



PART 1

1

MAN,” SAID TERL, “IS AN ENDANGERED SPECIES.” The hairy paws of the Chamco brothers hung suspended above the broad keys of the laser-bash game. The cliffs of Char’s eyebones drew down over his yellow orbs as he looked up in mystery. Even the steward, who had been padding quietly about picking up her saucepans, lumbered to a halt and stared.

Terl could not have produced a more profound effect had he thrown a meat-girl naked into the middle of the room.

The clear dome of the Intergalactic Mining Company employee recreation hall shone black around and above them, silvered at its crossbars by the pale glow of the Earth’s single moon, half full on this late summer night.

Terl lifted his large amber eyes from the tome that rested minutely in his massive claws and looked around the room. He was suddenly aware of the effect he had produced, and it amused him. Anything to relieve the humdrum monotony of a ten-year* duty tour in this gods-abandoned mining camp, way out here on the edge of a minor galaxy.

In an even more professorial voice, already deep and roaring enough, Terl repeated his thought. “Man is an endangered species.”

Char glowered at him. “What in the name of diseased crap are *you* reading?”

Terl did not much care for his tone. After all, Char was simply one of several mine managers, but he, Terl, was chief of minesite security. “I didn’t read it. I thought it.”

“You must’ve got it from somewhere,” growled Char. “What *is* that book?”

Terl held it up so Char could see its back. It said *General Report of Geological Minesites, Volume 250,369*. Like all such books, it was huge

*Time, distance and weight have been translated in all cases throughout this book to old Earth time, distance and weight systems for the sake of uniformity and to prevent confusion in the various systems employed by the Psychlos. —Translator

but printed on material that made it almost weightless, particularly on a low-gravity planet such as Earth, a triumph of design and manufacture that did not cut heavily into the payloads of freighters.

“*Rughr*,” growled Char in disgust. “That must be two, three hundred Earth-years old. If you want to prow around in books, I got an up-to-date general board of directors’ report that says we’re thirty-five freighters behind in bauxite deliveries.”

The Chamco brothers looked at each other and then at their game to see where they had gotten to in shooting down the live mayflies in the air box. But Terl’s next words distracted them again.

“Today,” said Terl, brushing Char’s push for work aside, “I got a sighting report from a recon drone that recorded only thirty-five men in that valley near that peak.” Terl waved his paw westward toward the towering mountain range silhouetted by the moon.

“So?” said Char.

“So I dug up the books out of curiosity. There used to be hundreds in that valley. And furthermore,” continued Terl with his professorial ways coming back, “there used to be thousands and thousands of them on this planet.”

“You can’t believe all you read,” said Char heavily. “On my last duty tour—it was Arcturus IV—”

“This book,” said Terl, lifting it impressively, “was compiled by the Culture and Ethnology Department of the Intergalactic Mining Company.”

The larger Chamco brother batted his eyebones. “I didn’t know we had one.”

Char sniffed. “It was disbanded more than a century ago. Useless waste of money. Yapping around about ecological impacts and junk like that.” He shifted his bulk around to Terl. “Is this some kind of scheme to explain a nonscheduled vacation? You’re going to get your butt in a bind. I can see it, a pile of requisitions this high for breathe-gas tanks and scoutcraft. You won’t get any of *my* workers.”

“Turn off the juice,” said Terl. “I only said that Man—”

“I know what you said. But you got your appointment because you are clever. That’s right, clever. Not intelligent. *Clever*. And I can see right through an excuse to go on a hunting expedition. What Psychlo in his right skull would *bother* with the things?”

The smaller Chamco brother grinned. “I get tired of just dig-dig-dig, ship-ship-ship. Hunting might be fun. I didn’t think anybody did it for—”

Char turned on him like a tank zeroing in on its prey. “Fun hunting

those things! You ever *see* one?" He lurched to his feet and the floor creaked. He put his paw just above his belt. "They only come up to here! They got hardly any hair on them except their heads. They're a dirty white color like a slug. They're so brittle they break up when you try to put them in a pouch." He snarled in disgust and picked up a saucepan of kerbango. "They're so weak they couldn't pick this up without straining their guts. And they're *not* good eating." He tossed off the kerbango and made an earthquake shudder.

"You ever *see* one?" said the bigger Chamco brother.

Char sat down, the dome rumbled, and he handed the empty saucepan to the steward. "No," he said. "Not alive. I seen some bones in the shafts and I heard."

"There were thousands of them once," said Terl, ignoring the mine manager. "Thousands! All over the place."

Char belched. "Shouldn't wonder they die off. They breathe this oxygen-nitrogen air. Deadly stuff."

"I got a crack in my face mask yesterday," said the smaller Chamco brother. "For about thirty seconds I thought I wasn't going to make it. Bright lights bursting inside your skull. Deadly stuff. I really look forward to getting back home where you can walk around without a suit or mask, where the gravity gives you something to push against, where everything is a beautiful purple and there's not one bit of this green stuff. My papa used to tell me that if I wasn't a good Psychlo and if I didn't say sir-sir-sir to the right people, I'd wind up at a butt end of nowhere like this. He was right. I did. It's your shot, Brother."

Char sat back and eyed Terl. "You ain't really going hunting for a *man*, are you?"

Terl looked at his book. He inserted one of his talons to keep his place and then thumped the volume against his knee.

"I think you're wrong," he mused. "There *was* something to these creatures. Before we came along, it says here, they had towns on every continent. They had flying machines and boats. They even appear to have fired off stuff into space."

"How do you know that wasn't some other race?" said Char. "How do you know it wasn't some lost colony of Psychlos?"

"No, it wasn't that," said Terl. "Psychlos can't breathe this air. It was *man* all right, just like the cultural guys researched. And right in our own histories, you know how it says we got here?"

"*Ump*," said Char.

“Man apparently sent out some kind of probe that gave full directions to the place, had pictures of man on it and everything. It got picked up by a Psychlo recon. And you know what?”

“*Ump*,” said Char.

“The probe and the pictures were on a metal that was rare-rare-rare everywhere and worth a clanking fortune. And Intergalactic paid the Psychlo governors sixty trillion Galactic credits for the directions and the concession. One gas barrage and we were in business.”

“Fairy tales, fairy tales,” said Char. “Every planet I ever helped gut has some butt and crap story like that. Every one.” He yawned his face into a huge cavern. “All that was hundreds, maybe thousands of years ago. You ever notice that the public relations department always puts their fairy tales so far back nobody can ever check them?”

“I’m going to go out and catch one of these things,” said Terl.

“Not with any of my crews or equipment you ain’t,” said Char.

Terl heaved his mammoth bulk off the seat and crossed the creaking floor to the berthing hatch.

“You’re as crazy as a nebula of crap,” said Char.

The two Chamco brothers got back into their game and intently and alternately laser-blasted the entrapped mayflies into smoky puffs, one by one.

Char looked at the empty door. The security chief knew no Psychlo could go up into those mountains. Terl really *was* crazy. There was deadly *uranium* up there.

But Terl, rumbling along a hallway to his room, did not consider himself crazy. He was being very clever as always. He had started the rumors so no questions would get out of hand when he began to put into motion the personal plans that would make him wealthy and powerful and, almost as important, dig him out of this accursed planet.

The man-things were the perfect answer. All he needed was just *one* and then he could get the others. His campaign had begun and begun very well, he thought.

He went to sleep gloating over how clever he was.

2

It was a good day for a funeral, only it seemed there wasn’t going to be one.

Dark, stormy-looking clouds were creeping in from the west, shredded

by the snow-speckled peaks, leaving only a few patches of blue sky showing.

Jonnie Goodboy Tyler stood beside his horse at the upper end of the wide mountain meadow and looked with discontent upon the sprawled and decayed village.

His father was dead and he ought to be properly buried. He hadn't died of the red blotches and there was no question of somebody else catching it. His bones had just crumbled away. So there was no excuse not to properly bury him. Yet there was no sign of anyone doing so.

Jonnie had gotten up in the dawn dark, determined to choke down his grief and go about his correct business. He had yelled up Windsplitter, the fastest of his several horses, put a cowhide rope on his nose, and gone down through the dangerous defiles to the lower plain, and with a lot of hard riding and herding, had pushed five wild cattle back up to the mountain meadow. He had then bashed out the brains of the fattest of them and ordered his Aunt Ellen to push the barbecue fire together and get meat cooking.

Aunt Ellen hadn't cared for the orders. She had broken her sharpest rock, she said, and couldn't skin and cut the meat, and certain men hadn't dragged in any firewood lately.

Jonnie Goodboy had stood very tall and looked at her. Among people who were average height, Jonnie Goodboy stood half a head taller, a muscular six feet shining with the bronzed health of his twenty years. He had just stood there, wind tangling his corn-yellow hair and beard, looking at her with his ice-blue eyes. And Aunt Ellen had gone and found some wood and had put a stone to work, even though it was a very dull one. He could see her now, down there below him, wrapped in the smoke of slow-roasting meat, busy.

There ought to be more activity in the village, Jonnie thought. The last big funeral he had seen was when he was about five years old, when Smith the mayor had died. There had been songs and preaching and a feast and it had ended with a dance by moonlight. Mayor Smith had been put in a hole in the ground and the dirt filled in over him, and while the two cross-sticks of the marker were long since gone, it had been a proper respectful funeral. More recently they had just dumped the dead in the black-rock gulch below the water pool and let the coyotes clean them up.

Well, that wasn't the way you went about it, Jonnie told himself. Not with his father, anyway.

He spun on his heel and with one motion went aboard Windsplitter and with the thump of a hard bare heel sent the horse down toward the courthouse.

He passed by the decayed ruins of cabins on the outskirts. Every year they caved in further. For a long time anybody needing a building log hadn't cut any trees: they had just stripped handy existing structures. But the logs in these cabins were so eaten up and rotted now, they hardly even served as firewood.

Windsplitter picked his way down the weed-grown track, walking watchfully to avoid stepping on ancient and newly discarded food bones and trash. He twitched his ear toward a distant wolf howl from up in a mountain glen.

The smell of new blood and the meat smoke must be pulling the wolves down, thought Jonnie, and he hefted his kill-club from where it dangled by a thong into his palm. He'd lately seen a wolf right down in the cabins, prowling around for bones, or maybe even a puppy or a child. Even a decade ago it wouldn't have happened. But every year there were fewer and fewer people.

Legend said that there had been a thousand in the valley, but Jonnie thought that was probably an exaggeration. There was plenty of food. The wide plains below the peaks were overrun with wild cattle, wild pigs and bands of horses. The ranges above were alive with deer and goats. And even an unskilled hunter had no trouble getting food. There was plenty of water due to the melting snows and streams, and the little patches of vegetables would thrive if anybody planted and tended them.

