, or maybe their culture demands stoicism." He looked at her and did not look away again. "To be frank, darling, I can't really mourn either. I'm too happy to have you back."

"And I you—oh, Pete, Pete, my only—"

They found a secret spot and made love. He saw nothing wrong in that. Do you ever in this life come closer to the wonder which is God?

Afterward they returned to their companions. Thus the clash of wings awoke them, hours later. They scrambled from their bedrolls and saw the Ythrians swing aloft.

The wind was strong and loud as yet, though easing off in fickleness, flaws, downdrafts, whirls, and eddies. Clouds were mostly gone. Those which remained raced gold and hot orange before a sun low in the west, across blue serenity. The lagoon glittered purple, the greensward lay aglow. It had warmed up till rich odors of growth, of flowers, blended with the sea-salt.

And splendid in the sky danced Enherrian, Whell, and Rusa. They wheeled, soared, pounced, and rushed back into light which ran molten off their pinions. They chanted, and fragments blew down to the humans: "*High flew your spirit on many winds... be always remembered...*"

"What *is* that?" Olga breathed.

"Why, they... they..." The knowledge broke upon Pete. "They're holding a service for Arrach."

He knelt and said a prayer for her soul's repose. But he wondered if she, who had belonged to the air, would truly want rest. And his eyes could not leave her kindred.

Enherrian screamed a hunter's challenge and rushed down at the earth. He flung himself meteoric past the stone outcrop Pete had seen; for an instant the man gasped, believing he would be shattered; then he rose, triumphant.

He passed by the lean tree of thin branches. Gusts flailed them about. A nearly razor edge took off his left wing. Blood spurted; Ythrian blood is royal purple. Somehow Enherrian slewed around and made a crash landing on the bluff top, just beyond range of what has since been named the surgeon tree.

Pete yanked the medikit to him and ran. Olga wailed, briefly, and followed. When they reached the scene, they found that Whell and Rusa had pulled feathers from their breasts to try staunching the wound.

*** *** ***

Evening, night, day, evening, night.

Enherrian sat before a campfire. Its light wavered, picked him red out of shadow and let him half-vanish again, save for the unblinking yellow eyes. His wife and son supported him. Stim, cell-freeze, and plasma surrogate had done their work, and he could speak in a weak roughness. The bandages on his stump were a nearly glaring white.

Around crowded shrubs which, by day, showed low and russet-leaved. They filled a hollow on the far side of the island, to which Enherrian had been carried on an improvised litter. Their odor was rank, in an atmosphere once more subtropically hot, and they clutched at feet with raking twigs. But this was the most sheltered spot his companions could find, and he might die in a new storm on the open beach.

He looked through smoke, at the Bergs, who sat as close together as they were able. He said—the surf growled faintly beneath his words, while never a leaf rustled in the breathless dark—"I have read that your people can make a lost part grow forth afresh."

Pete couldn't answer. He tried but couldn't. It was Olga who had the courage to say, "We can do it for ourselves. None except ourselves." She laid her head on her man's breast and wept.

Well, you need a lot of research to unravel a genetic code, a lot of development to make the molecules of heredity repeat what they did in the womb. Science hasn't had time yet for other races. It never will for all. They are too many.

"As I thought," Enherrian said. "Nor can a proper prosthesis be engineered in my lifetime. I have few years left; an Ythrian who cannot fly soon becomes sickly."

"Grav units—" Pete faltered.

The scorn in those eyes was like a blow. Dead metal to raise you, who have had wings?

Fierce and haughty though the Ythrian is, his quill-clipped slaves have never rebelled: for they are only half-alive. Imagine yourself, human male, castrated. Enherrian might flap his remaining wing and the stump to fill his blood with air; but he would have nothing he could do with that extra energy, it would turn inward and corrode his body, perhaps at last his mind.

For a second, Whell laid an arm around him.

"You will devise a signal tomorrow," Enherrian said, "and start work on it. Too much time has already been wasted."

Before they slept, Pete managed to draw Whell aside. "He needs constant care, you know," he whispered to her in the acrid booming gloom. "The drugs got him over the shock, but he can't tolerate more and he'll be very weak."

True, she said with feathers rather than voice. Aloud: "Olga shall nurse him. She cannot get around as easily as Rusa or me, and lacks your physical strength. Besides, she can prepare meals and the like for us."

Pete nodded absently. He had a dread to explain. "Uh... uh... do you think... well, I mean in your ethic, in the New Faith... might Enherrian put an end to himself?" And he wondered if God would really blame the captain.

Her wings and tail spread, her crest erected, she glared. "You say that of him?" she shrilled. Seeing his concern, she eased, even made a *kerr* noise which might answer to a chuckle. "No, no, he has his deathpride. He would never rob God of honor."

After survey and experiment, the decision was to hack a giant cross in the island turf. That growth couldn't be ignited, and what wood was burnable—deadfall—was too scant and stingy of smoke for a beacon.

The party had no spades; the vegetable mat was thick and tough; the toil became brutal. Pete, like Whell and Rusa, would return to camp and topple into sleep. He wouldn't rouse till morning, to gulp his food and plod off to labor. He grew gaunt, bearded, filthy, numb-brained, sore in every cell.

Thus he did not notice how Olga was waning. Enherrian was mending, somewhat, under her care. She did her jobs, which were comparatively light, and would have been ashamed to complain of headaches, giddiness, diarrhea, and nausea. Doubtless she imagined she suffered merely from reaction to disaster, plus a sketchy and ill-balanced diet, plus heat and brilliant sun and—she'd cope.

The days were too short for work, the nights too short for sleep. Pete's terror was that he would see a flitter pass and vanish over the horizon before the Ythrians could hail it. Then they might try sending Rusa for help. But that was a long, tricky flight; and the gulf coast camp was due to be struck rather soon anyway.

Sometimes he wondered dimly how he and Olga might do if marooned on Gray. He kept enough wits to dismiss his fantasy for what it was. Take the simple fact that native life appeared to lack certain vitamins.

Then one darkness, perhaps a terrestrial week after the shipwreck, he was roused by her crying his name. He struggled to wakefulness. She lay beside him. Gray's moon was up, nearly full, swifter and brighter than Luna. Its glow drowned most of the stars, frosted the encroaching bushes, fell without pity to show him her fallen cheeks and rolling eyes. She shuddered in his arms; he heard her teeth clapping. "I'm cold, darling, I'm cold," she said in the subtropical summer night. She vomited over him, and presently she was delirious.

The Ythrians gave what help they could, he what medicines he could. By sunrise (an outrageousness of rose and gold and silver-blue, crossed by the jubilant wings of waterfowl) he knew she was dying.

He examined his own physical state, using a robot he discovered he had in his skull: yes, his wretchedness was due to more than overwork, he saw that now; he too had had the upset stomach and the occasional shivers, nothing like the disintegration which possessed Olga, nevertheless the same kind of thing. Yet the Ythrians stayed healthy. Did a local germ attack humans while finding the other race unavourable?

The rescuers, who came on the island two Gray days later, already had the answer. That genus of bushes is widespread on the planet. A party elsewhere, after getting sick and getting into safety suits, analyzed its vapors. They are a cumulative poison to man; they scarcely harm an Ythrian. The analysts named it the hell shrub.

Unfortunately, their report wasn't broadcast until after the boat left. Meanwhile Pete had been out in the field every day, while Olga spent her whole time in the hollow, over which the sun regularly created an inversion layer.

Whell and Rusa went grimly back to work. Pete had to get away. He wasn't sure of the reason, but he had to be alone when he screamed at heaven, "Why did You do this to her, why did You do it?" Enherrian could look after Olga, who had brought him back to a life he no longer wanted. Pete had stopped her babblings, writhings, and sawtoothed sounds of pain with a shot. She ought to sleep peacefully into that death which the monitor instruments said was, in the absence of hospital facilities, ineluctable.

He stumbled off to the heights. The sea reached calm, in a thousand hues of azure and green, around the living island, beneath the gentle sky. He knelt in all that emptiness and put his question.

After an hour he could say, "Your will be done" and return to camp.

Olga lay awake. "Pete, Pete!" she cried. Anguish distorted her voice till he couldn't recognize it; nor could he really see her in the yellowed sweating skin and lank hair drawn over a skeleton, or find her in the stench and the nails which flayed him as they clutched. "Where were you, hold me close, it hurts, how it hurts—"

He gave her a second injection, to small effect.

He knelt again, beside her. He has not told me what he said, or how. At last she grew quiet, gripped him hard and waited for the pain to end.

When she died, he says, it was like seeing a light blown out.

He laid her down, closed eyes and jaw, folded her hands. On mechanical feet he went to the pup tent which had been rigged for Enherrian. The cripple calmly awaited him. "She is fallen?" he asked.

Pete nodded.

"That is well," Enherrian said.

"It is not," Pete heard himself reply, harsh and remote. "She shouldn't have aroused. The drug should've... Did you give her a stim shot? Did you bring her back to suffer?"

"What else?" said Enherrian, though he was unarmed and a blaster lay nearby for Pete to seize. *Not that I'll ease him out of his fate!* went through the man in a spasm. "I saw that you, distraught, had misgauged. You were gone and I unable to follow you. She might well die before your return."

Out of his void, Pete gaped into those eyes. "You mean," rattled from him, "you mean... she... mustn't?"

Enherrian crawled forth—he could only crawl, on his single wing—to take Pete's hands. "My friend," he said, his tone immeasurably compassionate, "I honored you both too much to deny her her deathpride."

Pete's chief awareness was of the cool sharp talons.

"Have I misunderstood?" asked Enherrian anxiously. "Did you not wish her to give God a battle?"

Even on Lucifer, the nights finally end. Dawn blazed on the tors when Pete finished his story.

I emptied the last few ccs. into our glasses. We'd get no work done today.

"Yeh," I said. "Cross-cultural semantics. Given the best will in the universe, two beings from different planets—or just different countries, often—take for granted they think alike; and the outcome can be tragic."

"I assumed that at first," Pete said. "I didn't need to forgive Enherrian—how could he know? For his part, he was puzzled when I buried my darling. On Ythri they cast them from a great height into wilderness. But neither race wants to watch the rotting of what was loved, so he did his lame best to help me."

He drank, looked as near the cruel bluish sun as he was able, and mumbled: "What I couldn't do was forgive God."

"The problem of evil," I said.

"Oh, no. I've studied these matters, these past years: read theology, argued with priests, the whole route. Why does God, if He is a loving and personal God, allow evil? Well, there's a perfectly good Christian answer to that. Man—intelligence everywhere—must have free will. Otherwise we're puppets and have no reason to exist. Free will necessarily includes the capability of doing wrong. We're here, in this cosmos during our lives, to learn how to be good of our unforced choice."

"I spoke illiterately," I apologized. "All that brandy. No, sure, your logic is right, regardless of whether I accept your premises or not. What I meant was: the problem of pain. Why does a merciful God permit undeserved agony? If He's omnipotent, He isn't compelled to."

"I'm not talking about the sensation which warns you to take your hand from the fire, anything useful like that. No, the random accident which wipes out a life... or a mind..." I drank. "What happened to Arrach, yes, and to Enherrian, and Olga, and you, and Whell. What happens when a disease hits, or those catastrophes we label acts of God. Or the slow decay of us if we grow very old. Every such horror. Never mind if science has licked some of them; we have enough left, and then there were our ancestors who endured them all."

"Why? What possible end is served? It's not adequate to declare we'll receive an unbounded reward after we die and therefore it makes no difference whether a life was gusty or grisly. That's no explanation."

"Is this the problem you're grappling with, Pete?"

"In a way." He nodded, cautiously, as if he were already his father's age. "At least, it's the start of the problem."

"You see, there I was, isolated among Ythrians. My fellow humans sympathized, but they had nothing to say that I didn't know already. The New Faith, however... Mind you, I wasn't about to convert. What I did hope for was an insight, a freshness, that'd help me make Christian sense of our losses. Enherrian was so sure, so learned, in his beliefs."

"We talked, and talked, and talked, while I was regaining my strength. He was as caught as me. Not that he couldn't fit our troubles into his scheme of things. That was easy. But it turned out that the New Faith has no satisfactory answer to the problem of evil. It says God allows wickedness so we may win honor by fighting for the right. Really, when you stop to think, that's weak, especially in carnivore Ythrian terms. Don't you agree?"

"You know them, I don't," I sighed. "You imply they have a better answer to the riddle of pain than your own religion does."

"It seems better." Desperation edged his slightly blurred tone. "They're hunters, or were until lately. They see God like that, as the Hunter. Not the Torturer—you absolutely must understand this point—no, He rejoices in our happiness the way we might rejoice to see a game animal gamboling. Yet at last He comes after us. Our noblest moment is when we, knowing He is irresistible, give Him a good chase, a good fight."

"Then He wins honor. And some infinite end is furthered. (The same one as when my God is given praise? How can I tell?) We're dead, struck down, lingering at most a few years in the memories of those who escaped this time. And that's what we're here for. That's why God created the universe."

"And this belief is old," I said. "It doesn't belong just to a few cranks. No, it's been held for centuries by millions of sensitive, intelligent, educated beings. You can live by it, you can die by it. If it doesn't solve every paradox, it solves some that your faith won't, quite. This is your dilemma, true?"

He nodded again. "The priests have told me to deny a false creed and to acknowledge a mystery. Neither instruction feels right. Or am I asking too much?"

"I'm sorry, Pete," I said, altogether honestly. It hurt. "But how should I know? I looked into the abyss once, and saw nothing, and haven't looked since. You keep looking. Which of us is the braver?"

"Maybe you can find a text in Job. I don't know, I tell you, I don't know."

The sun lifted higher above the burning horizon.

THE END

INTRODUCTION TO *HOW TO BE ETHNIC IN ONE EASY LESSON*

WHAT RENNHI, her flightmates in the endeavor, and more lately Hloch were able to seek out has been limited and in great measure chance-blown. No scholar from Avalon has yet prevailed over the time or the means to ransack data banks on Terra itself. Yonder must abide records more full by a cloud-height than those which have reached the suns where Domain of Ythri and Terran Empire come together.

It may be just as well. They would surely overwhelm the writer of this book, whose aim is at no more than an account of certain human events which helped bring about the founding of the Stormgate Choth. Even the fragmentary original material he has is more than he can directly use. He rides among whatever winds blow, choosing first one, then another, hoping that in this wise he may find the overall set of the airstream.

Here is a story of no large import, save that it gives a picture from within of Terran society when the Polesotechnic League was in its glory—and, incidentally, makes the first mention known to Hloch of a being who was to take a significant part in later history. The source is a running set of reminiscences written down through much of his life by James Ching, a spaceman who eventually settled on Catawrayannis. His descendants kept the notebooks and courteously made them available to Rennhi after she had heard of their existence. To screen a glossary of obscure terms, punch Library Central 254-0691.

—Hloch of the Stormgate Choth
The Earth Book of Stormgate

HOW TO BE ETHNIC IN ONE EASY LESSON

ADZEL TALKS a lot about blessings in disguise, but this disguise was impenetrable. In fact, what Simon Snyder handed me was an exploding bomb.

I was hard at study when my phone warbled. That alone jerked me half out of my lounger. I'd set that instrument to pass calls from no more than a dozen people, to all of whom I'd explained that they shouldn't bother me about anything much less urgent than a rogue planet on a collision course.

You see, my preliminary tests for the Academy were coming up soon. Not the actual entrance exams—I'd face those a year hence—but the tests as to whether I should be allowed to apply for admission. You can't blame that policy on the Brotherhood. Not many regular spaceman's berths become available annually, and a hundred young Earthlings clamor for each of them. The ninety-nine who don't make it... well, mostly they try to get work with some company which will maybe someday assign them to a post somewhere outsystem; or they set their teeth and save their money till at last they can go as shepherded tourists.

At night, out above the ocean in my car, away from city glow, I'd look upward and be ripped apart by longing. As for the occasional trips to Luna—last time, several months before, I'd found my eyes running over at sight of that sky, when the flit was my sixteenth-birthday present.

And now tensor calculus was giving me trouble. No doubt the Education Central computer would have gotten monumentally bored, projecting the same stuff over and over on my screen, if it had been built to feel emotions. Is that why it hasn't been?

The phone announced: "Freeman Snyder."

You don't refuse your principal counselor. His or her word has too much to do with the evaluation of you as a potential student by places like the Academy. "Accept," I gulped. As his lean features flashed on: "Greeting, sir."

"Greeting, Jim," he said. "How are you?"

"Busy," I hinted.

"Indeed. You are a rather intense type, eh? The indices show you're apt to work yourself into the ground. A change of pace is downright necessary."

Why are we saddled with specialists who arbitrate our lives on the basis of a psychoprofile and a theory? If I'd been apprenticed to a Master Merchant of the Polesotechnic League instead, he wouldn't have given two snorts in vacuum about my "optimum developmental strategy." He'd have told me, "Ching, do this or learn that"; and if I didn't cut it satisfactorily, I'd be fired—or dead, because we'd be on strange worlds, out among the stars, the stars.

No use daydreaming. League apprenticeships are scarcer than hair on a neutron, and mostly filled by relatives. (That's less nepotism for its own sake than a belief that kin of survivor types are more likely to be the same than chance-met groundhugger kids.) I was an ordinary student bucking for an Academy appointment, from which I'd graduate to service on regular runs and maybe, at last, a captaincy.

"To be frank," Simon Snyder went on, "I've worried about your indifference to extracurricular activities. It doesn't make for an outgoing personality, you know. I've thought of an undertaking which should be right in your orbit. In addition, it'll be a real service, it'll bring real credit, to—" he smiled afresh to pretend he was joking while he intoned—"the educational complex of San Francisco Integrate."

"I haven't time!" I wailed.

"Certainly you do. You can't study twenty-four hours a day, even if a medic would prescribe the stim. Brains go stale. All work and no play, remember. Besides, Jim, this matter has its serious aspect. I'd like to feel I could endorse your altruism as well as your technological abilities."

I eased my muscles, let the lounge mold itself around me, and said in what was supposed to be a hurrah voice: "Please tell me, Freeman Snyder."

He beamed. "I knew I could count on you. You've heard of the upcoming Festival of Man."

"Haven't I?" Realizing how sour my tone was, I tried again. "I have."

He gave me a pretty narrow look. "You don't sound too enthusiastic."

"Oh, I'll tune in ceremonies and such, catch a bit of music and drama and whatnot, if and when the chance comes. But I've got to get these transformations in hyperdrive theory straight, or—"

"I'm afraid you don't quite appreciate the importance of the Festival, Jim. It's more than a set of shows. It's an affirmation."

Yes, I'd heard that often enough before—too dismally often. Doubtless you remember the line of argument the promoters used: "Humankind, gaining the stars, is in grave danger of losing its soul. Our extraterrestrial colonies are fragmenting into new nations, whole new cultures, to which Earth is scarcely a memory. Our traders, our explorers push ever outward, ever further away; and no missionary spirit drives them, nothing but lust for profit and adventure. Meanwhile the Solar Commonwealth is deluged with alien—nonhuman—influence, not only diplomats, entrepreneurs, students, and visitors, but the false glamour of ideas never born on man's true home... We grant we have learned much of value from these outsiders. But much else has been unassimilable or has had a disastrously distorting effect, especially in the arts. Besides, they are learning far more from us. Let us proudly affirm that fact. Let us hark back to our own origins, our own variousness. Let us strike new roots in the soil from which our forebears sprang."

A year-long display of Earth's past—well, it'd be colorful, if rather fakey most of the time. I couldn't take it more seriously than that. Space was where the future lay, I thought. At least, it was where I dreamed my personal future would lie. What were dead bones to me, no matter how fancy the costumes you put on them? Not that I scorned the past; even then, I wasn't so foolish. I just believed that what was worth saving would save itself, and the rest had better be let fade away quietly.

I tried to explain to my counselor: "Sure, I've been told about 'cultural pseudomorphosis' and the rest. Really, though, Freeman Snyder, don't you think the shoe is on the other foot? Like, well, I've got this friend from Woden, name of Adzel, here to learn planetology. That's a science we developed; his folk are primitive hunters, newly discovered by us. He talks human languages too—he's quick at languages—and lately he was converted to Buddhism and... Shouldn't the Wodenites worry about being turned into imitation Earthlings?"

My example wasn't the best, because you can only humanize a four-and-a-half-meter-long dragon to a limited extent. Whether he knew that or not. (Who can know all the races, all the worlds we've already found in our small corner of this wonderful cosmos?)

Snyder wasn't impressed. He snapped, "The sheer variety of extraterrestrial influence is demoralizing. Now I want our complex to make a decent showing during the Festival. Every department, office, club, church, institution in the Integrate will take part. I want its schools to have a leading role."

"Don't they, sir? I mean, aren't projects under way?"

"Yes, yes, to a degree." He waved an impatient hand. "Far less than I'd expect from our youth. Too many of you are spacestruck—" He checked himself, donned his smile again, and leaned forward till his image seemed ready to fall out of the screen. "I've been thinking about what my own students might do. In your case, I have a first-class idea. You will represent San Francisco's Chinese community among us."

"What?" I yelped. "But—but—"

"A very old, almost unique tradition," he said. "Your people have been in this area for five or six hundred years."

"My people?" The room wobbled around me. "I mean... well, sure, my name's Ching and I'm proud of it. And maybe the, uh, the chromosome recombinations do make me look like those ancestors. But... half a thousand years, sir! If I haven't got blood in me of every breed of human being that ever lived, why, then I'm a statistical monstrosity!"

"True. However, the accident which makes you a throwback to your Mongoloid forebears is helpful. Few of my students are identifiably anything. I try to find roles for them, on the basis of surnames, but it isn't easy."

Yeb, I thought bitterly. *By your reasoning, everybody named Marcontonio should dress in a toga for the occasion, and everybody named Smith should paint himself blue.*

"There is a local ad hoc committee on Chinese-American activities," Snyder went on. "I suggest you contact them and ask for ideas and information. What can you present on behalf of our educational system? And then, of course, there's Library Central. It can supply more historical material than you could read in a lifetime. Do you good to learn a few subjects besides math, physics, xenology—" His grimace passed by. I gave him marks for sincerity: "Perhaps you can devise something, a float or the like, something which will call on your engineering ingenuity and knowledge. That would please them too, when you apply at the Academy."

Sure, I thought, *if it hasn't eaten so much of my time that I flunk these prelims.*

"Remember," Snyder said, "the Festival opens in barely three months. I'll expect progress reports from you. Feel free to call on me for help or advice at any time. That's what I'm here for, you know: to guide you in developing your whole self."

More of the same followed. I haven't the stomach to record it.

*** *** ***

I called Betty Riefenstahl, but just to find out if I could come see her. Though holovids are fine for image and sound, you can't hold hands with one or catch a whiff of perfume and girl.

Her phone told me she wasn't available till evening. That gave me ample chance to gnaw my nerves raw. I couldn't flat-out refuse Snyder's pet notion. The right was mine, of course, and he wouldn't consciously hold a grudge; but neither would he speak as well as he might of my energy and team spirit. On the other hand, what did I know about Chinese civilization? I'd seen the standard sights; I'd read a classic or two in literature courses; and that was that. What persons I'd met over there were as modern-oriented as myself. (No pun, I hope!) And as for Chinese-Americans—

Vaguely remembering that San Francisco had once had special ethnic sections, I did ask Library Central. It screened a fleet of stuff about a district known as Chinatown. Probably contemporaries found that area picturesque. (Oh, treetop highways under the golden-red sun of Cynthia! Four-armed drummers who sound the mating call of Gorzun's twin moons! Wild wings above Ythril!) The inhabitants had celebrated a Lunar New Year with fireworks and a parade. I couldn't make out details—the photographs had been time-blurred when their information was recoded—and was too disheartened to plow through the accompanying text.

For me, dinner was a refueling stop. I mumbled something to my parents, who mean well but can't understand why I must leave the nice safe Commonwealth, and flitted off to the Riefenstahl place.

The trip calmed me a little. I was reminded that, to outworlders like Adzel, the miracle was here. Light glimmered in a million earthbound stars across the hills, far out over the great sheen of Bay and ocean; often it fountained upward in a many-armed tower, often gave way to the sweet darkness of a park or ecocenter. A murmur of machines beat endlessly through cool, slightly foggy air. Traffic Control passed me so near a bus that I looked in its canopy and saw the passengers were from the whole globe and beyond—a dandified Lunarian, a stocky blueskin of Alfzar, a spacehand identified by his Brotherhood badge, a journeyman merchant of the Polesotechnic League who didn't bother with any identification except the skin weathered beneath strange suns, the go-to-hell independence in his face, which turned me sick with envy.

The Riefenstahls' apartment overlooked the Golden Gate. I saw lights twinkle and flare, heard distant clangor and hissing, where crews worked around the clock to replicate an ancient bridge. Betty met me at the door. She's slim and blonde and usually cheerful. Tonight she looked so tired and troubled that I myself paid scant attention to the briefness of her tunic.

"Sh!" she cautioned. "Let's don't say hello to Dad right now. He's in his study, and it's very brown." I knew that her mother was away from home, helping develop the tape of a modern musical composition. Her father conducted the San Francisco Opera.

She led me to the living room, sat me down, and punched for coffee. A full-wall transparency framed her where she continued standing, in city glitter and shimmer, a sickle moon with a couple of pinpoint cities visible on its dark side, a few of the brightest stars. "I'm glad you came, Jimmy," she said. "I need a shoulder to cry on."

"Like me," I answered. "You first, however."

"Well, it's Dad. He's ghastly worried. This stupid Festival—"

"Huh?" I searched my mind and found nothing except the obvious. "Won't he be putting on a, uh, Terrestrial piece?"

"He's expected to. He's been researching till every hour of the mornings, poor dear. I've been helping him go through playbacks—hundreds and hundreds of years' worth—and prepare synopses and excerpts to show the directors. We only finished yesterday, and I *had* to catch up on sleep. That's why I couldn't let you come earlier."

"But what's the problem?" I asked. "Okay, you've been forced to scan those tapes. But once you've picked your show, you just project it, don't you? At most, you may need to update the language. And you've got your mother to handle reprogramming."

Betty sighed. "It's not that simple. You see, they—his board of directors, plus the officials in charge of San Francisco's participation—they insist on a live performance."

Partly I knew what she was talking about, partly she explained further. Freeman Riefenstahl had pioneered the revival of in-the-flesh opera. Yes, he said, we have holographic records of the greatest artists; yes, we can use computers to generate original works and productions which no mortal being could possibly match. Yet neither approach will bring forth new artists with new concepts of a part, nor do they give individual brains a chance to create—and, when a million fresh ideas are flowing in to us from the galaxy, natural-born genius must create or else revolt.

"Let us by all means use technical tricks where they are indicated, as for special effects," Freeman Riefenstahl said. "But let us never forget that music is only alive in a living performer." While I don't claim to be very esthetic, I

tuned in his shows whenever I could. They did have an excitement which no tape and no calculated stimulus interplay—no matter how excellent—can duplicate.

"His case is like yours," Betty told me near the start of our acquaintance. "We could send robots to space. Nevertheless men go, at whatever risk." That was when I stopped thinking of her as merely pretty.

Tonight, her voice gone bleak, she said: "Dad succeeded too well. He's been doing contemporary things, you know, letting the archives handle the archaic. Now they insist he won't be showing sufficient respect, as a representative of the Integrate, for the Human Ethos—unless he puts on a historic item, live, as the Opera Company's share of the Festival."

"Well, can't he?" I asked. "Sure, it's kind of short notice, same as for me. Still, given modern training methods for his cast—"

"Of course, of course," she said irritably. "But don't you see, a routine performance isn't good enough either? People today are conditioned to visual spectacles. At least, the directors claim so. And—Jimmy, the Festival is important, if only because of the publicity. If Dad's part in it falls flat, his contract may not be renewed. Certainly his effort would be hurt, to educate the public back to real music." Her tone and her head drooped. "And that'd hurt him."

She drew a breath, straightened, even coaxed a smile into existence. "Well, we've made our *précis* of suggestions," she said. "We're waiting to hear what the board decides, which may take days. Meanwhile, you need to tell me your woes." Sitting down opposite me: "Do."

I obeyed. At the end I grinned on one side of my face and remarked: "Ironic, huh? Here your father has to stage an ultraethnic production—I'll bet they'll turn handsprings for him if he can make it German, given a name like his—only he's not supposed to use technology for much except backdrops. And here I have to do likewise, in Chinese style, the flashier the better, only I really haven't time to apply the technology for making a firework fountain or whatever. Maybe he and I should pool our efforts."

"How?"

"I dunno." I shifted in the chair. "Let's get out of here, go someplace where we can forget this mess."

What I had in mind was a flit over the ocean or down to the swimmably warm waters off Baja, followed maybe by a snack in a restaurant featuring outsystem food. Betty gave me no chance. She nodded and said quickly, "Yes, I've been wanting to. A serene environment... Do you think Adzel might be at home?"

*** *** ***

The League scholarship he'd wangled back on his planet didn't reach far on Earth, especially when he had about a ton of warmblooded mass to keep fed. He couldn't afford special quarters, or anything near the Clement Institute of Planetology. Instead, he paid exorbitant rent for a shack 'way down in the San José district. The sole public transportation he could fit into was a rickety old twice-a-day gyrotrain, which meant he lost hours commuting to his laboratory and live-lecture classes, waiting for them to begin and waiting around after they were finished. Also, I strongly suspected he was undernourished. I'd fretted about him ever since we met, in the course of a course in micrometrics.

He always dismissed my fears: "Once, Jimmy, I might well have chafed, when I was a prairie-galloping hunter. Now, having gained a minute measure of enlightenment, I see that these annoyances of the flesh are no more significant than we allow them to be. Indeed, we can turn them to good use. Austerities are valuable. As for long delays, why, they are opportunities for study or, better yet, meditation. I have even learned to ignore spectators, and am grateful for the discipline which that forced me to acquire."

We may be used to extraterrestrials these days. Nevertheless, he was the one Wodenite on this planet. And you take a being like that: four hooped legs supporting a spike-backed, green-scaled, golden-bellied body and tail; torso, with arms in proportion, rising two meters to a crocodilian face, fangs, rubbery lips, bony ears, wistful brown eyes—you take that fellow and set him on a campus, in his equivalent of the lotus position, droning "*Om mani padme hum*" in a rich basso profundo, and see if you don't draw a crowd.

Serious though he was, Adzel never became a prig. He enjoyed good food and drink when he could get them, being especially fond of rye whiskey consumed out of beer tankards. He played murderous chess and poker. He sang, and sang well, everything from his native chants through human folk ballads on to the very latest spinnies. (A few things, such as *Eskimo Nell*, he refused to render in Betty's presence. From his avid reading of human history, he'd picked up anachronistic inhibitions.) I imagine his jokes often escaped me by being too subtle.

All in all, I was tremendously fond of him, hated the thought of his poverty, and had failed to hit on any way of helping him out.

I set my car down on the strip before his hut. A moldering conurb, black against feverish reflections off thickening fog, cast it into deep and sulfurous shadow. Unmuffled industrial traffic brawled around. I took a stun pistol from a drawer before escorting Betty outside.

Adzel's doorplate was kaput, but he opened at our knock. "Do come in, do come in," he greeted. Fluorolight shimmered gorgeous along his scales and scutes. Incense puffed outward. He noticed my gun. "Why are you armed, Jimmy?"

"The night's dark here," I said. "In a crime area like this—"

"Is it?" He was surprised. "Why, I have never been molested."

We entered. He waved us to mats on the floor. Those, and a couple of cheap tables, and bookshelves cobbled together from scrap and crammed with codexes as well as reels, were his furniture. An Old Japanese screen—repro, of course—hid that end of the single room which contained a miniature cooker and some complicated specially installed plumbing. Two scrolls hung on the walls, one showing a landscape and one the Compassionate Buddha.

Adzel bustled about, making tea for us. He hadn't quite been able to adjust to these narrow surroundings. Twice I had to duck fast before his tail clonked me. (I said nothing, lest he spend the next half-hour in apologies.) "I am delighted to see you," he boomed. "I gathered, however, from your call, that the occasion is not altogether happy."

"We hoped you'd help us relax," Betty replied. I myself felt a bit disgruntled. Sure, Adzel was fine people; but couldn't Betty and I relax in each other's company? I had seen too little of her these past weeks.

He served us. His pot held five liters, but—thanks maybe to that course in micrometrics—he could handle the tiniest cups and put on an expert tea ceremony. Appropriate silence passed. I fumed. Charming the custom might be; still, hadn't Oriental traditions caused me ample woe?

At last he dialled for *pipa* music, settled down before us on hocks and front knees, and invited: "Share your troubles, dear friends."

