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And Then There Were None



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Index: [chapter 1](#) [chapter 2](#) [chapter 3](#) [chapter 4](#) [chapter 5](#) [chapter 6](#) [end notes](#)



Chapter 1



[The ambassador] went silent as the ship closed in and the planet's day-side face rapidly expanded. Then followed the usual circling and photographing. A lot of villages and small towns were to be seen, also cultivated areas of large extent. It was obvious that this planet—while by no means fully exploited—was in the hands of colonists who were energetic and numerically strong.

Relieved that life was full, abundant and apparently free from alien disease. Grayder brought the ship down onto the first hard-standing he saw. Its enormous mass landed feather-like on a long, low hump amid well-tended fields. Again all the ports became filled with faces as everyone had a look at the new world.

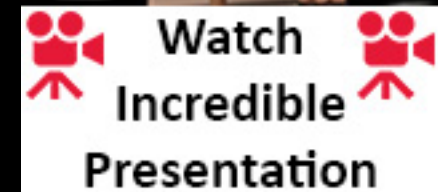
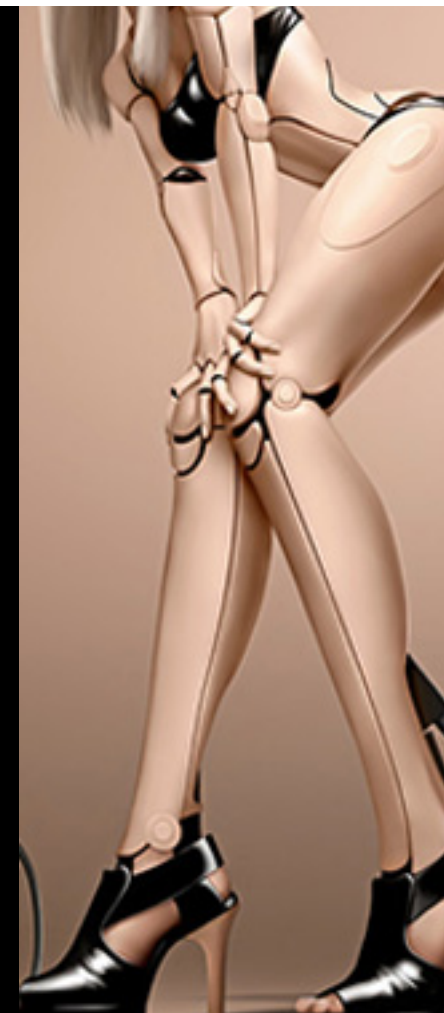
The midway airlock opened, the gangway went down. As before, exit was made in strict order of precedence starting with the Ambassador and finishing with Sergeant Major Bidworthy. Grouping near the bottom of the gangway they spent the first few moments absorbing sunshine and fresh air.

His Excellency scuffed the thick turf under his feet, plucked a blade of it grunting as he stooped. He was so constructed that the effort came close to an athletic feat and gave him a crick in the belly.

'Earth-type grass. See that, Captain? Is it just a coincidence or did they bring seed with them?'

'Could be either. Several grassy worlds are known. And almost all colonists went away loaded with seeds.'

'It's another touch of home, anyway. I think I'm going to like this



place.’ The Ambassador gazed into the distance, doing it with pride of ownership. ‘Looks like there’s someone working over there. He’s using a little motor-cultivator with a pair of fat wheels. They can’t be very backward, it seems.

‘H’m-m-m!’ He rubbed a couple of chins. ‘Bring him here. We’ll have a talk and find out where it’s best to make a start.’

‘Very well.’ Captain Grayder turned to Colonel Shelton. ‘His Excellency wishes to speak to that farmer.’ He pointed to the faraway figure.