No, it wasn't food. It was something else. Animals reproduced, it seemed, but Man didn't. At least not to any extent. The death rate and the birth rate were unbalanced, with death the winner. Even when children were born they sometimes had only one eye or one lung or one hand and had to be left out in the icy night. Monsters were unwanted things. All life was overpowered by a fear of monsters.

Maybe it was this valley.

When he was seven he had asked his father about it. "But maybe people can't live in this place," he had said.

His father had looked at him wearily. "There were people in some other valleys, according to the legends. They're all gone, but there are still some of us."

He had not been convinced. Jonnie had said, "There's all those plains down there and they're full of animals. Why don't we go live there?"

Well, Jonnie had always been a bit of a trial. Too smart, the elders had said. Always stirring things up. Questions, questions. And did he believe what he was told? Even by older men who knew a lot better? No. Not Jonnie Goodboy Tyler. But his father had not brought any of this up. He had just said wearily, “There’s no timber down there to build cabins.”

This hadn’t explained anything, so Jonnie had said, “I bet I could find something down there to build a cabin with.”

His father had knelt down, patient for once, and said, “You’re a good boy, Jonnie. And your mother and I love you very much. But nobody could build anything that would keep out the monsters.”

Monsters, monsters. All his life Jonnie had been hearing about the monsters. He’d never seen one. But he held his peace. The oldsters believed in monsters, so they believed in monsters.

But thinking of his father brought an unwelcome wetness to his eyes. And he was almost unseated as his horse reared. A string of foot-long mountain rats had rushed headlong from a cabin and hit Windsplitter’s legs.

What you get for dreaming, Jonnie snapped to himself. He put Windsplitter’s four hoofs back down on the path and drummed him forward the last few yards to the courthouse.

3

Chrissie was standing there, her leg being hugged as always by her younger sister.

Jonnie Goodboy ignored her and looked at the courthouse. The old, old building was the only one to have a stone foundation and stone floor. Somebody had said it was a thousand years old, and though Jonnie didn’t believe it, the place sure looked it. Even its seventeenth roof was as swaybacked as an overpacked horse. There wasn’t a log in the upper structure that wasn’t gaping with wormholes. The windows were mainly caved in like eyeholes in a rotted skull. The stone walkway close to it was worn half a foot deep by the bare horny feet of scores of generations of villagers coming here to be tried and punished in the olden days when somebody had cared. In his lifetime Jonnie had never seen a trial, or a town meeting for that matter.

“Parson Staffor is inside,” said Chrissie. She was a slight girl, very pretty, about eighteen. She had large black eyes in strange contrast to

her corn-silk hair. She had wrapped around herself a doeskin, really tight, and it showed her breasts and a lot of bare leg.

Her little sister, Pattie, a budding copy of the older girl, looked bright-eyed and interested. "Is there going to be a real funeral, Jonnie?"

Jonnie didn't answer. He slid off Windsplitter in a graceful single motion. He handed the lead rope to Pattie, who ecstatically uncoiled herself from Chrissie's leg and snatched at it. At seven, Pattie had no parents and little enough of a home, and her sun rose and set only on Jonnie's proud orders.

"Is there going to be meat and a burying in a hole in the ground and everything?" demanded Pattie.

Jonnie started through the courthouse door, paying no heed to the hand Chrissie put out to touch his arm.

Parson Staffor lay sprawled on a mound of dirty grass, mouth open in snores and flies buzzing about. Jonnie stirred him with his foot.

Parson Staffor had seen better days. Once he had been fat and inclined to pomposity. But that was before he had begun to chew locoweed—to ease his toothaches, he said. He was gaunt now, dried up, nearly toothless, seamed with inlaid grime. Some wads of weed lay on the stones beside his moldy bed.

As the toe prodded him again, Staffor opened his eyes and rubbed some of the scum out of them in alarm. Then he saw it was Jonnie Goodboy Tyler, and he fell back with lost interest.

"Get up," said Jonnie.

"That's this generation," muttered the parson. "No respect for their elders. Rushing off to the bushes, fornicating, grabbing the best meat pieces."

"Get up," said Jonnie. "You are going to give a funeral."

"A *funeral*?" moaned Staffor.

"With meat and sermons and dancing."

"Who is dead?"

"You know quite well who's dead. You were there at the end."

"Oh, yes. Your father. A good man. Yes, a good man. Well, maybe he was your father."

Jonnie suddenly looked a little dangerous. He was standing there at ease, but he was wearing the skin of a puma that he himself had slain and he had his kill-club on a wrist thong. The club seemed to jump of its own volition into his palm.

Parson Staffor abruptly sat up. "Now don't take it wrong, Jonnie. It's just that things are a little mixed up these days, you know. Your

mother had three husbands one time and another, and there being no real ceremonies these days—”

“You better get up,” said Jonnie.

Staffor clawed for the corner of an ancient, scarred bench and pulled himself upright. He began to tie the deerskin he usually wore, and obviously had worn far too long, using a frayed woven-grass rope. “My memory isn’t so good these days, Jonnie. One time I could remember all kinds of things. Legends, marriage ceremonies, hunt blessings, even family quarrels.” He was looking around for some fresh locoweed.

“When the sun is straight up,” said Jonnie, “you’re going to call the whole village together at the old graveyard and you’re—”

“Who’s going to dig the hole? There has to be a hole, you know, for a proper funeral.”

“I’ll dig the hole,” said Jonnie.

Staffor had found some fresh locoweed and began to gum it. He looked relieved. “Well, I’m glad the town doesn’t have to dig the hole. Horns, but this stuff is green. You said meat. Who is going to kill and cook it?”

“That’s all taken care of.”

Staffor nodded and then abruptly saw more work ahead. “Who’s going to assemble the people?”

“I’ll ask Pattie to tell them.”

Staffor looked at him reproachfully. “Then there’s nothing for me to do until straight up. Why’d you wake me up?” He threw himself back down on the dirty grass and sourly watched Jonnie walk out of the ancient room.

4

Jonnie Goodboy sat with his knees to his chest, his arms wrapped around them, staring into the remains of the dance fire.

Chrissie lay on her stomach beside him, idly shredding the seeds from a large sunflower between her very white teeth. She looked up at Jonnie from time to time, a little puzzled but not unduly so. She had never seen him cry before, even as a little boy. She knew he had loved his father. But Jonnie was usually so tall and grand, even cold. Could it be that under that good-looking, almost pretty face, he felt emotions for her, too? It was something to speculate about. She knew very well how she felt about Jonnie. If anything happened to Jonnie she would throw herself off the cliff where they sometimes herded wild cattle to

their death, an easy way to kill them. Yes, she'd just throw herself off that cliff. Life without Jonnie Goodboy would not only not be worth living, it would be totally and completely unbearable. Maybe Jonnie did care about her. The tears showed *something*.

Pattie had no such troubles. She had not only stuffed herself with roast meat, she had also stuffed herself with the wild strawberries that had been served by the heap. And then during the dancing she had run and run and run with two or three little boys and then come back to eat some more. She was sleeping so heavily she looked like a mound of rags.

Jonnie blamed himself. He had tried to tell his father, not just when he was seven, but many times thereafter, that something was wrong with this place. Places were *not* all the same. Jonnie had been—was—sure of it. Why did the pigs and horses and cattle in the plains have little pigs and horses and cattle so numerous and so continuously? Yes, and why were there more and more wolves and coyotes and pumas and birds up in the higher ranges, and fewer and fewer men?

The villagers had been quite happy with the funeral, especially since Jonnie and a couple of others had done most of the work.

Jonnie had not been happy with it at all. It wasn't good enough.

They had gathered at sun straight up on the knoll above the village where some said the graveyard had been. The markers were all gone. Maybe it had been a graveyard. When Jonnie had toiled—naked so as not to stain his puma-skin cloak and doe britches—in the morning sun, he had dug into something that might have been an old grave. At least there was a bone in it that could have been human.

The villagers had come slouching around and there had been a wait while Pattie tore back to the courthouse and awakened Parson Staffor again. Only twenty-five of them had assembled. The others had said they were tired and asked for any food to be brought back to them.

Then there had been an argument about the shape of the grave hole. Jonnie had dug it oblong so the body could lie level, but when Staffor arrived *he* said it should be straight up and down, that graves were dug straight up and down because you could get more bodies into a graveyard that way. When Jonnie had pointed out that there weren't any burials these days and there was plenty of room, Staffor had told him off in front of everybody.

"You're too smart," Staffor had rapped at him. "When we had even half a council *they* used to remark on it. Every few council meetings, some prank of yours would come up. You'd ridden to the high ridge and

killed a goat. You'd gone clear up Highpeak and gotten lost in a blizzard and found your way back, you said, by following the downslope of the ground. *Too* smart. Who else trained six horses? Everybody knows graves should be straight up and down."

But they had buried his father lying flat anyway, because nobody else had wanted to do more digging and the sun was now past straight up and it was getting hot.

Jonnie hadn't dared suggest what he really wanted to do. There would have been a riot.

He had wanted to put his father in the cave of the ancient gods, far up at the top of the dark canyon, a savage cleft in the side of the tallest peak. When he was twelve he had strayed up there, more trying out a pony than going someplace. But the way up the canyon had been very flat and inviting. He had gone for miles and miles and miles and then he had been abruptly halted by giant vertical doors. They were of some kind of metal, heavily corroded. One couldn't see them from above or even from the canyon rims. They were absolutely huge. They went up and up.

He had gotten off his pony and climbed over the rubble in front of them and simply stared. He had walked all around in circles and then come back and stared some more.

After a while he had gotten brave and had walked up to them. But push as he might, he couldn't open them. Then he had found a latchlike bar and he had pried it off and it fell, just missing his foot. Rusted but very heavy.

He had braced his shoulder against one door, sure that it was a door, and pushed and pushed. But his twelve-year-old shoulder and weight hadn't had much effect on it.

Then he had taken the fallen bar and had begun to pry it into the slight crack, and after a few minutes, he had gotten a purchase with it.

There had been a horrible groaning sound that almost stood his hair up straight, and he had dropped the bar and had run for the pony.

Once he was mounted, his fright had ebbed a bit. Maybe it was just a sound caused by the rusted hinges. Maybe it wasn't a monster.

He had gone back and worked some more with the bar, and sure enough, it was just the door groaning on the pins that held it.

An awful smell had come out of the cracked opening. The smell itself had made him afraid. A little light had been let in and he peeked inside.

A long flight of steps led down, remarkably even steps. And they would have been very neat, except—

The steps were covered by skeletons tumbled every which way. Skeletons in strips of clothing—clothing like he had never seen.