"Oh, we've been over them and over them," Betty said. "I came here for peace."

"Why, certainly," Adzel answered. "I am glad to try to oblige. Would you like to join me in a spot of transcendental meditation?"

That tore my patience apart. "No!" I yelled. They both stared at me. "I'm sorry," I mumbled. "But... chaos, everything's gone bad and..."

A gigantic four-digited hand squeezed my shoulder, gently as my mother might have done. "Tell, Jimmy," Adzel said low.

It flooded from me, the whole sad, ludicrous situation. "Freeman Snyder can't understand," I finished. "He thinks I can learn those equations, those facts, in a few days at most."

"Can't you? Operant conditioning, for example—"

"You know better. I can learn to parrot, sure. But I won't get the knowledge down in my bones where it belongs. And they'll set me problems which require original thinking. They must. How else can they tell if I'll be able to handle an emergency in space?"

"Or on a new planet." The long head nodded. "Yes-s-s."

"That's not for me," I said flatly. "I'll never be tagged by the merchant adventurers." Betty squeezed my hand. "Even freighters can run into grief, though."

He regarded me for a while, most steadily, until at last he rumbled: "A word to the right men—that does appear to be how your Technic civilization operates, no? *Zothkeh*. Have you prospects for a quick performance of this task, that will allow you to get back soon to your proper work?"

"No. Freeman Snyder mentioned a float or display. Well, I'll have to soak up cultural background, and develop a scheme, and clear it with a local committee, and design the thing—which had better be spectacular as well as ethnic—and build it, and test it, and find the bugs in the design, and rebuild it, and... And I'm no artist anyhow. No matter how clever a machine I make, it won't look like much."

Suddenly Betty exclaimed: "Adzel, you know more about Old Oriental things than he does! Can't you make a suggestion?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps." The Wodenite rubbed his jaw, a sandpaper noise. "The motifs... Let me see." He hooked a book off a shelf and started leafing through it. "They are generally of pagan origin in Buddhistic, or for that matter Christian art... *Gr-r-rr'm*... Betty, my sweet, while I search, won't you unburden yourself too?"

She twisted her fingers and gazed at the floor. I figured she'd rather not be distracted. Rising from my mat, I went to look over his shoulder—no, his elbow.

"My problem is my father's, actually," she began. "And maybe he and I already have solved it. That depends on whether or not one of the possibilities we've found is acceptable. If not—how much further can we research? Time's getting so short. He needs time to assemble a cast, rehearse, handle the physical details..." She noticed Adzel's puzzlement and managed a sort of chuckle. "Excuse me. I got ahead of my story. We..."

"Hoy!" I interrupted. My hand slapped down on a page. "What's that?... Uh, sorry, Betty."

Her smile forgave me. "Have you found something?" She sprang to her feet.

"I don't know," I stammered, "b-b-but, Adzel, that thing in this picture could almost be you. What is it?"

He squinted at the ideograms. "The *lung*," he said.

"A dragon?"

"Western writers miscalled it thus." Adzel settled happily down to lecture us. "The dragon proper was a creature of European and Near Eastern mythology, almost always a destructive monster. In Chinese and related societies, contrariwise, these herpetoids represented beneficent powers. The *lung* inhabited the sky, the *li* the ocean, the *chiaio* the marshes and mountains. Various other entities are named elsewhere. The *lung* was the principal type, the one which was mimed on ceremonial occasions—"

The phone warbled. "Would you please take that, Betty?" Adzel asked, reluctant to break off. "I daresay it's a notification I am expecting of a change in class schedules. Now, Jimmy, observe the claws on hind and forefeet. Their exact number is a distinguishing characteristic of—"

"Dad!" Betty cried. Glancing sideways, I saw John Riefenstahl's mild features in the screen, altogether weebegone.

"I was hoping I'd find you, dear," he said wearily. I knew that these days she seldom left the place without recording a list of numbers where she could probably be reached.

"I've just finished a three-hour conference with the board chairman," her father's voice plodded. "They've vetoed every one of our proposals."

"Already?" she whispered. "In God's name, why?"

"Various reasons. They feel *Carmen* is too parochial in time and space; hardly anybody today would understand what motivates the characters. *Alpha of the Centaur* is about space travel, which is precisely what we're supposed to get away from. *La Traviata* isn't visual enough. *Götterdämmerung*, they agree, has the Mythic Significance they want, but it's *too* visual. A modern audience wouldn't accept it unless we supply a realism of effects which would draw attention away from the live performers on whom it ought to center in a production that emphasizes Man. Et cetera, et cetera."

"They're full of nonsense!"

"They're also full of power, dear. Can you bear to run through more tapes?"

"I'd better."

"I beg your pardon, Freeman Riefenstahl," Adzel put in. "We haven't met but I have long admired your work. May I ask if you have considered Chinese opera?"

"The Chinese themselves will be doing that, Freeman—er—" The conductor hesitated.

"Adzel." My friend moved into scanner range. His teeth gleamed alarmingly sharp. "Honored to make your acquaintance, sir... ah... sir?"

John Riefenstahl, who had gasped and gone bloodless, wiped his forehead. "Eh-eh-excuse me," he stuttered. "I didn't realize you... That is, here I had Wagner on my mind, and then Fafner himself confronted me—"

I didn't know those names, but the context was obvious. All at once Betty and I met each other's eyes and let out a yell.

*** *** ***

Knowing how Simon Snyder would react, I insisted on a live interview. He sat behind his desk, surrounded by his computers, communicators, and information retrievers, and gave me a tight smile.

"Well," he said. "You have an idea, Jim? Overnight seems a small time for a matter this important."

"It was plenty," I answered. "We've contacted the head of the Chinese-American committee, and he likes our notion. But since it's on behalf of the schools, he wants your okay."

"We?" My counselor frowned. "You have a partner?"

"Chaos, sir, he *is* my project. What's a Chinese parade without a dragon? And what fake dragon can possibly be as good as a live one? Now we take this Wodenite, and just give him a wig and false whiskers, claws over his hoofs, lacquer on his scales—"

"A nonhuman?" The frown turned into a scowl. "Jim, you disappoint me. You disappoint me sorely. I expected better from you, some dedication, some application of your talents. In a festival devoted to your race, you want to feature an alien! No, I'm afraid I cannot agree—"

"Sir, please wait till you've met Adzel." I jumped from my chair, palmed the hall door, and called: "C'mon in."

He did, meter after meter of him, till the office was full of scales, tail, spikes, and fangs. He seized Snyder's hand in a gentle but engulfing grip, beamed straight into Snyder's face, and thundered: "How joyful I am at this opportunity, sir! What a way to express my admiration for terrestrial culture, and thus help glorify your remarkable species!"

"Um, well, that is," the man said feebly.

I had told Adzel that there was no reason to mention his being a pacifist. He continued: "I do hope you will approve Jimmy's brilliant idea, sir. To be quite frank, my motives are not unmixd. If I perform, I understand that the local restaurateurs' association will feed me during rehearsals. My stipend is exiguous and—" he licked his lips, two centimeters from Snyder's nose—"sometimes I get so hungry."

He would tell only the strict, if not always the whole truth. I, having fewer compunctions, whispered in my counselor's ear: "He is kind of excitable, but he's perfectly safe if nobody frustrates him."

"Well." Snyder coughed, backed away till he ran into a computer, and coughed again. "Well. Ah... yes. Yes, Jim, your concept is undeniably original. There is a—" he winced but got the words out—"a certain quality to it which suggests that you—" he strangled for a moment—"will go far in life."

"You plan to record that opinion, do you not?" Adzel asked. "In Jimmy's permanent file? At once?"

I hurried them both through the remaining motions. My friend, my girl, and her father had an appointment with the chairman of the board of the San Francisco Opera Company.

*** *** ***

The parade went off like rockets. Our delighted local merchants decided to revive permanently the ancient custom of celebrating the Lunar New Year. Adzel will star in that as long as he remains on Earth. In exchange—since he brings in more tourist credits than it costs—he has an unlimited meal ticket at the Silver Dragon Chinese Food and Chop Suey Palace.

More significant was the production of Richard Wagner's *Siegfried*. At least, in his speech at the farewell performance, the governor of the Integrate said it was significant. "Besides the bringing back of a musical masterpiece too many centuries neglected," he pumped, "the genius of John Riefenstahl has, by his choice of cast, given the Festival of Man an added dimension. He has reminded us that, in seeking our roots and pride, we must never grow chauvinistic. We must always remember to reach forth the hand of friendship to our brother beings throughout God's universe," who might otherwise be less anxious to come spend their money on Earth.

The point does have its idealistic appeal, though. Besides, the show was a sensation in its own right. For years to come, probably, the complete Ring cycle will be presented here and there around the Commonwealth; and Freeman Riefenstahl can be guest conductor, and Adzel can sing Fafner, at top salary, any time they wish.

I won't see the end of that, because I won't be around. When everything had been settled, Adzel, Betty, and I threw ourselves a giant feast in his new apartment. After his fifth magnum of champagne, he gazed a trifle blurrily across the table and said to me:

"Jimmy, my affection for you, my earnest wish to make a fractional return of your kindness, has hitherto been baffled."

"Aw, nothing to mention," I mumbled while he stopped a volcanic hiccough.

"At any rate." Adzel wagged a huge finger. "He would be a poor friend who gave a dangerous gift." He popped another cork and refilled our glasses and his stein. "That is, Jimmy, I was aware of your ambition to get into deep space, and not as a pleyer of routine routes but as a discoverer, a pioneer. The question remained, could you cope with unpredictable environments?"

I gaped at him. The heart banged in my breast. Betty caught my hand.

"You have convinced me you can," Adzel said. "True, Freeman Snyder may not give you his most ardent recommendation to the Academy. No matter. The cleverness and, yes, toughness with which you handled this problem—those convinced me, Jimmy, you are a true survivor type."

He knocked back half a liter before tying the star-spangled bow knot on his package: "Being here on a League scholarship, I have League connections. I have been in correspondence. A certain Master Merchant I know will soon be in the market for another apprentice and accepts what I have told him about you. Are you interested?"

I collapsed into Betty's arms. She says she'll find a way to follow me.

THE END

INTRODUCTION TO *THE SEASON OF FORGIVENESS*

THE FOLLOWING story was written by Judith Dalmady/Lundgren for the periodical *Morgana*. She based it upon an incident whereof her father had told her, he having gotten the tale from one of the persons directly concerned when he was an entrepreneur in those parts. Hloch includes it, first, because it shows more than the usual biographies do of a planet on which David Falkayn had, earlier, had a significant adventure. Second, it gives yet another glimpse into a major human faith, alive unto this year and surely of influence upon him and his contemporaries.

—Hloch of the Stormgate Choth
The Earth Book of Stormgate

THE SEASON OF FORGIVENESS

It WAS a strange and lonely place for a Christmas celebration—the chill planet of a red dwarf star, away off in the Pleiades region, where half a dozen humans laired in the ruins of a city which had been great five thousand years ago, and everywhere else reached wilderness.

"No!" said Master Trader Thomas Overbeck. "We've got too much work on our hands to go wasting man-hours on a piece of frivolity."

"It isn't, sir," answered his apprentice, Juan Hernandez. "On Earth it's important. You have spent your life on the frontier, so perhaps you don't realize this."

Overbeck, a large blond man, reddened. "Seven months here, straight out of school, and you're telling me how to run my shop? If you've learned all the practical technique I have to teach you, why, you may as well go back on the next ship."

Juan hung his head. "I'm sorry, sir. I meant no disrespect."

Standing there, in front of the battered desk, against a window which framed the stark, sullenly lit landscape and a snag of ancient wall, he seemed younger than his sixteen Terrestrial years, slight, dark-haired, big-eyed. The company-issue coverall didn't fit him especially well. But he was quick-witted, Overbeck realized; he had to be, to graduate from the Academy that soon. And he was hardworking, afire with eagerness. The merchants of the League operated over so vast and diverse a territory that promising recruits were always in short supply.

That practical consideration, as well as a touch of sympathy, made the chief growl in a milder tone: "Oh, of course I've no objection to any small religious observance you or the others may want to hold. But as for doing more —" He waved his cigar at the scene outside. "What does it mean, anyway? A date on a chronopiece. A chronopiece adjusted for Earth! Ivanhoe's year is only two-thirds as long; but the globe takes sixty hours to spin around once; and to top it off, this is local summer, even if you don't dare leave the dome unless you're bundled to the ears. You see, Juan, I've got the same right as you to repeat the obvious."

His laughter boomed loud. While the team kept their living quarters heated, they found it easiest to maintain ambient air pressure, a fourth again as high as Terrestrial standard. Sound carried strongly.

"Believe it or not," he finished, "I do know something about Christmas traditions, including the very old ones. You want to decorate the place and sing 'Jingle Bells'? That's how to make 'em ridiculous!"

"Please, no, sir," Juan said. "Also on Earth, in the southern hemisphere the feast comes at summer. And nobody is sure what time of year the Nativity really happened." He knotted his fists before he plunged on. "I thought not of myself so much, though I do remember how it is in my home. But that ship will come soon. I'm told small children are aboard. Here will be a new environment for them, perhaps frightening at first. Would we not help them feel easy if we welcomed them with a party like this?"

"Hm." Overbeck sat still a minute, puffing smoke and tugging his chin. His apprentice had a point, he admitted.

Not that he expected the little ones to be anything but a nuisance as far as he himself was concerned. He'd be delighted to leave them behind in a few more months, when his group had ended its task. But part of that task was to set up conditions which would fit the needs of their successors. The sooner those kids adjusted to life here, the sooner the parents could concentrate on their proper business.

And that was vital. Until lately, Ivanhoe had had no more than a supply depot for possible distressed spacecraft. Then a scientific investigator found the *adir* herb in the deserts of another continent. It wouldn't grow outside its own ecology; and it secreted materials which would be valuable starting points for several new organic syntheses. In short, there was money to be gotten. Overbeck's team was assigned to establish a base, make friends with the natives, learn their ways and the ways of their country, and persuade them to harvest the plant in exchange for trade goods.

That seemed fairly well in order now, as nearly as a man could judge amidst foreignness and mystery. The time looked ripe for putting the trade on a regular basis. Humans would not sign a contract to remain for a long stretch unless they could bring their families. Nor would they stay if the families grew unhappy.

And Tom Overbeck wouldn't collect his big, fat bonus until the post had operated successfully for five standard years.

Wherefore the Master Trader shrugged and said, "Well, okay. If it doesn't interfere too much with work, go ahead."

*** *** ***

He was surprised at how enthusiastically Ram Gupta, Nikolai Sarychev, Mamoru Noguchi, and Philip Feinberg joined Juan's project. They were likewise young, but not boys; and they had no common faith. Yet together they laughed a lot as they made ready. The rooms and passageways of the dome filled with ornaments cut from foil or sheet metal, twisted together from color-coded wire, assembled from painted paper. Smells of baking cookies filled the air. Men went about whistling immemorial tunes.

Overbeck didn't mind that they were cheerful. That was a boost to efficiency, in these grim surroundings. He argued a while when they wanted to decorate outdoors as well, but presently gave in.

After all, he had a great deal else to think about.

A couple of Ivanhoan days after their talk, he was standing in the open when Juan approached him. The apprentice stopped, waited, and listened, for his chief was in conversation with Raffak.

The dome and sheds of the human base looked oddly bright, totally out of place. Behind them, the gray walls of Dahia lifted sheer, ten meters to the parapets, overtopped by bulbous-battlemented watchtowers. They were less crumbled than the buildings within. Today's dwindled population huddled in what parts of the old stone mansions and temples had not collapsed into rubble. A few lords maintained small castles for themselves, a few priests carried on rites behind porticos whose columns were idols, along twisting dusty streets. Near the middle of town rose the former Imperial palace. Quarried for centuries, its remnants were a colossal shapelessness.

The city dwellers were more quiet than humans. Not even vendors in their flimsy booths cried their wares. Most males were clad in leather kilts and weapons, females in zigzag-patterned robes. The wealthy and the military officers rode on beasts which resembled narrow-snouted, feathery-furred horses. The emblems of provinces long lost fluttered from the lances they carried. Wind, shrill in the lanes, bore sounds of feet, hoofs, groaning cartwheels, an occasional call or the whine of a bone flute.

A human found it cold. His breath smoked into the dry air. Smells were harsh in his nostrils. The sky above was deep purple, the sun a dull ruddy disc. Shadows lay thick; and nothing, in that wan light, had the same color as it did on Earth.

The deep tones of his language rolled from Raffak's mouth. "We have made you welcome, we have given you a place, we have aided you by our labor and counsel," declared the speaker of the City Elders.

"You have... for a generous payment," Overbeck answered.

"You shall not, in return, exclude Dahia from a full share in the wealth the *adir* will bring." A four-fingered hand, thumb set oppositely to a man's, gestured outward. Through a cyclopean gateway showed a reach of dusky-green bush, part of the agricultural hinterland. "It is more than a wish to better our lot. You have promised us that. But Dahia was the crown of an empire reaching from sea to sea. Though it lies in wreck, we who live here preserve the memories of our mighty ancestors, and faithfully serve their gods. Shall desert-prowling savages wax rich and strong, while we descendants of their overlords remain weak—until they become able to stamp out this final spark of glory? Never!"

"The nomads claim the wild country," Overbeck said. "No one has disputed that for many centuries."

"Dahia disputes it at last. I came to tell you that we have sent forth emissaries to the Black Tents. They bore our demand that Dahia must share in the *adir* harvest."

Overbeck, and a shocked Juan, regarded the Ivanhoan closely. He seemed bigger, more lion-like than was right. His powerful, long-limbed body would have loomed a full two meters tall did it not slant forward. A tufted tail whipped the bent legs. Mahogany fur turned into a mane around the flat face. That face lacked a nose—breathing was through slits beneath the jaws—but the eyes glowed green and enormous, ears stood erect, teeth gleamed sharp.

The human leader braced himself, as if against the drag of a gravity slightly stronger than Earth's, and stated: "You were foolish. Relations between Dahia and the nomads are touchy at best, violent at worst. Let war break out, and there will be no *adir* trade. Then Dahia too will lose."

"Lose material goods, maybe," Raffak said. "Not honor."

"You have already lost some honor by your action. You knew my people had reached agreement with the nomads. Now you Elders seek to change that agreement before consulting us." Overbeck made a chopping gesture which signified anger and determination. "I insist on meeting with your council."

After an argument, Raffak agreed to this for the next day, and stalked off. Hands jammed into pockets, Overbeck stared after him. "Well, Juan," he sighed, "there's a concrete example for you, of how tricky this business of ours can get."

"Might the tribes really make trouble, sir?" wondered the boy.

"I hope not." Overbeck shook his head. "Though how much do we know, we Earthlings, as short a while as we've been here? Two whole societies, each with its own history, beliefs, laws, customs, desires—in a species that isn't human!"

"What do you suppose will happen?"

"Oh, I'd guess the nomads will refuse flat-out to let the Dahians send gathering parties into their territory. Then I'll have to persuade the Dahians all over again, to let nomads bring the stuff here. That's what happens when you try to make hereditary rivals cooperate."

"Couldn't we base ourselves in the desert?" Juan asked.

"It's better to have a large labor force we can hire at need, one that stays put," Overbeck explained. "Besides, well —" He looked almost embarrassed. "We're after a profit, yes, but not to exploit these poor beings. An *adir* trade would benefit Dahia too, both from the taxes levied on it and from developing friendlier relations with the tribesfolk. In time, they could start rebuilding their civilization here. It was great once, before its civil wars and the barbarian invasions that followed." He paused. "Don't ever quote me to them."

"Why not, sir? I should think—"

"*You* should. I doubt they would. Both factions are proud and fierce. They might decide they were being patronized, and resent it in a murderous fashion. Or they might get afraid we intend to undermine their martial virtues, or their religions, or something." Overbeck smiled rather grimly. "No, I've worked hard to keep matters simple, on a level where nobody can misunderstand. In native eyes, we Earthlings are tough but fair. We've come to build a trade that will pay off for us, and for no other reason. It's up to them to keep us interested in remaining, which we won't unless they behave. That attitude, that image is clear enough, I hope, for the most alien mind to grasp. They may not love us, but they don't hate us either, and they're willing to do business."

Juan swallowed and found no words.

"What'd you want of me?" Overbeck inquired.

"Permission to go into the hills, sir," the apprentice said. "You know those crystals along Wola Ridge? They'd be beautiful on the Christmas tree." Ardently: "I've finished all my jobs for the time being. It will only take some hours, if I can borrow a flitter."

Overbeck frowned. "When a fight may be brewing? The Black Tents are somewhere that way, last I heard."

"You said, sir, you don't look for violence. Besides, none of the Ivanhoans have a grudge against us. And they respect our power. Don't they? Please!"

"I aim to preserve that state of affairs." Overbeck pondered. "Well, shouldn't be any risk. And, hm-m-m, a human going out alone might be a pretty good demonstration of confidence... Okay," he decided. "Pack a blaster. If a situation turns ugly, don't hesitate to use it. Not that I believe you'll get in any scrape, or I wouldn't let you go. But —" He shrugged. "There's no such thing as an absolutely safe bet."

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Three hundred kilometers north of Dahia, the wilderness was harsh mountainsides, deep-gashed canyons, umber crags, thinly scattered thorn-shrubs and wind-gnarled trees with ragged leaves. Searching for the mineral which cropped here and there out of the sandy ground, Juan soon lost sight of his flitter. He couldn't get lost from it himself. The aircraft was giving off a radio signal, and the transceiver in his pocket included a directional meter for homing on it. Thus he wandered further than he realized before he had collected a bagful.

However slowly Ivanhoe rotates, its days must end. Juan grew aware of how low the dim red sun was, how long and heavy the shadows. Chilliness had turned to a cold which bit at his bare face. Evening breezes snickered in the brush. Somewhere an animal howled. When he passed a rivulet, he saw that it had begun to freeze.

I'm in no trouble, he thought, but I am hungry, and late for supper, and the boss will be annoyed.

Even now, it was getting hard for him to see. His vision was meant for bright, yellow-white Sol. He stumbled on rocks. Had his radio compass not been luminous-dialed, he would have needed a flashbeam to read it.

Nevertheless he was happy. The very weirdness of this environment made it fascinating; and he could hope to go on to many other worlds. Meanwhile, the Christmas celebration would be a circle of warmth and cheer, a memory of home—his parents, his brother and two sisters, Tío Pepe and Tía Carmen, the dear small Mexican town and the laughter as children struck at a *piñata*—

"Raielli, Erratan!"

Halt, Earthling! Juan jarred to a stop.

He was near the bottom of a ravine, which he was crossing as the most direct way to the flitter. The sun lay hidden behind one wall of it, and dusk filled the heavens. He could just make out boulders and bushes, vague in the gloom.

Then metal caught what light there was in a faint glimmer. He saw spearheads and a single breastplate. The rest of the warriors had only leather harness. They were blurs around him, save where their huge eyes gleamed like their steel.

Juan's heart knocked. *These are friends!* he told himself. *The People of the Black Tents are anxious to deal with us... Then why did they wait here for me? Why have a score of them risen out of hiding to ring me in?*

His mouth felt suddenly parched. He forced it to form words, as well as it could imitate the voice of an Ivanhoan. City and wilderness dwellers spoke essentially the same language. "G-greeting." He remembered the desert form of salutation. "I am Juan Sancho's-child, called Hernandez, pledged follower of the merchant Thomas William's-child, called Overbeck, and am come in peace."

"I am Tokonnen Undassa's-child, chief of the Elassi Clan," said the lion-being in the cuirass. His tone was a snarl. "We may no longer believe that any Earthling comes in peace."

"What?" cried Juan. Horror smote him. "But we do! How—"

"You camp among the City folk. Now the City demands the right to encroach on our land... Hold! I know what you carry."

Juan had gripped his blaster. The natives growled. Spears drew back, ready to throw. Tokonnen confronted the boy and continued:

"I have heard tell about weapons like yours. A fire-beam, fiercer than the sun, springs forth, and rock turns molten where it strikes. Do you think a male of Elassi fears that?" Scornfully: "Draw it if you wish."

Juan did, hardly thinking. He let the energy gun dangle downward in his fingers and exclaimed, "I only came to gather a few crystals—"

"If you slay me," Tokonnen warned, "that will prove otherwise. And you cannot kill more than two or three of us before the spears of the rest have pierced you. We know how feebly your breed sees in the least of shadows."

"But what do you *want*?"

"When we saw you descend, afar off, we knew what we wanted—you, to hold among us until your fellows abandon Dahia."

Half of Juan realized that being kept hostage was most likely a death sentence for him. He couldn't eat Ivanhoan food; it was loaded with proteins poisonous to his kind of life. In fact, without a steady supply of anti-allergen, he might not keep breathing. How convince a barbarian herder of that?

The other half pleaded, "You are being wild. What matter if a few City dwellers come out after *adir*? Or... you can tell them 'no.' Can't you? We, we Earthlings—we had nothing to do with the embassy they sent."

"We dare not suppose you speak truth, you who have come here for gain," Tokonnen replied. "What is our freedom to you, if the enemy offers you a fatter bargain? And we remember, yes, across a hundred generations we remember the Empire. So do they in Dahia. They would restore it, cage us within their rule or drive us into the badlands. Their harvesters would be their spies, the first agents of their conquest. This country is ours. It is strong with the bones of our fathers and rich with the flesh of our mothers. It is too holy for an Imperial foot to tread. You would not understand this, merchant."

"We mean you well," Juan stammered. "We'll give you things—"

Tokonnen's mane lifted haughtily against darkling cliff, twilight sky. From his face, unseen in murk, the words rang: "Do you imagine things matter more to us than our liberty or our land?" Softer: "Yield me your weapon and come along. Tomorrow we will bring a message to your chief."

The warriors trod closer.

There went a flash through Juan. He knew what he could do, must do. Raising the blaster, he fired straight upward.

Cloven air boomed. Ozone stung with a smell of thunderstorms. Blue-white and dazzling, the energy beam lanced toward the earliest stars.

The Ivanhoans yelled. By the radiance, Juan saw them lurch back, drop their spears, clap hands to eyes. He himself could not easily look at that lightning bolt. They were the brood of a dark world. Such brilliance blinded them.

Juan gulped a breath and ran.

Up the slope! Talus rattled underfoot. Across the hills beyond! Screams of wrath pursued him.

The sun was now altogether down, and night came on apace. It was less black than Earth's, for the giant stars of the Pleiades cluster bloomed everywhere aloft, and the nebula which enveloped them glowed lacy across heaven. Yet often Juan fell across an unseen obstacle. His pulse roared, his lungs were aflame.

It seemed forever before he glimpsed his vehicle. Casting a glance behind, he saw what he had feared, the warriors in pursuit. His shot had not permanently damaged their sight. And surely they tracked him with peripheral vision, ready to look entirely away if he tried another flash.

Longer-legged, born to the planet's gravity, they overhauled him, meter after frantic meter. To him they were barely visible, bounding blacknesses which often disappeared into the deeper gloom around. He could not have hoped to pick them all off before one of them got to range, flung a spear from cover, and struck him.

Somehow, through every terror, he marveled at their bravery.

Run, run.

He had barely enough of a head start. He reeled into the hull, dogged the door shut, and heard missiles clatter on metal. Then for a while he knew nothing.

When awareness came back, he spent a minute giving thanks. Afterward he dragged himself to the pilot chair. *What a scene!* passed across his mind. And, a crazy chuckle: *The old definition of adventure. Somebody else having a hard time a long ways off.*

He slumped into the seat. The vitryl port showed him a sky turned wonderful, a land of dim slopes and sharp ridges... He gasped and sat upright. The Ivanhoans were still outside.

They stood leaning on their useless spears or clinging to the hilts of their useless swords, and waited for whatever he would do. Shakily, he switched on the sound amplifier and bullhorn. His voice boomed over them: "What do you want?"

Tokonnen's answer remained prideful. "We wish to know your desire, Earthling. For in you we have met a thing most strange."

Bewildered, Juan could merely respond with, "How so?"

"You rendered us helpless," Tokonnen said. "Why did you not at once kill us? Instead, you chose to flee. You must have known we would recover and come after you. Why did you take the unneeded risk?"

"You *were* helpless," Juan blurted. "I couldn't have... hurt you... especially at this time of year."

Tokonnen showed astonishment. "Time of year? What has that to do with it?"

"Christmas..." Juan paused. Strength and clarity of mind were returning to him. "You don't know about that. It's a season which, well, commemorates one who came to us Earthlings, ages ago, and spoke of peace as well as much else. For us, this is a holy time." He laid hands on controls. "No matter. I only ask you believe that we don't mean you any harm. Stand aside. I am about to raise this wagon."

"No," Tokonnen said. "Wait. I ask you, wait." He was silent for a while, and his warriors with him. "What you have told us... We must hear further. Talk to us, Earthling."

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Once he had radioed that he was safe, they stopped worrying about Juan at the base. For the next several hours, the men continued their jobs. It was impossible for them to function on a sixty-hour day, and nobody tried. Midnight had not come when they knocked off. Recreation followed. For four of them, this meant preparing their Christmas welcome to the ship.

As they worked outdoors, more and more Dahians gathered, fascinated, to stand silently around the plaza and watch. Overbeck stepped forth to observe the natives in his turn. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

A tree had been erected on the flagstones. Its sparse branches and stiff foliage did not suggest an evergreen; but no matter, it glittered with homemade ornaments and lights improvised from electronic parts. Before it stood a manger scene that Juan had constructed. A risen moon, the mighty Pleiades, and the luminous nebular veil cast frost-cold brilliance. The beings who encompassed the square, beneath lean houses and fortress towers, formed a shadow-mass wherein eyes glimmered.

Feinberg and Gupta decorated. Noguchi and Sarychev, who had the best voices, rehearsed. Breath from their song puffed white

*"O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie—"*

A muted "A-a-ahhh!" rose from the Dahians, and Juan landed his flitter.

He bounded forth. Behind him came a native in a steel breastplate. Overbeck had awaited this since the boy's last call. He gestured to Raffak, speaker of the Elders. Together, human and Ivanhoan advanced to greet human and Ivanhoan.

Tokonnen said, "It may be we misjudged your intent, City folk. The Earthling tells me we did."

"And his lord tells me we of Dahia pushed forward too strongly," Raffak answered. "That may likewise be."

Tokonnen touched sword-hilt and warned, "We shall yield nothing which is sacred to us."

"Nor we," said Raffak. "But surely our two people can reach an agreement. The Earthlings can help us make terms."

"They should have special wisdom, now in the season of their Prince of Peace."

"Aye. My fellows and I have begun some hard thinking about that."

"How do you know of it?"

"We were curious as to why the Earthlings were making beauty, here where we can see it away from the dreadful heat," Raffak said. "We asked. In the course of this, they told us somewhat of happenings in the desert, which the far-speaker had informed them of."

"It is indeed something to think about," Tokonnen nodded. "They, who believe in peace, are more powerful than us."

"And it was war which destroyed the Empire. But come," Raffak invited. "Tonight be my guest. Tomorrow we will talk."

They departed. Meanwhile the men clustered around Juan. Overbeck shook his hand again and again. "You're a genius," he said. "I ought to take lessons from you."

"No, please, sir," his apprentice protested. "The thing simply happened."

"It wouldn't have, if I'd been the one who got caught."

Sarychev was puzzled. "I don't quite see what did go on," he confessed. "It was good of Juan to run away from those nomads, instead of cutting them down when he had the chance. However, that by itself can't have turned them meek and mild."

"Oh, no." Overbeck chuckled. His cigar end waxed and waned like a variable star. "They're as ornery as ever—same as humans." Soberly: "The difference is, they've become willing to listen to us. They can take our ideas seriously, and believe we'll be honest brokers, who can mediate their quarrels."

"Why could they not before?"

"My fault, I'm afraid. I wasn't allowing for a certain part of Ivanhoan nature. I should have seen. After all, it's part of human nature too."

"What is?" Gupta asked.

"The need for..." Overbeck broke off. "You tell him, Juan. You were the one who did see the truth."

The boy drew breath. "Not at first," he said. "I only found I could not bring myself to kill. Is Christmas not when we should be quickest to forgive our enemies? I told them so. Then... when suddenly their whole attitude changed... I guessed what the reason must be." He searched for words. "They knew—both Dahians and nomads knew—we are strong; we have powers they can't hope to match. That doesn't frighten them. They have to be fearless, to survive in as bleak a country as this.

"Also, they have to be dedicated. To keep going through endless hardship, they must believe in something greater than themselves, like the Imperial dream of Dahia or the freedom of the desert. They're ready to die for those ideals.