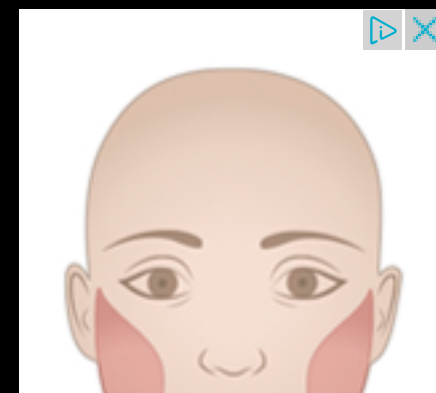
‘That farmer,’ said Shelton to Major Hame. ‘His Excellency wants him at once.’

‘Bring that farmer here,’ Hame ordered Lieutenant Deacon. ‘Quickly.’

‘Go get that farmer,’ Deacon told Sergeant Major Bid-worthy. ‘And hurry—His Excellency is waiting.’

Bidworthy sought around for a lesser rank, remembered that they were all inside, cleaning ship and not smoking, by his order. He, it seemed, was elected.

Tramping across four fields and coming within hailing distance of his objective, he performed a precise military halt, released a barracks square bellow of, ‘Hi, you!’ and waved urgently.



The farmer stopped his steady trudging behind the tiny cultivator, wiped his forehead, glanced casually around. His indifferent manner suggested that the mountainous bulk of the ship was a mirage such as are five a penny around these parts. Bidworthy waved again, making it an authoritative summons. Now suddenly aware of the sergeant major's existence, the farmer calmly waved back, resumed his work.

Bidworthy employed a brief but pungent expletive which—when its flames had died out—meant, 'Dear me!' and marched fifty paces nearer. He could now see that the other was bushy-browed, leather-faced, tall and lean.

'Hi!' he bawled.

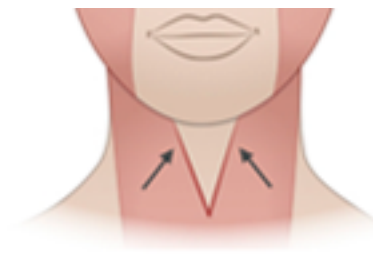
Stopping the cultivator again, the farmer leaned on one of its shafts and idly picked his teeth.

Smitten by the ingenious thought that perhaps during the last few centuries the old Terran language had been abandoned in favour of some other lingo, Bidworthy approached to within normal talking distance and asked, 'Can you understand me?'

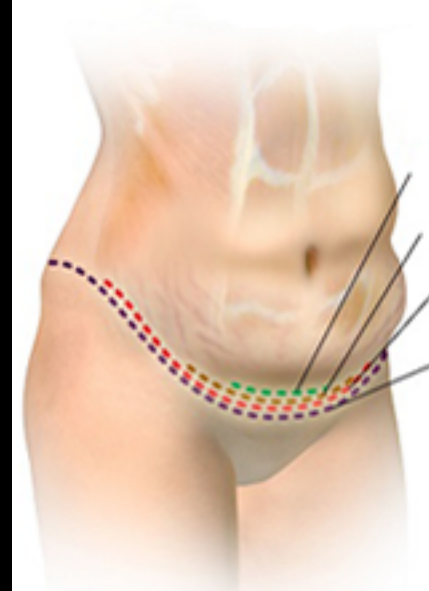
'Can any person understand another?' inquired the farmer with clear diction.

Bidworthy found himself afflicted with a moment of confusion. Recovering, he informed hurriedly, 'His Excellency the Earth Ambassador wishes to speak with you at once.'

'Is that so?' The other eyed him speculatively, had another pick at his



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teeth. 'And what makes him excellent?'

'He is a person of considerable importance,' said Bidworthy, unable to decide whether the other was trying to be funny at this expense or alternatively was what is known as a character. A lot of these long-isolated pioneering types liked to think of themselves as characters.

'Of considerable importance,' echoed the farmer, narrowing his eyes at the horizon. He appeared to be trying to grasp a completely alien concept. After a while, he inquired, 'What will happen to your home world when this person dies?'

'Nothing,' Bidworthy admitted.

'It will roll on as before?'

'Yes.'

'Round and round the sun?'

'Of course.'

'Then,' declared the farmer flatly, 'if his existence or nonexistence makes no difference he cannot be important.' with that, his little engine went chuff-chuff and the cultivator rolled forward.