Bits of metal, some bright, had fallen among the bones.

He had run away again, but this time not as far as the pony. He had suddenly realized he would need proof.

Bracing his nerve to a pitch he had seldom before achieved, he went back and gingerly stepped inside and picked up one of the bits of metal. It had a pretty design, a bird with flying wings holding arrows in its claws, quite bright.

His heart almost stopped when the skull he had removed it from tipped sideways and went to powder before his very gaze, as though it had reproached him with its gaping eyes for his robbery and then expired.

The pony had been in a white-coat lather when he pulled up in the village.

For two whole days he had said nothing, wondering how best to ask his questions. Previous experiences in asking questions had made him cautious.

Mayor Duncan was still alive at that time. Jonnie had sat quietly beside him until the big man was properly stuffed with venison and was quiet except for a few belches.

“That big tomb,” Jonnie had said abruptly.

“What big what?” Mayor Duncan had snorted.

“The place up the dark canyon where they used to put the dead people.”

“What place?”

Jonnie had taken out the bright bird badge and shown it to Mayor Duncan.

Duncan had looked at it, twisting his head this way and that, twisting the badge this way and that.

Parson Staffor, brighter in those days, had reached across the fire in a sudden swoop and grabbed the badge.

The ensuing interrogation had not been pleasant: about young boys who went to places that were forbidden and got everybody in trouble and didn’t listen at conferences where they had to learn legends and were too smart anyway.

Mayor Duncan, however, had himself been curious and finally pinned Parson Staffor into recounting an applicable legend.

“A tomb of the old gods,” the parson had finally said. “Nobody has

been there in living memory—small boys do not count. But it was said to exist by my great-grandfather when he was still alive—and he lived a long time. The gods used to come into these mountains and they buried the great men in huge caverns. When the lightning flashed on Highpeak, it was because the gods had come to bury a great man from over the water.

“Once there were thousands and thousands living in big villages a hundred times the size of this one. These villages were to the east, and it is said there is the remains of one straight east where thousands lived. And the place was flat except for some hills. And when a great man died there the gods brought him to the tomb of the gods.”

Parson Staffor had shaken the badge. “This was placed on the foreheads of the great when they were laid to rest in the great tomb of the gods. And that’s what it is, and ancient law says that nobody is supposed to go there and must not go there and had better stay away from there forever—especially little boys.” And he had put the badge in his pouch, and that was the last Jonnie ever saw of it. After all, Staffor was a holy man and in charge of holy things.

Nevertheless, Jonnie thought his father should have been buried in the tomb of the gods. Jonnie had never been back there again and thought of it only when he saw lightning hit Highpeak.

But he wished he had buried his father there.

“Are you worried?” asked Chrissie.

Jonnie looked down at her, his reverie broken. The dying fire wove a reddish sheen into her hair and sparked in her dark eyes.

“It’s my fault,” said Jonnie.

Chrissie smiled and shook her head. Nothing could be Jonnie’s fault.

“Yes, it is,” said Jonnie. “There’s something wrong with this place. My father’s bones . . . in the last year they just crumbled like that skeleton’s in the tomb of the gods.”

“The tomb of the what?” said Chrissie idly. If Jonnie wanted to talk nonsense it was all right with her. At least he was talking to her.

“I should have buried him there. He was a great man. He taught me a lot of things—how to braid grass rope, how to wait for a puma to crouch before you stepped aside and hit him as he sprang; they can’t turn in midair, you know. How to cut hide into strips . . .”

“Jonnie, you aren’t guilty of anything.”

“It was a bad funeral.”

“Jonnie, it’s the only funeral I remember.”

“No, it was not a good funeral. Staffor didn’t preach a funeral sermon.”

“He talked. I didn’t listen because I was helping gather strawberries, but I know he talked. Did he say something bad?”

“No. Only it didn’t apply.”

“Well, what did he say, Jonnie?”

“Oh, you know, all that stuff about God being angry with the people. Everybody knows that legend. I can quote it myself.”

“Quote it.”

Jonnie sniffed a little impatiently. But she was interested and it made him feel a little better.

“... And then there came a day when God was wroth. And wearied he was of the fornicating and pleasure dallying of the people. And he did cause a wondrous cloud to come and everywhere it struck, the anger of God snuffed out the breath and breathing of ninety-nine out of a hundred men. And disaster lay upon the land and plagues and epidemics rolled and smote the unholy; and when it was done, the wicked were gone and only the holy and righteous, the true children of the Lord, remained upon the stark and bloodied field. But God even then was not sure and so he tested them. He sent monsters upon them to drive them to the hills and secret places, and lo, the monsters hunted them and made them less and less until at last all men remaining were the only holy, the only blessed, the only sure righteous upon Earth. Hey man!”

“Oh, that one. You say it very nicely, Jonnie.”

“It’s my fault,” said Jonnie morosely. “I should have made my father listen. There is something wrong with this place. I am certain that had he listened and had we moved elsewhere, he would be alive today. I *feel* it!”

“Where else is there?”

“There’s that whole great plain out there. Weeks of riding on it, I am sure. And they say man once lived in a big village out there.”

“Oh, no, Jonnie. The monsters.”

“I’ve never seen a monster.”

“You’ve seen the shiny flashing things that sail overhead every few days.”

“Oh, those. The sun and moon sail overhead, too. So do the stars. And even shooting stars.”

Chrissie was frightened suddenly. “Jonnie, you’re not going to *do* something?”

“I am. With first light I am going to ride out and see if there really was a big village in the plains.”

Chrissie felt her heart contract. She looked up at his determined

profile. It was as though she was sinking down, down, down into the earth, as though she lay in today's grave.

"Please, Jonnie."

"No, I'm going."

"Jonnie, I'll go with you."

"No, you stay here." He thought fast, something to deter her. "I may be gone for a whole year."

Water got into her sight. "What will I do if you don't come back?"

"I'll come back."

"Jonnie, if you don't come back in a year, I'll come looking for you."

Jonnie frowned. He scented blackmail.

"Jonnie, if you're leaving, you see those stars up there? When they come back to the same place next year and you haven't returned, I will come looking."

"You'd be killed out in the plains. The pigs, the wild cattle—"

"Jonnie, that is what I will do. I swear it, Jonnie."

"You think I'd just wander off and never return?"

"That's what I will do, Jonnie. You can go. But that's what I will do."

5

The first dawn light was painting Highpeak rose. It was going to be a beautiful day.

Jonnie Goodboy was completing the packing of a lead horse. Windsplitter was sidling about, biting at the grass, but not really eating. He had his eye on Jonnie. They were obviously going somewhere, and Windsplitter was not going to be left out.

Some wisps of smoke were coming from the breakfast fire of the Jimson family nearby. They were roasting a dog. Yesterday at the funeral feast nearly a score of dogs had gotten into an idiot fight. There had been plenty of bones and meat as well. But the pack had gotten into a fight and a big brindle had been killed. Looked like the Jimson family would have meat all day.

Jonnie was trying to keep his mind on petty details and off Chrissie and Pattie, who were standing there watching him quietly.

Brown Limper Staffor was also there, idling about in the background. He had a clubfoot, born that way. Obviously deformed and should have been killed, but he was the only child the Staffors had ever had, and Staffor was parson after all. Maybe mayor, too, since there wasn't any now.

There was no affection whatever between Jonnie and Brown Limper. During the funeral dancing, Brown had sat on the sidelines making sneering remarks about the dancing, about the funeral, about the meat, about the strawberries. But when he had made a remark about Jonnie's father—"Maybe never had a bone in the right place"—Jonnie had hit him a backhand cuff. Made Jonnie ashamed of himself, hitting a cripple.

Brown Limper stood crookedly, a faint blue bruise on his cheek, watching Jonnie get ready, wishes of bad luck written all over him. Two other boys of similar age—there were only five in the whole village who were in their late teens—wandered up and asked Brown what was going on. Brown shrugged.

Jonnie kept his mind carefully on his business. He was probably taking too much, but he didn't know what he'd run into. Nobody knew. In the two buckskin sacks he was roping on either side of the lead horse, he had flint stones for fire, rat's nests for tinder, bundles of cut thongs, some sharp-edged rocks that were sometimes hard to find and cut indifferently well, three spare kill-clubs—one heavy enough to crush a bear's skull just in case—some warm robes that didn't stink very much, a couple of buckskins for spare clothes . . .

He gave a start. He hadn't realized Chrissie had come within a foot of him. He hoped he wouldn't have to talk.

Blackmail, that's what it was—plain as possible and all bad. If she'd said she would kill herself if he didn't come back, well, one could have put that down to girl vaporings. But threatening to follow him in a year put another shadow on it entirely. It meant he would have to be cautious. He'd have to be careful not to get himself killed. It was one thing to worry about his own life; he didn't care a snap for risk or danger. But the thought of Chrissie going down on the plains if he didn't come back made him snow-cold at the pit of his stomach. She'd be gored or mauled or eaten alive and every agonizing second of it would be Jonnie's fault. She had effectively committed him to caution and care—just what she intended.

She was holding something out to him. Two somethings. One was a large bone needle with a thong hole in it, and the other was a skin awl. Both were worn and polished and valuable.

"They were mama's," said Chrissie.

"I don't need anything."

"No, you have them."

"I won't need them!"

“If you lose your clothes,” she wailed, “how are you going to sew?”

The crowd had thickened. Jonnie didn’t need any outbursts. He snatched the needle and awl out of her hand and unlashed the neck of a sack and dropped them in, made sure they hadn’t missed and dropped out, and then relashed the sack.

Chrissie stood more quietly. Jonnie turned and faced her. He was a little bit shocked. There wasn’t even a smudge of color in her face. She looked like she hadn’t slept and had tick fever as well.

Jonnie’s resolution wavered. Then beyond Chrissie he saw Brown Limper tittering and talking behind his hand to Petie Thommsso.

Jonnie’s face went tight. He grabbed Chrissie and kissed her *hard*. It was as though he had taken a board from an irrigation trough: the tears went down her cheeks.

“Now look,” said Jonnie. “Don’t you follow me!”

She made a careful effort to control her voice. “If you don’t come back in a year, I will. By all the gods on Highpeak, Jonnie, I *will*.”

He looked at her. Then he beckoned to Windsplitter, who sidled over. With one smooth spring he mounted, the lead rope of the other horse gripped in his hand.

“You can have my other four horses,” said Jonnie to Chrissie. “Don’t eat them; they’re trained.” He paused. “Unless you get awful hungry, of course, like in the winter.”

Chrissie hung on to his leg for a moment and then she stepped back and sagged.

Jonnie thumped Windsplitter with a heel and they moved off. This was going to be no wild free ride to adventure. This was going to be a tiptoe scout with care. Chrissie had seen to that!