"We came, we Earthlings. We offered them a fair, profitable bargain. But nothing else. We seemed to have no other motive than material gain. They could not understand this. It made us too peculiar. They could never really trust us.

"Now that they know we have our own sacrednesses, well, they see we are not so different from them, and they'll heed our advice."

Juan uttered an unsteady laugh. "What a long lecture, no?" he ended. "I'm very tired and hungry. Please, may I go get something to eat and afterward to bed?"

As he crossed the square, the carol followed him:

*"—The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight."*

THE END

INTRODUCTION TO *ESAU*

THE FOLLOWING tale is here because it shows a little more of the philosophy and practice which once animated the Polesotechnic League. Grip well: already these were becoming somewhat archaic, if not obsolete. Nevertheless, the person concerned appears to have soared high for long years afterward. Children of his moved to Avalon with David Falkayn. This story was written in her later years by one of them, Judith, drawing upon her father's reminiscences when she was young and on a good knowledge of conditions as they had been in his own youth. It appeared in a periodical of the time called *Morgana*.

—Hloch of the Stormgate Choth
The Earth Book of Stormgate

ESAU

THE CAB obtained clearance from certain machines and landed on the roof of the Winged Cross. Emil Dalmady paid and stepped out. When it took off, he felt suddenly very alone. The garden was fragrant around him in a warm deep-blue summer's dusk; at this height, the sounds of Chicago Integrate were a murmur as of a distant ocean; the other towers and the skyways between them were an elven forest through which flitted will-o'-the-wisp aircars and beneath which—as if Earth had gone transparent—a fantastic galaxy of many-colored lights was blinking awake farther than eye could reach. But the penthouse bulking ahead might have been a hill where a grizzly bear had its den.

The man squared his shoulders. *Haul in*, he told himself. *He won't eat you*. Anger lifted afresh. *I might just eat him*. He strode forward: a stocky, muscular figure in a blue zipskin, features broad, high of cheekbones, snub-nosed, eyes green and slightly tilted, hair reddish black.

But despite stiffened will, the fact remained that he had not expected a personal interview with any merchant prince of the Polesotechnic League, and in one of the latter's own homes. When a live butler had admitted him, and he had crossed an improbably long stretch of trollcat rug to the VieWall end of a luxury-cluttered living room, and was confronting Nicholas van Rijn, his throat tightened and his palms grew wet.

"Good evening," the host rumbled. "Welcome." His corpulent corpus did not rise from the lounge.

Dalmady didn't mind. Not only bulk but height would have dwarfed him. Van Rijn waved a hand at a facing seat; the other gripped a liter tankard of beer. "Sit. Relax. You look quivery like a blanc-mange before a firing squad. What you drink, smoke, chew, sniff, or otherwise make amusements with?"

Dalmady lowered himself to an edge. Van Rijn's great hook-beaked, multi-chinned, mustached and goateed visage, framed in black shoulder-length ringlets, crinkled with a grin. Beneath the sloping brow, small jet eyes glittered at the newcomer. "Relax," he urged again. "Give the form-fitting a chance. Not so fun-making an embrace like a pretty girl, but less extracting, ha? I think maybe a little glass Genever and bitters over dry ice is a tranquilizer for you." He clapped.

"Sir," Dalmady said, harshly in his tension, "I don't want to seem ungracious, but—"

"But you came to Earth breathing flame and brimrocks, and went through six echelons of the toughest no-saying secretaries and officers what the Solar Spice and Liquors Company has got, like a bulldozer chasing a cowdozer, demanding to see whoever the crockhead was what fired you after what you done yonderways. Nobody had a chance to explain. Trouble was, they assumptioned you knew things what they take for granted. So natural, what they said sounded to you like a flushoff and you hurricaned your way from them to somebody else."

Van Rijn offered a cigar out of a gold humidor whose workmanship Dalmady couldn't identify except that it was nonhuman. The young man shook his head. The merchant selected one himself, bit off the end and spat that expertly into a receptor, and inhaled the tobacco to ignition. "Well," he continued, "somebody would have got through into you at last, only then I learned about you and ordered this meeting. I would have wanted to talk at you anyhow. Now I shall clarify everything like Hindu butter."

His geniality was well nigh as overwhelming as his wrath would have been, assuming the legends about him were true. *And he could be setting me up for a thunderbolt*, Dalmady thought, and clung to his indignation as he answered:

"Sir, if your outfit is dissatisfied with my conduct on Suleiman, it might at least have told me why, rather than sending a curt message that I was being replaced and should report to HQ. Unless you can prove to me that I bungled, I will not accept demotion. It's a question of personal honor more than professional standing. They think that way where I come from. I'll quit. And... there are plenty of other companies in the League that will be glad to hire me."

"True, true, in spite of every candle I burn to St. Dismas." Van Rijn sighed through his cigar, engulfing Dalmady in smoke. "Always they try to pirate my executives what have not yet sworn fealty, like the thieves they are. And I, poor old lonely fat man, trying to run this enterprise personal what stretches across so many whole worlds, even with modern computer technology I get melted down from overwork, and too few men for helpers what is not total gruntbrains, and some of them got to be occupied just luring good executives away from elsewhere." He took a noisy gulp of beer. "Well."

"I suppose you've read my report, sir," was Dalmady's gambit.

"Today. So much information flowing from across the light-years, how can this weary old noggle hold it without data flowing back out like ear wax? Let me review to make sure I got it tesseract. Which means—ho, ho!—straight in four dimensions."

Van Rijn wallowed deeper into his lounge, bridged hairy fingers, and closed his eyes. The butler appeared with a coldly steaming and hissing goblet. *If this is his idea of a small drink—!* Dalmady thought. Grimly, he forced himself to sit at ease and sip.

"Now." The cigar waggled in time to the words. "This star what its discoverer called Osman is out past Antares, on the far edge of present-day regular-basis League activities. One planet is inhabited, called by humans Suleiman. Subjovian; life based on hydrogen, ammonia, methane; primitive natives, but friendly. Turned out, on the biggest continent grows a plant we call... um-m-m... bluejack, what the natives use for a spice and tonic. Analysis showed a complicated blend of chemicals, answering sort of to hormonal stuffs for us, with synergistic effects. No good to oxygen breathers, but maybe we can sell to hydrogen breathers elsewhere.

"Well, we found very few markets, at least what had anythings to offer we wanted. You need a special biochemistry for bluejack to be beneficent. So synthesis would cost us more, counting investment and freight charges from chemical-lab centers, than direct harvesting by natives on Suleiman, paid for in trade goods. Given that, we could show a wee profit. Quite teensy—whole operation is near-as-damn marginal—but as long as things stayed peaceful, well, why not turn a few honest credits?

"And things was peaceful, too, for years. Natives cooperated fine, bringing in bluejack to warehouses. Outshipping was one of those milk runs where we don't knot up capital in our own vessels, we contract with a freighter line to make regular calls. Oh, *ja*, contretemps kept on countertiming—bad seasons, bandits raiding caravans, kings getting too greedy about taxes—usual stuffing, what any competent factor should could handle on the spot, so no reports about it ever come to pester me.

"And then—Ahmed, more beer!—real trouble. Best market for bluejack is on a planet we call Babur. Its star, Mogul, lies in the same general region, about thirty light-years from Osman. Its top country been dealing with Technic civilization off and on for decades. Trying to modernize, they was mainly interested in robotics for some reason; but at last they did pile together enough outplanet exchange for they could commission a few hyperdrive ships built and crews trained. So now the Solar Commonwealth and other powers got to treat them with a little more respect; blast cannon and nuclear missiles sure improve manners, by damn! They is still small tomatoes, but ambitious. And to them, with the big domestic demand, bluejack is not an incidental thing."

Van Rijn leaned forward, wrinkling the embroidered robe that circled his paunch. "You wonder why I tell you what you know, ha?" he said. "When I need direct reports on a situation, especial from a world as scarcely known as Suleiman, I can't study each report from decades. Data retrieval got to make me an abstract. I check with you now, who was spotted there, whether the machine give me all what is significant to our talking. Has I been correct so far?"

"Yes," Dalmady said. "But—"

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Yvonne Vaillancourt looked up from a console as the factor passed the open door of her collation lab. "What's wrong, Emil?" she asked. "I heard you clattering the whole way down the hall."

Dalmady stopped for a look. Clothing was usually at a minimum in the Earth-conditioned compound, but, while he had grown familiar with the skins of its inhabitants, he never tired of hers. Perhaps, he had thought, her blonde shapeliness impressed him the more because he had been born and raised on Altai. The colonists of that chill planet went heavily dressed of necessity. The same need to survive forced austere habits on them; and, isolated in a largely unexplored frontier section, they received scant news about developments in the core civilization.

When you were half a dozen humans on a world whose very air was death to you—when you didn't even have visitors of your own species, because the ship that regularly called belonged to a Cynthian carrier—you had no choice but to live in free and easy style. Dalmady had had that explained to him while he was being trained for this post, and recognized it and went along with it. But he wondered if he would ever become accustomed to the *casualness* of the sophisticates whom he bossed.

"I don't know," he answered the girl. "The Thalassocrat wants me at the palace."

"Why, he knows perfectly well how to make a visi call."

"Yes, but a nomad's brought word of something nasty in the Uplands, and won't come near the set. Afraid it'll imprison his soul, I imagine."

"M-m-m, I think not. We're still trying to chart the basic Suleimanite psychology, you know, with only inadequate data from three or four cultures to go on... but they don't seem to have animistic tendencies like man's. Ceremony, yes, in abundance, but nothing we can properly identify as magic or religion."

Dalmady barked a nervous laugh. "Sometimes I think my whole staff considers our commerce an infernal nuisance that keeps getting in the way of their precious science."

"Sometimes you'd be right," Yvonne purred. "What'd hold us here except the chance to do research?"

"And how long would your research last if the company closed down this base?" he flared. "Which it will if we start losing money. My job's to see that we don't. I could use cooperation."

She slipped from her stool, came to him, and kissed him lightly. Her hair smelled like remembered steppe grass warmed by an orange sun, rippling under the rings of Altai. "Don't we help?" she murmured. "I'm sorry, dear."

He bit his lip and stared past her, down the length of gaudy murals whose painting had beguiled much idle time over the years. "No, I'm sorry," he said with the stiff honesty of his folk. "Of course you're all loyal and... It's me. Here I am, the youngest among you, a half-barbarian herdboy, supposed to make a go of things... in one of the easiest, most routinized outposts in this sector... and after a bare fifteen months..."

If I fail, he thought, well, I can return home, no doubt, and dismiss the sacrifices my parents made to send me to managerial school offplanet, scorn the luck that Solar Spice and Liquors had an opening here and no more experienced employee to fill it, forget every dream about walking in times to come on new and unknown worlds that really call forth every resource a man has to give. Oh, yes, failure isn't fatal, except in subtler ways than I have words for.

"You fret too much." Yvonne patted his cheek. "Probably this is just another tempest in a chickenhouse. You'll bribe somebody, or arm somebody, or whatever's needful, and that will once again be that."

"I hope so. But the Thalassocrat acted—well, not being committed to xenological scholarly precision, I'd say he acted worried too." Dalmady stood a few seconds longer, scowling, before: "All right, I'd better be on my way." He gave her a hug. "Thanks, Yvonne."

She watched him till he was out of sight, then returned to her work. Officially she was the trade post's secretary-treasurer, but such duties seldom came to her except when a freighter had landed. Otherwise she used the computers to try to find patterns in what fragments of knowledge her colleagues could wrest from a world—an entire, infinitely varied world—and hoped that a few scientists elsewhere might eventually scan a report on Suleiman (one among thousands of planets) and be interested.

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Airsuit donned, Dalmady left the compound by its main personnel lock. Wanting time to compose himself, he went afoot through the city to the palace.

If they were city and palace.

He didn't know. Books, tapes, lectures, and neuroinductors had crammed him with information about this part of this continent; but those were the everyday facts and skills needed to manage operations. Long talks with his subordinates here had added a little insight, but only a little. Direct experience with the autochthons was occasionally enlightening, but just as apt to be confusing. No wonder that, once a satisfactory arrangement was made with Coast and Upland tribes (?), his predecessors had not attempted expansion or improvement. When you don't understand a machine but it seems to be running reasonably smoothly, you don't tinker much.

Outside the compound's forcefield, local gravity dragged at him with forty percent greater pull than Earth's. Though his suit was light and his muscles hard, the air recycler necessarily included the extra mass of a unit for dealing with the hydrogen that seeped through any material. Soon he was sweating. Nevertheless it was as if the chill struck past all thermostatic coils, into his heavy bones.

High overhead stood Osman, a furious white spark, twice as luminous as Sol but, at its distance, casting a bare sixteenth of what Earth gets. Clouds, tinged red by organic compounds, drifted on slow winds through a murky sky where one of the three moons was dimly visible. That atmosphere bore thrice a terrestrial standard pressure. It was mostly hydrogen and helium, with vapors of methane and ammonia and traces of other gas. Greenhouse effect did not extend to unfreezing water.

Indeed, the planetary core was overlaid by a shell of ice, mixed with rock, penetrated by tilted metal-poor strata. The land glittered amidst its grayness and scrunched beneath Dalmady's boots. It sloped down to a dark, choppy sea of liquid ammonia whose horizon was too remote—given a 17,000-kilometer radius—for him to make out through the red-misted air.

Ice also were the buildings that rose blocky around him. They shimmered glasslike where doorways or obscure carved symbols did not break their smoothness. There were no streets in the usual sense, but aerial observation had disclosed an elaborate pattern in the layout of structures, about which the dwellers could not or would not speak. Wind moved ponderously between them. The air turned its sound, every sound, shrill.

Traffic surged. It was mainly pedestrian, natives on their business, carrying the oddly shaped tools and containers of a fireless neolithic nonhuman culture. A few wagons lumbered in with produce from the hinterland; their draught animals suggested miniature dinosaurs modeled by someone who had heard vague rumors of such creatures. A related, more slender species was ridden. Coracles bobbed across the sea; you might as well say the crews were fishing, though a true fish could live here unprotected no longer than a man.

Nothing reached Dalmady's earphones except the wind, the distant wave-rumble, the clop of feet and creak of wagons. Suleimanites did not talk casually. They did communicate, however, and without pause: by gesture, by ripple across erectile fur, by delicate exchanges between scent glands. They avoided coming near the human, but simply because his suit was hot to their touch. He gave and received many signals of greeting. After two years—twenty-five of Earth's—Coast and Uplands alike were becoming dependent on metal and plastic and energy-cell trade goods. Local labor had been eagerly available to help build a spaceport on the mesa overlooking town, and still did most of the work. That saved installing automatic machinery—one reason for the modest profit earned by this station.

Dalmady leaned into his uphill walk. After ten minutes he was at the palace.

The half-score natives posted outside the big, turreted building were not guards. While wars and robberies occurred on Suleiman, the slaying of a "king" seemed to be literally unthinkable. (An effect of pheromones? In every community the xenologists had observed thus far, the leader ate special foods which his followers insisted would poison anyone else; and maybe the followers were right.) The drums, plumed canes, and less identifiable gear which these beings carried were for ceremonial use.

Dalmady controlled his impatience and watched with a trace of pleasure the ritual of opening doors and conducting him to the royal presence. The Suleimanites were a graceful and handsome species. They were plantigrade bipeds, rather like men although the body was thicker and the average only came to his shoulder. The hands each bore two fingers between two thumbs, and were supplemented by a prehensile tail. The head was round, with a parrotlike beak, tympani for hearing, one large golden-hued eye in the middle and two smaller, less developed ones for binocular and peripheral vision. Clothing was generally confined to a kind of sporran, elaborately patterned

with symbols, to leave glands and mahogany fur available for signals. The fact that Suleimanite languages had so large a nonvocal component handicapped human efforts at understanding as much as anything else did.

The Thalassocrat addressed Dalmady by voice alone, in the blue-glimmering ice cavern of his audience room. Earphones reduced the upper frequencies to some the man could hear. Nonetheless, that squeak and gibber always rather spoiled the otherwise impressive effect of flower crown and carved staff. So did the dwarfs, hunchbacks, and cripples who squatted on rugs, and skin-draped benches. It was not known why household servants were always recruited among the handicapped. Suleimanites had tried to explain when asked, but their meaning never came through.

"Fortune, power, and wisdom to you, Factor." They didn't use personal names on this world, and seemed unable to grasp the idea of an identification which was not a scent-symbol.

"May they continue to abide with you, Thalassocrat." The vocalizer on his back transformed Dalmady's version of local speech into sounds that his lips could not bring forth.

"We have here a Master of caravaneers," the monarch said.

Dalmady went through polite ritual with the Uplander, who was tall and rangy for a Suleimanite, armed with a stone-headed tomahawk and a trade rifle designed for his planet, his barbarianism showing in gaudy jewels and bracelets. They were okay, however, those hill-country nomads. Once a bargain had been struck, they held to it with more literal-mindedness than humans could have managed.

"And what is the trouble for which I am summoned, Master? Has your caravan met bandits on its way to the Coast? I will be glad to equip a force for their suppression."

Not being used to talking with men, the chief went into full Suleimanite language—his own dialect, at that—and became incomprehensible. One of the midgets stumped forward. Dalmady recognized him. A bright mind dwelt in that poor little body, drank deep of whatever knowledge about the universe was offered, and in return had frequently helped with counsel or knowledge. "Let me ask him out, Factor and Thalassocrat," he suggested.

"If you will, Advisor," his overlord agreed.

"I will be in your debt, Translator," Dalmady said, with his best imitation of the prancing thanks-gesture. Beneath the courtesies, his mind whirred and he found himself holding his breath while he waited. Surely the news couldn't be really catastrophic!

He reviewed the facts, as if hoping for some hitherto unnoticed salvation in them. With little axial tilt, Suleiman lacked seasons. Bluejack needed the cool, dry climate of the Uplands, but there it grew the year around. Primitive natives, hunters and gatherers, picked it in the course of their wanderings. Every several months, terrestrial, such a tribe would make rendezvous with one of the more advanced nomadic herding communities, who bartered for the parched leaves and fruits. A caravan would then form and make the long trip to this city, where Solar's folk would acquire the bales in exchange for Technic merchandise. You could count on a load arriving about twice a month. Four times in an Earth-side year, the Cynthian vessel took away the contents of Solar's warehouse... and left a far more precious cargo of letters, tapes, journals, books, news from the stars that were so rarely seen in these gloomy heavens.

It wasn't the most efficient system imaginable, but it was the cheapest, once you calculated what the cost would be—in capital investment and civilized-labor salaries—of starting plantations. And costs must be kept low or the enterprise would change from a minor asset to a liability, which would soon be liquidated. As matters were, Suleiman was a typical outpost of its kind: to the scientists, a fascinating study and a chance to win reputation in their fields; to the factors, a comparatively easy job, a first step on a ladder at the top of which waited the big, glamorous, gorgeously paid managerial assignments.

Or thus it had been until now.

The Translator turned to Dalmady. "The Master says this," he piped. "Lately in the Uplands have come what he calls—no, I do not believe that can be said in words alone... It is clear to me, they are machines that move about harvesting the bluejack."

"What?" The man realized he had exclaimed in Anglic. Through suddenly loud pulses, he heard the Translator go on:

"The wild folk were terrified and fled those parts. The machines came and took what they had stored against their next rendezvous. That angered this Master's nomads, who deal there. They rode to protest. From afar they saw a vessel, like the great flying vessel that lands here, and a structure a-building. Those who oversaw that work were... low, with many legs and claws for hands... long noses... A gathering robot came and shot lightning past the nomads. They saw they too must flee, lest its warning shot become deadly. The Master himself took a string of remounts and posted hither as swiftly as might be. In words, I cannot say more of what he has to tell."

Dalmady gasped into the frigid blueness that enclosed him. His mouth felt dry, his knees weak, his stomach in upheaval. "Baburites," he mumbled. "Got to be. But why're they doing this to us?"

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Brush, herbage, leaves on the infrequent trees, were many shades of black. Here and there a patch of red or brown or blue flowering relieved it, or an ammonia river cataracting down the hills. Further off, a range of ice mountains flashed blindingly; Suleiman's twelve-hour day was drawing to a close, and Osman's rays struck level through a break

in roiling ruddy cloud cover. Elsewhere a storm lifted like a dark wall on which lightning scribbled. The dense air brought its thunder-noise to Dalmady as a high drumroll. He paid scant attention. The gusts that hooted around his car, the air pockets into which it lurched, made piloting a fulltime job. A cybernated vehicle would have been too expensive for this niggardly rewarding planet.

"There!" cried the Master. He squatted with the Translator in an after compartment, which was left under native conditions and possessed an observation dome. In deference to his superstitions, or whatever they were, only the audio part of the intercom was turned on.

"Indeed," the Translator said more calmly. "I descry it now. Somewhat to our right, Factor—in a valley by a lake—do you see?"

"A moment." Dalmady locked the altitude controls. The car would bounce around till his teeth rattled, but the grav field wouldn't let it crash. He leaned forward in his harness, tried to ignore the brutal pull on him, and adjusted the scanner screen. His race had not evolved to see at those wavelengths which penetrated this atmosphere best; and the distance was considerable, as distances tend to be on a subjovian.

Converting light frequencies, amplifying, magnifying, the screen flung a picture at him. Tall above shrubs and turbulent ammonia stood a spaceship. He identified it as a Holbert-X freighter, a type commonly sold to hydrogen breathers. There had doubtless been some modifications to suit its particular home world, but he saw none except a gun turret and a couple of missile tube housings.

A prefabricated steel and ferrocrete building was being assembled nearby. The construction robots must be working fast, without pause; the cube was already more than half-finished. Dalmady glimpsed flares of energy torches, like tiny blue novas. He couldn't make out individual shapes, and didn't want to risk coming near enough.

"You see?" he asked the image of Peter Thorson, and transmitted the picture to another screen.

Back at the base, his engineer's massive head nodded. Behind could be seen the four remaining humans. They looked as strained and anxious as Dalmady felt, Yvonne perhaps more so.

"Yeh. Not much we can do about it," Thorson declared. "They pack bigger weapons than us. And see, in the corners of the barn, those bays? That's for blast cannon, I swear. Add a heavy-duty forcefield generator for passive defense, and it's a nut we can't hope to crack."

"The home office—"

"Yeh, they *might* elect to resent the invasion and dispatch a regular warcraft or three. But I don't believe it. Wouldn't pay, in economic terms. And it'd make every kind of hooraw, because remember, SSL hasn't got any legal monopoly here." Thorson shrugged. "My guess is, Old Nick'll simply close down on Suleiman, probably wangling a deal with the Baburites that'll cut his losses and figuring to diddle them good at a later date." He was a veteran mercantile professional, accustomed to occasional setbacks, indifferent to the scientific puzzles around him.

Yvonne, who was not, cried softly, "Oh, no! We can't! The insights we're gaining—"

And Dalmady, who could not afford a defeat this early in his career, clenched one fist and snapped, "We can at least talk to those bastards, can't we? I'll try to raise them. Stand by." He switched the outercom to a universal band and set the Come In going. The last thing he had seen from the compound was her stricken eyes.

The Translator inquired from aft: "Do you know who the strangers are and what they intend, Factor?"

"I have no doubt they come from Babur, as we call it," the man replied absently. "That is a world"—the more enlightened Coast dwellers had acquired some knowledge of astronomy—"akin to yours. It is larger and warmer, with heavier air. Its folk could not endure this one for long without becoming sick. But they can move about unarmored for a while. They buy most of our bluejack. Evidently they have decided to go to the source."

"But why, Factor?"

"For profit, I suppose, Translator." *Maybe just in their nonhuman cost accounting. That's a giant investment they're making in a medicinal product. But they don't operate under capitalism, under anything that human history ever saw, or so I've heard. Therefore they may consider it an investment in... empire? No doubt they can expand their foothold here, once we're out of the way—*

The screen came to life.

The being that peered from it stood about waist-high to a man in its erect torso. The rest of the body stretched behind in a vaguely caterpillar shape, on eight stumpy legs. Along that glabrous form was a row of opercula protecting tracheae which, in a dense hydrogen atmosphere, aerated the organism quite efficiently. Two arms ended in claws reminiscent of a lobster's; from the wrists below sprouted short, tough finger-tendrils. The head was dominated by a spongy snout. A Baburite had no mouth. It—individuals changed sex from time to time—chewed food with the claws and put it in a digestive pouch to be dissolved before the snout sucked it up. The eyes were four, and tiny. Speech was by diaphragms on either side of the skull, hearing and smell were associated with the tracheae. The skin was banded orange, blue, white, and black. Most of it was hidden by a gauzy robe.

The creature would have been an absurdity, a biological impossibility, on an Earth-type world. In its own ship, in strong gravity and thick cold air and murk through which shadowy forms moved, it had dignity and power.

It thrummed noises which a vocalizer rendered into fairly good League Latin: "We expected you. Do not approach closer."

Dalmady moistened his lips. He felt cruelly young and helpless. "G-g-greeting. I am the factor."

The Baburite made no comment.

After a while, Dalmady plowed on: "We have been told that you... well, you are seizing the bluejack territory. I cannot believe that is correct."

"It is not, precisely," said the flat mechanical tone. "For the nonce, the natives may use these lands as heretofore, except that they will not find much bluejack to harvest. Our robots are too effective. Observe."

The screen flashed over to a view of a squat, cylindrical machine. Propelled by a simple grav drive, it floated several centimeters off the ground. Its eight arms terminated in sensors, pluckers, trimmers, brush cutters. On its back was welded a large basket. On its top was a maser transceiver and a swivel-mounted blaster.

"It runs off accumulators," the unseen Baburite stated. "These need only be recharged once in thirty-odd hours, at the fusion generator we are installing, unless a special energy expenditure occurs... like a battle, for instance. High-hovering relay units keep the robots in constant touch with each other and with a central computer, currently in the ship, later to be in the blockhouse. It controls them all simultaneously, greatly reducing the cost per unit." With no trace of sardonicism: "You will understand that such a beamcasting system cannot feasibly be jammed. The computer will be provided with missiles as well as guns and defensive fields. It is programmed to strike back at any attempt to hamper its operations."

The robot's image disappeared, the being's returned. Dalmady felt faint. "But that would... would be... an act of war!" he stuttered.

"No. It would be self-protection, legitimate under the rules of the Polesotechnic League. You may credit us with the intelligence to investigate the social as well as physical state of things before we acted and, indeed, to become an associate member of the League. No one will suffer except your company. That will not displease its competitors. They have assured our representatives that they can muster enough Council votes to prevent sanctions. It is not as if the loss were very great. Let us recommend to you personally that you seek employment elsewhere."

Uh-huh... after I dropped a planet... I might maybe get a job cleaning latrines someplace, went through the back of Dalmady's head. "No," he protested, "what about the autochthons? They're hurting already."

"When the land has been cleared, bluejack plantations will be established," the Baburite said. "Doubtless work can be found for some of the displaced savages, if they are sufficiently docile. Doubtless other resources, ignored by you oxygen breathers, await exploitation. We may in the end breed colonists adapted to Suleiman. But that will be of no concern to the League. We have investigated the practical effect of its prohibition on imperialism by members. Where no one else is interested in a case, a treaty with a native government is considered sufficient, and native governments with helpful attitudes are not hard to set up. Suleiman is such a case. A written-off operation that was never much more than marginal, out on an extreme frontier, is not worth the League's worrying about."

"The principle—"

"True. We would not provoke war, nor even our own expulsion and a boycott. However, recall that you are not being ordered off this planet. You have simply met a superior competitor, superior by virtue of living closer to the scene, being better suited to the environment, and far more interested in succeeding here. We have the same right to launch ventures as you."

"What do you mean, 'we'?" Dalmady whispered. "Who are you? What are you? A private company, or—"

"Nominally, we are so organized, though like many other League associates we make no secret of this being *pro forma*," the Baburite told him. "Actually, the terms on which our society must deal with the Technic aggregate have little relevance to the terms of its interior structure. Considering the differences—sociological, psychological, biological—between us and you and your close allies, our desire to be free of your civilization poses no real threat to the latter and hence will never provoke any real reaction. At the same time, we will never win the freedom of the stars without the resources of modern technology.

"To industrialize with minimum delay, we must obtain the initial capacity through purchases from the Technic worlds. This requires Technic currency. Thus, while we spend what appears to be a disproportionate amount of effort and goods on this bluejack project, it will result in saving outplanet exchange for more important things.

"We tell you what we tell you in order to make clear, not only our harmlessness to the League as a whole, but our determination. We trust you have taped this discussion. It may prevent your employer from wasting our time and energy in counteracting any foredoomed attempts by him to recoup. While you remain on Suleiman, observe well. When you go back, report faithfully."

The screen blanked. Dalmady tried for minutes to make the connection again, but got no answer.

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Thirty days later, which would have been fifteen of Earth's, a conference met in the compound. Around a table, in a room hazed and acrid with smoke, sat the humans. In a full-size screen were the images of the Thalassocrat and the Translator, a three-dimensional realism that seemed to breathe out the cold of the ice chamber where they crouched.

Dalmady ran a hand through his hair. "I'll summarize," he told them wearily. The Translator's fur began to move, his voice to make low whistles, as he rendered from the Anglic for his king. "The reports of our native scouts were waiting for me, recorded by Yvonne, when I returned from my own latest flit a couple of hours ago. Every datum confirms every other.

"We'd hoped, you recall, that the computer would be inadequate to cope with us, once the Baburite ship had left."

"Why should the live crew depart?" Sanjuro Nakamura asked.

"That's obvious," Thorson said. "They may not run their domestic economy the way we run ours, but that doesn't exempt them from the laws of economics. A planet like Babur—actually, a single dominant country on it, or whatever they have—still backward, still poor, has limits on what it can afford. They may enjoy shorter lines of communication than we do, but we, at home, enjoy a lot more productivity. At their present stage, they can't spend what it takes to create and maintain a permanent, live-staffed base like ours. Suleiman isn't too healthy for them, either, you know, and they lack even our small background of accumulated experience. So they've got to automate at first, and just send somebody once in a while to check up and collect the harvest."

"Besides," Alice Bergen pointed out, "the nomads are sworn to us. They wouldn't make a deal with another party. Not that the Baburites could use them profitably anyway. We're sitting in the only suitable depot area, the only one whose people have a culture that makes it easy to train them in service jobs for us. So the Baburites have to operate right on the spot where the bluejack grows. The nomads resent having their caravan trade ended, and would stage guerrilla attacks on live workers."

"Whew!" Nakamura said, with an attempted grin. "I assure you, my question was only rhetorical. I simply wanted to point out that the opposition would not have left everything in charge of a computer if they weren't confident the setup would function, including holding us at bay. I begin to see why their planners concentrated on developing robotics at the beginning of modernization. No doubt they intend to use machines in quite a few larcenous little undertakings."

"Have you found out yet how many robots there are?" Isabel da Fonseca asked.

"We estimate a hundred," Dalmady told her, "though we can't get an accurate count. They operate fast, you see, covering a huge territory—in fact, the entire territory where bluejack grows thickly enough to be worth gathering—and they're identical in appearance except for the relay hoverers."

"That must be some computer, to juggle so many at once, over such varying conditions," Alice remarked. Cybernetics was not her field.

Yvonne shook her head; the gold tresses swirled. "Nothing extraordinary. We have long-range telephotos, taken during its installation. It's a standard multichannel design, only the electronics modified for ambient conditions. Rudimentary awareness: more isn't required, and would be uneconomic to provide, when its task is basically simple."

"Can't we outwit it, then?" Alice asked.

Dalmady grimaced. "What do you think my native helpers and I have been trying to do thereabouts, this past week? It's open country; the relayers detect you coming a huge ways off, and the computer dispatches robots. Not many are needed. If you come too close to the blockhouse, they fire warning blasts. That's terrified the natives. Few of them will approach anywhere near, and in fact the savages are starting to evacuate, which'll present us with a nice bunch of hungry refugees. Not that I blame them. A low-temperature organism cooks easier than you or me. I did push ahead, and was fired on for real. I ran away before my armor should be pierced."

"What about airborne attack?" Isabel wondered.

Thorson snorted. "In three rattly cars, with handguns? Those robots fly too, remember. Besides, the centrum has forcefields, blast cannon, missiles. A naval vessel would have trouble reducing it."

"Furthermore," interjected the Thalassocrat, "I am told of a threat to destroy this town by airborne weapons, should a serious assault be made on yonder place. That cannot be risked. Sooner would I order you to depart for, aye, and strike what bargain I was able with your enemies."

He can make that stick, Dalmady thought, by the simple process of telling our native workers to quit.