Digging his nails into the palms of his hands, Bidworthy spent half a minute gathering oxygen before he said in hoarse tones, 'Are you going to speak to the Ambassador or not?'

'Not.'

‘I cannot return without at least a message for His Excellency.’

‘Indeed?’ The other was incredulous. ‘What is to stop you?’ Then, noticing the alarming increase in Bidworthy’s colour, he added with compassion, ‘Oh, well. you may tell him that I said’—he paused while he thought it over—‘God bless you and good-bye.’

Sergeant Major Bidworthy was a powerful man who weighed more than two hundred pounds, had roamed the cosmos for twenty-five years and feared nothing. He had never been known to permit the shiver of one hair—but he was trembling all over by the time he got back to the base of the gangway.



F-I-W

His Excellency fastened a cold eye upon him and demanded, ‘Well?’

‘He refuses to come.’ Bidworthy’s veins stood out on his forehead. ‘And, sir, if only I could have him in the space troops for a few months I’d straighten him up and teach him to move at the double.’

‘I don’t doubt that, Sergeant Major,’ the Ambassador soothed. He continued in a whispered aside to Colonel Shelton. ‘He’s a good fellow but no diplomat. Too abrupt and harsh-voiced. Better go yourself and fetch that farmer. We can’t loaf around forever waiting to learn where to begin.’

‘Very well, Your Excellency.’ Trudging across the field, Shelton caught up with the farmer, smiled pleasantly and said, ‘Good morning, my man.’

Stopping his machine, the farmer sighed as if it were one of those days one has sometimes. His eyes were dark brown, almost black as they regarded the newcomer.

‘What makes you think I’m your man.’

‘It is a figure of speech,’ explained Shelton. He could see what was wrong now. Bidworthy had fallen foul of an irascible type. They’d been like two dogs snarling at one another. Oh, well, as a high-ranking officer he was competent to handle anybody, the good and the bad, the sweet and the sour, the jovial and the liverish. Shelton went on oilily, ‘I was only trying to be courteous.’

‘It must be said,’ meditated the farmer, ‘that that is something worth trying for—if you can make it.’

Pinking a little, Shelton continued with determination, ‘I am commanded to request the pleasure of your company at the ship.’

‘Commanded?’

‘Yes.’

‘Really and truly commanded?’

‘Yes.’

The other appeared to wander into a momentary daydream before he came back and asked blandly, ‘Think they’ll get any pleasure out of my company?’

‘I’m sure of it,’ said Shelton.

‘You’re a liar,’ said the farmer.

His colour deepening, Colonel Shelton snapped, 'I do not permit people to call me a liar.'

'You've just permitted it,' the farmer pointed out. Letting it pass, Shelton insisted, 'Are you coming to the ship?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Myob!' said the farmer.

'What was that?'

'Myob!' he repeated. It sounded like some sort of insult. Shelton went back, told the Ambassador, 'That fellow is one of those too-clever types. At the finish all I could get out of him was 'Myob' whatever that means.'

'Local slang,' chipped in Grayder. 'An awful lot of it develops in four centuries. I've come across one or two worlds where there has been so much of it that to all intents and purposes it formed a new language.'

'He understood your speech?' asked the Ambassador of Shelton.

'Yes, Your Excellency. And his own is quite good. But he won't leave his work.' He reflected briefly, suggested, 'If it were left to me I'd bring him in by force with an armed escort.'

'That would encourage him to give essential information,' commented the Ambassador with open sarcasm. He patted his stomach, smoothed his jacket, glanced down at his glossy shoes. 'Nothing for it but to go and speak to him myself.'

Shelton was shocked. 'Your Excellency, you can't do that!'

‘Why can’t I?’

‘It would be undignified.’

‘I am fully aware of the fact,’ said the Ambassador dryly. ‘What alternative do you suggest?’

‘We can send out a patrol to find someone more co-operative.’

‘Someone better informed, too,’ Captain Grayder offered. ‘At best we won’t get much out of one surly hayseed. I doubt whether he knows one quarter of what we require to learn.’