At the entrance to the defile he looked back. About fifteen people were still standing there watching him go. They all looked dejected. He used a heel signal to make Windsplitter rear and waved his hand. They all waved back with sudden animation.

Then Jonnie was gone down the dark canyon trail to the wide and unknown plains.

The rest of the people drifted off. Chrissie still stood there, hoping with a wild crazy hope that he would ride into sight, returning.

Pattie tugged at her leg. “Chrissie. Chrissie, will he come back?”

Chrissie’s voice was very low, her eyes like ashes in a dead fire. “Goodbye,” she whispered.

6

Terl belched. It was a polite way to attract attention, but the belch didn't make much impression through the whine and howl of machines in the transport department maintenance dome.

Zzt's concentration on his work became more marked. Minesite Sixteen's transport chief had little use for the security head. Every time a tool or a car or fuel turned up missing—or even just broken—it got attention from security.

Three crashed cars were strewn about in various stages of reassembly, one of them very messy with splotches of green Psychlo blood on the interior upholstery. The big drills that dangled from the ceiling rails pointed sharp beaks this way and that, idling in their programing. Lathes with nothing in their jaws spun waiting for something to twist and shave. Belts snarled and slapped at each other.

Terl watched the surprisingly nimble talons of Zzt disassemble the small concentric shells of a high-speed jet engine. Terl had hoped to detect a small tremble or two in Zzt's paws—if the transport chief's conscience was bothering him, it would be much easier to do business. There was no tremble.

Zzt finished the disassembly and threw the last ring on the bench. His yellow orbs contracted as he looked at Terl. "Well? What have I done now?"

Terl lumbered closer and looked around. "Where are your maintenance men?"

"We're fifteen mechanics under complement. They were transferred to operations over the last month. I know it and you know it. So why are you here?"

As chief of security, Terl had learned through experience not to be very straightforward. If he simply asked for a manual reconnaissance plane, the transport chief would demand the emergency voucher, not get it, and say "No transport." And there were no emergencies for security on this dull planet. Not real ones. In hundreds of years of operation, there had not been the slightest security threat to Intergalactic Mining operations here. A dull-dull-dull security scene, and consequently the chief of that department was not considered very important. Apparent threats had to be manufactured with guile as their sole ingredient.

"I've been investigating a suspicion of conspiracy to sabotage

transport,” said Terl. “Kept me busy for the last three weeks.” He eased his bulk back against a wrecked car.

“Don’t lean on that recon. You’ll dent its wing.”

Terl decided it was better to be friendly and rumbled over to a stool at the bench where Zzt was working. “Confidentially, Zzt, I’ve had an idea that could get us some outside personnel. I’m working on it, and that’s why I need a manual recon.”

Zzt batted his eyebones and sat down on another stool, which creaked despairingly under his thousand-pound bulk.

“This planet,” said Terl confidently, “used to have a sentient race on it.”

“What race was that?” asked Zzt suspiciously.

“Man,” said Terl.

Zzt looked at him searchingly. A security officer was never noted for his sense of humor. Some had been known to bait and entrap and then file charges. But Zzt couldn’t help himself. His mouthbones started to stretch, and even though he sought to control them, they spread and suddenly his laugh exploded in Terl’s face. Zzt hastily got it under control and turned back to his bench to resume work.

“Anything else on your mind?” asked Zzt, as an afterthought.

This was not going well, thought Terl. Well, that’s what happened when you were frank. It just didn’t mix with security.

“This suspicion of conspiracy to sabotage transport,” said Terl as he looked around at the wrecked cars with half-lowered eyebones, “could reach to high places.”

Zzt threw down a wrench with a clang. A low snarl rumbled in him. He sat there, staring in front of him. He was thinking.

“What do you really want?” he asked at last.

“A recon plane. For five or six days.”

Zzt got up and yanked a transport schedule clipboard off the wall and studied it. He could hear Terl almost purring.

“You see this schedule?” said Zzt, pushing it under Terl’s nose.

“Well, yes.”

“Do you see where it has six drone recons assigned to security?”

“Of course.”

“And do you see where this has been going on for”—Zzt peeled back sheet after sheet—“blast! For centuries, I suppose.”

“Have to keep a minesite planet under surveillance,” said Terl complacently.

“Under surveillance for what?” said Zzt. “Every scrap of ore was spotted and estimated long before your and my living memory. There’s nothing out there but mammals. *Air* organisms.”

“There might be a hostile landing.”

“Here?” sneered Zzt. “Company probes in outer space would detect it ages before it ever arrived here. Terl, transport has to fuel and maintain and recondition those drones two and three times a year. You know and I know the company is on an economy wave. Tell you what.”

Terl waited sourly to be told.

“If you will let us cancel those recon drones, I’ll put a triwheel ground cycle at your disposal for a limited time.”

Terl let out a small, shrill scream.

Zzt amended his bargain. “A ground car at your disposal when ordered.”

Terl lumbered over to the crashed vehicle that had blood on its seats. “Wonder if this was caused by faulty maintenance.”

Zzt stood there, unrelenting. The crash had been caused by too much kerbango on duty.

“One recon drone programed to cover the whole planet once a month,” said Zzt. “One ground car at your permanent disposal.”

Terl looked at the other wrecks but couldn’t think of anything. These investigations were done and dead. Teach him to close investigations!

He wandered back to Zzt. “One drone recon programed to cover the whole planet once a month. One *armored* and *firepower* ground car at permanent disposal with no questions on ammunition, breathe-gas or fuel requisitions.”

Zzt took the forms from the bench drawer and made them out. He shoved the papers and clipboard at Terl.

As he signed, Terl thought to himself that this transport chief really ought to be looked into. Maybe for ore robbery!

Zzt took the papers back and removed from the switchboard the combination keycard of the oldest and rattiest ground car that was gathering dust in the garage dome. He coupled it with a coupon book for ammo, another for breathe-gas and another for fuel.

The deal would never actually become part of recorded history as a deal, for the dates of the orders were carefully not coincident. Neither suspected that they had just materially altered the future of the planet. And not for the better of Intergalactic. But that is sometimes the way with large commercial companies.

When Terl had left to get his Mark II (armored, firepower, “The Enemy Is Ours”) ground car, Zzt thought to himself that it was wonderful what lies executives told just to be able to go hunting. Kill-mad they all were. Machine kill-mad, too, from the jam-ups he had to repair. What a story! Man a sentient race indeed! He laughed and got back to work.

7

Jonnie Goodboy Tyler galloped free across the vast ocean of grass, Windsplitter exuberantly stretching his legs, the lead horse rollicking along behind.

What a day. Blue sky and the wind a cooling freshness on his face.

Now two days out, he had come down from the mountains, through the foothills, and into the vastest plain he had ever imagined. He could still see the tiniest tip of Highpeak behind him, and with the sun, it kept him true on course and reassured him that he could find his way home whenever he wanted.

Total security! The herds of wild cattle were many, but he had been living with those all his life. A few wolves, but what were wolves? No bear, no puma so far. Why, in all reverence to the gods, did anybody ever stay cooped up in the mountains?

And monsters—what monsters? *Phagh!* Crazy tales!

Even that shiny, floating cylinder that had gone overhead every few days the whole of his life was overdue down here. It had come from west to east with the regularity of every other heavenly body, but even it seemed to have stopped. On his present course he would have seen it.

In short, Jonnie Goodboy Tyler was suffering from a *badly* swollen case of overconfidence. And the first disaster that hit him had to do with pigs.

Pigs were usually easy to kill—if you were a bit nimble and watched out for charges of the boars. And a small suckling pig was exactly what one could use for supper.

Right there ahead of him, clear in the late-afternoon light, was a compact herd of pigs out in the open. There were big ones and small ones, but they were all fat.

Jonnie pulled Windsplitter to a halt and slid off. The wind was not quite right, a bit too downwind to the pigs. They’d smell him if he approached directly.

With a bent-knee run, he brought himself silently around them until the wind was at right angles.

He stopped and hefted his club. The tall grass was nearly to his waist. The pigs were rooting around a shallow depression in the plain, where water stood in the wet months, making a temporary marsh. There must be roots to be had there, Jonnie supposed. There were dozens of pigs, every one with his snout down.

With a crouching gait, staying below the grass tops, Jonnie went forward closing the distance yard by yard.

Only a few feet separated him now from the outermost fringe of pigs. Silently he rose until his eyes were just above the level of the grass. A small porker was only three arm-spans from him, an easy throw.

“Here’s for supper,” breathed Jonnie and heaved his kill-club straight and true at the head of the pig.

Dead on, a direct hit. The pig let out an ear-splitter and dropped.

But that wasn’t all that happened. Instant confusion roared.

Hidden from Jonnie by the tall grass and slightly behind him and to his right, a five-hundred-pound boar who had become tired of eating had lain down for a nap.

The squeal of the hit pig acted like a whip on the whole herd and away they went in an instant charge, straight upwind at Jonnie’s horses.

For the big boar, to see was to charge.

Jonnie felt like he had been struck by a mountain avalanche. He was knocked flat and squashed in instants so close together they felt like one.

He rolled. But the whole sky over him was filled with boar belly. He didn’t see but he sensed the teeth and tusks trying to find him.

He rolled again, the savage squeals mixing with the roaring pound of the blood in his ears.

Once more he rolled and this time he saw daylight and a back.

In the blink of an eye he was on the boar’s back.

He reached an arm across the throat.

The boar spun around and around like a bucking horse.

Jonnie’s arm tightened until he could feel his sinews crack.

And then the boar, strangled, dropped into a limp, jerking pile.

Jonnie unloaded quickly and backed up. The boar was gasping its breath back. It lurched to unsteady feet, and seeing no opponent, staggered off.

Jonnie went over and picked up the small pig, keeping an eye on the departing boar. But the boar, although it cast about and made small convulsive charges, still couldn’t see anybody, and after a bit it trotted in the direction the herd had taken, following the trampled grass.

There was no herd in sight.

And there were no horses!

No horses! Jonnie stood there with the dead pig. He had no sharp rock to cut it. He had no flints to start a fire and roast it. And he had no horses.

Chrissie's promise and his own determination to be cautious hit him like a soggy hide.

It might even be worse. He looked at his legs, expecting to see tusk gashes. But he found none. His back and face ached a bit from the collision of the charge and his own collision with the ground, but that was all.

Mentally kicking himself, more ashamed than scared, he made off in the direction of the trail of crushed grass. After a while his depression wore off a bit, to be replaced by optimism. He began to whistle a call. The horses would not have just gone on running in front of the pigs. They would have veered off somewhere.