Not that that would necessarily make any difference. He recalled the last statement of a nomad Master, as the retreat from a reconnaissance took place, Suleimanites on their animals, man on a gravscooter. "We have abided by our alliance with you, but you not by yours with us. Your predecessors swore we should have protection from skyborne invaders. If you fail to drive off these, how shall we trust you?" Dalmady had pleaded for time and had grudgingly been granted it, since the caravaneers did value their trade with him. *But if we don't solve this problem soon, I doubt the system can ever be renewed.*

"We shall not imperil you," he promised the Thalassocrat.

"How real is the threat?" Nakamura asked. "The League wouldn't take kindly to slaughter of harmless autochthons."

"But the League would not necessarily do more than complain," Thorson said, "especially if the Baburites argue that we forced them into it. They're banking on its indifference, and I suspect their judgment is shrewd."

"Right or wrong," Alice said, "their assessment of the psychopolitics will condition what they themselves do. And what assessment have they made? What do we know about their ways of thinking?"

"More than you might suppose," Yvonne replied. "After all, they've been in contact for generations, and you don't negotiate commercial agreements without having done some studies in depth first. The reason you've not seen much of me, these past days, is that I've buried myself in our files. We possess, right here, a bucketful of information about Babur."

Dalmady straightened in his chair. His pulse picked up the least bit. It was no surprise that a large and varied xenological library existed in this insignificant outback base. Microtapes were cheaply reproduced, and you never knew who might chance by or what might happen, so you were routinely supplied with references for your entire sector. "What do we have?" he barked.

Yvonne smiled wryly. "Nothing spectacular, I'm afraid. The usual: three or four of the principal languages, sketches of history and important contemporary cultures, state-of-technology analyses, statistics on stuff like population and productivity—besides the planetology, biology, psychoprofiling, et cetera. I tried and tried to find a weak point, but couldn't. Oh, I can show that this operation must be straining their resources, and will have to be abandoned if it doesn't quickly pay off. But that's been just as true of us."

Thorson fumed on his pipe. "If we could fix a gadget... We have a reasonably well-equipped workshop. That's where I've been sweating, myself."

"What had you in mind?" Dalmady inquired. The dullness of the engineer's voice was echoed in his own.

"Well, at first I wondered about a robot to go out and hunt theirs down. I could build one, a single one, more heavily armed and armored." Thorson's hand flopped empty, palm up, on the table. "But the computer has a hundred; and it's more sophisticated by orders of magnitude than any brain I could cobble together from spare cybernetic parts; and as the Thalassocrat says, we can't risk a missile dropped on our spaceport in retaliation, because it'd take out most of the city.

"Afterward I thought about jamming, or about somehow lousing the computer itself, but that's totally hopeless. It'd never let you get near." He sighed. "My friends, let's admit that we've had the course, and plan how to leave with minimum loss."

The Thalassocrat stayed imperturbable, as became a monarch. But the Translator's main eye filmed over, his tiny body shrank into itself, and he cried: "We had hoped... one year our descendants, learning from you, joining you among the uncounted suns... Is there instead to be endless rule by aliens?"

Dalmady and Yvonne exchanged looks. Their hands clasped. He believed the same thought must be twisting in her: *We, being of the League, cannot pretend to altruism. But we are not monsters either. Some cold accountant in an office on Earth may order our departure. But can we who have been here, who like these people and were trusted by them, can we abandon them and continue to live with ourselves? Would we not forever feel that any blessings given us were stolen?*

And the old, old legend crashed into his awareness.

He sat for a minute or two, unconscious of the talk that growled and groaned around him. Yvonne first noticed the blankness in his gaze. "Emil," she murmured, "are you well?"

Dalmady sprang to his feet with a whoop.

"What in space?" Nakamura said.

The Factor controlled himself. He trembled, and small chills ran back and forth along his nerves; but his words came steady. "I have an idea."

*** *** ***

Above the robes that billowed around him in the wind, the Translator carried an inconspicuous miniature audiovisual two-way. Dalmady in the car which he had landed behind a hill some distance off, Thorson in the car which hovered to relay, Yvonne and Alice and Isabel and Nakamura and the Thalassocrat in the city, observed a bobbing, swaying landscape on their tuned-in screens. Black leaves streamed, long and ragged, on bushes whose twigs clicked an answer to the whining air; boulders and ice chunks hunched among them; an ammonia fall boomed on the right, casting spray across the field of view. The men in the cars could likewise feel the planet's traction and the shudder of hulls under that slow, thick wind.

"I still think we should've waited for outside help," Thorson declared on a separate screen. "That rig's a godawful lash-up."

"And I still say," Dalmady retorted, "your job's made you needlessly fussy in this particular case. Besides, the natives couldn't've been stalled much longer." *Furthermore, if we can rout the Baburites with nothing but what was on hand, that ought to shine in my record. I'd like to think that's less important to me, but I can't deny it's real.*

One way or another, the decision had to be mine. I am the Factor.

Its a lonesome feeling. I wish Yvonne were here beside me.

"Quiet," he ordered. "Something's about to happen."

The Translator had crossed a ridge and was gravscooting down the opposite slope. He required no help at that; a few days of instruction had made him a very fair driver, even in costume. He was entering the robot-held area, and already a skyborne unit slanted to intercept him. In the keen Osmanlight, against ochereous clouds, it gleamed like fire.

Dalmady crouched in his seat. He was airsuited. If his friend got into trouble, he'd slap down his faceplate, open the cockpit, and swoop to an attempted rescue. A blaster lay knobby in his lap. The thought he might come too late made a taste of sickness in his mouth.

The robot paused at hover, arms extended, weapon pointed. The Translator continued to glide at a steady rate. When near collision, the two-way spoke for him: "Stand aside. We are instituting a change of program."

Spoke, to the listening computer, in the principal language of Babur.

Yvonne had worked out the plausible phrases, and spent patient hours with vocalizer and recorder until they seemed right. Engineer Thorson, xenologists Nakamura and Alice Bergen, artistically inclined biologist Isabel da Fonseca, Dalmady himself and several Suleimanite advisors who had spied on the Baburites, had created the disguise. Largely muffled in cloth, it didn't have to be too elaborate—a torso shaven and painted; a simple

mechanical caterpillar body behind, steered by the hidden tail, automatically pacing its six legs with the wearer's two; a flexible mask with piezoelectric controls guided by the facial muscles beneath; claws and tendrils built over the natural arms, fake feet over the pair of real ones.

A human or an ordinary Suleimanite could not successfully have worn such an outfit. If nothing else, they were too big. But presumably it had not occurred to the Baburites to allow for midgets existing on this planet. The disguise was far from perfect; but presumably the computer was not programmed to check for any such contingency; furthermore, an intelligent, well-rehearsed actor, adapting his role moment by moment as no robot ever can, creates a gestalt transcending any minor errors of detail.

And... logically, the computer *must* be programmed to allow Baburites into its presence, to service it and collect the bluejack stored nearby.

Nonetheless, Dalmady's jaws ached from the tension on them.

The robot shifted out of the viewfield. In the receiving screens, ground continued to glide away underneath the scooter.

Dalmady switched off audio transmission from base. Though none save Yvonne, alone in a special room, was now sending to the Translator, and she via a bone conduction receiver—still, the cheers that had filled the car struck him as premature.

But the kilometers passed and passed. And the blockhouse hove in view, dark, cubical, bristling with sensors and antennae, cornered with the sinister shapes of gun emplacements and missile silos. No forcefield went up. Yvonne said through the Translator's unit: "Open; do not close again until told," and the idiot-savant computer directed a massive gate to swing wide.

What happened beyond was likewise Yvonne's job. She scanned through the portal by the two-way, summoned what she had learned of Baburite automation technology, and directed the Translator. Afterward she said it hadn't been difficult except for poor visibility; the builders had used standard layouts and programming languages. But to the Factor it was an hour of sweating, cursing, pushing fingers and belly muscles against each other, staring and staring at the image of enigmatic units which loomed between blank walls, under bluish light that was at once harsh and wan.

When the Translator emerged and the gate closed behind him, Dalmady almost collapsed.

Afterward, though—well, League people were pretty good at throwing a celebration!

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"Yes," Dalmady said. "But—"

"Butter me no butts," van Rijn said. "Fact is, you reset that expensive computer so it should make those expensive robots stand idle. Why not leastwise use them for Solar?"

"That would have ruined relations with the natives, sir. Primitives don't take blandly to the notion of technological unemployment. So scientific studies would have become impossible. How then would you attract personnel?"

"What personnel would we need?"

"Some on the spot, constantly. Otherwise the Baburites, close as they are, could come back and, for example, organize and arm justly disgruntled Suleimanites against us. Robots or no, we'd soon find the bluejack costing us more than it earned us... Besides, machines wear out and it costs to replace them. Live native help will reproduce for nothing."

"Well, you got that much sense, anyhow," van Rijn rumbled. "But why did you tell the computer it and its robots should attack *any* kind of machine, like a car or spacecraft, what comes near, and anybody of any shape what tells it to let him in? Supposing situations change, our people can't do nothings with it now neither."

"I told you, they don't need to," Dalmady rasped. "We get along—not dazzlingly, but we get along, we show a profit—with our traditional arrangements. As long as we maintain those, we exclude the Baburites from them. If we ourselves had access to the computer, we'd have to mount an expensive guard over it. Otherwise the Baburites could probably pull a similar trick on us, right? As is, the system interdicts any attempt to modernize operations in the bluejack area. Which is to say, it protects our monopoly—free—and will protect it for years to come."

He started to rise. "Sir," he continued bitterly, "the whole thing strikes me as involving the most elementary economic calculations. Maybe you have something subtler in mind, but if you do—"

"Whoa!" van Rijn boomed. "Squat yourself. Reel in some more of your drink, boy, and listen at me. Old and fat I am, but lungs and tongue I got. Also in working order is two other organs, one what don't concern you but one which is my brain, and my brain wants I should get information from you and stuff it."

Dalmady found he had obeyed.

"You need to see past a narrow specialism," van Rijn said. "Sometimes a man is too stupid good at his one job. He booms it, no matter the consequential to everything else, and makes trouble for the whole organization he is supposed to serve. Like, you considered how Babur would react?"

"Of course. Freelady Vaillancourt—" *When will I be with her again?*—"and Drs. Bergen and Nakamura in particular, did an exhaustive analysis of materials on hand. As a result, we gave the computer an additional directive: that it warn

any approaching vehicle before opening fire. The conversation I had later, with the spaceship captain or whatever he was, bore out our prediction."

(A quivering snout. A bleak gleam in four minikin eyes. But the voice, strained through a machine, emotionless: "Under the rules your civilization has devised, you have not given us cause for war; and the League always responds to what it considers unprovoked attack. Accordingly, we shall not bombard.")

"No doubt they feel their equivalent of fury," Dalmady said. "But what can they do? They're realists. Unless they think of some new stunt, they'll write Suleiman off and try elsewhere."

"And they buy our bluejack yet?"

"Yes."

"We should maybe lift the price, like teaching them a lesson they shouldn't make fumblydiddles with us?"

"You can do that, if you want to make them decide they'd rather synthesize the stuff. My report recommends against it."

This time Dalmady did rise. "Sir," he declared in anger, "I may be a yokel, my professional training may have been in a jerkwater college, but I'm not a congenital idiot who's mislaid his pills and I do take my pride seriously. I made the best decision I was able on Suleiman. You haven't tried to show me where I went wrong, you've simply had me dismissed from my post, and tonight you drone about issues that anybody would understand who's graduated from diapers. Let's not waste more of our time. Good evening."

Van Rijn avalanched upward to his own feet. "Ho, ho!" he bawled. "Spirit, too! I like, I like!"

Dumbfounded, Dalmady could only gape.

Van Rijn clapped him on the shoulder, nearly felling him. "Boy," the merchant said, "I didn't mean to rub your nose in nothings except sweet violets. I did have to know, did you stumble onto your answer, which is beautiful, or can you think original? Because you take my saying, maybe everybody understands like you what is not wearing diapers no more; but if that is true, why, ninety-nine point nine nine percent of every sophont race is wearing diapers, at least on their brains, and it leaks out of their mouths. I find you is in the oh point oh one percent, and I want you. Hoo-ha, how I want you!"

He thrust the gin-filled goblet back into Dalmady's hand. His tankard clanked against it. "Drink!"

Dalmady took a sip. Van Rijn began to prowl.

"You is from a frontier planet and so is naive," the merchant said, "but that can be outlived like pimples. See, when my underlings at HQ learned you had pulled our nuts from the fire on Suleiman, they sent you a standard message, not realizing an Altaian like you would not know that in such cases the proceeding is SOP," which he pronounced "sop." He waved a gorilla arm, splashing beer on the floor. "Like I say, we had to check if you was lucky only. If so, we would promote you to be manager someplace better and forget about you. But if you was, actual, extra smart and tough, we don't want you for a manager. You is too rare and precious for that. Would be like using a Hokusai print in a catbox."

Dalmady raised goblet to mouth, unsteadily. "What do you mean?" he croaked.

"Entrepreneur! You will keep title of factor, because we can't make jealousies, but what you do is what the old Americans would have called a horse of a different dollar.

"Look." Van Rijn reclaimed his cigar from the disposal rim, took a puff, and made forensic gestures with it and tankard alike while he continued his earthquake pacing. "Suleiman was supposed to be a nice routine post, but you told me how little we know on it and how sudden the devil himself came to lunch. Well, what about the real new, real hairy—and real fortune-making—places? Ha?

"You don't want a manager for them, not till they been whipped into shape. A good manager is a very high-powered man, and we need a lot of him. But in his bottom, he is a routinier; his aim is to make things go smooth. No, for the wild places you need an innovator in charge, a man what likes to take risks, a heterodoxy if she is female—somebody what can meet wholly new problems in unholy new ways—you see?

"Only such is rare, I tell you. They command high prices: high as they can earn for themselves. Natural, I want them earning for me too. So I don't put that kind of factor on salary and dangle a promotion ladder in front of him. No, the entrepreneur kind, first I get his John Bullcock on a ten-year oath of fealty. Next I turn him loose with a stake and my backup, to do what he wants, on straight commission of ninety percent.

"Too bad nobody typed you before you went in managerial school. Now you must have a while in an entrepreneurial school I got tucked away where nobody notices. Not dull for you; I hear they throw fine orgies; but mainly I think you will enjoy your classes, if you don't mind working till brain-sweat runs out your nose. Afterward you go get rich, if you survive, and have a big ball of fun even if you don't. Hokay?"

Dalmady thought for an instant of Yvonne; and then he thought, *What the deuce, if nothing better develops, in a few years I can set any hiring policies I feel like;* and: "Hokay!" he exclaimed, and tossed off his drink in a single gulp.

THE END

INTRODUCTION TO *THE MASTER KEY*

TOO MANY of us unthinkingly think of David Falkayn as if he flashed into being upon Avalon like a lightning bolt. The Polesotechnic League we know of only in its decadence and downfall. Yet for long and long it was wing and talon of that Technic civilization which humans begot and from which many other races—Ythrians too, Ythrians too—drew fresh blood that still flows within them.

Remote from the centers of Technic might, unaccustomed to the idea that alien sophonts are alien in more than body, our ancestors in the first lifetimes after the Discovery were little aware of anything behind the occasional merchant vessels, scientists, hired teachers and consultants, that came to their planet. The complexity of roots, trunks, boughs, which upbore the leaf-crown they saw, lay beyond their ken. Even the visits of a few to Terra brought scant enlightenment.

Later ancestors, moving vigorously into space on their own, were better informed. Paradoxically, though, they had less to do with the League. By then they required no imports to continue development. Furthermore, being close to the stars in this sector, they competed so successfully for trade that League members largely withdrew from a region which had never been highly profitable for them. The main point of contact was the planet Esperance and it, being as yet thinly settled, was not a market which drew great flocks from either side.

Thus the ordinary Ythrian, up to this very year, has had only a footgrip upon reality where the League is concerned. He/she/youngling must strengthen this if the origins of the Avalonian colony are to be made clear. What winds did Falkayn ride, what storms blew him hitherward at last?

His biographies tell how he became a protégé of Nicholas van Rijn, but say little about that merchant lord. You may well be surprised to learn that on numerous other worlds, it is the latter who lives in folk memory, whether as hero or rogue. He did truthfully fly in the front echelon of events when several things happened whose thunders would echo through centuries. With him as our archetype, we can approach knowledge.

Though hardly ever read or played anymore upon this globe, a good many accounts of him exist in Library Central, straightforward, semifictional, or romantic. Maychance the best introduction is the story which follows, from *Tales of the Great Frontier* by A. A. Craig.

—Hloch of the Stormgate Choth
The Earth Book of Stormgate

THE MASTER KEY

*A loftier Argo cleaves the main,
Fraught with a later prize;
Another Orpheus sings again,
And loves, and weeps, and dies.
A new Ulysses leaves once more
Calypso for his native shore.*

—Shelley

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a king who set himself above the foreign merchants. What he did is of no account now; it was long ago and on another planet, and besides, the wench is dead. Harry Stenvik and I hung him by the seat of his trousers from his tallest minaret, in sight of all the people, and the name of the Polesotechnic League was great in the land. Then we made inroads on the stock-in-trade of the Solar Spice & Liquors Company factor and swore undying brotherhood.

Now there are those who maintain that Nicholas van Rijn has a cryogenic computer in that space used by the ordinary Terran for storing his heart. This may be so. But he does not forget a good workman. And I know no reason why he should have invited me to dinner except that Harry would be there, and – this being the briefest of business trips to Earth for me – we would probably have no other chance of meeting.

The flitter set me off atop the Winged Cross, where Van Rijn keeps what he honestly believes is a modest little penthouse apartment. A summer's dusk softened the mass of lesser buildings that stretched to the horizon and beyond; Venus had wakened in the west and Chicago Integrate was opening multitudinous lights. This high up, only a low machine throb reached my ears. I walked along roses and jasmine to the door. When it scanned me and dilated, Harry was waiting. We fell into each other's arms and praised God with many loud violations of His third commandment.

Afterward we stood apart and looked. "You haven't changed much," he lied. "Mean and ugly as ever. Methane in the air must agree with you."

"Ammonia, where I've been of late," I corrected him. "S.O.P.: occassional bullets and endless dickering. You're disgustingly sleek and contented. How's Sigrid?" As it must to all men, domesticity had come to him. In his case it lasted, and he had built a house on the cliffs above Hardanger Fjord and raised mastiffs and sons. Myself – but that also is irrelevant.

"Fine. She sends her love and a box of her own cookies. Next time you must wangle a longer stay and come see us."

"The boys?"

"Same." The soft Norse accent roughened the least bit. "Per's had his troubles, but they are mending. He's here tonight."

"Well, great." The last I'd heard of Harry's oldest son, he was an apprentice aboard one of Van Rijn's ships, somewhere in the Hercules region. But that was several years ago, and you can rise fast in the League if you survive. "I imagine he has master's rank by now."

"Yes, quite newly. Plus an artificial femur and a story to tell. Come, let's join them."

Hm, I thought, so Old Nick was economizing on his bird-killing stones again. He had enough anecdotes of his own that he didn't need to collect them, unless they had some special use to him. A gesture of kindness might as well be thrown into the interview.

We passed through the foyer and crossed a few lightyears of trollocat rug to the far end of the living room. Three men sat by the viewer wall, at the moment transparent to sky and city. Only one of them rose. He had been seated a little to one side, in a tigery kind of relaxed alertness – a stranger to me, dark and lean, with a blaster that had seen considerable service at his hip.

Nicholas van Rijn wallowed his bulk deeper into his lounge, hoisted a beer stein and roared, "Ha! Welcome to you, Captain, and you will maybe have a small drink like me before dinner?" After which he tugged his goatee and muttered, "Gabriel will tootle before I get you bepestered Anglic through this poor old noggin. I think I have just called myself a small drink."

I bowed to him as is fitting to a merchant prince, turned, and gave Per Stenvik my hand. "Excuse my staying put," he said. His face was still pale and gaunt; health was coming back, but youth never would. "I got a trifle clobbered."

"So I heard," I answered. "Don't worry, it'll heal up. I hate to think how much of me is replacement by now, but as long as the important parts are left..."

"Oh, yes, I'll be okay. Thanks to Manuel. Manuel Felipe Gomez y Palomares of Nuevo Mexico, here. My ensign."

I introduced myself with great formality, according to what I knew of customs of those poor and haughty colonists from the far side of Arcturus. His courtesy was equal, before he turned to make sure the blanket was secure around Per's legs. Nor did he go back to his seat and his glass of claret before Harry and I lowered ourselves.

A human servant-male, in this one Van Rijn establishment, brought us our orders, akvavit for Harry and a martini for me. Per fiddled with a glass of Ansan vermouth.

"How long will you be home?" I asked him after the small talk had gone by.

"As long as needful," Harry said quickly.

"No more, though," Van Rijn said with equal speed. "Not one millimoment more can he loaf than nature must have; and he is young and strong."

"Pardon, senior," Manuel said now softly and deferentially, and with what a clang of colliding stares. "I would not gainsay my superiors. But my duty is to know how it is with my captain, and the doctors are fools. He shall rest not less than till the Day of the Dead; and then surely, with the Nativity so near, the senior will not deny him the holidays at home?"

Van Rijn threw up his hands. "Everyone, they call me apocalyptic beast," he wailed, "and I am only a poor lonely old man in a sea of grievances, trying so hard to keep awash. One good boy with promises I find, I watch him from before his pants dry out for I know his breed. I give him costly schooling in hopes he does not turn out another curdlebrain, and no sooner does he not but he is in the locker and my fine new planet gets thrown to the wolves!"

"Lord help the wolves," Per grimed. "Don't worry, sir, I'm as anxious to get back as you are."

"Hoy, hoy, I am not going. I am too old and fat. Ah, you think you have troubles now, but wait till time has gnawed you down to a poor old wheezer like me who has not even any pleasures left. Abdul! Abdul, you jellylegs, bring drink, you want we should dry up and puff away?... What, only me ready for a refill?"

"Do you really want to see that Helheim – again?" Harry asked, with a stiff glance at Van Rijn.

"Judas, yes," Per said. "It's just waiting for the right man. A whole world, Dad! Don't you remember?"

Harry looked through the wall and nodded. I made haste to intrude on his silence. "What were you there after, Per?"

"Everything," the young man said. "I told you it's an entire planet. Not one percent of the land surface has been mapped."

"Huh? Not even from orbit?"

Manuel's expression showed me what they thought of orbital maps.

"But for a starter, what attracted us in the first place, furs and herbs," Per said. Wordlessly, Manuel took a little box from his pocket, opened it, and handed it to me. A bluish-green powder of leaves lay within. I tasted. There was a sweet-sour flavor with wild overtones, and the odor went to the oldest, deepest part of my brain and roused memories I had not known were lost.

"The chemicals we have not yet understood and synthesized," Van Rijn rumbled around the cigar he was lighting. "Bah! What do my chemists do all day but play happy fun games in the lab alcohol? And the furs, *ja*, I have Lupescu of the Peltery volcanomaking that he must buy them from me. He is even stooping to spies, him, he has the ethics of a paranoid weasel. Fifteen thousand he spent last month alone, trying to find where that planet is."

"How do you know how much he spent?" Harry asked blandly.

Van Rijn managed to look smug and hurt at the same time.

Per said with care, "I'd better not mention the coordinates myself. It's out Pegasus way. A G-nine dwarf star, about half as luminous as Sol. Eight planets, one of them terrestroid. Brander came upon it in the course of a survey, thought it looked interesting, and settled down to learn more. He'd really only time to tape the language of the locality where he was camped, and do the basic planetography and bionics. But he did find out about the furs and herbs. So I was sent to establish a trading post."

"His first command," Harry said, unnecessarily on anyone's account but his own.

"Trouble with the natives, eh?" I asked.

"Trouble is not the word," Van Rijn said. "The word is not for polite ears." He dove into his beer stein and came up snorting. "After all I have done for them, the saints keep on booting me in the soul like this."

"But we seem to have it licked," Per said.

"Ah. You think so?" Van Rijn wagged a hairy forefinger at him. "That is what we should like to be more sure of, boy, before we send out and maybe lose some expensive ships."

"*Y algunos hombres buenos*," Manuel muttered, so low he could scarcely be heard. One hand dropped to the butt of his gun.

"I have been reading the reports from Brander's people," Van Rijn said. "Also your own. I think maybe I see a pattern. When you have been swindling on so many planets like me, new captain, you will have analogues at your digits for much that is new... Ah, pox and pity it is to get jaded!" He puffed a smoke ring that settled around Per's bright locks. "Still, you are never sure. I think sometimes God likes a little practical joke on us poor mortals, when we get too cockish. So I jump on no conclusions before I have heard from your own teeth how it was. Reports, even on visitape, they have no more flavor than what my competition sells. In you I live again the fighting and merry-larks, everything that is now so far behind me in my dotting."

This from the single-handed conqueror of Borthu, Diomedes, and t'Kela!

"Well..." Per blushed and fumbled with his glass. "There really isn't a lot to tell, you know. I mean, each of you freemen has been through so much more than – uh – one silly episode..."

Harry gestured at the blanketed legs. "Nothing silly – there," he said.

Per's lips tightened. "I'm sorry. You're right. Men died."

Chiefly because it is not good to dwell overly long on those lost from a command of one's own, I said, "What's the planet like? 'Terrestroid' is a joke. They sit in an Earthside office and call it that if you can breathe the air."

"And not fall flat in an ooof from the gravity for at least half an hour, and not hope the whole year round you have no brass-monkey ancestors." Van Rijn's nod sent the black ringlets swirling around his shoulder.

"I generally got assigned to places where the brass monkeys melted," Harry complained.

"Well, Cain isn't too bad in the low latitudes," Per said. His face relaxed, and his hands came alive in quick gestures that reminded me of his mother. "It's about Earth-size, average orbital radius a little over one A.V. Denser atmosphere, though, by around fifteen percent, which makes for more greenhouse effect. Twenty-hour rotation period; no moons. Thirty-two degrees of axial tilt, which does rather complicate the seasons. But we were at fifteen-forty north, in fairly low hills, and it was summer. A nearby pool was frozen every morning, and snowbanks remained on the slopes – but really, not bad for the planet of a G-nine star."

"Did Brander name it Cain?" I asked.

"Yes. I don't know why. But it turned out appropriate. Too damned appropriate." Again the bleakness. Manuel took his captain's empty glass and glided off, to return in a moment with it filled. Per drank hurriedly.

"Always there is trouble," Van Rijn said. "You will learn."

"But the mission was going so well!" Per protested. "Even the language and the data seemed to... to flow into my head on the voyage out. In fact, the whole crew learned easily." He turned to me. "There were twenty of us on the *Miriam Knight*. She's a real beauty, Cheland-class transport, built for speed rather than capacity, you know. More wasn't needed, when we were only supposed to erect the first post and get the idea of regular trade across to the autochthones. We had the usual line of goods, fabrics, tools, weapons, household stuff like scissors and meat grinders. Not much ornament, because Brander's xenologists hadn't been able to work out any consistent pattern for it. Individual Cainites seemed to dress and decorate themselves any way they pleased. In the Ulash area, at least, which of course was the only one we had any details on."

"And damn few there," Harry murmured. "Also as usual."

"Agriculture?" I inquired.

"Some primitive cultivation," Per said. "Small plots scratched out of the forest, tended by the Lugals. In Ulash a little metallurgy has begun, copper, gold, silver, but even they are essentially neolithic. And essentially hunters – the Yildivans, that is – along with such Lugals as they employ to help. The food supply is mainly game. In fact, the better part of what farming is done is to supply fabric."

"What do they look like, these people?"

"I've a picture here." Per reached in his tunic and handed me a photograph. "That's old Shivaru. Early in our acquaintance. He was probably scared of the camera but damned if he'd admit it. You'll notice the Lugal he has with him is frankly in a blue funk."

I studied the image with an interest that grew. The background was harsh plutonic hillside, where grass of a pale yellowish turquoise grew between dark boulders. But on the right I glimpsed a densely wooded valley. The sky overhead was wan, and the orange sunlight distorted colors.

Shivaru stood very straight and stiff, glaring into the lens. He was about two meters tall, Per said, his body build much like that of a long-legged, deep-chested man. Tawny, spotted fur covered him to the end of an elegant tail. The head was less anthropoid: a black ruff on top, slit-pupiled green eyes, round mobile ears, flat nose that looked feline even to the cilia around it, full-lipped mouth with protruding tushes at the corners, and jaw that tapered down to a V. He wore a sort of loincloth, gaudily dyed, and a necklace of raw semiprecious stones. His left hand clutched an obsidian-bladed battle-ax and there was a steel trade-knife in his belt.

"They're mammals, more or less," Per said, "though with any number of differences in anatomy and chemistry, as you'd expect. They don't sweat, however. There's a complicated system of exo- and endothermic reactions in the blood to regulate temperature."

"Sweating is not so common on cold terrestroids," Van Rijn remarked. "Always you find analogs to something you met before, if you look long enough. Evolution makes parallels."

"And skew lines," I added. "Um... Brander got some corpses to dissect, then?"

"Well, not any Yildivans," Per said. "But they sold him as many dead Lugals as he asked for, who're obviously of the same genus." He winced. "I hope to hell they didn't kill the Lugals especially for that purpose."

My attention had gone to the creature that cowered behind Shivaru. It was a squat, short-shanked, brown-furred version of the other Cainite. Forehead and chin were poorly developed and the muzzle had not yet become a nose. The being was nude except for a heavy pack, a quiver of arrows, a bow, and two spears piled on its muscular back. I could see that the skin was rubbed naked and calloused by such burdens. "This is a Lugal?" I pointed.

"Yes. You see, there are two related species on the planet, one farther along in evolution than the other. As if *Australopithecus* had survived till today on Earth. The Yildivans have made slaves of the Lugals – certainly in Ulash, and as far as we could find out by spot checks, everywhere on Cain."

"Pretty roughly treated, aren't they, the poor devils?"

Harry said. "I wouldn't trust a slave with weapons."

"But Lugals are completely trustworthy," Per said. "Like dogs. They do the hard, monotonous work. The Yildivans – male and female – are the hunters, artists, magicians, everything that matters. That is, what culture exists is Yildivan." He scowled into his drink. "Though I'm not sure how meaningful 'culture' is in this connection."

"How so?" Van Rijn lifted brows far above his small black eyes.

"Well... they, the Yildivans, haven't anything like a nation, a tribe, any sort of community. Family groups split up when the cubs are old enough to fend for themselves. A young male establishes himself somewhere, chases off all comers, and eventually one or more young females come join him. Their Lugals tag along, naturally – like dogs again. As near as I could learn, such families have only the most casual contact. Occasional barter, occasional temporary gangs formed to hunt extra-large animals, occasional clashes between individuals, and that's about it."

"But hold on," I objected. "Intelligent races need more. Something to be the carrier of tradition, something to stimulate the evolution of brain, a way for individuals to communicate ideas to each other. Else intelligence hasn't got any biological function."

"I fretted over that too," Per said. "Had long talks with Shivaru, Fereghir, and others who drifted into camp whenever they felt like it. We really tried hard to understand each other. They were as curious about us as we about them, and as quick to see the mutual advantage in trade relations. But what a job! A whole different planet – two or three billion years of separate evolution – and we had only pidgin Ulash to start with, the limited vocabulary Brander's people had gotten. We couldn't go far into the subtleties. Especially when they, of course, took everything about their own way of life for granted."

"Toward the end, though, I began to get a glimmering. It turns out that in spite of their oafish appearance, the Lugals are not stupid. Maybe even as bright as their masters, in a different fashion; at any rate, not too far behind them. And – in each of these family groups, these patriarchal settlements in a cave or hut, way off in the forest, there are several times as many Lugals as Yildivans. Every member of the family, even the kids, has a number of slaves. Thus you may not get Yildivan clans or tribes, but you do get the numerical equivalent among the Lugals."

"Then the Lugals are sent on errands to other Yildivan preserves, with messages or barter goods or whatever, and bring back news. And they get traded around; the Yildivans breed them deliberately, with a shrewd practical grasp of genetics. Apparently, too, the Lugals are often allowed to wander off by themselves when there's no work for them to do – much as we let our dogs run loose – and hold powwows of their own."

"You mustn't think of them as being mistreated. They are, by our standards, but Cain is a brutal place and Yildivans don't exactly have an easy life either. An intelligent Lugal is valued. He's made straw boss over the others, teaches the Yildivan young special skills and songs and such, is sometimes even asked by his owner what he thinks ought to be done in a given situation. Some families let him eat and sleep in their own dwelling, I'm told. And remember, his loyalty is strictly to the masters. What they may do to other Lugals is nothing to him. He'll gladly help cull the weaklings, punish the lazy, anything."