‘All right.’ The Ambassador dropped the idea of doing his own chores. ‘Organise a patrol and let’s have some results.’

‘A patrol,’ said Colonel Shelton to Major Hame. ‘Nominate one immediately.’

‘Call out a patrol,’ Hame ordered Lieutenant Deacon. ‘At once.’

‘Parade a patrol forthwith, Sergeant Major,’ said Deacon.

Bidworthy lumbered up the gangway, stuck his head into the airlock and shouted, ‘sergeant Gleed, out with your squad and make it snappy!’ He gave a suspicious sniff and went farther into the lock. His voice gained several more decibels. ‘Who’s been smoking? By heavens, if I catch the man—’

Across the fields something quietly went *chuff-chuff* while fat wheels crawled along.

The patrol formed by the right in two ranks of eight men each, turned at a barked command and marched off in the general direction of the ship’s nose. They moved with perfect rhythm if no great beauty of motion. Their boots thumped in unison, their accoutrements clattered with martial noises and the orange-coloured sun made sparkles on their metal.

Sergeant Gleed did not have to take his men far. They were one hundred yards beyond the ship's great snout when he noticed a man ambling across the field to his right. Treating the ship with utter indifference, this character was making toward the farmer still toiling far over to the left.

'Patrol, right wheel!' yelled Gleed, swift to take advantage of the situation. The patrol right-wheeled, marched straight past the wayfarer who couldn't be bothered even to wave a handkerchief at them. Now Gleed ordered an about-turn and followed it with a take-him gesture.

Speeding up its pace, the patrol opened its ranks and became a double file of men tramping on either side of the lone pedestrian. Ignoring his suddenly acquired escort the latter continued to plod straight ahead like one long convinced that all is illusion.

'Left wheel!' roared Gleed, trying to bend the whole caboodle toward the waiting Ambassador.

Swiftly obedient, the double file headed leftward, one, two, three, hup! It was neat, precise execution beautiful to watch. Only one thing spoiled it: the man in the middle stubbornly maintained his self-chosen orbit and ambled casually between numbers four and five of the right-hand file.

That upset Gleed, especially since the patrol continued to thump steadily ambassadorwards for lack of a further order. His Excellency was being treated to the unmilitary spectacle of an escort dumbly boot-beating one way while its prisoner airily mooched another way. In due course Colonel Shelton would have plenty to say about it and anything he forgot Bidworthy would remember.

'Patrol!' hoarsed Gleed, pointing an outraged finger at the escapee and momentarily dismissing all regulation commands from his mind, 'Get that mug!'

Breaking ranks, they moved at the double and surrounded the wanderer too closely to permit further progress. Perforce he stopped.

Gleed came up and said somewhat breathlessly, 'Look, the Earth Ambassador wants to speak to you—that's all.'

The other gazed at him with mild blue eyes. He was a funny looking sample, long overdue for a shave. He had a fringe of ginger whiskers sticking out all around his face and bore faint resemblance to a sunflower.

'I should care,' he said.

'Are you going to talk with His Excellency?' Gleed persisted.

'Naw.' The other nodded toward the farmer. 'Going to talk to Zeke.'

'The Ambassador first,' retorted Gleed, wearing his tough expression. 'He's a big noise.'

'I don't doubt that,' remarked the sunflower, showing what sort of a noise he had in mind.

'Smartie Artie, eh?' grated Gleed, pushing his face close and making it unpleasant. He signed to his men. 'All right, hustle him along. We'll show him!'

Smartie Artie chose this moment to sit down. He did it sort of solidly, giving himself the aspect of a squatting statue anchored for the remainder of eternity. But Gleed had handled sitters before, the only difference being that this one was cold sober.

'Pick him up,' commanded Gleed, 'and carry him.'

So they picked him up and carried him, feet first, whiskers last. He hung limp and unresisting in their hands, a dead weight made as difficult as possible to bear. In this

inauspicious manner he arrived in the presence of the Ambassador where the escort plonked him on his feet.