Just as darkness was falling he spotted Windsplitter calmly cropping grass. The horse looked up with a "Where-have-you-been?" And then, with a plainly mischievous grin, as though he had intended to all the time, came over and bumped Jonnie with his muzzle.

It took another ten minutes of anxious casting about to locate the lead horse and the packs.

Jonnie went back a short way to a little spring they'd passed and made camp.

There he made himself a belt and a pouch, and into the latter he put tinder and a flint and some small, sharp-edged stones. He put a stronger thong on the big kill-club and fastened it to the belt. He wasn't going to be caught empty-handed a *second* time in this vast prairie. No *indeed*.

That night he dreamed of Chrissie being strangled by pigs, Chrissie mauled by bears, Chrissie crushed to a pulp under stampeding hoofs, while he stood helpless in the sky where the spirits go, unable to do a damned thing.

8

The "Great Village" where "thousands had lived" was obviously another one of those myths, like "monsters." But he would look for it nonetheless.

By the half-light of the yellowing dawn, Jonnie was again trotting eastward.

The plain was changing. There were some features about it that didn't seem usual, such as those mounds. Jonnie detoured from his way into the sun to look at one of them.

He stopped, leaning forward with a hand braced on Windsplitter's shoulder, to study the place.

It was a little sort of hill, but it had a hole in the side. A rectangular hole. Otherwise the mound was all covered with dirt and grass. Some freak of nature? A window opening?

He slid off his horse and approached it. He walked around it. Then he paced it out. It was about thirty-five paces long and ten paces wide. Hah! Maybe the mound was rectangular too!

An old, splintered stump stood to one side and Jonnie appropriated a jagged piece of it.

He approached the window and, using the scrap of wood, began to push away the grass edges. It surprised him that he seemed to be digging not in earth but in loose sand.

When he got the lower part of the rectangle cleared, he could get right up to it and look into it.

The mound was hollow!

He backed up and looked at his horses and then around at the countryside. There wasn't anything menacing there.

He bent over and started to crawl into the mound.

And the window bit him!

He backed right up and looked at his wrist.

It was bleeding.

It wasn't a bad cut. It was that he was cut at all that startled him.

Very carefully he looked at the window more closely.

It had teeth!

Well, maybe they weren't teeth. They were dull-bright and had a lot of colors in them and they stood all around the outside edges of the frame. He pulled one of them out—they were very loose. He took a bit of thong from his belt and tried it.

Wonder of wonders, the tooth readily cut the thong, far better than the best rock edge.

Hey, he thought, delighted, Look what I got! And with the greatest care—for the things did bite unless you were careful—he removed the splinters big and small from the frame and stacked them neatly. He went to his pack and got a piece of buckskin and wrapped them up. Valuable! You could cut and skin and scrape something wonderful with these things. Some kind of rock. Or this mound was the skull of some strange beast and these were the remains of its teeth. Wonderful!

When he had them all and they were carefully stowed in his pack—except one nice bit he put in his belt pouch—he returned to the task of entering the mound.

There was nothing to bite him now and he climbed through the rectangle. There wasn't any pit. The level of the inside seemed to be a bit higher than the outside ground.

A sudden flurry startled him half out of his wits. But it was just a bird that had a nest in here, and it left through the window with a rustle of wings. Once outside, it found a place to sit and began to scold and scold and scold.

Jonnie fumbled his way through the dimness. There wasn't much there, mainly rust. But there *had* been things there; he could tell from the rust piles and wall marks.

Walls? Yes, the place had walls. They were of some sort of rough stone or something, very evenly fitted together in big square blocks.

Yes, these were walls. No animal made anything like this.

And no animal made anything like this tray. It must have been part of something else, now turned to reddish powder. At the bottom of the powder were some circular disks about as big as three thumbnails. And at the bottom of the pile of disks was one that was almost bright.

Jonnie picked it up and turned it over. He caught his breath.

He moved over to the window where there was better light. There could be NO mistake.

It was the big bird with spread wings and arrows gripped in its claws. The same sign he had found in the tomb.

He stood in quivering excitement for a bit and then calmed down. He had it now. The mystery was solved. And he went back out the window and showed Windsplitter.

"God house," said Jonnie. "This is where they stayed while waiting to take great men up to the tomb. Pretty, isn't it?"

Windsplitter finished chewing a mouthful of grass and gave Jonnie a shove in the chest. It was time they were going.

Jonnie put the disk in his belt pouch. Well, it was no "Great Village," but it proved definitely that there were things to find out here in the plains. Walls, imagine that. Those gods could build walls.

The bird stopped scolding in some relief as Jonnie mounted up and moved away. It looked after the little cavalcade, and then, with a couple more criticisms, went back inside the ancient ruin.

9

Terl was as happy as a baby Psychlo on a diet of straight kerbango. Although it was late in the day, he was on his way!

He steered the Mark II ground car down off the ramp, through the atmosphere port, and into the open air.

There was a warning plaque on the ledge in front of the driver's seat:

BATTLE READINESS MUST BE OBSERVED AT ALL TIMES!
Although this tank is compression contained, personal face masks and independent breathing systems must be kept in place. Personal and unauthorized battle use prohibited. (signed) Political Department, Intergalactic Mining Company, Vice-Director Szot.

Terl grinned at the sign. In the absence of political officers—on a planet where there was no indigenous politics—and in the absence of a war department—on a planet that had nothing to war against—the chief of security covered both those functions. That this old battle car existed on the planet at all meant that it must be very, very old and in addition must have gotten there as a result of fixed allocations of vehicles to company stations. Clerks in Planet One, Galaxy One offices were not always well advised when they wrote their endless directives and orders to the far-flung outposts of the commercial empire. Terl threw his personal face mask and tank onto the gunner's seat beside him and rubbed a thankful paw over his craggy face.

What a lark! The old car ran like a well-greased digger. Small, not more than thirty feet long and ten feet high, it skimmed above the ground like a low-flying wingless bird. Cunning mathematics had contoured it so that every exterior surface would make a hostile projectile glance off at an angle. Missile-proof glass slots gave a fine view of the terrain. Even the blast muzzles of its artillery were cleverly recessed. The interior upholstery, though worn and cracked in places, was a beautiful soothing shade of purple.

Terl felt good. He had five days of jet fuel and breathe-gas and five days of rations in their ten-pound packs. He had cleaned up every scrap of paper in his baskets and had started no new "emergencies." He had a "borrowed" shaft analysis picto-recorder that would take great pictures when put to other uses. And he was on his way!

A break in the dull-dull life of a security chief on a planet without

insecurities. A planet that wasn't likely to produce many opportunities for an ambitious security chief to get promotion and advancement.

It had been a gut blow when they ordered him to Earth. He wondered at once what he had done, whom he had accidentally insulted, whose bad side he had gotten on, but they assured him that none of these was the case. He was *young*. A Psychlo had a life span of about one hundred ninety years, and Terl had been only thirty-nine when he had been appointed. It was pointed out to him that few ever became security *chiefs* at such a tender age. It would show in his record that he had been one. And when he came back from the duty tour, they would see. Plums, like planets you could breathe on, went to older Psychlos.

He had not been fooled, really. Nobody in security personnel pool, Planet One, Galaxy One, had wanted anything at all to do with this post. He could hear the future assignment interview now.

"Last post?"

"Earth."

"Where?"

"Earth, rim star, third planet, secondary Galaxy Sixteen."

"Oh. What did you accomplish on that post?"

"It's all in the record."

"Yes, but there's nothing in the record."

"There *must* be something. Let me see it."

"No, no. Confidential company record."

And then the final horror: "Employee Terl, it just happens that we have an opening in another rim star system, Galaxy Thirty-Two. It's a quiet place, no indigenous life and no atmosphere at all. . . ."

Or even worse: "Employee Terl, Intergalactic has been dropping for some time on the exchange and we have orders to economize. I'm afraid your record doesn't recommend continued employment. Don't call us. We'll call you."

He already had a bit of scribble on the wall. A month ago he'd received word that his tour of duty had been extended and there was no mention of his relief. A little bit of horror had touched him, a vision of a one-hundred-ninety-year-old Terl tottering around on this same planet, long forgotten by friends and family, ending his days in a dome-crazy stupor, lowered into a slit-trench grave, and ticked off the roster by a clerk who kept the records neat—but didn't know a single face on them.

Such questionable fates required *action*. Big *action*.

There were better daydreams: waiting in a big entrance hall, uniformed ushers at attention, but one of them whispering to another, "Who's that?" And the other, "Don't you know? That's *Terl*." And the big doors opening: "The president of the company is waiting to thank you, sir. Please come this way..." Ah, *well!*

According to the mine surveys there was an ancient highway to the north of here. Terl flipped the ground car onto auto and spread out a big map. Yep. There it was. Ran east and west. And west was where he wanted to go. It would be busted up and overgrown, maybe even hard to spot. But it would have no steep grades and it would run squarely up into the mountains. Terl had drawn a big circle around the target meadow.

Aha! There was the "highway" ahead.

He threw the controls to manual and fumbled a bit. He hadn't driven one of these things since security school years ago, and his uncertain control made the car yaw.

He zoomed up the side embankment of the road and yanked back the throttles and pawed the brakes. The car slammed to earth in a geysering puff of dust, square in the center of the highway. It was a pretty jolting stop but not bad, not bad. He'd get smoother at it.

He picked up his face mask and tank and donned them. Then he hit the decompression button so the tanks would recontain the breathe-gas without waste. There was a momentary vacuum, a trifle uncomfortable on the hearing bones, and then with a sigh, the outside air entered the cab.

Terl swung open the top hatch and stood up on the seat, the tank creaking and shuddering under his repositioned weight. The wind felt cool outside the borders of his face mask.

He gazed around with some distaste. This sure was wide-wide-wide country. And empty-empty-empty. The only sound was the whisper of wind in the grass. And the sound of silence, vast silence. Even a far-off birdcall made the silence heavier.

Things were tan and green. The earth was tan and brown. The grass and occasional shrubs were green. The sky was an expansive blue, specked with white puffs of clouds. Sure a strange country. People on home planet wouldn't believe it. Not for a minute. No lovely purple anywhere.

With a sudden inspiration Terl reached down into the car and grabbed the picto-recorder. He aimed it in a sweeping circle, letting it grind away. He'd send his folks a spool of this. Then they'd believe him when he said it was one horns-awful of a planet and maybe sympathize with him.

“My daily view,” he said into the recorder as he finished the sweep. The words rumbled through his mask, sounding sad.

Hey. There *was* something purple. Straight west there were some mountains and they looked *purple*. He put the picto-recorder down and grinned at the mountains so far away. This was better than he thought. No wonder *men* lived up in the mountains. They were purple. Maybe the *men* were a bit sentient after all. He hoped so, but not with any great confidence; he was probably being optimistic. But it gave some substance to his nebulous plans.