"So, to get to the point, I think that's your answer. The Yildivans do have a community life, a larger society – but indirectly, through their Lugals. The Yildivans are the creators and innovators, the Lugals the communicators and preservers. I daresay the relationship has existed for so long a time that the biological evolution of both species has been conditioned by it."

"You speak rather well of them," said Harry grimly, "considering what they did to you."

"But they were very decent people at first." I could hear in Per's voice how hurt he was by that which had happened. "Proud as Satan, callous, but not cruel. Honest and generous. They brought gifts whenever they arrived, with no thought of payment. Two or three offered to assign us Lugal laborers. That wasn't necessary or feasible when we had machinery along, but they didn't realize it then. When they did, they were quick to grasp the idea, and mightily impressed, I think. Hard to tell, because they couldn't or wouldn't admit anyone else might be superior to them. That is, each individual thought of himself as being as good as anyone else anywhere in the world. But they seemed to regard us as their equals. I didn't try to explain where we were really from. 'Another country' looked sufficient for practical purposes."

"Shivaru was especially interested in us. He was middle-aged, most of his children grown and moved away. Wealthy in local terms, progressive – he was experimenting with ranching as a supplement to hunting – and his advice was much sought after by the others. I took him for a ride in a flitter and he was happy and excited as any child; brought his three mates along next time so they could enjoy it too. We went hunting together occasionally. Lord, you should have seen him run down those great horned beasts, leap on their backs, and brain them with one blow of that tremendous ax! Then his Lugals would butcher the game and carry it home to camp. The meat tasted damn good, believe me. Cainite biochemistry lacks some of our vitamins, but otherwise a human can get along all right there."

"Mainly, though, I remember how we'd talk. I suppose it's old hat to you freemen, but I had never before spent hour after hour with another being, both of us at work trying to build up a vocabulary and an understanding, both getting such a charge out of it that we'd forget even to eat until Manuel or Cherkez – that was his chief Lugal, a gnarly, droll old fellow, made me think of the friendly gnomes in my fairy tale books when I was a youngster – until one of them would tell us. Sometimes my mind wandered off and I'd come back to earth realizing that I'd just sat there admiring his beauty. Yildivans are as graceful as cats, as pleasing in shape as a good gun. And as deadly, when they want to be. I found that out!"

"We had a favorite spot, in the lee of a cottage-sized boulder on the hillside above camp. The rock was warm against our backs; seemed even more so when I looked at that pale shrunken sun and my breath smoking out white across the purplish sky. Far, far overhead a bird of prey would wheel, then suddenly stoop – in the thick air I could

hear the whistle through its wing feathers – and vanish into the treetops down in the valley. Those leaves had a million different shades of color, like an endless autumn.

"Shivaru squatted with his tail curled around his knees, ax on the ground beside him. Cherkez and one or two other Lugals hunkered at a respectful distance. Their eyes never left their Yildivan. Sometimes Manuel joined us, when he wasn't busy bossing some phase of construction. Remember, Manuel? You really shouldn't have kept so quiet."

"Silence was fitting, Captain," said the Nuevo Mexican.

"Well," Per said, "Shivaru's deep voice would go on and on. He was full of plans for the future. No question of a trade treaty – no organization for us to make a treaty with – but he foresaw his people bringing us what we wanted in exchange for what we offered. And he was bright enough to see how the existence of a central mart like this, a common meeting ground, would affect them. More joint undertakings would be started. The idea of close cooperation would take root. He looked forward to that, within the rather narrow limits he could conceive. For instance, many Yildivans working together could take real advantage of the annual spawning run up the Mukushyat River. Big canoes could venture across a strait he knew of, to open fresh hunting grounds. That sort of thing.

"But then in a watchtick his ears would perk, his whiskers vibrate, he'd lean forward and start to ask about my own people. What sort of country did we come from? How was the game there? What were our mating and child-rearing practices? How did we ever produce such beautiful things? Oh, he had the whole cosmos to explore! Bit by bit, as my vocabulary grew, his questions got less practical and more abstract. So did mine, naturally. We were getting at each other's psychological foundations now, and were equally fascinated.

"I was not too surprised to learn that his culture had no religion. In fact, he was hard put to understand my questions about it. They practiced magic, but looked on it simply as a kind of technology. There was no animism, no equivalent of anthropomorphism. A Yildivan knew too damn well he was superior to any plant or animal. I think, but I'm not sure, that they had some vague concept of reincarnation. But it didn't interest them much, apparently, and the problem of origins hadn't occurred. Life was what you had, here and now. The world was a set of phenomena, to live with or be defeated by as the case might be.

"Shivaru asked me why I'd asked him about such a self-evident thing."

Per shook his head. His glance went down to the blanket around his lap and quickly back again. "That may have been my first mistake."

"No, Captain," said Manuel most gently. "How could you know they lacked souls?"

"Do they?" Per mumbled.

"We leave that to the theologians," Van Rijn said. "They get paid to decide. Go on, boy."

I could see Per brace himself. "I tried to explain the idea of God," he said tonelessly. "I'm pretty sure I failed. Shivaru acted puzzled and... troubled. He left soon after. The Yildivans of Ulash use drums for long-range communication, have I mentioned? All that night I heard the drums mutter in the valley and echo from the cliffs. We had no visitors for a week. But Manuel, scouting around in the area, said he'd found tracks and traces. We were being watched.

"I was relieved, at first, when Shivaru returned. He had a couple of others with him, Fereghir and Tulitur, important males like himself. They came straight across the hill toward me. I was supervising the final touches on our timber-cutting system. We were to use local lumber for most of our construction, you see. Cut and trim in the woods with power beams, load the logs on a gravsled for the sawmill, then snake them directly through the induration vats to the site, where the foundations had now been laid. The air was full of whine and crash, boom and chug, in a wind that cut like a laser. I could hardly see our ship or our seal tents through dust, tinged bloody in the sun.

"They came to me, those three tall hunters, with a dozen armed Lugals hovering behind. Shivaru beckoned. 'Come,' he said. 'This is no place for a Yildivan.' I looked him in the eyes and they were filmed over, as if he'd put a glass mask between me and himself. Frankly, my skin prickled. I was unarmed – everybody was except Manuel, you know what Nuevo Mexicans are – and I was afraid I'd precipitate something by going for a weapon. In fact, I even made a point of speaking Ulash as I ordered Tom Bullis to take over for me and told Manuel to come along uphill. If the autochthones had taken some notion into their heads that we were planning harm, it wouldn't do for them to hear us use a language they didn't know.

"Not another word was spoken till we were out of the dust and racket, at the old place by the boulder. It didn't feel warm today. Nothing did. 'I welcome you,' I said to the Yildivans, 'and bid you dine and sleep with us.' That's the polite formula when a visitor arrives. I didn't get the regular answer.

"Tulitur hefted the spear he carried and asked – not rudely, understand, but with a kind of shiver in the tone – 'Why have you come to Ulash?'

"'Why?' I stuttered. 'You know. To trade.'

"'No, wait, Tulitur,' Shivaru interrupted. 'Your question is blind.' He turned to me. 'Were you sent?' he asked. And what I would like to ask you sometime, freemen, is whether it makes sense to call a voice black.

"I couldn't think of any way to hedge. Something had gone awry, but I'd no feeblest notion what. A lie or a stall was as likely, *a priori*, to make matters worse as the truth. I saw the sunlight glisten along that dark ax head and felt most infernally glad to have Manuel beside me. Even so, the noise from the camp sounded faint and distant. Or was it only that the wind was whittering louder?

"I made myself stare back at him. 'You know we are here on behalf of others like us at home,' I said. The muscles tightened still more under his fur. Also... I can't read nonhuman expressions especially well. But Fereghir's lips were drawn off his teeth as if he confronted an enemy. Tulitur had grounded his spear, point down. Brander's reports observed that a Yildivan never did that in the presence of a friend. Shivaru, though, was hardest to understand. I could have sworn he was grieved.

"Did God send you?' he asked.

"That put the dunce's cap on the whole lunatic business. I actually laughed, though I didn't feel at all funny. Inside my head it went click-click-click. I recognized a semantic point. Ulash draws some fine distinctions between various kinds of imperative. A father's command to his small child is entirely different – in word and concept both – from a command to another Yildivan beaten in a fight, which is different in turn from a command to a Lugal, and so on through a wider range than our psycholinguists have yet measured.

"Shivaru wanted to know if I was God's slave.

"Well, this was no time to explain the history of religion, which I'm none too clear about anyway. I just said no, I wasn't; God was a being in Whose existence some of us believed, but not everyone, and He had certainly not issued me any direct orders.

"That rocked them back! The breath hissed between Shivaru's fangs, his ruff bristled aloft and his tail whipped his legs. 'Then who did send you?' he nearly screamed. I could translate as well by: 'So who is your owner?'

"I heard a slither alongside me as Manuel loosened his gun in the holster. Behind the three Yildivans, the Lugals gripped their own axes and spears at the ready. You can imagine how carefully I picked my words. 'We are here freely,' I said, 'as part of an association.' Or maybe the word I had to use means 'fellowship' – I wasn't about to explain economics either. 'In our home country,' I said, 'none of us is a Lugal. You have seen our devices that work for us. We have no need of Lugalhood.'

"Ah-h-h,' Fereghir sighed, and poised his spear. Manuel's gun clanked free. 'I think best you go,' he said to them, 'before there is a fight. We do not wish to kill.'

"Brander had made a point of demonstrating guns, and so had we. No one stirred for a time that went on eternally, in that Fimbul wind. The hair stood straight on the Lugals. They were ready to rush us and die at a word. But it wasn't forthcoming. Finally the three Yildivans exchanged glances. Shivaru said in a dead voice, 'Let us consider this thing.' They turned on their heels and walked off through the long, whispering grass, their pack close around them.

"The drums beat for days and nights.

"We considered the thing ourselves at great length. What was the matter, anyhow? The Yildivans were primitive and unsophisticated by Commonwealth standards, but not stupid. Shivaru had not been surprised at the ways we differed from his people. For instance, the fact that we lived in communities instead of isolated families had only been one more oddity about us, intriguing rather than shocking. And, as I've told you, while large-scale cooperation among Yildivans wasn't common, it did happen once in a while; so what was wrong with our doing likewise?

"Igor Yuschenkoff, the captain of the *Miriam*, had a reasonable suggestion. 'If they have gotten the idea that we are slaves, he said, then our masters must be still more powerful. Can they think we are preparing a base for invasion?'

"But I told them plainly we are not slaves,' I said.

"No doubt.' He laid a finger alongside his nose. 'Do they believe you?'"

"You can imagine how I tossed awake in my sealtent. Should we haul gravs altogether, find a different area and start afresh? That would mean scrapping nearly everything we'd done. A whole new language to learn was the least of the problems. Nor would a move necessarily help. Scouting trips by flitter had indicated pretty strongly that the same basic pattern of life prevailed everywhere on Cain, as it did on Earth in the paleolithic era. If we'd run afoul, not of some local taboo, but of some fundamental... I just didn't know. I doubt if Manuel spent more than two hours a night in bed. He was too busy tightening our system of guards, drilling the men, prowling around to inspect and keep them alert.

"But our next contact was peaceful enough on the surface. One dawn a sentry roused me to say that a bunch of natives were here. Fog had arisen overnight, turned the world into wet gray smoke where you couldn't see three meters. As I came outside I heard the drip off a trac parked close by, the only clear sound in the muffledness. Tulitur and another Yildivan stood at the edge of camp, with about fifty male Lugal behind. Their fur sheened with water, and their weapons were rime-coated. 'They must have traveled by night, Captain,' Manuel said, 'for the sake of cover. Surely others wait beyond view.' He led a squad with me.

"I made the Yildivans welcome, ritually, as if nothing had happened. I didn't get any ritual back. Tulitur said only, 'We are here to trade. For your goods we will return those furs and plants you desire.'

"That was rather jumping the gun, with our post still less than half built. But I couldn't refuse what might be an olive branch. 'That is well,' I said. 'Come, let us eat while we talk about it.' Clever move, I thought. Accepting someone's food puts you under the same sort of obligation in Ulash that it used to on Earth.

"Tulitur and his companion – Bokzahan, I remember the name now – didn't offer thanks, but they did come into the ship and sit at the mess table. I figured this would be more ceremonious and impressive than a tent; also, it was out of that damned raw cold. I ordered stuff like bacon and eggs that the Cainites were known to like. They got right to business. 'How much will you trade to us?'

"That depends on what you want, and on what you have to give in exchange,' I said, to match their curtness.

"We have brought nothing with us,' Bokzahan said, 'for we knew not if you would be willing to bargain.'

"Why should I not be?' I answered. 'That is what I came for. There is no strife between us.' And I shot at him: 'Is there?'

"None of those ice-green eyes wavered. 'No,' Tultur said, 'there is not. Accordingly, we wish to buy guns.'

"Such things we may not sell,' I answered. Best not to add that policy allowed us to as soon as we felt reasonably sure no harm would result. 'However, we have knives to exchange, as well as many useful tools.'

"They sulked a bit, but didn't argue. Instead, they went right to work, haggling over terms. They wanted as much of everything as we'd part with, and really didn't try to bargain the price down far. Only they wanted the stuff on credit. They needed it now, they said, and it'd take time to gather the goods for payment.

"That put me in an obvious pickle. On the one hand, the Yildivans had always acted honorably and, as far as I could check, always spoken truth. Nor did I want to antagonize them. On the other hand – but you can fill that in for yourself. I flatter myself I gave them a diplomatic answer.

"We did not for an instant doubt their good intentions,' I said. 'We knew the Yildivans were fine chaps. But accidents could happen, and if so, we'd be out of pocket by a galactic sum.'

"Tultur slapped the table and snorted, 'Such fears might have been expected. Very well, we shall leave our Lugals here until payment is complete. Their value is great. But then you must carry the goods where we want them.'

"I decided that on those terms they could have half the agreed amount right away."

Per fell silent and gnawed his lip. Harry leaned over to pat his hand. Van Rijn growled, "Ja, by damn, no one can foretell everything that goes wrong, only be sure that some bloody-be-plastered thing will. You did hokay, boy... Abdul, more drink, you suppose maybe this is Mars?"

Per sighed. "We loaded the stuff on a gravsled," he went on. "Manuel accompanied in an armed flitter, as a precaution. But nothing happened. Fifty kilometers or so from camp, the Yildivans told our men to land near a river. They had canoes drawn onto the bank there, with a few other Yildivans standing by. Clearly they intended to float the goods further by themselves, and Manuel called me to see if I had any objections. 'No,' I said. 'What difference does it make? They must want to keep the destination secret. They don't trust us any longer.' Behind him, in the screen, I saw Bokzahan watching. Our communicators had fascinated visitors before now. But this time, was there some equivalent of a sneer on his face?"

"I was busy arranging quarters and rations for the Lugals, though. And a guard or two, nothing obtrusive. Not that I really expected trouble. I'd heard their masters say, 'Remain here and do as the Erziran direct until we come for you.' But nevertheless it felt queasy, having that pack of dog-beings in camp.

"They settled down in their animal fashion. When the drums began again that night they got restless, shifted around in the pavilion we'd turned over to them and mewled in a language Brander hadn't recorded. But they were quite meek next morning. One of them even asked if they couldn't help in our work. I had to laugh at the thought of a Lugal behind the controls of a five hundred kilowatt trac, and told him no, thanks, they need only loaf and watch us. They were good at loafing.

"A few times, in the next three days, I tried to get them into conversation. But nothing came of that. They'd answer me, not in the deferential style they used to a Yildivan but not insolently either. However, the answers were meaningless. 'Where do you live?' I would say. 'In the forest yonder,' the slave replied, staring at his toes. 'What sort of tasks do you have to do at home?' 'That which my Yildivan sets for me.' I gave up.

"Yet they weren't stupid. They had some sort of game they played, involving figures drawn in the dirt, that I never did unravel. Each sundown they formed ranks and crooned, an eerie minor-key chant, with improvisations that sometimes sent a chill along my nerves. Mostly they slept, or sat and stared at nothing, but once in a while several would squat in a circle, arms around their neighbors shoulders, and whisper together.

"Well... I'm making the story too long. We were attacked shortly before dawn of the fourth day.

"Afterward I learned that something like a hundred male Yildivans were in that party, and heaven knows how many Lugals. They'd rendezvoused from everywhere in that tremendous territory called Ulash, called by the drums and, probably, by messengers who'd run day and night through the woods. Our pickets were known to their scouts, and they laid a hurricane of arrows over those spots, while the bulk of them rushed in between. Otherwise I can't tell you much. I was a casualty." Per grimaced. "What a damn fool thing to happen. On my first command!"

"Go on," Harry urged. "You haven't told me any details."

"There aren't many," Per shrugged. "The first screams and roars slammed me awake. I threw on a jacket and stuffed feet into boots while my free hand buckled on a gun belt. By then the sirens were in full cry. Even so, I heard a blaster beam sizzle past my tent.

"I stumbled out into the compound. Everything was one black, boiling hell-kettle. Blasters flashed and flashed, sirens howled and voices cried battle. The cold stabbed at me. Starlight sheened on snowbanks and hoarfrost over the hills. I had an instant to think how bright and many the stars were, out there and not giving a curse.

"Then Yuschenkoff switched on the floodlamps in the *Miriam's* turret. Suddenly an artificial sun stood overhead, too bright for us to look at. What must it have been to the Cainites? Blue-white incandescence, I suppose. They swarmed among our tents and machines, tall leopard-furred hunters, squat brown gnomes, axes, clubs, spears, bows, slings, our own daggers in their hands. I saw only one man – sprawled on the earth, gun still between his fingers, head a broken horror.

"I put the command mike to my mouth – always wore it on my wrist as per doctrine – and bawled out orders as I pelted toward the ship. We had the atom itself to fight for us, but we were twenty, no, nineteen or less, against Ulash.

"Now our dispositions were planned for defense. Two men slept in the ship, the others in seal tents ringed around her. The half dozen on guard duty had been cut off, but the rest had the ship for an impregnable retreat. What we must do, though, was rally to the rescue of those guards, and quick. If it wasn't too late.

"I saw the boys emerge from their strong point under the landing jacks. Even now I remember how Zerkowsky hadn't fastened his parka, and what a low-comedy way it flapped around his bottom. He didn't use pajamas. You notice the damndest small things at such times, don't you? The Cainites had begun to mill about, dazzled by the light. They hadn't expected that, or the siren, which is a terrifying thing to hear at close range. Quite a few of them were already strewn dead or dying.

"Then – but all I knew personally was a tide that bellowed and yelped and clawed. It rolled over me from behind. I went down under their legs. They pounded across me and left me in the grip of a Lugal. He lay on my chest and went for my throat with teeth and hands. Judas, but that creature was strong! Centimeter by centimeter he closed in against my pushing and gouging. Suddenly another one got into the act. Must have snatched a club from some fallen Cainite and attacked whatever part of me was handiest, which happened to be my left shin. It's nothing but pain and rage after that, till the blessed darkness came.

"The fact was, of course, that our Lugal hostages had overrun their guards and broken free. I might have expected as much. Even without specific orders, they wouldn't have stood idle while their masters fought. But doubtless they'd been given advance commands. Tulitur and Bokzahan diddled us very nicely. First they got a big consignment of our trade goods, free, and then they planted reinforcements for themselves right in our compound.

"Even so, the scheme didn't work. The Yildivans hadn't really comprehended our power. How could they have? Manuel himself dropped the two Lugals who were killing me. He needed exactly two shots for that. Our boys swept a ring of fire, and the enemy melted away.

"But they'd hurt us badly. When I came to, I was in the *Miriam's* sick bay. Manuel hovered over me like an anxious raven. 'How'd we do?' I think I said.

"'You should rest, senior,' he said, 'and God forgive me that I made the doctor rouse you with drugs. But we must have your decision quickly. Several men are wounded. Two are dead. Three are missing. The enemy is back in the wilderness, I believe with prisoners.'

"He lifted me into a carrier and took me outside. I felt no physical pain, but was lightheaded and half crazy. You know how it is when you're filled to the cap with stimulol. Manuel told me straight out that my legbone was pretty well pulverized, but that didn't seem to matter at the time... What do I mean, seem? Of course it didn't! Gower and Muramoto were dead. Bullis, Cheng, and Zerkowsky were gone.

"The camp was unnaturally quiet under the orange sun. My men had policed the grounds while I was unconscious. Enemy corpses were laid out in a row. Twenty-three Yildivans – that number's going to haunt me for the rest of my life – and I'm not sure how many Lugals, a hundred perhaps. I had Manuel push me along while I peered into face after still, bloody face. But I didn't recognize any.

"Our own prisoners were packed together in our main basement excavation. A couple of hundred Lugals, but only two wounded Yildivans. The rest who were hurt had been carried off by their friends. With so much construction and big machines standing around for cover, that hadn't been too hard to do. Manuel explained that he'd stopped the attack of the hostages with stunbeams. Much the best weapon. You can't prevent a Lugal fighting for his master with a mere threat to kill him.

"In a corner of the pit, glaring up at the armed men above, were the Yildivans. One I didn't know. He had a nasty blaster bum, and our medics had give him sedation after patching it, so he was pretty much out of the picture anyway. But I recognized the other, who was intact. A stunbeam had taken him. It was Kochihir, an adult son of Shivar, who'd visited us like his father a time or two.

"We stared at each other for a space, he and I. Finally, I asked him. 'Why have you done this?' Each word puffed white out of my mouth and the wind shredded it.

"'Because they are traitors, murderers, and thieves by nature, that's why,' Yuschenkoff said, also in Ulash. Brander's team had naturally been careful to find out whether there were words corresponding to concepts of honor and the reverse. I don't imagine the League will ever forget the Darborian Semantics!

"Yuschenkoff spat at Kochihir. 'Now we shall hunt down your breed like the animals they are,' he said. Gower had been his brother-in-law.

"'No,' I said at once, in Ulash, because such a growl had risen from the Lugals that any insane thing might have happened next. 'Speak thus no more.' Yuschenkoff shut his mouth, and a kind of ripple went among those packed, hairy bodies, like wind dying out on ocean. 'But Kochihir,' I said, 'your father was my good friend. Or so I believed. In what wise have we offended him and his people?'

"He raised his ruff, the tail lashed his ankles, and he snarled, 'You must go and never come back. Else we shall harry you in the forests, roll the hillsides down on you, stampede horned beasts through your camps, poison the wells, and burn the grass about your feet. Go, and do not dare return!'

"My own temper flared – which made my head spin and throb, as if with fever – and I said, 'We shall certainly not go unless our captive friends are returned to us. There are drums in camp that your father gave me before he

betrayed us. Call your folk on those, Kochiher, and tell them to bring back our folk. After that, perhaps we can talk. Never before.'

"He fled at me without replying.

"I beckoned to Manuel. 'No sense in stalling unnecessarily,' I said. 'We'll organize a tight defense here. Won't get taken by surprise twice. But we've got to rescue those men. Send flitters aloft to search for them. The war party can't have gone far.'

"You can best tell how you argued with me, Manuel. You said an airflit was an utter waste of energy which was badly needed elsewhere. Didn't you?"

The Nuevo Mexican looked embarrassed. "I did not wish to contradict my captain," he said. His oddly delicate fingers twisted together in his lap as he stared out into the night that had fallen. "But, indeed, I thought that aerial scouts would never find anyone in so many, many hectares of hill and ravine, water and woods. They could have dispersed; those devils. Surely, even if they traveled away in company, they would not be in such a clump that infrared detectors could see them through the forest roof. Yet I did not like to contradict my captain."

"Oh, you did, you," Per said. A corner of his mouth bent upward. "I was quite daft by then. Shouted and stormed at you, eh? Told you to jolly well obey orders and get those flitters in motion. You saluted and started off, and I called you back. 'You mustn't go in person. Too damned valuable here.' Yes, that meant I was keeping back the one man with enough wilderness experience that he might have stood a chance of identifying spoor, even from above. But my brain was spinning down and down the sides of a maelstrom. 'See what you can do to make this furry bastard cooperate,' I said."

"It pained me a little that my captain should appoint me his torturer," Manuel confessed mildly. "Although from time to time, on various planets, when there was great need... no matter."

"I'd some notion of breaking down morale among our prisoners," Per said. "In retrospect, I see that it wouldn't have made any difference if they had cooperated, at least to the extent of drumming for us. The Cainites don't have our kind of group solidarity. If Kochiher and his buddy came to grief at our hands, that was their hard luck. But Shivaru and some of the others had read our psychology shrewdly enough to know what a hold on us their three prisoners gave.

"I looked down at Kochiher: his teeth gleamed back. He hadn't missed a syllable or a gesture, and even if he didn't know any Anglic, he must have understood almost exactly what was going on. By now I was slurring my words as if drunk. So, also like a drunk, I picked them with uncommon care. 'Kochiher,' I said, 'I have commanded our fliers out to hunt down your people and fetch our own whom they have captured. Can a Yildivan outrun a flying machine? Can he fight when its guns flame at him from above? Can he hide from its eyes that see from end to end to horizon? Your kinfolk will dearly pay if they do not return our men of their own accord. Take the drums, Kochiher, and tell them so. If you do not, it will cost you dearly. I have commanded my man here to do whatever may be needful to break your will.'

"Oh, that was a vicious speech. But Gower and Muramoto had been my friends. Bullis, Cheng, and Zerkowsky still were, if they lived. And I was on the point of passing out. I did, actually, on the way back to the ship. I heard Doc Leblanc mutter something about how could he be expected to treat a patient whose system was abused with enough drugs to bloat a camel, and then the words kind of trailed off in a long gibber that went on and on, rising and falling until I thought I'd been turned into an electron and was trapped in an oscilloscope... and the darkness turned green and... and they tell me I was unconscious for fifty hours.

"From there on it's Manuel's story."

At this stage, Per was croaking. As he sank back in his lounge, I saw how white he had become. One hand picked at his blanket, and the vermouth slopped when he raised his glass. Harry watched him, with a helpless anger that smoldered at Van Rijn.

The merchant said, "There, there, so soon after his operation and I make him lecture us, ha? But shortly comes dinner, no better medicine than a real *nijstaffel*, and so soon after that he can walk about, he comes to my place in Djakarta for a nice old-fashioned orgy."

"Oh, hellfire!" Per exploded in a whisper. "Why're you trying to make me feel good? I ruined the whole show!"

"Whoa, son," I ventured to suggest. "You were in good spirits half an hour ago, and half an hour from now you'll be the same. It's only that reliving the bad moments is more punishment than Jehovah would inflict. I've been there too." Blindly, the blue gaze sought mine. "Look, Per," I said, "if Freeman Van Rijn thought you'd botched a mission through your own fault, you wouldn't be lapping his booze tonight. You'd be selling meat to the cannibals."

A ghost of a grin rewarded me.

"Well, Don Manuel," Van Rijn said, "now we hear from you, *nie?*"

"By your favor, senor, I am no Don," the Nuevo Mexican said, courteously, academically, and not the least humbly. "My father was a huntsman in the Sierra de los Bosques Secos, and I traveled in space as a mercenary with Rogers' Rovers, becoming sergeant before I left them for your service. No more." He hesitated. "Nor is there much I can relate of the happenings on Cain."

"Don't make foolishness," Van Rijn said, finished his third or fourth liter of beer since I arrived, and signaled for more. My own glass had been kept filled too, so much so that the stars and the city lights had begun to dance in the dark outside. I stuffed my pipe to help me ease off. "I have read the official reports from your expeditioning," Van Rijn continued. "They are scum-dreary. I need details – the little things nobody thinks to record, like Per has used up

his lawrence in telling – I need to make a planet real for me before this cracked old pot of mine can maybe find a pattern. For it is my experience of many other planets, where I, even I, Nicholas van Rijn, got my nose rubbed in the dirt – which, ho, ho, takes a lot of dirt – it is on that I draw. Evolutions have parallels, but also skews, like somebody said tonight. Which lines is Cain's evolution parallel to? Talk, Ensign Gomezy Palomaro. Brag. Pop jokes, sing songs, balance a chair on your head if you want – but talk!"

The brown man sat still a minute. His eyes were steady on us, save when they moved to Per and back.

"As the senor wishes," he began. Throughout, his tone was level, but the accent could not help singing. "When they bore my captain away I stood in thought, until Igor Yuschenkoff said, 'Well, who is to take the flitters?'"

"None," I said.

"But we have orders," he said.

"The captain was hurt and shaken. We should not have roused him," I answered, and asked of the men who stood near, 'Is this not so?'"

"They agreed, after small argument. I leaned over the edge of the pit and asked Kochihiro if he would beat the drums for us. 'No,' he said, 'whatever you do.'"

"I shall do nothing, yet," I said. "We will bring you food presently." And that was done. For the rest of the short day I wandered about among the snows that lay in patches on the grass. *Ay*, this was a stark land, where it swooped down into the valley and then rose again at the end of sight in saw-toothed purple ranges. I thought of home and of one Dolores whom I had known, a long time ago. The men did no work; they huddled over their weapons, saying little, and toward evening the breath began to freeze on their parka hoods.

"One by one I spoke to them and chose them for those tasks I had in mind. They were all good men of their hands, but few had been hunters save in sport. I myself could not trail the Cainites far, because they had crossed a broad reach of naked rock on their way downward and once in the forest had covered their tracks. But Hamud ibn Rashid and Jacques Ngolo had been woodsmen in their day. We prepared what we needed. Then I entered the ship and looked on my captain – how still he lay!"

"I ate lightly and slept briefly. Darkness had fallen when I returned to the pit. The four men we had on guard stood like deeper shadows against the stars which crowd that sky. 'Go now,' I said, and took out my own blaster. Their footfalls crunched away.

"The shapes that clotted the blackness of the pit stirred and mumbled. A voice hissed upward, 'Oh, you are back. To torment me?' Those Cainites have eyes that see in the night like owls. I had thought, before, that they snickered within themselves when they watched us blunder about after sunset.

"No," I said, 'I am only taking my turn to guard you.'

"You alone?" he scoffed.

"And this." I slapped the blaster against my thigh.

"He fell silent. The cold gnawed deeper into me. I do not think the Cainites felt it much. As the stars wheeled slowly overhead, I began to despair of my plan. Whispers went among the captives, but otherwise I stood in a world where sound was frozen dead.

"When the thing happened, it went with devil's haste. The Lugals had been shifting about a while, as if restless. Suddenly they were upon me. One had stood on another's shoulders and leaped. To death, as they thought – but my shot missed, a quick flare and an amazed gasp from him that he was still alive. Had I not missed, several would have died to bring me down.

"As it was, two fell upon me. I went under, breaking hands loose from my throat with a judo release but held writhing by their mass. Hard fists beat me on head and belly. A palm over my mouth muffled my yells. Meanwhile the prisoners helped themselves out and fled.

"Finally I worked a leg free and gave one of them my knee. He rolled off with pain rattling in his throat. I twisted about on top of the other and struck him below the skull with the blade of my hand. When he went limp, I sprang up and shouted.

"Siren and floodlights came to life. The men swarmed from ship and tents. 'Back!' I cried. 'Not into the dark!' Many Lugals had not yet escaped, and those retreated snarling to the far side of the pit as our troop arrived. With their bodies they covered the wounded Yildivan from the guns. But we only fired, futilely, after those who were gone from sight.

"Guards posted themselves around the cellar. I scabbled over the earth, seeking my blaster. It was gone. Someone had snatched it up: if not Kochihiro, then a Lugal who would soon give it to him. Jacques Ngolo came to me and saw. 'This is bad,' he said.

"An evil turn of luck," I admitted, 'but we must proceed anyhow.' I rose and stripped off my parka. Below were the helmet and spacesuit torso which had protected me in the fight. I threw them down, for they would only hinder me now, and put the parka back on. Hamud ibn Rashid joined us. He had my pack and gear and another blaster for me. I took them, and we three started our pursuit.

"By the mercy of God, we had never found occasion to demonstrate night-seeing goggles here. They made the world clear, though with a sheen over it like dreams. Ngolo's infrared tracker was our compass, the needle trembling toward the mass of Cainites that loped ahead of us. We saw them for a while, too, as they crossed the bare hillside, in and out among tumbled boulders; but we kept ourselves low lest they see us against the sky. The grass was rough in

my face when I went all-fours, and the earth sucked heat out through boots and gloves. Somewhere a hunter beast screamed.