Still looking westward, he suddenly caught sight of a landscape feature between himself and the mountains: a distant skyline silhouetted against the declining sun. He shifted a lever on his face mask glass to get magnification. The skyline leaped closer. Yes, he was right. There was a ruined city. Fuzzy and broken but the buildings still very tall. And quite extensive.

The wind fluttered his mine map as he looked at it. The ancient highway ran straight west into it. Reaching down, he took a massive tome off the pile he had on the rear crew seat and opened it to a marked place. There was an insert drawing on the page—some cultural artist had sketched it a few centuries ago.

The company had used air-breathing Chinkos for cultural posts on planets where there *was* air. The Chinkos had come from Galaxy Two, beings as tall as Psychlos but thread-thin and delicate. They were an old-old-old race, and the Psychlos didn't like to admit they had learned what they knew of cultural arts from them. But they had been easy to transport, despite breathing air and being feather light. And they had been cheap-cheap-cheap. Alas, they were no more, not even in Galaxy Two, having initiated a *strike*, of all things. Intergalactic had wiped them out. But that was long after the Culture and Ethnology Department had been terminated on Earth. Terl had never seen a Chinko. Kind of remarkable, drawing pictures like this. Colorful too. Why would anybody *draw* something?

He compared the distant skyline to the sketch. Aside from a bit of blunting and crumbling in the ensuing years, they were the same.

The text said, “To eastward of the mountains lies the ruin of a man-city, remarkably well preserved. It was man-called ‘Denver.’ It is not as aesthetically advanced as those in the middle or eastern part of the continent. The usual miniature doors have little or no ornamentation. The interiors are no more than slightly oversized dollhouses. Utility

rather than artistry seems to have been the overall architectural purpose. There are three cathedrals, which were apparently devoted to the worship of different heathen gods, showing that the culture was not monosectarian even though it may have been dominated by priesthoods. One god, 'Bank,' seems to have been more general in worship. There was a man-library remarkably well stocked with books. The department sealed some of the library rooms after removing to archives the only important volumes—those on mining. As no ore bodies were evident under the foundations and no valuable ore materials were employed by the indigenous population in its construction, the man-city remains in a remarkable state of preservation, aided in part by the dry climate. The cost of further restoration is being requisitioned."

Terl laughed to himself. No wonder the Culture and Ethnology Department had been phased out on this planet, if it was applying for credits to reconstruct man-cities! He could hear the counterblast from the directors now. They'd fair put a shaft through the heads of such tinny-spinny, oh-dear-me, arty types.

Well, it was data he might use in his plans. Who knew?

He got back to the business at hand. Yep! There was the highway stretching out. He was right on it, right in the middle of it. It was a couple of hundred feet wide at this point and it could be clearly discerned. It probably had two or three feet of sand on top of it, but the growing grass was uniform and the shrubs to either side, not being able to put down roots directly on it, defined between their two edge rows a straight course.

Terl took another look around. There were some cattle, a small herd of horses in the distance. Nothing worth shooting—since no Psychlo could eat meat of that metabolism—nothing dangerous enough to offer sport. It was luxurious to have time to think about hunting and even to be equipped for it! And even more luxurious not to do it! He had a bigger game going anyway.

He dropped down into the driver's seat and punched the buttons to close the top. The unbreathable air exhausted from the cab and was replaced by proper gas. He took off his face mask, contrary to regulations, and dropped it on the gunner's seat. The purple interior was a relief to his nerves.

This confounded planet! It even looked bad through the purple tint of the windscreens!

He glanced again at the map. Now was the time for some luck. He

knew he couldn't go up into the mountains themselves due to the uranium the recon drones always indicated in that area. But the recon drones also reported that these man-things sometimes came down to the mountain foothills, which were safe enough.

Terl thought over his plans again. They were beautiful plans. Personal wealth, personal power. The recon drones had told him more than others knew. The scans had pointed out a vein of almost solid gold, uncovered by a landslide after Intergalactic surveys were finalized. A delicious, fabulously rich vein of gold in plain sight. A vein about which the company was ignorant—since the landslide was recent and Terl had destroyed the records. A joke on Zzt to propose no more recon drones over the area!

The uranium count in that area of the mountains was formidable and so no Psychlo could mine it. Even a few bits of uranium dust could explode Psychlo breathe-gas.

Terl smiled at his own genius. All he needed was a man-thing and then a few more man-things. *They* could mine it and to blast with uranium. Somehow he would get the gold off the planet and home, and he had ideas about how he could do that too. Then wealth and power! And no more of this place!

All the security chief had to do was keep others from suspecting what he was *really* doing, to advertise quite other reasons. But Terl was an expert at that.

If he were truly lucky he could catch a man-thing this side of the meadow. He did not have too much time to lie in wait. He *felt* lucky.

The sun was very low, thanks to his late start. He'd lie up in that man-city for the night, sleeping in the car.

He sent the Mark II skimming along the ancient highway. Tomorrow was going to be a *big* day.

10

A skyline!

Jonnie Goodboy Tyler pulled up with a yank so sudden he startled Windsplitter into a rear.

There it was, straight east. It wasn't hills or mountains. It wasn't some trick of the eye. It was sharp and rectangular.

He had been so unconvinced.

When he had left the ancient ruin, he had found a very easy way to travel. It was almost as if the ruin with the window had once had a broad path leading to it.

There were shrubs on the right and shrubs on the left, two rows about two hundred feet apart that dwindled eastward into the distance. Underfoot there was fairly even grass. You had to watch it a bit because there were shallow gullies in places. When you looked down between these little gullies, there was something gray white. Jonnie had inspected it with care. He had gotten down and dug at the edges of such a crack and it seemed that the gray white stuff was continuous.

Just like the inner walls of the ruin.

Maybe it was a wall of the ancients, fallen over sideways. But no, it would have cracked as it fell.

Outside the courthouse at home, level stones had been laid as pavement. But who wanted a pavement two hundred feet wide? And an hour's journey long? For what?

This big path had not been used for a long, long time. If it was a path. It went between hillocks that had been sliced into and it went across water courses—although it was pretty irregular and broken in these.

He had been excited for a while, but then he got used to it and devoted his attention mainly to keeping Windsplitter from tripping in the little gullies.

When he was a little boy, one of the families had had a wheeled cart they hauled firewood in, and he had been told that once there had been a lot of carts, even one that was pulled by a mare. Well, you could sure roll a cart on this wide turf. And roll it fast and far.

But as to the "Great Village," he was coming to believe as the afternoon wore on that somebody had probably seen that god house back there and multiplied it in his imagination.

And then suddenly there it was!

But was it?

He put Windsplitter up to a trot regardless of the little gullies. In the clear air the skyline wasn't coming his way very fast. It even appeared to be receding.

He stopped. Maybe it was a trick of the eye after all. But no, the lines it made were up and down and flat on top and there was an *awful* lot of it.

It wasn't hills or mountains. Only building sides could be that regular.

He started up again, more sedately, remembering now to be careful. And after a while he could see that he was getting closer.

The sun was coming down and he wasn't there yet. The prospect of entering that place in the dark was definitely not cheering. Who knew what it might be full of? Ghosts? Gods? People?

Monsters? Ah, no. Not monsters. They were just the stuff mamas frightened their kids to sleep with.

He pulled off the path where it crossed a stream and made camp. He warmed up some of his roasted pork and then interestedly cut it up with one of the sharp, shiny things he had taken out of the window.

My, he marveled, imagine anything cutting like that. It would make life a real pleasure. You had to watch it not to cut your own fingers, as he had already done twice, slightly. Maybe you could bed the cutting edge in wood or something for a handle. Then you would *really* have something. Oh, my!

After supper he built up his fire to keep the wolves off—a couple were sitting over there now, amber-eyed in the reflected firelight and looking hungry.

“Run away,” shouted Jonnie, “or I'll be wearing your hides.” But the wolves just sat there.

Windsplitter and the lead horse didn't want to go away from the fire. The wolves made them nervous. So Jonnie picked up a couple of rocks, fist-sized, from the nearby stream bed.

He wasn't interested in hunting wolves, but his horses had to find grass.

He threw a pork bone about ten feet beyond the fire and in the direction of the wolves.

Big rangy things they were. One slunk forward, belly low, snarling to reach the pork bone. In a moment the wolf's attention would be fixed on the bone.

Jonnie's arm blurred. The far wolf caught the rock squarely between his eyes.

Jonnie's arm blurred again. The near wolf didn't jump in time and he too was a dead wolf.

Jonnie said to Windsplitter, “I got to do all the work, is that it?” And he walked over to the far wolf and hauled the carcass to the fire. Then he dragged the closer one in. Nope, neither one had a pelt worth taking at this time of the year. And they had ticks too.

“Go on and eat,” he told the horses.

He built up the fire again, just in case the wolves had friends, and rolled up in his robes. Tomorrow was going to be *the* day.

11

Jonnie approached the “Great Village” cautiously.

Partly from awe, partly from fears for Chrissie, he was taking absolutely no chances.

He was up before first light, and the yellow dawn found him in the outskirts of the place, peering, halting, looking closer at the strange sights, nervous.

Sand lay over everything, and grass and even scrub grew in the wide paths between the buildings.

He gave a start every time a rabbit or a rat came tearing out of the ancient structures, disturbed by his footfalls. Even though the hoofs were muffled by the grass and sand, the silence of the place was so intense that any disturbance of it seemed overloud.

He had never heard an echo before to notice it. The return of sound caused him a great deal of worry. For a little while he thought there must be another horse walking in the distance. But at last he worked it out.

He hit his wrist kill-club against the one in his belt and promptly heard the same sound repeated softly. Like a mockery. He waited but no further mock occurred. Then he hit the clubs together again and the same sound returned. He decided it didn’t happen unless he did it first.

He looked about him. To both his left and his right were the tall remains of buildings, very tall indeed. Pitted by wind erosion, discolored by endless centuries of weather, they still stood, flat and even and imposing. Astonishing. Whoever could build such things? Gods, perhaps?

He eyed the massive size of the building blocks. No man could lift one by himself.

Jonnie sat his horse in the middle of what must have been the main path of the “Great Village.” He frowned, straining to conceptualize the building of such a place. Many men? But how could they reach so high?

He concentrated laboriously. Gradually he could conceive that if one built up steps of logs, and if many, many men put ropes around a block, and if they carried it up the steps and then took the steps away, they might have done it. Marvelous, dizzy, and dangerous. But it was possible.

Satisfied that it didn’t need gods or monsters to have made this place, and therefore very relieved, he continued his exploration.

He wondered whether some odd kind of tree had grown along this path. He got down and looked at the stump of one. It was hard and jagged. It had been hollow and it was deep in the strange rock. It wasn’t wood. It was a

reddish metal, and when you scraped away the red powder, underneath was black. He looked up and down both sides of the wide path. The placing of these things was very precise. Although he couldn't figure out what they were for, it was obvious that, like buildings, they were placed objects. Well!

The innumerable windows surrounded him, seeming to stare back at him. The morning sun had come now and it shone into those that faced it. Here and there were vast surfaces of the shiny stuff he had collected from the mound on the plain. It was not clear; it was whitish and bluish like the cataracts on an old man's eyes. But there were whole sheets of it in some places. He began to realize it was some kind of covering, perhaps to keep out the cold and heat and yet let in light. People at home sometimes did that, using the tissue of animal stomachs. But those who had built the "Great Village" had access to some kind of rock or hard substance that came in sheets. They must have been very clever people.

He saw a great yawning doorway ahead of him. The doors had fallen away and lay there half-buried in the sand. The inside of the building gaped darkly.

Jonnie walked his horse through the door and looked about in the dimness. Debris was scattered all about, rotted and decayed beyond identification. But a waist-high series of platforms stood; they were of a remarkably white stone that had bluish veins in it.

He leaned down from his horse and stared at the walls behind them. There were heavy, heavy doors set into it, two of them ajar, one of them wide open. Big wheels of still-bright metal were inset into them.

Jonnie stepped to the platforms of white stone and dropped to the other side. Cautiously he approached the open niche.

There were shelves, and on the shelves, tangled with rotted remains of some kind of sacking, were mounds and mounds and mounds of disks. Some were a dull gray, almost tarnished away, but one pile was bright yellow.

Jonnie picked up a disk. It was as wide across as two fingernails and remarkably heavy. He turned it over and his eyes bugged.

Here was that bird again! Talons gripping a bundle of arrows. Hastily he pawed into the other mounds, looking at disk after disk. Most of them had a bird on one side. The face of a man, the faces of different men, were on the other.

Face of a *man*!

And some of them had *women* on them.

This was *not* a god symbol. This was a *man* symbol.

The bird with the arrows belonged to *man*!

The shock of it sent him reeling. He supported himself against the wall of the niche for minutes. He felt his head buzzing with the readjustment of ideas.

These doors to the niches were *man*-made. The "Great Village" was *man*-made. The doors of the tomb in the mountains were of similar material even if larger.

The tomb was *not* a god tomb. The mound out on the plain was also *man*-made.

Man had once built things. He was certain of it.

It would take many men to make this "Great Village." Therefore there must have been many men at one time.

He rode his horse out of the place in a deep daze. His background ideas and values had suffered severe shifts and it took an awful lot of getting used to. What legends were true? Which ones were false?

There was the legend of the "Great Village" and here it was. Man had obviously made it and had lived here in forgotten times.

Maybe the legend of God getting angry with man and wiping him out was true. And maybe it wasn't. Maybe it had just been a big storm.

He looked around the paths and buildings. There was no evidence of a storm: the buildings were still standing. Many even had that strange thin rock in the windows. There were no bodies about, but from a time so long ago, bones wouldn't last.

And then he saw a structure that had its doors firmly closed and sheets of metal fastened where the windows should be, and looking closer, he saw that a huge metal lock sealed the place. He got down and inspected the seal.

It was of a different age than the village: there was no tarnish on it at all. Old, but not *that* old.

Something or someone at some time had pushed aside the sand in front of the doors. It was grass-grown sand, but it had been disturbed.

Jonnie frowned. This building was not like the rest. It was in a fair state of preservation. Somebody had put metal sheets on the windows and the metal was quite different from any in the rest of the town: it showed no signs of corrosion.

Somebody had given *this* building special treatment.

He backed up to get a better overall view. It was indeed a different kind of building. Fewer windows. Block solid.

As an experienced tracker, Jonnie studied the time differences here. Long, long after the village had been abandoned, somebody had made access to this place, made a path, even dug a path in and out of the doors and then had sealed the doors thoroughly. But even that had been a long time ago.

Curious, he scanned the front façade. One of the metal window covers was loose. It was higher than his head, so he stood on his horse and pried at it. It gave a little bit. Encouraged, he shoved the handle of his kill-club into the crack, and with a protesting whine the cover suddenly sprang loose, startling Windsplitter, who moved off.

Jonnie held on to the ledge, his feet dangling.

He pulled himself up. The transparent sheeting under the cover was still in place. He took his kill-club and managed to hit it.

The crash and tinkle of the stuff as it fell was shockingly loud in this quiet place.

Experienced now with the cutting quality of this stuff, Jonnie hung on to the ledge with one arm and cleaned up the jagged bits from one side of the frame and dusted off the ledge.

He pulled himself through.

The place was so dark that it took quite a while to see anything. Light was coming through in thin cracks where other windows remained covered. At length, his eyes adjusted and he dropped cautiously down into the huge room. Now that he was not blocking the window's light he could see quite well.

Dust and sand were only a filmy cover over things. There were tables and tables and tables and chairs and chairs and chairs, all marshaled in orderly rows. But they were not the interesting things.

Almost every wall was covered with shelving. The stacks of shelves even protruded out into the room. Somebody had covered them with a sheeting you could see through. Something lay under the sheeting on every shelf.

Jonnie approached cautiously. He carefully removed the fastenings to the sheeting and looked behind it.

Queer, thick rectangles stood on these shelves. Rows of them. At first he thought it was all one piece and then he found that one could remove a single rectangle. He took one off the shelf.

It almost fell to pieces in his hands!

Awkwardly, he juggled to hold it together and then succeeded. What a strange object! It was a box that wasn't a box. The covers slid sideways away from each other, enclosing a packet of thin—remarkably thin—slices that had black marks on them, lots of little, tiny black marks all in orderly rows. What a strange object! How complicated!

He put the first one back on the shelf and took a second, smaller one. It too fell open.

Jonnie found himself staring at a *picture*.

It didn't have depth. At first it seemed to, but his finger told him it was just a flat plane. The object there was a big red circle, much bigger than a strawberry, much smoother. It had a stem. And alongside it there was a black tent with a crossbar in the middle of it.

He turned the sheet. There was a picture of a *bee*. No bee was ever that big, but this was certainly a bee. It too looked three-dimensional until his finger told him it wasn't. And a black thing beside it had two bulges on it.

Jonnie turned another sheet. There was a *cat*. A small cat, to be sure, but it was definitely a cat. And it had a curved black thing beside it like a new moon.

A few pages later there was a picture of a *fox*. And beside it was a black pole with two flags coming off it.

Suddenly a quiver went through Jonnie. He held his breath. He grabbed the first object he had taken and pried it open again. There was the tent. There was the *bee's* black mark. Yes! And there was the pole with two flags.

He held the two rectangles, his head in a whirl. He stared at them.

There was a *meaning* here. Foxes? Bees? Cats? Tents, bulges, new moons?

These things had *meanings* in them!

But about what? Animals? Weather?

Well! He could sort all that out later. He crowded the two rectangles into his belt pouch. Anything that was connected to weather and animals had value. Rectangles with meaning in them. The idea made bright lights pop in your skull.

He replaced the protective sheet, went back out the window, replaced the metal covering as well as he could, and whistled Windsplitter over, dropping down to the horse's back.

Jonnie looked around him expansively. Who knew what things of enormous value were in the Great Village? He felt rich, excited.

There was no reason at all for his people to stay cooped up there in the mountains. Here was shelter and to spare. Here was firewood growing in the streets. Here were rooms and rooms and rooms!

And come to think of it, he felt better since he had been away from the mountain meadow. Better physically.

It hadn't taken a year. Actually just a few days.

He gathered up the lead rope of his pack horse and they trotted briskly along the wide paths toward the eastern part of the Great Village.

Although his eyes were busy taking it all in, his mind was engrossed in organizing a migration from the mountains down to this place: what he would have to pick up for evidence to convince them; what he was going to say to Staffor; how they could transport their goods... maybe build a cart? Hey, maybe there were carts right here in the Great Village. He could round up some horses. These piles of red dust he saw along either side of the wide paths from time to time might once have been carts of a sort. It was hard to figure out what shape they had really had, they were so caved in. The impression of a wheel. Sheets of translucent rock. No, they hadn't been horse carts, or had they? He began to look at such objects more closely.

And then he saw the *insect*.

12

It was very bright daylight now. And there it sat. There could be no mistaking it.

Alien.

Surely it *must* be an insect. Only cockroaches looked like that. Or beetles. No, cockroaches.

But there were no cockroaches that big. Not thirty feet long and ten feet high and maybe twelve feet side to side.

A horrible brown color. And smooth.

Jonnie had stopped, the lead horse bunched up behind. The thing was sitting squarely in the middle of the wide path. It seemed to have two eyes in front, slitted. There was nothing like this on the plains or in the mountains, and he had seen nothing like it in the Great Village center. It looked new, with very little dust on it, and shiny.

He felt it was alive. There was something about it. Yes, alive. Not inanimate metal but a living thing. Then he saw what made him think so.

There had been a slight rocking motion. Yes! Something moved behind the slitted eyes.

Jonnie, making no sudden movements, turned Windsplitter and, pulling the lead horse, began to move away in the direction from which he had approached. He had already noted that these paths were mostly rectangular and that you could go all the way around a group of buildings and come back to the same place.

There was open country to the east, not very far. He would go down a side path and then circle back and get out into the plains. Hopefully he could outrun it. If it moved.

There was an earsplitting roar!

Jonnie glanced back in terror. The thing rose up three feet above the ground. Dust flew from below it. It began to inch forward. It *was* alive!

He put Windsplitter into a gallop straight down the street. He passed one corner path, two. The thing was falling behind. It was now two corners back.

He swerved Windsplitter up a side path, yanking the lead horse with him. They reached another corner and again he turned. Up ahead were two tall buildings. He'd keep going and reach the open country. He'd make it.

And then suddenly there was a sheet of flame. Ahead of him the right-hand building exploded apart. Its top slid oh so slowly down and into the street ahead, blocking it.

Spattered with dust, Jonnie hauled up short.

He could hear the roaring of the thing somewhere beyond the rubble. He listened, holding his breath. The position of the roar was changing. It was shifting to the right.

He traced it with his ears. It was going on down the other street. Now it was level with him. Now it was getting behind him.

The thing had somehow blocked the street ahead of him and then gone on, planning to come up behind him.

He was trapped.

Jonnie looked at the smoking mound of fresh rubble ahead of him. It rose twenty feet above the pavement, a steep barricade.