"We were panting by the time we reached the edge of trees. Yet in under their shadows we must go, before the Cainites fled farther than the compass would reach. Already it flickered, with so many dark trunks and so much brake to screen off radiation. But thus far the enemy had not stopped to hide his trail. I moved through the underbrush more carefully than him – legs brought forward to part the stems that my hands then guided to either side of my body – reading the book of trampled bush and snapped branch.

"After an hour we were well down in the valley. Tall trees gloomed everywhere about; the sky was hidden, and I must tune up the photomultiplier unit in my goggles. Now the book began to close. The Cainites were moving at a natural pace, confident of their escape, and even without special effort they left little spoor. And since they were now less frantic and more alert, we must follow so far behind that infrared detection was of no further use.

"At last we came to a meadow, whose beaten grass showed that they had paused here a while. And that was seen which I feared. The party had broken into three or four, each bound a different way. 'Which do we choose?' Ngolo asked.

"'Three of us can follow three of them,' I said.

"'Bismillah!' Hamud grunted. 'Blaster or no, I would not care to face such a band alone. But what must be, must be.'

"We took so much time to ponder what clues the forest gave that the east was gray before we parted. Plainly, the Lugals had gone toward their masters' homes, while Kochihir's own slaves had accompanied him. And Kochihir was the one we desired. I could only guess that the largest party was his, because most likely the first break had been made under his orders by his own Lugals, whose capabilities he knew. That path I chose for myself. Hamud and Ngolo wanted it too, but I used my rank to seize the honor, that folk on Nuevo Mexico might never say a Gomez lacked courage.

"So great a distance was now between that there was no reason not to use our radios to talk with each other and with the men in camp. That was often consoling, in the long time which was upon me. For it was slow, slow, tracing those woods – wily hunters through their own land. I do not believe I could have done it, had they been only Yildivans and such Lugals as are regularly used in the chase. But plain to see, the attack had been strengthened by calling other Lugals from fields and mines and household tasks, and those were less adept.

"Late in the morning, Ngolo called. 'My gang just reached a cave and a set of lean-tos,' he said. 'I sit in a tree and watch them met by some female and half-grown Yildivans. They shuffle off to their own shed. This is where they belong, I suppose, and they are not going farther. Shall I return to the meadow and pick up another trail?'

"'No,' I said, 'it would be too cold by now. Backtrack to a spot out of view and have a flitter fetch you.'

"Some hours later, the heart leaped in my breast. For I came upon a tree charred by unmistakable blaster shots. Kochihir had been practicing.

"I called Hamud and asked where he was. 'On the bank of a river,' he said, 'casting about the place where they crossed. That was a bitter stream to wade!'

"'Go no farther,' I said. 'My path is the right one. Have yourself taken back to camp.'

"'What?' he asked. 'Shall we not join you now?'

"'No,' I said. 'It is uncertain how near I am to the end. Perhaps so near that a flitter would be seen by them as it came down and alarm them. Stand by.' I confess it was a lonely order to give.

"A few times I stopped to eat and rest. But stimulants kept me going in a way that would have surprised my quarry who despised me. By evening his trail was again so fresh that I slacked my pace and went on with a snake's caution. Down here, after sunset, the air was not so cold as on the heights; yet every leaf glistened hoar in what starlight pierced through.

"Not much into the night, my own infrared detector began to register a source, stronger than living bodies could account for. I whispered the news into my radio and then ordered no more communication until further notice, lest we be overheard. Onward I slipped. The forest rustled and creaked about me, somewhere far off a heavy animal broke brush in panic flight, wings whirred overhead, yet Santa Maria, how silent and alone it was!

"Until I came to the edge of a small clearing.

"A fire burned there, throwing unrestful shadows on the wall of a big, windowless log cabin which nestled under the trees beyond. Two Yildivans leaned on their spears. And light glimmered from the smoke hole in the roof.

"Most softly, I drew my stun gun. The bolt snicked twice, and they fell in heaps. At once I sped across the open ground, crouched in the shadow under that rough wall, and waited.

"But no one had heard. I glided to the doorway. Only a leather curtain blocked my view. I twitched it aside barely enough that I might peer within.

"The view was dimmed by smoke, but I could see that there was just one long room. It did not seem plain, so beautiful were the furs hung and draped everywhere about. A score or so of Yildivans, mostly grown males, squatted in a circle around the fire, which burned in a pit and picked their fierce flat countenances out of the dark. Also there were several Lugals hunched in a corner. I recognized old Cherkez among them, and was glad he had outlived the battle. The Lugals in Kochihir's party must have been sent to barracks. He himself was telling his father Shivaru of his escape.

"As yet the time was unripe for happiness, but I vowed to light many candles for the saints. Because this was as I had hoped: Kochihir had not gone to his own home, but sought an agreed rendezvous. Zetkowsky, Cheng, and Bullis were here. They sat in another corner at the far end of the room, coughing from the smoke, skins drawn around them to ward off the cold.

"Kochihir finished his account and looked at his father for approval. Shivaru's tail switched back and forth. 'Strange that they were so careless about you,' he said.

"They are like blind cubs,' Kochihir scoffed.

"I am not so sure,' the old Yildivan murmured. 'Great are their powers. And... we know what they did in the past.' Then suddenly he grew stiff, and his whisper struck out like a knife. 'Or *did* they do it? Tell me again, Kochihir, how the master ordered one thing and the rest did another.'

"No, now, that means nothing,' said a different Yildivan, scarred and grizzled. 'What we must devise is a use for these captives. You have thought they might trade our Lugal and Gumush, whom Kochihir says they still hold, for three of their own. But I say, why should they? Let us instead place the bodies where the Erziran can find them, in such condition that they will be warned away.

"Just so,' said Bokzahan, whom I now spied in the gloom. 'Tulitur and I proved they are weak and foolish.'

"First we should try to bargain,' said Shivaru. 'If it fails...'. His fangs gleamed in the firelight.

"Make an example of one, then, before we talk,' Kochihir said angrily. 'They threatened the same for me.'

A rumble went among them, as from a beast's cage in the zoo. I thought with terror of what might be done. For my captain has told you how no Yildivan is in authority over any other. Whatever his wishes, Shivaru could not stop them from doing what they would.

"I must decide my own course immediately. Blaster bolts could not destroy them all fast enough to keep them from hurling the weapons that lay to hand upon me – not unless I set the beam so wide that our men must also be killed. The stun gun was better, yet it would not overpower them either before I went down under axes and clubs. By standing to one side I could pen them within, for they had only the single door. But Bullis, Cheng, and Zerkowsky would remain hostages.

"What I did was doubtless stupid, for I am not my captain. I sneaked back to the edge of the woods and called the men in camp. 'Come as fast as may be,' I said, and left the radio going for them to home on. Then I circled about and found a tree overhanging the cabin. Up I went, and down again from a branch to the sod roof, and so to the smoke hole. Goggles protected my eyes, but nostrils withered in the fumes that poured forth. I filled my lungs with clean air and leaned forward to see.

"Best would have been if they had gone to bed. Then I could have stunned them one by one as they slept, without risk. But they continued to sit about and quarrel over what to do with their captives. How hard those poor men tried to be brave, as that dreadful snarling broke around them, as slit eyes turned their way and hands went stroking across knives!

"The time felt long, but I had not completed the Rosary in my mind when thunder awoke. Our flitters came down the sky like hawks. The Yildivans roared. Two or three of them dashed out the door to see what was afoot. I dropped them with my stunner, but not before one had screamed, 'The Erzirall are here!'

"My face went back to the smoke hole. It was turmoil below. Kochihir screeched and pulled out his blaster. I fired but missed. Too many bodies in between, senores. There is no other excuse for me.

"I took the gun in my teeth, seized the edge of the smoke hole, and swung myself as best I could before letting go. Thus I struck the dirt floor barely outside the firepit, rolled over and bounced erect. Cherkez leaped for my throat. I sent him reeling with a kick to the belly, took my gun, and fired around me.

"Kochihir could not be seen in the mob which struggled from wall to wall. I fought my way toward the prisoners. Shivaru's ax whistled down. By the grace of God, I dodged it, twisted about and stunned him point-blank. I squirmed between two others. A third got on my back. I snapped my head against his mouth and felt flesh give way. He let go. With my gun arm and my free hand I tossed a Lugal aside and saw Kochihir. He had reached the men. They shrank from him, too stupefied to fight. Hate was on his face, in his whole body, as he took unpracticed aim.

"He saw me at his sight's edge and spun. The blaster crashed, blinding in that murk. But I had dropped to one knee as I pulled trigger. The beam scorched my parka hood. He toppled. I pounced, got the blaster, and whirled to stand before our people.

"Bokzahan raised his ax and threw it. I blasted it in mid air and then killed him. Otherwise I used the stunner. And in a minute or two more, the matter was finished. A grenade brought down the front wall of the cabin. The Cainites fell before a barrage of knockout beams. We left them to awaken and returned to camp."

Again silence grew upon us. Manuel asked if he might smoke, politely declined Van Rijn's cigars, and took a vicious-looking brown cigarette from his own case. That was a lovely, grotesque thing, wrought in silver on some planet I could not identify.

"Whoof!" Van Rijn gusted. "But this is not the whole story, from what you have written. They came to see you before you left."

Per nodded. "Yes, sir," he said. A measure of strength had re-arisen in him. "We'd about finished our preparations when Shivaru himself arrived, with ten other Yildivans and their Lugal. They walked slowly into the compound, ruffs erect and tails held stiff, looking neither to right nor left. I guess they wouldn't have been surprised

to be shot down. I ordered such of the boys as were covering them to holster guns and went out on my carrier to say hello with due formality.

"Shivaru responded just as gravely. Then he got almost tongue-tied. He couldn't really apologize. Ulash doesn't have the phrases for it. He beckoned to Cherkez. 'You were good to release our people whom you held,' he said." Per chuckled. "Huh! What else were we supposed to do, keep feeding them? Cherkez gave him a leather bag. 'I bring a gift,' he told me, and pulled out Tulitur's head. 'We shall return as much of the goods he got from you as we can find,' he promised, 'and if you will give us time, we shall bring double payment for everything else.'

"I'm afraid that after so much blood had gone over the dam, I didn't find the present as gruesome as I ought. I only spluttered that we didn't require such tokens.

"'But we do,' he said, 'to cleanse our honor.'

"I invited them to eat, but they declined. Shivaru made haste to explain that they didn't feel right about accepting our hospitality until their debt was paid off. I told them we were pulling out. Though that was obvious from the state of the camp, they still looked rather dismayed. So I told them we, or others like us, would be back, but first it was necessary to get our injured people home.

"Another mistake of mine. Because being reminded of what they'd done to us upset them so badly that they only mumbled when I tried to find out why they'd done it. I decided best not press that issue – the situation being delicate yet – and they left with relief branded on them.

"We should have stuck around a while, maybe, because we've got to know what the trouble was before committing more men and equipment to Cain. Else it's all too likely to flare up afresh. But between our being shorthanded, and having a couple of chaps who needed first-class medical treatment, I didn't think we could linger. All the way home we wondered and argued. What had gone wrong? And what, later, had gone right? We still don't know."

Van Rijn's eyes glittered at him. "What is your theory?" he demanded.

"Oh..." Per spread his hands. "Yuschenkoff's, more or less. They were afraid we were the spearhead of an invasion. When we acted reasonably decently – refraining from mistreatment of prisoners, thanks to Manuel, and using stunners rather than blasters in the rescue operation – they decided they were mistaken."

Manuel had not shifted a muscle in face or body, as far as I could see. But Van Rijn's battleship prow of a nose swung toward him and the merchant laughed, "You have maybe a little different notion, ha? Come, spew it out."

"My place is not to contradict my captain," said the Nuevo Mexican.

"So why you make fumblydiddles against orders, that day on Cain? When you know better, then you got a duty, by damn, to tell us where to stuff our heads."

"If the senor commands. But I am no learned man. I have no book knowledge of studies made on the psychonomy. It is only that... that I think I know those Yildivans. They seem not so unlike men of the *barranca* country on my home world, and again among the Rovers."

"How so?"

"They live very near death, their whole lives. Courage and skill in fighting, those are what they most need to survive, and so are what they most treasure. They thought, seeing us use machines and weapons that kill from afar, seeing us blinded by night and most of us clumsy in the woods, hearing us talk about what our life is like at home – they thought we lacked *cojones*. So they scorned us. They owed us nothing, since we were spiritless and could never understand their own spirit. We were only fit to be the prey, first of their wits and then of their weapons."

Manuel's shoulders drew straight. His voice belled out so that I jumped in my seat. "When they found how terrible men are, that they themselves are the weak ones, we changed in their eyes from peasants to kings!"

Van Rijn sucked noisily on his cigar. "Any other shipboard notions?" he asked.

"No, sir, those were our two schools of thought," Per said.

Van Rijn gaffawed. "So! Take comfort, freemen. No need for angelometrics on pinheads. Relax and drink. You are both wrong."

"I beg your pardon," Harry rapped. "You were not there, may I say."

"No, not in the flesh." Van Rijn slapped his paunch. "Too much flesh for that. But tonight I have been on Cain up here, in this old brain, and it is rusty and afloat in alcohol but it has stored away more information about the universe than maybe the universe gets credit for holding. I see now what the parallels are. Xanadu, Dunbar, Tametha, Disaster Landing... oh, the analogue is never exact and on Cain the thing I am thinking of has gone far and far... but still I see the pattern, and what happened makes sense.

"Not that we have got to have an analogue. You gave us so many clues here that I could solve the puzzle by logic alone. But analogues help, and also they show my conclusion is not only correct but possible."

Van Rijn paused. He was so blatantly waiting to be coaxed that Harry and I made a long performance out of refreshing our drinks. Van Rijn turned purple, wheezed a while, decided to keep his temper for a better occasion, and chortled.

"Hokay, you win," he said. "I tell you short and fast, because very soon we eat if the cook has not fallen in the curry. Later you can study the formal psychologies.

"The key to this problem is the Lugals. You have been calling them slaves, and there is your mistake. They are not. They are domestic animals."

Per sat bolt upright. "Can't be!" he exclaimed. "Sir, I mean, they have language and..."

"*Ja, ja, ja*, for all I care they do mattress algebra in their heads. They are still tame animals. What is a slave, anyhow? A man who has got to do what another man says, willy-billy. Right? Harry said he would not trust a slave with weapons, and I would not either, because history is too pocked up with slave revolts and slaves running away and slaves dragging their feet and every such foolishness. But your big fierce expensive dogs, Harry, you trust them with their teeth, *nie?* When your kids was little and wet, you left them alone in rooms with a dog to keep watches. There is the difference. A slave may or not obey. But a domestic animal has *got* to obey. His genes won't let him do anything different.

"Well, you yourselves figured the Yildivans had kept Lugal so long, breeding them for what traits they wanted, that this had changed the Lugal nature. Must be so. Otherwise the Lugal would be slaves, not animals, and could not always be trusted the way you saw they were. You also guessed the Yildivans themselves must have been affected, and this is very sleek thinking only you did not carry it so far you ought. Because everything you tell about the Yildivans goes to prove by nature they are wild animals.

"I mean wild, like tigers and buffalos. They have no genes for obediences, except to their parents when they are little. So long have they kept Lugal to do the dirty work – before they really became intelligent, I bet, like ants keeping aphids; for remember, you found no Lugal that was not kept – any gregarious-making genes in the Yildivans, any inborn will to be led, has gone foof. This must be so. Otherwise, from normal variation in ability, some form of Yildivan ranks would come to exist, *nie?*

"This pops your fear-of-invasion theory, Per Stenvik. With no concept of a tribe or army, they can't have any notions about conquest. And wild animals don't turn humble when they are beat, Manuel Gomez y Palomares, the way you imagine. A man with a superiority complexion may lick your boots when you prove you are his better; but an untamed carnivore hasn't got any such pride in the first place. He is plain and simple independent of you.

"Well, then, what did actual go on in their heads?

"Recapitalize. Humans land and settle down to deal. Yildivans have no experience of races outside their own planet. They natural assume you think like them. In puncture of fact, I believe they could not possible imagine anything else, even if they was told. Your findings about their culture structure shows their half-symbiosis with the Lugal is psychological too; they are specialized in the brains, not near so complicated as man.

"But as they get better acquainted, what do they see? People taking orders. How can this be? No Yildivan ever took orders, unless to save his life when an enemy stood over him with a sharp thing. Ah, ha! So some of the strangers is Lugal type. Pretty soon, I bet, old Shivaru decides all of you is Lugal except young Stenvik, because in the end all orders come from him. Some others, like Manuel, is straw bosses maybe, but no more. Tame animals.

"And then Per mentions the idea of God." Van Rijn crossed himself with a somewhat irritating piety. "I make no blasfuming," he said. "But everybody knows our picture of God comes in part from our kings. If you want to know how Oriental kings in ancient days was spoken to, look in your prayer book. Even now, we admit He is the Lord, and we is supposed to do His will, hoping He will not take too serious a few things that happen to anybody like anger, pride, envy, gluttony, lust, sloth, greed, and the rest what makes life fun.

"Per said this. So Per admitted he had a master. But then he must also be a Lugal – an anima1. No Yildivan could possible confess to having even a mythical master, as shown by the fact they have no religion themselves though their Lugal seem to.

"Give old boy Shivaru his credits, he came again with some friends to ask further. What did he learn? He already knew everybody else was a Lugal, because of obeying. Now Per said he was no better than the rest. This confirmed Per was also a Lugal. And what blew the cork out of the bottle was when Per said he nor none of them had any owners at home!

"Whup, whup, slow down, youngster. You could not have known. Always we make discoveries the hard way. Like those poor Yildivans.

"They was real worried, you can imagine. Even dogs turn on people now and then, and surely some Lugal go bad once in a while on Cain and make big trouble before they can get killed. The Yildivans had seen some of your powers, knew you was dangerous... and your breed of Lugal must have gone mad and killed off its own Yildivans. How else could you be Lugal and yet have no masters?

"So. What would you and I do, friends, if we lived in lonely country houses and a pack of wild dogs what had killed people set up shop in our neighborhood?"

Van Rijn gurgled beer down his throat. We pondered for a while.

"Seems pretty farfetched," Harry said.

"No." Per's cheeks burned with excitement. "It fits. Freeman Van Rijn put into words what I always felt as I got to know Shivaru. A – a single-mindedness about him. As if he was incapable of seeing certain things, grasping certain ideas, though his reasoning faculties were intrinsically as good as mine. Yes..."

I nodded at my pipe, which had been with me when I clashed against stranger beings than that.

"So two of them first took advantage of you," Van Rijn said, "to swindle away what they could before the attack because they wasn't sure the attack would work. No shame there. You was outside the honor concept, being animals. Animals whose ancestors must have murdered a whole race of true humans, in their views. Then the alarmed males tried to scrub you out. They failed, but hoped maybe to use their prisoners for a lever to pry you off their country. Only Manuel fooled them."

"But why'd they change their minds about us?" Per asked.

Van Rijn wagged his finger. "*Ja*, there you was lucky. You gave a very clear and important order. Your men disobeyed every bit of it. Now Lugals might go crazy and kill off Yildivans, but they are so bred to being bossed that they can't stand long against a leader. Or if they do, it's because they is too crazy to think straight. Manuel, though, was thinking straight like a plumber line. His strategy worked five-four-three-two-one-zero. Also, your people did not kill more Yildivans than was needful, which crazy Lugals would do.

"So you could not be domestic animals after all, gone bad or not. Therefore you had to be wild animals. The Cainite mind – a narrow mind like you said – can't imagine any third horn on that special bull. If you had proved you was not Lugal type, you must be Yildivan type. Indications to the contrariwise, the way you seemed to take orders or acknowledge a Lord, those must have been misunderstandings on the Cainites' part.

"Once he had time to reason this out, Shivaru saw his people had done yours dirty. Partway he felt bad about it in his soul, if he has one stowed somewhere; Yildivans do have some notion about upright behavior to other Yildivans. And besides, he did not want to lose a chance at your fine trade goods. He convinced his friends. They did what best they could think about to make amendments."

Van Rijn rubbed his palms together in glee. "Oh, ho, ho, what customers they will be for us!" he roared.

We sat still for another time, digesting the idea, until the butler announced dinner. Manuel helped Per rise.

"We'll have to instruct everybody who goes to Cain," the young man said. "I mean, not to let on that we aren't wild animals, we humans."

"But, Captain," Manuel said, and his head lifted high, "we are."

Van Rijn stopped and looked at us a while. Then he shook his own head violently and shambled bearlike to the viewer wall. "No," he growled. "*Some* of us are."

"How's that?" Harry wondered.

"We here in this room are wild," Van Rijn said. "We do what we do because we want to or because it is right. No other motivations, *nie*? If you made slaves of us, you would for sure not be wise to let us near a weapon.

"But how many slaves has there been, in Earth's long history, that their masters could trust? Quite some! There was even armies of slaves, like the Janissaries. And how many people today is domestic animals at heart? Wanting somebody else should tell them what to do, and take care of their needfuls, and protect them not just against their fellow men but against themselves? Why has every free human society been so short-lived? Is this not because the wild-animal men are born so heartbreaking seldom?"

He glared out across the City, where it winked and glittered beneath the stars, around the curve of the planet.

"Do you think they yonder is free?" he shouted. His hand chopped downward in scorn.

THE END

INTRODUCTION TO *A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE*

AS A DEWDROP may reflect the glade wherein it lies, even so does the story which follows give a glimpse into some of the troubles which Technic civilization was bringing upon itself, among many others. Ythrians, be not overly proud; only look back, from the heights of time, across Ythrian history, and then forward to the shadow of God across the future.

This tale appears at first glance to have no bearing on the fate-to-be of Avalon. Yet consider: it shows a kindred spirit. Ythri was not the sole world that responded to the challenge which, wittingly or no, humans and starflight had cried. Like the countless tiny influences which, together, draw a hurricane now this way, now that, the actions of more individuals than we can ever know did their work upon history. Also, Paradox and Trillia are not galactically distant from us; they may yet come to be of direct import.

The tale was brought back to Ythri lifetimes ago by the xenologist Fluoch of Mistwood. Arinnian of Stormgate, whose hitman name is Christopher Holm and who has rendered several Ythrian works into Anglic, prepared this version for the book you behold.

—Hloch of the Stormgate Choth
The Earth Book of Stormgate

A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE

THEY FOUND the planet during the first Grand Survey. An expedition to it was organized very soon after the report appeared; for this looked like an impossibility.

It orbited its G9 sun at an average distance of some three astronomical units, thus receiving about one-eighteenth the radiation Earth gets. Under such a condition (and others, e. g., the magnetic field strength which was present) a subjovian ought to have formed; and indeed it had fifteen times the terrestrial mass. But — that mass was concentrated in a solid globe. The atmosphere was only half again as dense as on man's home, and breathable by him.

"*Where 'ave h'all the H'atoms gone?*" became the standing joke of the research team. Big worlds are supposed to keep enough of their primordial hydrogen and helium to completely dominate the chemistry. Paradox, as it was unofficially christened, did retain some of the latter gas, to a total of eight percent of its air. This posed certain technical problems which had to be solved before anyone dared land. However, land the men must; the puzzle they confronted was so delightfully baffling.

A nearly circular ocean basin suggested an answer which studies of its bottom seemed to confirm. Paradox had begun existence as a fairly standard specimen, complete with four moons. But the largest of these, probably a captured asteroid, had had an eccentric orbit. At last perturbation brought it into the upper atmosphere, which at that time extended beyond Roche's limit. Shock waves, repeated each time one of these ever-deeper grayings was made, blew vast quantities of gas off into space: especially the lighter molecules. Breakup of the moon hastened this process and made it more violent, by presenting more solid surface. Thus at the final crash, most of those meteoroids fell as one body, to form that gigantic astrobleme. Perhaps metallic atoms, thermally ripped free of their ores and splashed as an incandescent fog across half the planet, locked onto the bulk of what hydrogen was left, if any was.

Be that as it may, Paradox now had only a mixture of what had hitherto been comparatively insignificant impurities, carbon dioxide, water vapor, methane, ammonia, and other materials. In short, except for a small amount of helium, it had become rather like the young Earth. It got less heat and light, but greenhouse effect kept most of its water liquid. Life evolved, went into the photosynthesis business, and turned the air into the oxynitrogen common on terrestrials. The helium had certain interesting biological effects. These were not studied in detail. After all, with the hyperdrive opening endless wonders to them, spacefarers tended to choose the most obviously glamorous. Paradox lay a hundred parsecs from Sol. Thousands upon thousands of worlds were more easily reached; many were more pleasant and less dangerous to walk on. The expedition departed and had no successors.

First it called briefly at a neighboring star, on one of whose planets were intelligent beings that had developed a promising set of civilizations. But, again, quite a few such lay closer to home. The era of scientific expansion was followed by the era of commercial aggrandizement. Merchant adventurers began to appear in the sector. They ignored Paradox, which had nothing to make a profit on, but investigated the inhabited globe in the nearby system. In the language dominant there at the time, it was called something like Trillia, which thus became its name in League Latin. The speakers of that language were undergoing their equivalent of the First Industrial Revolution, and eager to leap into the modern age. Unfortunately, they had little to offer that was in demand elsewhere. And even in the spacious terms of the Polesotechnic League, they lived at the far end of a long haul. Their charming arts and crafts made Trillia marginally worth a visit, on those rare occasions when a trader was on such a route that the detour wasn't great. Besides, it was as well to keep an eye on the natives. Lacking the means to buy the important gadgets of Technic society, they had set about developing these for themselves.

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Bryce Harker pushed through flowering vines which covered an otherwise doorless entrance. They rustled back into place behind him, smelling like allspice, trapping gold-yellow sunlight in their leaves. That light also slanted through olive windows in a curving wall, to glow off the grain of the wooden floor. Furniture was sparse: a few stools, a low table bearing an intricately faceted piece of rock crystal. By Trillian standards the ceiling was high; but Harker, who was of average human size, must stoop.

Witweet bounced from an inner room, laid down the book of poems he had been reading, and piped, “Why, be welcome, dear boy... Oo-oo-oo!”

He looked down the muzzle of a blaster.

The man showed teeth. “Stay right where you are,” he commanded. The vocalizer on his breast rendered the sounds he made into soprano cadenzas and arpeggios, the speech of Lenidel. It could do nothing about his vocabulary and grammar. His knowledge did include the fact that, by omitting all honorifics and circumlocutions without apology, he was uttering a deadly insult.

That was the effect he wanted – deadliness.

“My, my, my dear good friend from the revered Solar Commonwealth,” Witweet stammered, “is this a, a jest too subtle for a mere pilot like myself to comprehend? I will gladly laugh if you wish, and then we, we shall enjoy tea and cakes. I have genuine Lapsang Soochong tea from Earth, and have just found the most darling recipe for sweet cakes —”

“Quiet!” Harker rapped. His glance flickered to the windows. Outside, flower colors exploded beneath reddish tree trunks; small bright wings went fluttering past; The Waterfall That Rings Like Glass Bells could be heard in the distance. Annanna was akin to most cities of Lenidel, the principal nation on Trillia, in being spread through an immensity of forest and parkscape. Nevertheless, Annanna had a couple of million population, who kept busy. Three aircraft were crossing heaven. At any moment, a pedestrian or cyclist might come along The Pathway Of The Beautiful Blossoms And The Bridge That Arches Like A Note Of Music, and wonder why two humans stood tense outside number 1337.

Witweet regarded the man’s skinsuit and boots, the pack on his shoulders, the tightly drawn sharp features behind the weapon. Tears blurred the blue of Witweet’s great eyes. “I fear you are engaged in some desperate undertaking which distorts the natural goodness that, I feel certain, still inheres,” he quavered. “May I beg the honor of being graciously let help you relieve whatever your distress may be?”

Harker squinted back at the Trillian. How much do he really know about his breed, anyway? Damned nonhuman thing—though I never resented his existence till now... His pulse knocked; his skin was wet and stank, his mouth was dry and cottony-tasting.

Yet his prisoner looked altogether helpless. Witweet was an erect biped; but his tubby frame reached to barely a meter, from the padded feet to the big, scalloped ears. The two arms were broomstick thin, the four fingers on either hand suggested straws. The head was practically spherical, bearing a pug muzzle, moist black nose, tiny mouth, quivering whiskers, upward-slanting tufty brows. That, the tail, and the fluffy silver-gray fur which covered the whole skin, had made Olafsson remark that the only danger to be expected from this race was that eventually their cuteness would become unendurable. Witweet had nothing upon him except an ornately embroidered kimono and a sash tied in a pink bow. He surely owned no weapons, and probably wouldn’t know what to do with any. The Trillians were omnivores, but did not seem to have gone through a hunting stage in their evolution. They had never fought wars, and personal violence was limited to an infrequent scuffle.

Still, Harker thought, they’ve shown the guts to push into deep space. I daresay even an unarmed policeman – Courtesy Monitor – could use his vehicle against us, like by ramming.

Hurry!

“Listen,” he said. “Listen carefully. You’ve heard that most intelligent species have members who don’t mind using brute force, outright killing, for other ends than self-defense. Haven’t you?”

Witweet waved his tail in assent. “Truly I am baffled by that statement, concerning as it does races whose achievements are of incomparable magnificence. However, not only my poor mind, but those of our most eminent thinkers have been engaged in fruitless endeavors to—”

“Dog your hatch!” The vocalizer made meaningless noises and Harker realized he had shouted in Anglic. He went back to Lenidellian-equivalent. “I don’t propose to waste time. My partners and I did not come here to trade as we announced. We came to get a Trillian spaceship. The project is important enough that we’ll kill if we must. Make trouble, and I’ll blast you to greasy ash. It won’t bother me. And you aren’t the only possible pilot we can work through, so don’t imagine you can block us by sacrificing yourself. I admit you are our best prospect. Obey, cooperate fully, and you’ll live. We’ll have no reason to destroy you.” He paused. “We may even send you home with a good piece of money. We’ll be able to afford that.”

The bottling of his fur might have made Witweet impressive to another Trillian. To Harker, he became a ball of fuzz in a kimono, an agitated tail and a sound of coloratura anguish. “But this is insanity... if I may say that to a respected guest... One of our awkward, lumbering, fragile, unreliable prototype ships – when you came in a vessel representing centuries of advancement...? Why, why, why, in the name of multiple sacredness, why?”

"I'll tell you later," the man said. "You're due for a routine supply trip to, uh, Gwinsai Base, starting tomorrow, right? You'll board this afternoon, to make final inspection and settle in. We're coming along. You'd be leaving in about an hour's time. Your things must already be packed. I didn't cultivate your friendship for nothing, you see! Now, walk slowly ahead of me, bring your luggage back here and open it so I can make sure what you've got. Then we're on our way."

Witweet stared into the blaster. A shudder went through him. His fur collapsed. Tail dragging, he turned toward the inner rooms.

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Stocky Leo Dolgorov and ash-blond Einar Olafsson gusted simultaneous oaths of relief when their leader and his prisoner came out onto the path. "What took you that time?" the first demanded. "Were you having a nap?"

"Nah, he entered one of their bowing, scraping, and unction-smearing contests." Olafsson's grin held scant mirth.

"Trouble?" Harker asked.

"N-no... three, four passersby stopped to talk – we told them the story and they went on," Dolgorov said. Harker nodded. He'd put a good deal of thought into that excuse for his guards' standing around – that they were about to pay a social call on Witweet but were waiting until the pilot's special friend Harker had made him a gift. A lie must be plausible, and the Trillian mind was not human. "We sure hung on the hook, though."

Olafsson started as a bicyclist came around a bend in the path and fluted a string of complimentary greetings. Dwarfed beneath the men, Witweet made reply. No gun was pointed at him now, but one rested in each of the holsters near his brain. (Harker and companions had striven to convince everybody that the bearing of arms was a peaceful but highly symbolic custom in their part of Technic society, that without their weapons they would feel more indecent than a shaven Trillian.) As far as Harker's wire-taut attention registered, Witweet's answer was routine. But probably some forlornness crept into the overtones, for the neighbor stopped.

"Do you feel quite radiantly well, dear boy?" he asked.

"Indeed I do, honored Pwiddy, and thank you in my prettiest thoughts for your ever-sweet consideration," the pilot replied. "I... well, these good visitors from the starfaring culture of splendor have been describing some of their experiences – oh, I simply must relate them to you later, dear boy! – and naturally, since I am about to embark on another trip, I have been made pensive by this." Hands, tail, whiskers gesticulated. *Meaning what?* wondered Harker in a chill; and clamping jaws together: *Well, you knew you'd have to take risks to win a kingdom.* "Forgive me, I pray you of your overflowing generosity, that I rush off after such curt words. But I have promises to keep, and considerable distances to go before I sleep."

"Understood." Pwiddy spent a mere five minutes bidding farewell all around before he pedaled off. Meanwhile several others passed by. However, since no well-mannered person would interrupt a conversation even to make salute, they created no problem.

"Let's go." It grated in Dolgorov's throat.

Behind the little witch-hatted house was a pergola wherein rested Witweet's personal flutter. It was large and flashy – large enough for three humans to squeeze into the back – which fact had become an element in Harker's plan. The car that the men had used during their stay on Trillia, they abandoned. It was unmistakably an off-planet vehicle.

"Get started!" Dolgorov curled at Witweet.

Olafsson caught his arm and snapped: "Control your emotions! Want to tear his head off?"

Hunched over the dashboard, Witweet squeezed his eyes shut and shivered till Harker prodded him. "Pull out of that funk," the man said.

"I... I beg your pardon. The brutality so appalled me..." Witweet flinched from their laughter. His fingers gripped levers and twisted knobs. Here was no steering by gestures in a light-field, let alone simply speaking an order to an autopilot. The overloaded flutter crawled skyward. Harker detected a flutter in its grav unit, but decided nothing was likely to fail before they reached the spaceport. And after that, nothing would matter except getting off this planet.

Not that it was a bad place, he reflected. Almost Earth-like in size, gravity, air, deliciously edible life forms – an Earth that no longer was and perhaps never had been, wide horizons and big skies, caressed by light and rain. Looking out, he saw woodlands in a thousand hues of green, meadows, river-gleam, an occasional dollhouse dwelling, grainfields ripening tawny and the soft gaudiness of a flower ranch. Ahead lifted The Mountain Which Presides Over Moonrise In Lenidel, a snowpeak pure as Fuji's. The sun, yellower than Sol, turned it and a few clouds into gold.

A gentle world for a gentle people. Too gentle.

Too bad. For them.

Besides, after six months of it, three city-bred men were about ready to climb screaming out of their skulls. Harker drew forth a cigarette, inhaled it into lighting and filled his lungs with harshness. *I'd almost welcome a fight*, he thought savagely.

But none happened. Half a year of hard, patient study paid richly off. It helped that the Trillians were – well, you couldn't say lax about security, because the need for it had never occurred to them. Witweet radioed to the portmaster as he approached, was informed that everything looked okay, and took his flitter straight through an open cargo lock into a hold of the ship he was to pilot.

The port was like nothing in Technic civilization, unless on the remotest, least visited of outposts. After all, the Trillians had gone in a bare fifty years from propeller-driven aircraft to interstellar spaceships. Such concentration on research and development had necessarily been at the expense of production and exploitation. What few vessels they had were still mostly experimental. The scientific bases they had established on planets of next-door stars needed no more than three or four freighters for their maintenance. Thus a couple of buildings and a ground-control tower bounded a stretch of ferrocrete on a high, chilly plateau; and that was Trillia's spaceport.

Two ships were in. One was being serviced, half its hull plates removed and furry shapes swarming over the emptiness within. The other, assigned to Witweet, stood on landing jacks at the far end of the field. Shaped like a fat torpedo, decorated in floral designs of pink and baby blue, it was as big as a Dromond-class hauler. Yet its payload was under a thousand tons. The primitive systems for drive, control, and life support took up that much room.

"I wish you a just too, too delightful voyage," said the portmaster's voice from the radio. "Would you honor me by accepting an invitation to dinner? My wife has, if I may boast, discovered remarkable culinary attributes of certain sea weeds brought back from Gwinsai; and for my part, dear boy, I would be *so* interested to hear your opinion of a new verse form with which I am currently experimenting."

"No... I thank you, no, impossible, I beg indulgence..." It was hard to tell whether the unevenness of Witweet's response came from terror or from the tobacco smoke that had kept him coughing. He almost slung his vehicle into the spaceship.

*** *** ***

Clearance granted, *The Serenity of the Estimable Philosopher Ittivin* lifted into a dawn sky. When Trillia was a dwindling cloud-marbled sapphire among the stars, Harker let out a breath. "We can relax now."

"Where?" Olafsson grumbled. The single cabin barely allowed three humans to crowd together. They'd have to take turns sleeping in the hall that ran aft to the engine room. And their voyage was going to be long. Top pseudovelocity under the snail-powered hyperdrive of this craft would be less than one light-year per day.

"Oh, we can admire the darling murals," Dolgorov fleered. He kicked an intricately painted bulkhead.

Witweet, crouched miserable at the control board, flinched. "I beg yon, dear, kind sir, do not scuff the artwork," he said.

"Why should you care?" Dolgorov asked. "Yon won't be keeping this junkheap."

Witweet wrung his hands. "Defacement is still very wicked. Perhaps the consignee will appreciate my patterns? I spent such a time on them, trying to get every teensiest detail correct."

"Is that why your freighters have a single person aboard?" Olafsson laughed. "Always seemed reckless to me, not taking a backup pilot at least. But I suppose two Trillians would get into so fierce an argument about the interior decor that they'd each stalk off in an absolute snit."

"Why, no," said Witweet, a trifle calmer. "We keep personnel down to one because more are not really needed. Piloting between stars is automatic, and the crewbeing is trained in servicing functions. Should he suffer harm en route, the ship will put itself into orbit around the destination planet and can be boarded by others. An extra would thus uselessly occupy space which is often needed for passengers. I am surprised that you, sir, who have set a powerful intellect to prolonged consideration of our astronomical practices, should not have been aware—"

"I was, I was!" Olafsson threw up his hands as far as the overhead permitted. "Ask a rhetorical question and get an oratorical answer."

"May I, in turn, humbly request enlightenment as to your reason for... sequestering... a spacecraft ludicrously inadequate by every standards of your oh, so sophisticated society?"

"You may." Harker's spirits bubbled from relief of tension. They'd pulled it off. They really had. He sat down – the deck was padded and perfumed – and started a cigarette. Through his bones beat the throb of the gravity drive: energy wasted by a clumsy system. The weight it made underfoot fluctuated slightly in a rhythm that felt wavelike.

"I suppose we may as well call ourselves criminals," he said; the Lenidellian word he must use had milder connotations. "There are people back home who wouldn't leave us alive if they knew who'd done certain things. But we never got rich off them. Now we will." He had no need for recapitulating except the need to gloat: "You know we came to Trillia half a standard year ago, on a League ship that was paying a short visit to buy art. We had goods of our own to barter with, and announced we were going to settle down for a while and look into the possibility of establishing a permanent trading post with a regular shuttle service to some of the Technic planets. That's what the captain of the ship thought too. He advised us against it, said it couldn't pay and we'd simply be stuck on Trillia till the next League vessel chanced by, which wouldn't likely be for more than a year. But when we insisted, and gave him passage money, he shrugged," as did Harker.

"You have told me this," Witweet said. "I thrilled to the ecstasy of what I believed was your friendship."

“Well, I *did* enjoy your company,” Harker smiled. “You’re not a bad little osco. Mainly, though, we concentrated on you because we’d learned you qualified for our uses – a regular freighter pilot, a bachelor so we needn’t fuss with a family, a chatterer who could be pumped for any information we wanted. Seems we gauged well.”

“We better have,” Dolgorov said gloomily. “Those trade goods cost us everything we could scratch together. I took a steady job for two years, and lived like a lama, to get my share.”

“And now we’ll be living like fakirs,” said Olafsson. “But afterward – afterward!”

“Evidently your whole aim was to acquire a Trillian ship,” Witweet said. “My bafflement at this endures.”

“We don’t actually want the ship as such, except for demonstration purposes,” Harker said. “What we want is the plans, the design. Between the vessel itself, and the service manuals aboard, we have that in effect.”

Witweet’s ears quivered. “Do you mean to publish the data for scientific interest? Surely, to beings whose ancestors went on to better models centuries ago – if, indeed, they ever burdened themselves with something this crude – surely the interest is nil. Unless... you think many will pay to see, in order to enjoy mirth at the spectacle of our fumbling efforts?” He spread his arms. “Why, you could have bought complete specifications most cheaply; or, indeed, had you requested of me, I would have been bubbly-happy to obtain a set and make you a gift.” On a note of timid hope: “Thus you see, dear boy, drastic action is quite unnecessary. Let us return. I will state you remained aboard by mistake—”

Olafsson guffawed. Dolgorov said, “Not even your authorities can be that sloppy-thinking.”

Harker ground out his cigarette on the deck, which made the pilot wince, and explained at leisured length: “We want this ship precisely because it’s primitive. Your people weren’t in the electronic era when the first human explorers contacted you. They, or some later visitors, brought you texts on physics. Then your bright lads had the theory of such things as gravity control and hyperdrive. But the engineering practice was something else again.

“You didn’t have plans for a starship. When you finally got an opportunity to inquire, you found that the idealistic period of Technic civilization was over and you must deal with hard-headed entrepreneurs. And the price was set way beyond what your whole planet could hope to save in League currency. That was just the price for diagrams, not to speak of an actual vessel. I don’t know if you are personally aware of the fact – it’s no secret – but this is League policy. The member companies are bound by an agreement.

“They won’t prevent anyone from entering space on his own. But take your case on Trillia. You had learned in a general way about, oh, transistors, for instance. But that did not set you up to manufacture them. An entire industrial complex is needed for that and for the million other necessary items. To design and build one, with the inevitable mistakes en route, would take decades at a minimum, and would involve regimenting your entire species and living in poverty because every bit of capital has to be reinvested. Well, you Trillians were too sensible to pay that price. You’d proceed more gradually. Yet at the same time, your scientists, all your more adventurous types were burning to get out into space.

“I agree your decision about that was intelligent too. You saw you couldn’t go directly from your earliest hydrocarbon-fuelled engines to a modern starship – to a completely integrated system of thermonuclear powerplant, initiative-grade navigation and engineering computers, full-cycle life support, the whole works, using solid-state circuits, molecular-level and nuclear-level transitions, forcefields instead of moving parts – an organism, more energy than matter. No, you wouldn’t be able to build that for generations, probably.

“But you could go ahead and develop huge, clumsy, but workable fission-power units. You could use vacuum tubes, glass rectifiers, kilometers of wire, to generate and regulate the necessary forces. You could store data on tape if not in single molecules, retrieve with a cathode-ray scanner if not with a quantum-field pulse, compute with miniaturized gas-filled units that react in microseconds if not with photon interplays that take a nanosecond.

“You’re like islanders who had nothing better than canoes till someone happened by in a nuclear-powered submarine. They couldn’t copy that, but they might invent a reciprocating steam engine turning a screw – they might attach an airpipe so it could submerge – and it wouldn’t impress the outsiders, but it would cross the ocean too, at its own pace; and it would overawe any neighboring tribes.”

He stopped for breath.

“I see,” Witweet murmured slowly. His tail switched back and forth. “You can sell our designs to sophonts in a proto-industrial stage of technological development. The idea comes from an excellent brain. But why could you not simply buy the plans for resale elsewhere?”

“The damned busybody League,” Dolgorov spat.

“The fact is,” Olafsson said, “spacecraft – of advanced type – have been sold to, ah, less advanced peoples in the past. Some of those weren’t near industrialization, they were Iron Age barbarians, whose only thought was plundering and conquering. They could do that, given ships which are practically self-piloting, self-maintaining, self-everything. It’s cost a good many lives and heavy material losses on border planets. But at least none of the barbarians have been able to duplicate the craft thus far. Hunt every pirate and warlord down, and that ends the problem. Or so the League hopes. It’s banned any more such trades.”

He cleared his throat. “I don’t refer to races like the Trillians, who’re obviously capable of reaching the stars by themselves and unlikely to be a menace when they do,” he said. “You’re free to buy anything you can pay for. The price of certain things is set astronomical mainly to keep you from beginning overnight to compete with the old-established outfits. They prefer a gradual phasing-in of newcomers, so they can adjust.

“But aggressive, warlike cultures, that’d not be interested in reaching a peaceful accommodation – they’re something else again. There’s a total prohibition on supplying their sort with anything that might lead to them getting off their planets in less than centuries. If League agents catch you at it, they don’t fool around with rehabilitation like a regular government. They shoot you.”

Harker grimaced. “I saw once on a telescreen interview,” he remarked, “Old Nick van Rijn said he wouldn’t shoot that kind of offenders. He’d hang them. A rope is reusable.”

“And this ship can be copied,” Witweet breathed. “A low industrial technology, lower than ours, could tool up to produce a modified design, in a comparatively short time, if guided by a few engineers from the core civilization.”

“I trained as an engineer,” Harker said. “Likewise Leo; and Einar spent several years on a planet where one royal family has grandiose ambitions.”

“But the horror you would unleash!” wailed the Trillian. He stared into their stoniness. “You would never dare go home,” he said.

“Don’t want to anyway,” Harker answered. “Power, wealth, yes, and everything those will buy – we’ll have more than we can use up in our lifetimes, at the court of the Militants. Fun, too.” He smiled. “A challenge, you know, to build a space navy from zero. I expect to enjoy my work.”

“Will not the, the, the Polesotechnic League... take measures?”

“That’s why we must operate as we have done. They’d learn about a sale of plans, and then they wouldn’t stop till they’d found and suppressed our project. But a non-Technic ship that never reported in won’t interest them. Our destination is well outside their sphere of normal operations. They needn’t discover any hint of what’s going on – till an interstellar empire too big for them to break is there. Meanwhile, as we gain resources, we’ll have been modernizing our industry and fleet.”

“It’s all arranged,” Olafsson said. “The day we show up in the land of the Militants, bringing the ship we described to them, we’ll become princes.”

“Kings, later,” Dolgorov added. “Behave accordingly, you xeno. We don’t need you much. I’d soon as not boot you through an airlock.”

Witweet spent minutes just shuddering.

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The *Serenity, etc.* moved on away from Trillia’s golden sun. It had to reach a weaker gravitational field than a human craft would have needed, before its hyperdrive would function.

Harker spent part of that period being shown around, top to bottom and end to end. He’d toured a sister ship before, but hadn’t dared ask for demonstrations as thorough as he now demanded. “I want to know this monstrosity we’ve got, inside out,” he said while personally tearing down and rebuilding a cumbersome oxygen renewer. He could do this because most equipment was paired, against the expectation of eventual in-flight down time.

In a hold, among cases of supplies for the research team on Gwinsai, he was surprised to recognize a lean cylindroid, one hundred twenty centimeters long. “But here’s a Solar-built courier!” he exclaimed.

Witweet made eager gestures of agreement. He’d been falling over himself to oblige his captors. “For messages in case of emergency, magnificent sir,” he babbled. “A hyperdrive unit, an autopilot, a radio to call at journey’s end till someone comes and retrieves the enclosed letter—”

“I know, I know. But why not build your own?”

“Well, if you will deign to reflect upon the matter, you will realize that anything we could build would be too slow and unreliable to afford very probable help. Especially since it is most unlikely that, at any given time, another spaceship would be ready to depart Trillia on the instant. Therefore this courier is set, as you can see if you wish to examine the program, to go a considerably greater distance – though nevertheless not taking long, your human constructions being superlatively fast – to the planet called, ah, Oasis... an Anglic word meaning a lovely, cool, refreshing haven, am I correct?”

Harker nodded impatiently. “Yes, one of the League companies does keep a small base there.”

“We have arranged that they will send aid if requested. At a price, to be sure. However, for our poor economy, as ridiculous a hulk as this is still a heavy investment, worth insuring.”

“I see. I didn’t know you bought such gadgets – not that there’d be a pegged price on them; they don’t matter any more than spices or medical equipment. Of course, I couldn’t find out every detail in advance, especially not things you people take so for granted that you didn’t think to mention them.” On impulse, Harker patted the round head. “You know, Witweet, I guess I do like you. I will see you’re rewarded for your help.”

“Passage home will suffice,” the Trillian said quietly, “though I do not know how I can face my kinfolk after having been the instrument of death and ruin for millions of innocents.”

“Then don’t go home,” Harker suggested. “We can’t release you for years in any case, to blab our scheme and our coordinates. But we could smuggle in whatever and whoever you wanted, same as for ourselves.”

The head rose beneath his palm as the slight form straightened. “Very well,” Witweet declared.

Can we trust him? jarred through Harker. *He is nonhuman, yes, but...* The wondering was dissipated by the continuing voice:

“Actually, dear boy, I must disabuse you. We did not buy our couriers, we salvaged them.”

“What? Where?”

“Have you heard of a planet named, by its human discoverers, Paradox?”

Harker searched his memory. Before leaving Earth he had consulted every record he could find about this entire stellar neighborhood. Poorly known though it was to men, there had been a huge sums of data – suns, worlds... “I think so,” he said. “Big, isn’t it? With, uh, a freaky atmosphere.”

“Yes.” Witweet spoke rapidly. “It gave the original impetus to Technic exploration of our vicinity. But later the men departed. In recent years, when we ourselves became able to pay visits, we found their abandoned camp. A great deal of gear had been left behind, presumably because it was designed for Paradox only and would be of no use elsewhere, hence not worth hauling back. Among these machines we came upon a few couriers. I suppose they had been overlooked. Your civilization can afford profligacy, if I may use that term in due respectfulness.”

He crouched, as if expecting a blow. His eyes glittered in the gloom of the hold.

“Hm.” Harker frowned. “I suppose by now you’ve stripped the place.”

“Well, no.” Witweet brushed nervously at his rising fur. “Like the men, we saw no use in, for example, tractors designed for a gravity of two-point-eight terrestrial. They can operate well and cheaply on Paradox, since their fuel is crude oil, of which an abundant supply exists near the campsite. But we already had electric-celled grav motors, however archaic they are by your standards. And we do not need weapons like those we found, presumably for protection against animals. We certainly have no intention of colonizing Paradox!”

“Hm.” The human waved, as if to brush off the chattering voice. “Hm.”

He slouched off, hands in pockets, pondering.

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In the time that followed, he consulted the navigator’s bible. His reading knowledge of Lenidellian was fair. The entry for Paradox was as laconic as it would have been in a Technic reference; despite the limited range of their operations, the Trillians had already encountered too many worlds to allow flowery descriptions. Star type and coordinates, orbital elements, mass density, atmospheric composition, temperature ranges, and the usual rest were listed. There was no notation about habitability, but none was needed. The original explorers hadn’t been poisoned or come down with disease; Trillian metabolism was similar to theirs.

The gravity field was not too strong for this ship to make landing and, later, ascent. Weather shouldn’t pose any hazards, given reasonable care in choosing one’s path; that was a weakly energized environment. Besides, the vessel was meant for planetfalls, and Witweet was a skilled pilot in his fashion...

Harker discussed the idea with Olafsson and Dolgorov. “It won’t take but a few days,” he said, “and we might pick up something really good. You know I’ve not been too happy about the Militants’ prospects of building an ample industrial base fast enough to suit us. Well, a few machines like this, simple things they can easily copy but designed by good engineers... could make a big difference.”

“They’re probably rustheaps,” Dolgorov snorted. “That was long ago.”

“No, durable alloys were available then,” Olafsson said. “I like the notion intrinsically, Bryce. I don’t like the thought of our tame xeno taking us down. He might crash us on purpose.”

“That sniveling faggot?” Dolgorov gibed. He jerked his head backward at Witweet, who sat enormous-eyed in the pilot chair listening to a language he did not understand. “By accident, maybe, seeing how scared he is!”

“It’s a risk we take at journey’s end,” Harker reminded them. “Not a real risk. The ship has some ingenious failsafes built in. Anyhow, I intend to stand over him the whole way down. If he does a single thine wrong, I’ll kill him. The controls aren’t made for me, but I can get us aloft again, and afterward we can re-rig.”

Olafsson nodded. “Seems worth a try,” he said. “What can we lose except a little time and sweat?”

*** **

Paradox rolled enormous in the viewscreen, a darkling world, the sky-band along its sunrise horizon redder than Earth’s, polar caps and winter snowfields gashed by the teeth of mountains, tropical forest and pampas a yellow-brown fading into raw deserts on one side and chopped off on another side by the furious surf of an ocean where three moons fought their tidal waves. The sun was distance-dwarfed, more dull in hue than Sol, nevertheless too bright to look near. Elsewhere, stars filled illimitable blackness.

It was very quiet aboard, save for the mutter of power plant and ventilators, the breathing of men, their restless shuffling about in the cramped cabin. The air was blued and fouled by cigarette smoke; Witweet would have fled into the corridor, but they made him stay, clutching a perfume-dripping kerchief to his nose.

Harker straightened from the observation screen. Even at full magnification, the rudimentary electro-optical system gave little except blurriness. But he’d pract iced on it, while orbiting a satellite, till he felt he could read those wavering traces.

“Campsite and machinery, all right,” he said. “No details. Brush has covered everything. When were your people here last, Witweet?”

“Several years back,” the Trillian wheezed. “Evidently vegetation grows apace. Do you agree on the safety of a landing?”

“Yes. We may snap a few branches, as well as flatten a lot of shrubs, but we’ll back down slowly, the last hundred meters, and we’ll keep the radar, sonar, and gravar sweeps going.” Harker glanced at his men. “Next thing is to compute our descent pattern,” he said. “But first I want to spell out again, point by point, exactly what each of us is to do under exactly what circumstances. I don’t aim to take chances.”

“Oh, no,” Witweet squeaked. “I beg you, dear boy, I beg you the prettiest I can, please don’t.”

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After the tension of transit, landing was an anticlimax. All at once the engine fell silent. A wind whistled around the hull. Viewscreens showed low, thick-boled trees, fronded brownish leaves; tawny undergrowth; shadowy glimpses of metal objects beneath vines and amidst tall, whipping stalks. The sun stood at late afternoon in a sky almost purple.

Witweet checked the indicators while Harker studied them over his head. “Air breathable, of course,” the pilot said, “which frees us of the handicap of having to wear smelly old spacesuits. We should bleed it in gradually, since the pressure is greater than ours at present and we don’t want earaches, do we? Temperature—” He shivered delicately. “Be certain you are wrapped up snug before you venture outside.”

“You’re venturing first,” Harker informed him.

“What? Oo-oooh, my good, sweet, darling friend, no, please, no! It is cold out there, scarcely above freezing. And once on the ground, no gravity generator to help, why, weight will be tripled. What could I possibly, possibly do? No, let me stay inside, keep the home fires burning – I mean keep the thermostat at a cozy temperature – and, yes, I will make you the nicest pot of tea—”

“If you don’t stop fluttering and do what you’re told, I’ll tear your head off,” Dolgorov said. “Guess what I’ll use your skin for.”

“Let’s get cracking,” Olafsson said. “I don’t want to stay in this Helheim any longer than you.”

They opened a hatch the least bit. While Paradoxian air seeped in, they dressed as warmly as might be, except for Harker. He intended to stand by the controls for the first investigatory period. The entering gases added a whine to the wind-noise. Their helium content made speech and other sounds higher pitched, not quite natural; and this would have to be endured for the rest of the journey, since the ship had insufficient reserve tanks to flush out the new atmosphere. A breath of cold got by the heaters, and a rank smell of alien growth. But you could get used to hearing funny, Harker thought. And the native life might stink, but it was harmless. You couldn’t eat it and be nourished, but neither could its germs live off your body. If heavy weapons had been needed here, they were far more likely against large, blundering herbivores than against local tigers.

That didn’t mean they couldn’t be used in war.

Trembling, eyes squinched half-shut, tail wrapped around his muzzle, the rest of him bundled in four layers of kimono, Witweet crept to the personnel lock. Its outer valve swung wide. The gangway went down. Harker grinned to see the dwarfish shape descend, step by step under the sudden harsh hauling of the planet. “Sure you can move around in that pull?” he asked his companions.

“Sure,” Dolgorov grunted. “An extra hundred-fifty kilos? I can backpack more than that, and then it’s less well distributed.”

“Stay cautious, though. Too damned easy to fall and break bones.”

“I’d worry more about the cardiovascular system,” Olafsson said. “One can stand three gees a while, but not for a very long while. Fluid begins seeping out of the cell walls, the heart feels the strain too much – and we’ve no gravanol along as the first expedition must have had.”

“We’ll only be here a few days at most,” Harker said, “with plenty of chances to rest inboard.”

“Right,” Olafsson agreed. “Forward!”

Gripping his blaster, he shuffled onto the gangway. Dolgorov followed. Below, Witweet huddled.

Harker looked out at bleakness, felt the wind slap his face with chill, and was glad he could stay behind. Later he must take his turn outdoors, but for now he could enjoy warmth, decent weight...

The world reached up and grabbed him. Off balance, he fell to the deck. His left hand struck first, pain gushed, he saw the wrist and arm splinter. He screamed. The sound came weak as well as shrill, out of a breast laboring against thrice the heaviness it should have had. At the same time, the lights in the ship went out.

Witweet perched on a boulder. His back was straight in spite of the drag on him, which made his robes hang stiff as if carved on an idol of some minor god of justice. His tail, erect, blew jauntily in the bitter sunset wind; the colors of his garments were bold against murk that rose in the forest around the dead spacecraft.

He looked into the guns of three men, and into the terror that had taken them behind the eyes; and Witweet laughed.

“Put those toys away before you hurt yourselves,” he said, using no circumlocutions or honorifics.

“You bastard, you swine, you filthy treacherous xeno, I’ll kill you,” Dolgorov groaned. “Slowly.”

“First you must catch me,” Witweet answered. “By virtue of being small, I have a larger surface-to-volume ratio than you. My bones, my muscles, my veins and capillaries and cell membranes suffer less force per square centimeter than do yours. I can move faster than you, here. I can survive longer.”

“You can’t outrun a blaster bolt,” Olafsson said.

“No. You can kill me with that – a quick, clean death which does not frighten me. Really, because we of Lenidel observe certain customs of courtesy, use certain forms of speech – because our males in particular are encouraged to develop esthetic interests and compassion – does that mean we are cowardly or effeminate?” The Trillian clicked his tongue. “If you supposed so, you committed an elementary logical fallacy which our philosophers name the does-not-follow.”

“Why shouldn’t we kill you?”

“That is inadvisable. You see, your only hope is quick rescue by a League ship. The courier can operate here, being a solid-state device. It can reach Oasis and summon a vessel which, itself of similar construction, can also land on Paradox and take off again... in time. This would be impossible for a Trillian craft. Even if one were ready to leave, I doubt the Astronautical Senate would permit the pilot to risk descent.

“Well, rescuers will naturally ask questions. I cannot imagine any story which you three men, alone, might concoct that would stand up under the subsequent, inevitable investigation. On the other hand, I can explain to the League’s agents that you were only coming along to look into trade possibilities and that we were trapped on Paradox by a faulty autopilot which threw us into a descent curve. I can do this in detail, which you could not if you killed me. They will return us all to Trillia, where there is no death penalty.”

Witweet smoothed his wind-ruffled whiskers. “The alternative,” he finished, “is to die where you are, in a most unpleasant fashion.”

Harker’s splinted arm gestured back the incoherent Dolgorov. He set an example by holstering his own gun. “I... guess we’re outsmarted,” he said, word by foul-tasting word. “But what happened? Why’s the ship inoperable?”

“Helium in the atmosphere,” Witweet explained calmly. “The monatomic helium molecule is ooh-how-small. It diffuses through almost every material. Vacuum tubes, glass rectifiers, electronic switches dependent on pure gases, any such device soon becomes poisoned. You, who were used to a technology that had long left this kind of thing behind, did not know the fact, and it did not occur to you as a possibility. We Trillians are, of course, rather acutely aware of the problem. I am the first who ever set foot on Paradox. You should have noted that my courier is a present-day model.”

“I see,” Olafsson mumbled.

“The sooner we get our message off, the better,” Witweet said. “By the way, I assume you are not so foolish as to contemplate the piratical takeover of a vessel of the Polesotechnic League.”

“Oh, no!” said they, including Dolgorov, and the other two blasters were sheathed.

“One thing, though,” Harker said. A part of him wondered if the pain in him was responsible for his own abnormal self-possession. Counterirritant against dismay? Would he weep after it wore off? “You bargain for your life by promising to have ours spared. How do we know we want your terms? What’ll they do to us on Trillia?”

“Entertain no fears,” Witweet assured him. “We are not vindictive, as I have heard some species are; nor have we any officious concept of ‘rehabilitation.’ Wrongdoers are required to make amends to the fullest extent possible. You three have cost my people a valuable ship and whatever cargo cannot be salvaged. You must have technological knowledge to convey, of equal worth. The working conditions will not be intolerable. Probably you can make restitution and win release before you reach old age.

“Now, come, get busy. First we dispatch that courier, then we prepare what is necessary for our survival until rescue.” He hopped down from the rock, which none of them would have been able to do unscathed, and approached them through gathering cold twilight with the stride of a conqueror.

THE END

INTRODUCTION TO *WINGLESS*

THE REST would appear to be everyone's knowledge: how at last, inevitably, the Babur War turned out to be the first civil war in the Commonwealth and gave the Polesotechnic League a mortal wound. The organization would linger on for another hundred Terran years, but waning and disintegrating; in truth, already it had ceased to be what it began as, the proud upbearer of liberty.

Eventually the Commonwealth, too, went under. The Troubles were only quelled with the rise and expansion of the Empire – and its interior peace is often bought with foreign violence, as Ythri and Avalon have learned. Honor be forever theirs whose deathride preserved for us our right to rule ourselves!

Surely much of that spirit flies through time from David and Coya Conyon/Falkayn. When they led to this planet humans who would found new homes, they were doing more than escaping from the chaos they foresaw; they were raising afresh the ancient banner of freedom. When they obtained the protection and cooperation of Ythri, they knew – it is in their writings – how rich and strong a world must come from the dwelling together of two races so unlike. Thus far the common wisdom. As for the creation and history of our choth upon Avalon, that is in *The Sky Book of Stormgate*. Yet Hloch has somewhat more to give you before his own purpose is fully served. As you well know, our unique society did not come easily into being. Especially in the early years, misunderstandings, conflicts, bitterness, even enmity would often strike talons into folks. Have you heard much of this from the human side? Belike not. It is fitting that you learn.

Hloch has therefore chosen two final tales as representative. That they are told from youthful hoverpoints is, in his mind, very fit. The first of them is the last that Judith Dalmady/Lundgren wrote for *Morgana*. Though she was then in her high old age, the memories upon which she was drawing were fresh.

—Hloch of the Stormgate Choht
The Earth Book of Stormgate

WINGLESS

AS FAR AS we know – but how much do we really know, in this one corner of this one galaxy which we have somewhat explored? – Avalon was the first planet whereon two different intelligent species founded a joint colony. Thus much was unforeseeable, not only about the globe itself, whose mysteries had barely been skimmed by the original explorers, but about the future of so mixed a people. The settlers began by establishing themselves in the Hesperian Islands, less likely to hold fatal surprises than a continent. And the two races chose different territories.

Relations between them were cordial, of course. Both looked forward to the day when men and Ythrians would take over the mainlands and dwell there together. But at first it seemed wise to avoid possible friction. After all, they had scarcely anything in common except more or less similar biochemistries, warm blood, live birth, and the hope of making a fresh start on an uncorrupted world. Let them get acquainted gradually, let mutuality develop in an unforced way.

Hence Nat Falkayn rarely saw winged folk in the early part of his life. When an Ythrian did, now and then, have business in Chartertown, it was apt to be with his grandfather David, or, presently, his father Nicholas: certainly not with a little boy. Even when an eaglelike being came as a dinner guest, conversation was seldom in Anglic. Annoyed by this, Nat grew downright grindstone about learning the Planha language as his school required. But the effort didn't pay off until he was seventeen Avalonian years old – twelve years of that Mother Earth he had never seen, of which his body bore scarcely an atom.

At that time, the archipelago settlements had grown to a point where leaders felt ready to plant a seed of habitation on the Coronan continent. But much study and planning must go before. Nicholas Falkayn, an engineer, was among those humans who joined Ythrian colleagues in a research and development team. The headquarters of his happened to be at the chief abode of the allied folk, known to its dwellers as Trauvay and to humans as Wingland. He would be working out of there for many cycles of the moon Morgana, each of which equalled not quite half a Lunar month. So he brought his wife and children along.

Nat found himself the only boy around in his own age bracket. However, there was no lack of young Ythrian companions.

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“Hyaa-aah!” In a whirl and thunder, Keshchyi left the balcony floor and swung aloft. Sunlight blazed off his feathers. The whistling, trumpeting challenge blew down: “What are you waiting for, you mudfeet?”

Less impetuous than his cousin, Thuriak gave Nat a sharp yellow glance. “Well, are you coming?” he asked.

“I... guess so,” the human mumbled.