There was no panic in him now. He slowed the hard pounding of his heart. The thing to do was wait until the monster was right in the street behind him—then go over that barricade.

He sidled Windsplitter back to get a good run.

The thing was roaring down the side path behind him. Now it was turning. He glanced back. There it was, wisps of smoke coming out of its nostrils.

Jonnie put the heel to Windsplitter. He yanked on the lead rope.

“EEYAH!” shouted Jonnie.

The horses sprinted at the barricade. Rough and full of loose stones. Dangerous.

Up they scrambled. Rubble slid. Pray the gods no broken legs.

Up they went.

They hit the top. One glance back showed the thing rolling up to the very bottom of the barricade.

Jonnie sent the horses down in a turmoil of tumbling debris.

They hit the street before them at a run and kept running.

The walls racketed with the thunder of their run. Jonnie swerved through a checkerboard of paths, edging to the open country.

He could not hear the roaring thing now over the powerful thud of the running hoofs.

Further and further. The buildings were thinning. He saw open country between two structures to his right and skidded down off the embankment and raced for freedom.

As soon as he had free running space everywhere but toward the town, he slowed.

Windsplitter and the lead horse were blowing and puffing. He walked them until they caught their breath, casting his eyes restlessly up and down the edges of the town behind them.

Then he caught the roaring again. He strained his eyes, watching.

There it was!

It slid out from among the buildings and started straight toward him.

He put the horses up to a trot.

The thing was closing the distance.

He put the horses up to a run.

The thing not only closed the distance but started to pass him.

Jonnie swerved at right angles.

The thing banked into a turn and flashed by him, went well ahead, turned and blocked his way.

Jonnie pulled up. There it was, ugly, roaring, gleaming.

He turned around and began to run away from it.

It let out a blasting roar, scorched by him and again stopped, blocking his way.

Jonnie's face tightened into determination.

He took his biggest kill-club from his belt. He put the thong solidly on his wrist. He cast off the lead horse.

Walking Windsplitter, he went up ahead of the thing. It didn't move.

He went about a hundred feet in front of the thing. It didn't move. He carefully spotted the position of a slitted eye.

He began to whirl the kill-club. It swooshed in the air.

He put a heel to Windsplitter and they raced straight at the thing.

The kill-club, carried with the full speed of the running horse, whooshed down straight at the slitted eye.

The crash of impact was deafening.

Jonnie slowed beyond the thing. It had not moved.

He trotted Windsplitter back to the original position, a hundred feet in front of the thing. He turned and made ready for a second run.

The lead horse came up behind him to its habitual place. Jonnie glanced at it and then back at the thing. He calculated the distance and the run to strike at the other slitted eye.

He touched a heel. Windsplitter plunged forward.

And then a great gout of yellow bloomed out from between the eyes. Jonnie was struck a blow like all the winds of Highpeak rolled into one.

Windsplitter caught the full force of it. Up into the air went horse and rider. Down they came with a shuddering crash against the earth.

13

Terl didn't know what he was looking at.

He had bunked down in the car in the outskirts. He had the old Chinko map of the ancient city, but he had no curiosity about it.

With a few shots of kerbango, he had eased himself off into sleep, intending to be gone with the dawn, through the city and into the mountains. Senseless, even risky, to go on in the dark.

The car, however, had grown hot with the morning sun before he awoke. And now he stared out at an odd thing in the street before him. Maybe it had been the footfalls that had awakened him.

He didn't know what it was. He had seen horses—they were always falling down mine shafts. But he had never before seen a horse with two heads.

That's right. Two heads. One in front and one in the middle.

And a second animal of similar sort behind. Only this one only had a second body in the middle, as if the second head was bent down out of sight.

He batted his eyebones. He shifted over into the driver's seat and stared more intently through the armored windshield.

The two beasts had now turned around and were walking the other way, so Terl started up and began to follow.

It became apparent to him at once that the beasts knew he was after them. He took a hasty look at his ancient street map, thinking he could flash around a couple of blocks and head them off.

But instead it was the beasts who turned.

Terl saw they would dead-end and knew they would circle a block. It was elementary indeed to handle that.

He glanced again at his map and spotted the right buildings to make a barricade.

The firepower of the old Mark II was not very heavy but it was surely enough for that. He adjusted the force lever with a fumbling and inexperienced paw and steered the tank into position. He hit the fire button.

The resulting explosion was extremely satisfactory. A whole building tipped over to make a barricade.

He jockeyed his throttle and wheeled around and went down the street, turned, and sure enough! There they were. He had his quarry trapped.

Then he sat with slack jawbones to see the beasts go straight up over the smoking rubble and vanish from view.

Terl sat there for a minute or two. Was this any part of what he was trying to accomplish? He was puzzled by the beasts, but they didn't have anything to do with the business he was in.

Oh, well. He had lots of time, and hunting was hunting after all. He pushed a button and fired off an antenna capsule set to hover three hundred feet up and then turned on his picture screen.

Sure enough, there were the beasts, tearing along, zigzagging around blocks. He watched their progress while he ate some breakfast. That done, he took a small shot of kerbango, engaged the drive train, and following the picture, was soon out in open country with his quarry in plain sight.

He raced around in front and blocked them. They turned. He did it again.

What *were* they? The second beast still had his head down, but the one in the lead definitely had two heads. Terl decided he had better not talk about this in the recreation room. They'd roast him.

He watched with curiosity when the beast in the front stopped, took a stick out of his belt, and began a run at him. His curiosity turned to amazement. The thing was going to attack him. Incredible!

The crash of the club against the windshield was deafening. His earbones clashed with the assault. And that wasn't all. There was an immediate atmosphere sizzle.

A wave of dizziness hit Terl. Bright lights popped in his skull. Air! Air was getting into the cab!

This old Mark II had seen better days. The supposedly armored windscreen had come loose in its mounts. Terl gaped at it in disbelief. The side gasket had given way!

He panicked. Then his eye caught the sign about face masks and he hastily snatched the mask and flask of breathe-gas off the gunner's seat and snapped it over his face, opening the valve. He inhaled deeply and the dizziness lessened. He took three deep breaths to clean the damned air out of his lungs.

Terl stared anew at the strange beast. It was lining up for another run!

His paws fumbled with the firepower. He wanted no recoil of the blast blowing back through the opened windscreen and he pulled the force lever low to "Stun." He hoped it was enough.

The beast started the run. Terl hit the fire button.

It was enough all right. The ions sizzled and glared. The beasts were slammed back, lifted clean off the ground. They fell.

Terl watched intently to make sure they kept on lying where they had fallen. Good! They did.

He let out a shuddering sigh into his mask, winding down. And then he sat up straight in new amazement. He had thought, when they were hit, that he was dealing with two four-legged beasts. But lying on the ground they had come apart!

Terl swung a side door wide and crawled out. He checked his beltgun and then rumbled over to the game he had hit.

Three beasts, maybe four!

The two four-legged beasts were two. On the one behind, a bundle of something had fallen apart. That maybe made three. The nearer one definitely was two different beasts.

What a confusion!

He shook his head, trying to clear it. The effects of air were not wearing off fast enough: little bright sparks were still popping in front of his eyes.

He lumbered over to the more distant one, pushing the tall grass away. Oh ho! It was a horse. He had seen plenty of horses; the plains were full

of them. But this horse had had a bundle tied on its back. Simple as that. The bundle had come loose. He kicked it. It wasn't anything alive, it was just some skins, some animal hides, and nonsense bits of other things.

He walked back toward the tank through the high grass.

Yep. The other thing was also a horse. And over to the right where it had fallen clear . . .

Terl pushed back the grass. Well, luck of the gold nebula! It was a *man!*

The Psychlo turned the man over. What a small, puny body! Hair on the face and head but nowhere else. Two arms, two legs. White brown skin.

Terl was unwilling to admit that Char's description fitted. In fact, he resented that it did come close and promptly rejected it.

The chest was moving—only slightly, true—but it was still alive. Terl felt fortunate indeed. His excursion was successful without his even going up into the mountains.

He picked it up with one paw and went back to the tank and threw it into the gunner's seat, which engulfed it. Then he set to work repairing the windscreen gasket with some permastick. The whole side of the glass had been dislodged, and although the glass itself was not even scratched, that had been quite a blow. He looked down at the small body swallowed in the seat. No, a fluke. It was the age of this tank, the brittleness of its gaskets. Sure was a ratty car; he'd find something wrong and put it in Zzt's records—misplaced parts or something. He went over the other gaskets, the doors and the other screen. They seemed all right, if brittle. Well, he wasn't going underwater and there would surely be no more attacks from things like that.

Terl stood up on the driver's seat and looked all around the horizon. All clear. No more of these beasts.

He banged down the top and settled himself. His paw hit the compression change, and the hiss of air exhausting from the cab and the gurgle of breathe-gas entering was welcome. His face mask was sweaty in the growing heat of the day and he hated the thing. Oh, for a proper-atmosphere planet, a planet with right gravity, with purple trees—

The man-thing went into a sudden convulsion.

Terl drew back, alarmed. It was turning blue. Jerking about. The last thing he wanted was a raving mad animal inside the cab.

Hastily he adjusted his face mask, reversed the compression, and

kicked open the side door. With one bat of his paw he knocked the thing back out onto the grass.

Terl sat there watching it. He was afraid his plans were going up in a puff. The thing must have been more heavily affected by the stun blast than he knew. Crap, they were weak!

He opened the cab top and looked over at one of the horses.

He could see its sides moving. It was breathing and wasn't in any convulsion. It was even recovering. Well, a horse was a horse, and a man might be . . .

He suddenly got it. The man-thing couldn't breathe breathe-gas. The bluish color was fading; the convulsions had stopped. The chest was panting as the thing gulped in air.

That gave Terl a problem. Blast if he was going to ride back to the minesite in a face mask.

He got out of the car and went to the farther horse. It was recovering, too. The sacks were lying near it. Terl rummaged through one and came up with some thongs.

He went back and picked up the man-thing and slammed it up on top of the car. He arranged it so its arms stuck out to each side. Tying piece after piece of thong together he made a long rope. He tied one end to one wrist of the thing, passed the rope under the car—grunting a bit as he lifted it up to do so—and tied the other wrist. He yanked it good and tight. Then he pushed at the man-thing experimentally to see whether it would fall off.

Very good. He threw the sacks onto the gunner's seat and got in, closed up, and restarted the atmosphere change.

The nearest horse was lifting its head, struggling to get up. Aside from surface blood boils caused by the stun gun, it seemed to be all right, which meant that the man-thing would probably recover.

Terl stretched his jawbones in a grin. Well, it was coming out all right after all.

He started up the car, turned it, and headed back toward the minesite.

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