You are troubled, Thuriak said, not with his voice. Infinitely variable, Ythrian plumage can send ripples of expression across the entire body, signs and symbols often more meaningful than words will ever be. Nat had

learned some of the conventional attitudes as part of his Planha lessons. But now, during these days of real acquaintance with living creatures, he had come to feel more and more like a deaf-mute.

He could merely say, in clumsy direct speech: “No, I’m fine. Honest I am. Just, uh, well, wondering if I shouldn’t at least call my mother and ask—”

His tone trailed off. Thuriak seemed to be registering scorn. And this was a gentle, considerate youth, not at all like that overbearing Keshchyi.

You must, like a nestling. Did that really stand written on the brown-hued feathers, the black-edged white of crest and tail? Nat felt very alone. He’d been delighted when these contemporaries of his, with whom he’d talked a bit and played a few games, invited him to spend the Freedom Week vacation at their home. And certainly that whole extended household known as the Weathermaker Choth had shown him politeness, if not intimacy – aside from a few jeering remarks of Keshchyi’s, which the fellow probably didn’t realize were painful. And his parents had been glad to let him accept.

“It’s a step toward the future,” his father had exclaimed. “Our two kinds are going to have to come to know each other inside out. That’s a job for your generation, Nat... and here you’re beginning on it.”

But the Ythrians were alien, and not just in their society. In their bones, their flesh, the inmost molecules of their genes, they were not human. It was no use pretending otherwise.

“Different” did not necessarily mean “inferior.” Could it, heartbreakingly, mean “better”? Or “happier”? Had God been in a more joyful mood when He made the Ythrians than when He made man?

Perhaps not. They were pure carnivores, born hunters. Maybe that was the reason why they allowed, yes, encouraged their young to go off and do reckless things, accepting stoically the fact that the unfit and the unlucky would not return alive.

Keshchyi swooped near. Nat felt a gust of air from beneath his wings.

“Are you glued in your place?” he shouted. “The tide isn’t, I can tell you. If you want to come, then for thunder’s sake, move!”

“He’s right, you know,” said calmer Thuriak. Eagerness quivered across him.

Nat gulped. As if searching for something familiar, anything, his gaze swept around.

He stood on a balcony of that tall stone tower which housed the core families. Below were a paved courtyard and rambling wooden buildings. Meadows where meat animals grazed sloped downhill in Terrestrial grass and clover, Ythrian starbell and wry, Terrestrial oak and pine, Ythrian braidbark and copperwood, until cultivation gave way to the reddish mat of native susin, the scattered intense green of native chasuble bush and delicate blue of janie. The sun Laura stood big and golden-colored at morning, above a distantly glimpsed mercury line of ocean. Elsewhere wandered a few cottony clouds and the pale, sinking ghost of Morgana. A flock of Avalonian draculas passed across view, their leathery wings awkward beside the plumed splendor of Keshchyi’s. No adult Ythrians were to be seen; they ranged afar on their business.

Nat, who was short and slender, with rumpled brown hair above thin features, felt dwarfed in immensity.

The wind murmured, caressed his face with coolness, blew him an odor of leaves and distances, a smoky whiff of Thuriak’s body. Though young, that being stood nearly as tall as one full-grown, which meant that he was about Nat’s height. What he stood on was his enormous wings, folded downward, claws at their main joints to serve as a kind of feet. What had been the legs and talons of his birdlike ancestors were, on him, arms and hands. His frame had an avian rigidity and jutting keelbone, but his head, borne proudly on a rather long neck, was almost mammalian beneath its crest-streamlined muzzle, tawny eyes, mouth whose lips looked oddly delicate against the fangs, little brow yet the skull bulging backward to hold an excellent brain.

“Are you off, then?” Thuriak demanded while Keshchyi whistled in heaven. “Or would you rather stay here? It might be best for you, at that.”

Blood beat in Nat’s temples. *I’m not going to let these creatures sneer at humans!* ran through him. At the same time he knew he was being foolish, that he ought to check with his mother – and knew he wasn’t going to, that he couldn’t help himself. “I’m coming,” he snapped.

Good, said Thuriak’s plumage. He brought his hands to the floor and stood on them an instant while he spread those wings. Light shining through made his pinions look molten. Beneath them, the gill-like antibranch slits, the “biological superchargers” which made it possible for an animal this size to fly under Earthlike conditions, gaped briefly, a row of purple mouths. In a rush and roar of his own, Thuriak mounted.

He swung in dizzying circles, up and up toward his hovering cousin. Shouts went between them. An Ythrian in flight burned more food and air than a human; they said he was more alive.

But I am no Ythrian, Nat thought. Tears stung him. He wiped them away, angrily, with the back of a wrist, and sought the controls of the gravbelt.

It encircled his coveralls at the waist. On his back were the two cylinders of its powerpack. He could rise, he could fly for hours. But how wretched a crutch this was!

Leaving the tower, he felt a slight steady vibration from the drive unit, pulsing through his belly. His fingers reached to adjust the controls, level him off and line him out northward. Wind blew, shrill and harsh, lashing his eyes till he must pull down the goggles on his leather helmet. The Ythrians had transparent third lids.

In the last several days, he had had borne in on him – until at night, on the cot set up for him in the young males’ nest, he must stifle his sobs lest somebody hear – borne in on him how much these beings owned their unbounded

skies, and how his kind did not. The machine that carried him went drone, drone. He trudged on a straight course through the air, while his companions dipped and soared and reveled in the freedom of heaven which was their birthright.

The north shore curved to form a small bay. Beyond sushin and bush and an arc of dunes, its waters glistened clear blue-green; surf roared furious on the reefs across its mouth. A few youngsters kept sailboats here. Keshchyi and Thuriak were among them.

But... they had quietly been modifying theirs for use on open sea. Today they proposed to take it out.

Nat felt less miserable when he had landed. On foot, he was the agile one, the Ythrians slow and limited. That was a poor tradeoff, he thought grayly. Still, he could be of help to them. Was that the real reason they had invited him to join this maiden venture?

For Keshchyi, yes, no doubt, the boy decided. *Thuriak seems to like me as a person... Seems to.* His look went across that haughty unhuman countenance, and though it was full of expression, he could read nothing more subtle than a natural excitement.

"Come on!" Keshchyi fairly danced in his impatience. "Launch!" To Nat: "You. Haul on the prow. We'll push on the stern. Jump!"

For a moment of anger, Nat considered telling him to go to hell and returning alone. He knew he wasn't supposed to be here anyway, on a dangerous faring, without having so much as told his parents. The whole idea had been presented to him with such beast-of-prey suddenness... *No,* he thought. *I can't let them believe I, a human, must be a coward. I'll show 'em better.*

He seized the sternpost, which curved over the bow in a graceful sculpture of vines and leaves. He bent his back and threw his muscles into work.

The boat moved readily from its shelter and across the beach. It was a slim, deckless, nearly flat-bottomed hull, carvel-built, about four meters long. A single mast rested in brackets. Sand, gritty beneath Nat's thin shoesoles, gave way to a swirl of water around his trouser legs. The boat uttered a chuckling sound as it came afloat.

Keshchyi and Thuriak boarded in a single flap. Nat must make an undignified scramble across the gunwale and stand there dripping. Meanwhile the others raised the mast, secured its stays, began unlashng jib and mainsail. It was a curious rig, bearing a flexible gaff almost as long as the boom. The synthetic cloth rose crackling into the breeze.

"Hoy, wait a minute," Nat said. The Ythrians gave him a blank glance and he realized he had spoken in Anglic. Had they never imagined it worth the trouble to learn his language properly, as he had theirs?

He shifted to Planha: "I've been sailing myself, around First Island, and know – uh, what is the word?" Flushing in embarrassment, he fumbled for ways to express his idea.

Thuriak helped him. After an effort, they reached understanding. "You see we have neither keel nor centerboard, and wonder how we'll tack," the Ythrian interpreted. "I'm surprised the sportsmen of your race haven't adopted our design." He swiveled a complexly curved board, self-adjusting on its pivot by means of vanes, upward from either rail. "This interacts with the wind to provide lateral resistance. No water drag. Much faster than your craft. We'll actually sail as a hydrofoil."

"Oh, grand!" Nat marvelled.

His pleasure soured when Keshchyi said in a patronizing tone: "Well, of course, knowledge of the ways of air comes natural to us."

"So we're off," Thuriak laughed. He took the tiller in his right hand and jibsheet in his left; wing-claws gripped a perch-bar. The flapping sails drew taut. The boat bounded forward.

Hunkered in the bottom – there were no thwarts – Nat saw the waters swirl, heard them hiss, felt a shiver of speed and tasted salt on his lips. The boat reached planing speed and skimmed surface in a smooth gallop. The shore fell aft, the surf grew huge and loud ahead, dismayingly fast.

Nat gulped. *No, I will not show them any uneasiness.* After all, he still wore his gravbelt. In case of capsizing or – or whatever – he could flit to shore. The Ythrians could too. Was that why they didn't bother to carry lifejackets along?

The reefs were of some dark coraloid. They made a nearly unbroken low wall across the lagoon entrance. Breakers struck green-bright, smashed across those jagged backs, exploded in foam and bone-rattling thunder. Whirlpools seethed. In them, thick brown nets of atlantis weed, torn loose from a greater mass far out to sea, snaked around and around. Squinting through spindrift, Nat barely made out a narrow opening toward which Thuriak steered.

I don't like this, I don't like it one bit, went through him, chill amidst primal bellows and grunts and hungry suckings.

Thuriak put down the helm. The boat came about in a slash of boom and gaff, a snap of sailcloth, sounds that were buried in the tornado racket. On its new tack, it leaped for the passage. Thuriak fluted his joy. Keshchyi spread plumes which shone glorious in sun and scud-blizzard.

The boat dived in among the reefs. An unseen net of weed caught the rudder. A riptide and a flaw of wind grabbed hold. The hull smashed against a ridge. Sharpnesses went like saws through the planks.

The surf took the boat and started battering it to death. Nat was aloft before he knew what had really happened. He hovered on his thrust-fields, above white and green violence, and stared wildly around. There was Thuriak, riding the air currents, dismay on every feather, but alive, safe... Where was Keshchyi? Nat yelled the question.

Faint through the noise there drifted back to him the shriek: “I don’t know, I don’t see him, did the gaff whip over him...?” and Thuriak swooped about and about, frantic. A cry tore from him. “Yonder!” And naked grief: “No, no, oh, Keshchyi, my blood-kin, my friend—”

Nat darted to join the Ythrian. Winds clawed at him; the breakers filled his head with their rage. Through a bitter upflung mist he peered. And he saw Keshchyi, one wing tangled in the twining weed, a-thresh in waves that surged across him, bore him under, cast him back for an instant and swept him bloodily along a reefside.

“We can grab him!” Nat called. But he saw what Thuriak had already seen, that this was useless. The mat which gripped Keshchyi was a dozen meters long and wide. It must weigh a ton or worse. He could not be raised, unless someone got in the water first to free him. And Ythrians, winged sky-folk, plainly could not swim. It was flat-out impossible for them. At most, help from above would keep the victim alive an extra minute or two.

Nat plunged.

Chaos closed on him. He had taken a full breath, and held it as he was hauled down into ice-pale depths. *Keep calm, keep calm, panic is what kills.* The currents were stronger than he was. But he had a purpose, which they did not. He had the brains to use them. Let them whirl him under – he felt his cheek scraped across a stone – for they would cast him back again and...

Somehow he was by Keshchyi. He was treading water, gulping a lungful when he could, up and down, up and down, away and back, always snatching to untangle those cables around the wing, until after a time beyond time, Keshchyi was loose.

Thuriak extended a hand. Keshchyi took it. Dazed, wounded, plumage soaked, he could not raise himself, nor could Thuriak drag him up alone.

A billow hurled Nat forward. His skull flew at the reef where the boat tossed in shards. Barely soon enough, he touched the controls of his gravbelt and rose.

He grabbed Keshchyi’s other arm and switched the power output of his unit to Overload. Between them, he and Thuriak brought their comrade to land.

*** *** ***

“My life is yours, Nathaniel Falkayn,” said Keshchyi in the house. “I beg your leave to honor you.”

“Aye, aye,” whispered through the rustling dimness where the Weathermaker Choth had gathered.

“Awww...” Nat mumbled. His cheeks felt hot. He wanted to say, “Please, all I ask is, don’t tell my parents what kind of trouble I got my silly self into.” But that wouldn’t be courteous, in this grave ceremony that his friends were holding for him.

It ended at last, however, and he and Thuriak got a chance to slip off by themselves, to the same balcony from which they had started. The short Avalonian day was drawing to a close. Sunbeams lay level across the fields. They shimmered off the sea, beyond which were homes of men. The air was still, and cool, and full of the scent of growing things.

“I have learned much today,” Thuriak said seriously.

“Well, I hope you’ve learned to be more careful in your next boat,” Nat tried to laugh. “I wish they’d stop making such a fuss about me, he thought.”

“They will, in time, and we can relax and enjoy each other. Meanwhile, though, I have learned how good it is that strengths be different, so that they may be shared.”

“Well, yes, sure. Wasn’t that the whole idea behind this colony?”

And standing there between sky and sea, Nat remembered swimming, diving, surfing, all the years of his life, brightness and laughter of the water that kissed his face and embraced his whole body, the riding on splendid waves and questing into secret twilit depths, the sudden astonishing beauty of a fish or a rippled sandy bottom, sunlight a-dance overhead... and he looked at the Ythrian and felt a little sorry for him.

THE END

INTRODUCTION TO *RESCUE ON AVALON*

FOR HIS LAST chapter, Hloch returns to A. A. Craig's *Tales of the Great Frontier*. The author was a Terran who traveled widely, gathering material for his historical narratives, during a pause in the Troubles, several lifetimes after the World-Taking. When he visited Avalon, he heard of an incident from the person, then aged, who had experienced it, and made therefrom the story which follows. Though fictionalized, the account is substantially accurate. Though dealing with no large matter, it seems a fitting one wherewith to close.

—Hloch of the Stormgate Choth
The Earth Book of Stormgate

RESCUE ON AVALON

THE YTHRIAN passed overhead in splendor. Sunlight on feathers made bronze out of his six-meter wingspan and the proudly held golden-eyed head. His crest and tail were white as the snowpeaks around, trimmed with black. He rode the wind like its conqueror.

Against his will, Jack Birnam confessed the sight was beautiful. But it was duty which brought up his binoculars. If the being made a gesture of greeting, he owed his own race the courtesy of a return salute; and Ythrians often forgot that human vision was less keen than theirs. *I have to be especially polite when I'm in country that belongs to them*, the boy thought. Bitterness rushed through him. *And this does, now, it does. Oh, curse our bargaining Parliament!*

Under magnification, he clearly saw the arched carnivore muzzle with its oddly delicate lips; the talons which evolution had made into hands; the claws at the "elbows" of the wings, which served as feet on the ground; the gill-like slits in the body, bellows pumped by the flight muscles, a biological supercharger making it possible for a creature that size to get aloft. He could even see by the plumage that this was a middle-aged male, and of some importance to judge by the ornate belt, pouch, and dagger which were all that he wore.

Though the Ythrian had undoubtedly noticed Jack, he gave no sign. That was likely just his custom. Choths differed as much in their ways as human nations did, and Jack remembered hearing that the Stormgate folk, who would be moving into these parts, were quite reserved. Nevertheless the boy muttered at him, "You can call it dignity if you want. I call it snobbery, and I don't like you either."

The being dwindled until he vanished behind a distant ridge. He's probably bound for Peace Deep on the far side, to hunt, Jack decided. *And I wanted to visit there...* Well, why not, anyway? *I'll scarcely meet him; won't be going down into the gorge myself.* The mountains have room for both of us – for a while, till his people come and settle them.

He hung the glasses on his packframe and started walking again through loneliness.

*** *** ***

The loftiest heights on the planet Avalon belong to the Andromeda Range. But that is a name bestowed by humans. Not for nothing do the Ythrians who have joined them in their colonizing venture call that region the Weathermother. Almost exactly two days – twenty-two hours – after he had spied the stranger, a hurricane caught Jack Birnam. Born and raised here, he was used to sudden tempests. The rapidly spinning globe was always breeding them. Yet the violence of this one astonished him.

He was in no danger. It had not been foolish to set off by himself on a trip into the wilderness. He would have preferred a companion, of course, but none of his friends happened to be free; and he didn't expect he'd ever have another chance to visit the beloved land. He knew it well. He intended merely to hike, not climb. At age twenty-four (or seventeen, if you counted the years of an Earth where he had never been) he was huskier than many full-grown men. In case of serious difficulty, he need merely send a distress signal by his pocket transceiver. Homing on it, an aircar from the nearest rescue station in the foothills should reach him in minutes.

If the sky was fit to fly in!

When wind lifted and clouds whirled like night out of the north, he made his quick preparations. His sleeping bag, with hood and breathing mask for really foul conditions, would keep him warm at lower temperatures than occurred anywhere on Avalon. Unrolled and erected over it as a kind of pup tent, a sheet of duraplast would stop hailstones or blown debris. The collapsible alloy frame, light but sturdy, he secured to four pegs whose explosive heads had driven them immovably into bedrock. This shelter wasn't going anywhere. When he had brought himself and his equipment inside, he had nothing to do but wait out the several shrieking hours which followed.

Nonetheless, he was almost frightened at the fury, and half-stunned by the time it died away.

Crawling forth, he found the sun long set. Morgana, the moon, was full, so radiant that it crowded most stars out of view. Remote snowfields glittered against blue-black heaven; boulders and shrubs on the ridgetop where Jack was camped shone as if turned to silver, while a nearby stream flowed like mercury. The cluck and chuckle of water, the boom of a more distant cataract, were the only sounds. After the wind-howl, this stillness felt almost holy. The air was chill but carried odors of plant life, sharp trefoil, sweet livewell, and janie. Breath smoked ghostly.

After his long lying motionless, he couldn't sleep. He decided to make a fire, cook a snack and coffee, watch dawn when it came. Here above timberline, the low, tough vegetation wasn't much damaged. But he was sure to find plenty of broken-off wood. The trees below must have suffered far worse. He'd see in the morning. At present, to him those depths were one darkness, hoar-frosted by moonlight.

His transceiver beeped. He stiffened. That meant a general broadcast on the emergency band. Drawing the flat object from his coverall, he flipped its switch for two-way. A human voice lifted small:

"—Mount Farview area. Andromeda Rescue Station Four calling anyone in the Mount Farview area. Andromeda—"

Jack brought the instrument to his mouth. "Responding," he said. Inside his quilted garment, he shivered with more than cold. "John Birnam responding to ARS Four. I... I'm a single party, on foot, but if I can help—"

The man at the other end barked: "Where are you, exactly?"

"It doesn't have a name on the map," Jack replied, "but I'm on the south rim of a big canyon which starts about twenty kilometers east-north-east of Farview's top. I'm roughly above the middle of the gorge, that'd be, uh, say thirty kilometers further east." *It does have a name, though*, went through his mind. *I named it Peace Deep, five years ago when I first came on it, because the forest down there is so tall and quiet. Wonder what the Ythrians will call it, after I can't come here anymore?*

"Got you," answered the man. He must have an aerial survey chart before him. "John Birnam, you said? I'm Ivar Holm. Did you come through the storm all right?"

"Yes, thanks, I was well prepared. Are you checking?"

"In a way." Holm spoke grimly. "Look, this whole sector's in bad trouble. The prediction on that devil-wind was totally inadequate, a gross underestimate. Not enough meteorological monitors yet, I suppose. Or maybe the colonies are too young to've learned every trick that Avalon can play. Anyhow, things are torn apart down here in the hills – farms, villages, isolated camps – aircars smashed or crashed, including several that belonged to this corps. In spite of help being rushed in from outside, we'll be days in finding and saving the survivors. Our pilots and medics are going to have to forget there ever was such a thing as sleep."

"I... I'm sorry," Jack said lamely.

"I was praying someone would be in your vicinity. You see, an Ythrian appears to have come to grief thereabouts."

"An Ythrian!" Jack whispered.

"Not just any Ythrian, either. Ayan, the Wyvan of Stormgate."

"What?"

"Don't you know about that?" It was very possible. Thus far, the two races hadn't overlapped a great deal. Within the territories they claimed, they had been too busy adapting themselves and their ways to a world that was strange to them both. Jack, whose family were sea ranchers, dwelling on the coast five hundred kilometers westward, had seldom encountered one of the other species. Even a well-educated person might be forgiven for a certain vagueness about details of an entire set of alien societies.

"In the Stormgate choth," Holm said, "'Wyvan' comes as close to meaning 'Chief or 'President' as you can get in their language. And Stormgate, needing more room as its population grows, has lately acquired this whole part of the Andromedas."

"I know," Jack couldn't help blurting in a refreshed rage. "The Parliament of Man and the Great Khruath of the Ythrians made their nice little deal, and never mind those of us who spent all the time we could up here because we love the country!"

"Huh? What're you talking about? It was a fair exchange. They gave over some mighty good prairie to us. We don't live by and ranching the way they do. We can't use alps for anything except recreation – and not many of us ever did – and why are you and I wasting time, Birnam?"

Jack set his teeth. "Go on, please."

"Well. Ayan went to scout the new land personally, alone. That's Ythrian style. You must be aware what a territorial instinct their race has got. Now I've received a worried call from Stormgate headquarters. His family says he'd have radioed immediately after the blow, if he could, and asked us to relay a message that he wasn't hurt. But he hasn't. Nor did he ever give notice of precisely where he'd be, and no Ythrian on an outing uses enough gear to be readily spotted from the air."

"A low-power sender won't work out of that particular forest," Jack said. "Too much ironleaf growing there."

"Sunblaze!" Holm groaned. "Things never do go wrong one at a time, do they?" He drew breath. "Ordinarily we'd have a fleet of cars out searching, regardless of the difficulty. We can't spare them now, especially since he may well be dead. Nevertheless... You spoke as if you had a clue to his whereabouts."

Jack paused before answering slowly, "Yes, I believe I do."

"What? Quick, for mercy's sake!"

"An Ythrian flew by me a couple of days ago, headed the same way I was. Must've been him. Then when I arrived on this height, down in the canyon, I saw smoke rising above the treetops. Doubtless a fire of his. I suppose he'd been hunting and... Well, I didn't pay close attention, but I could point the site out approximately. Why not send a team to where I am?"

Holm kept silent a while. The moonlight seemed to grow more cold and white.

“Weren’t you listening, Birnam?” he said at last. “We need every man and every vehicle we can get, every minute they can be in action. According to my map, that gorge is heavily wooded. Do you mean we should tie up two or three men and a car for hours or days, searching for the exact place – when the chances of him being alive look poor, and... you’re right on the scene?”

“Can’t you locate him? Find what the situation is, do what you can to help, and call back with precise information. Given that, we can snake him right out of there, without first wasting man-hours that should go to hundreds of people we know we can save. How about it?”

Now Jack had no voice.

“Hello?” Holm’s cry was tiny in the night. “Hello?”

Jack gripped the transceiver till his knuckles stood bloodless. “I’m not sure what I can manage,” he said.

“How d’you mean?”

“I’m allergic to Ythrians.”

“How?”

“Something about their feathers or... It’s gotten extremely bad in the last year or two. If I come near one, soon I can hardly breathe. And I didn’t bring my antiallergen, this trip. Never expected to need it.”

“Your condition ought to be curable.”

“The doctor says it is, but that requires facilities we don’t have on Avalon. RNA transformation, you know. My family can’t afford to send me to a more developed planet. I just avoid those creatures.”

“You can at least go look, can’t you?” Holm pleaded. “I appreciate the risk, but if you’re extra careful—”

“Oh, yes,” Jack said reluctantly. “I can do that.”

*** *** ***

With the starkness of his folk, Ayan had shut his mind to pain while he waited for rescue or death. From time to time he shrilled forth hunting calls, and these guided Jack to him after the boy reached the general location. They had grown steadily weaker, though.

Far down a steep slope, the Ythrian sprawled rather than lay, resting against a chasuble bush. Everywhere around him were ripped branches and fallen boles, a tangle which had made it a whole day’s struggle for Jack to get here. Sky, fading toward sunset, showed rough rents in the canopy overhead. Mingled with green and gold of other trees was the shimmering, glittering purple foliage of ironleaf.

The central bone in Ayan’s left wing was bent at an ugly angle. That fracture made it alike impossible for him to fly or walk. Gaunt, tusted, he still brought his crest erect as the human blundered into view. Hoarseness thickened the accent of his Anglic speech: “Welcome indeed!”

Jack stopped three meters off, panting, sweating despite the chill, his legs wobbly beneath him. He knew it was idiotic, but could think of nothing else than: “How... are you... sir?” *And why call him sir, this land-robber?*

“In a poor case,” dragged out of Ayan’s throat. “Well it is that you arrived. I would not have lasted a second night. The wind cast a heavy bough against my wing and broke it. My rations and equipment were scattered; I do not think you could find them yourself.” The three fingers and two thumbs of a hand gestured at the transceiver clipped on his belt. “Somehow this must also have been disabled. My calls for help have drawn no response.”

“They wouldn’t, here.” Jack pointed to the sinister loveliness which flickered in a breeze above. “Didn’t you know? That’s called ironleaf. It draws the metal from the soil and concentrates pure particles, to attract pollinating bugs by the shininess. Absorbs radio waves. Nobody should go into an area like this without a partner.”

“I was unaware – even as the weather itself caught me by surprise. The territory is foreign to me.”

“It’s home country to me.” Fists clenched till nails bit into palms.

Ayan’s stare sharpened upon Jack. Abruptly he realized how peculiar his behavior must seem. The Ythrian needed help, and the human only stood there. Jack couldn’t simply leave him untended; he would die.

The boy braced himself and said in a hurry: “Listen. Listen good, because maybe I won’t be able to repeat this. I’ll have to scramble back up to where I can transmit. Then they’ll send a car that I can guide to you. But I can’t go till morning. I’d lose my way, or break my neck, groping in the dark through this wreckage the storm’s made. First I’ll do what’s necessary for you. We better plan every move in advance.”

“Why?” asked Ayan quietly.

“Because you make me sick! I mean – allergy – I’m going to get asthma and hives, working on you. Unless we minimize my exposure, I may be too ill to travel tomorrow.”

“I see.” For all his resentment, Jack was awed by the self-control. “Do you perchance carry anagon in your first-aid kit? No? Pity—I believe that is the sole painkiller which works on both our species. *Hrau*. You can toss me your filled canteen and some food immediately. I am near collapse from both thirst and hunger.”

“It’s human-type stuff, you realize,” Jack warned. While men and Ythrians could eat many of the same things, each diet lacked certain essentials of the other. For that matter, native Avalonian life did not hold adequate nutrition for either colonizing race. The need to maintain separate ecologies was a major reason why they tended to live apart.

I can’t ever return, Jack thought. *Even if the new dwellers allowed me to visit, my own body wouldn’t.*

“Calories, at least,” Ayan reminded him. “Though I have feathers to keep me warmer than your skin would, last night burned most of what energy I had left.”

Jack obliged. "Next," he proposed, "I'll start a fire and cut enough wood to last you till morning."

Was Ayan startled? That alien face wasn't readable. It looked as if the Ythrian was about to say something and then changed his mind. The boy went on: "What sort of preliminary care do you yourself need?"

"Considerable, I fear," said Ayan. Jack's heart sank. "Infection is setting in, and I doubt you carry an antibiotic safe for use on me; so my injuries must be thoroughly cleansed. The bone must be set and splinted, however roughly. Otherwise... I do not wish to complain, but the pain at every slightest movement is becoming quite literally unendurable. I barely managed to keep the good wing flapping, thus myself halfway warm, last night. Without support for the broken one, I could not stay conscious to tend the fire."

Jack forgot that he hated this being. "Oh, gosh, no! I wasn't thinking straight. You take my bag. I can, uh, sort of fold you into it."

"Let us see. Best we continue planning and preparations."

Jack nodded jerkily. The time soon came when he must take a breath, hold it as long as possible, and go to the Ythrian.

It was worse than his worst imagining. At the end, he lay half-strangled, eyes puffed nearly shut, skin one great burning and itch, wheezed, wept, and shuddered. Crouched near the blaze, Ayan looked at him across the meters of cold, thickening dusk which again separated them. He barely heard the nonhuman voice:

"You need that bedroll more than I do, especially so when you must have strength back by dawn to make the return trip. Take your bag."

Jack crept to obey. He was too wretched to realize what the past minutes must have been like for Ayan.

*** *** ***

First light stole bleak between trees. The boy awakened to a ragged call: "Khrraah, khrraah, khrraah, human—"

For a long while, it seemed, he fought his way through mists and cobwebs. Suddenly, with a gasp, he came to full awareness. The icy air went into his lungs through a throat much less swollen than before. Blariness and ache still possessed his head, but he could think, he could see...

Ayan lay by the ashes of the fire. He had raised himself on his hands to croak aloud. His crest drooped, his eyes were glazed. "Khrraah—"

Jack writhed from his bag and stumbled to his feet. "What happened?" he cried in horror.

"I... fainted... only recovered this moment... Pain, weariness, and... lack of nourishment... I feared I might collapse but hoped I would not..."

It stabbed through Jack: why didn't I stop to think? Night before last, pumping that wing – the biological supercharger kindling his metabolism beyond anything a human can experience – burning not just what fuel his body had left, but vitamins that weren't in the rations I could give him.

"Why didn't you insist on the bedding?" the human cried in anguish of his own. "I could've stayed awake all night!"

"I was not certain you could," said the harsh whisper. "You appeared terribly ill, and... it would have been wrong, that the young die for the old... I know too little about your kind..." The Ythrian crumpled.

"And I about yours." Jack sped to him, took him in his arms, brought him to the warm bag and tucked him in with enormous care.

Presently Ayan's eyes fluttered open, and Jack could feed him. The asthma and eruptions weren't nearly as bad as earlier. Jack hardly noticed, anyway. When he had made sure Ayan was resting comfortably, supplies in easy reach, he himself gulped a bite to eat and started off.

It would be a stiff fight, in his miserable shape, to get past the ironleaf before dark. He'd do it, though. He knew he would.

*** *** ***

The doctors kept him one day in the hospital. Recovered, he borrowed protective garments and a respirator, and went to the Ythrian ward to say goodbye.

Ayan lay in one of the frames designed for his race. He was alone in his room. Its window stood open to a lawn and tall trees – Avalonian king's crown, Ythrian windnest, Earthly oak – and a distant view of snowpeaks. Light spilled from heaven. The air sang. Ayan looked wistfully outward.

But he turned his head and, yes, smiled as Jack entered, recognizing him no matter how muffled up he was. "Greeting, galemate," he said.

The boy had spent his own time abed studying usages of Stormgate. He flushed; for he could have been called nothing more tender and honoring than "galemate."

"How are you?" he inquired awkwardly.

"I shall get well, because of you." Ayan grew grave. "Jack," he murmured, "can you come near me?"

"Sure, as long's I'm wearing this." The human approached. Talons reached out to clasp his gloved hand.

"I have been talking with Ivar Holm and others," Ayan said very low. "You resent me, my whole people, do you not?"

“Aw, well—”

“I understand. We were taking from you a place you hold dear. Jack, you, and any guests of yours, will forever be welcome there, to roam as you choose. Indeed, the time is over-past for our two kinds to intermingle freely.”

“But... I mean, thank you, sir,” Jack stammered, “but I can’t.”

“Your weakness? Yes-s-s.” Ayan uttered the musical Ythrian equivalent of a chuckle. “I suspect it is of largely psychosomatic origin, and might fade of itself when your anger does. But naturally, my will send you off-planet for a complete cure.”

Jack could only stare and stutter.

Ayan lifted his free hand. “Thank us not. We need the closeness of like you, who would not abandon even an enemy.”

“But you aren’t!” burst from Jack. “I’ll be proud to call you my friend!”

THE END

LAST WORDS

TO THOSE WHO have traveled with him this far, Hloch gives thanks. It is his hope that he has aided you to a little deeper sight, and thereby done what honor he was able to his choth and to the memory of his mother, Rennhi the wise.

Countless are the currents which streamed together at Avalon. Here we have flown upon only a few. Of these, some might well have been better chosen. Yet it seems to Hloch that all, in one way or another, raise a little higher than erstwhile his knowledge of that race with which ours is to share this world until God the Hunter descends upon both. May this be true for you as well, O people.

Now *The Earth Book of Stormgate* is ended. From my tower I see the great white sweep of the snows upon Mount Anrovil. I feel the air blow in and caress my feathers. Yonder sky is calling. I will go. Fair winds forever.

—Hloch of the Stormgate Choth
The Earth Book of Stormgate