Promptly he set out for Zeke.

‘Hold him, darn you!’ howled Gleed.

The patrol grabbed and clung tight. The Ambassador eyed the whiskers with well-bred concealment of distaste, coughed delicately and spoke.

‘I am truly sorry that you had to come to me in this fashion.’

‘In that case,’ suggested the prisoner, ‘you could have saved yourself some mental anguish by not permitting it to happen.’

‘There was no other choice. We’ve got to make contact somehow.’

‘I don’t see it’ said Ginger Whiskers. ‘What’s so special about this date?’

‘The date?’ The Ambassador frowned in puzzlement. ‘What has the date got to do with it?’

‘That’s exactly what I’m asking.’

‘The point eludes me.’ The Ambassador turned to the others. ‘Do you understand what he’s aiming at?’

Shelton said, ‘I can hazard a guess, Your Excellency. I think he is hinting that since we’ve left them without contact for four hundred years there is no particular urgency about making it today.’ He looked to the sunflower for confirmation.

That worthy rallied to his support by remarking, ‘You’re doing pretty well for a halfwit.’

Regardless of Shelton's own reaction, this was too much for Bidworthy purpling nearby. His chest came up and his eyes caught fire. His voice was an authoritative rasp.

'Be more respectful while addressing high-ranking officers!'

The prisoner's mild blue eyes turned upon him in childish amazement, examined him slowly from feet to head and all the way down again. The eyes drifted back inquiringly to the Ambassador.

'Who is this preposterous person?'

Dismissing the question with an impatient wave of his hand, the Ambassador said, 'see here, it is not our purpose to bother you from sheer perversity, as you seem to think. Neither do we wish to detain you any longer than is necessary. All w—'

Pulling at his face-fringe as if to accentuate its offensiveness, the other interjected, 'It being you, of course, who determines the length of the necessity?'

'On the contrary, you may decide that for yourself,' gave back the Ambassador, displaying admirable self-control. 'All you need do is tell us—'

'Then I've decided it right now,' the prisoner chipped in. He tried to heave himself free of his escort. 'Let me go talk to Zeke.'

'All you need do,' the Ambassador persisted, 'is tell us where we can find a local official who can put us into touch with your central government.' His gaze was stern, commanding, as he added, 'For instance where is the nearest police post?'

'Myob!' said Ginger Whiskers.

'What was that?'

‘Myob!’

‘The same to you,’ retorted the Ambassador, his patience evaporating.

‘That’s precisely what I’m trying to do,’ insisted the prisoner, enigmatically. ‘Only you won’t let me do it.’

If I may make a suggestion, Your Excellency,’ but in Shelton, ‘allow me—’

‘I require no suggestions and I won’t allow you,’ said the Ambassador, somewhat out of temper. ‘I have had enough of all this stupid tomfoolery. I think we have landed at random in an area reserved for imbeciles. It would be as well to recognize the fact and get out of it with no more delay.’

‘Now you’re talking,’ approved Ginger Whiskers. ‘And the farther the better.’

‘We have no intention of leaving this planet, if that is what’s in your incomprehensible mind,’ asserted the Ambassador. He stamped a proprietary foot into the turf. ‘This is part of the Terran Empire. As such it is going to be recognized, charted and organized.’

‘Heah, heah!’ put in the senior civil servant who aspired to honours in elocution.

His Excellency threw a frown behind, went on, ‘We’ll move the ship to some other section where brains are brighter.’ He turned attention to the escort. ‘Let him go. Probably he is in a hurry to borrow a razor.’

They released their grips. Ginger Whiskers at once turned toward the distant farmer much as if he were a magnetized needle irresistibly drawn Zekeward. Without another word he set off at his original slovenly pace. Disappointment and disgust showed on the faces of Bidworthy and Glead as they watched him depart.

‘Have the vessel shifted at once, Captain,’ the Ambassador said to Grayder. ‘Plant it near to a likely town—not out in the wilds where every yokel views strangers as a bunch of crooks.’

He marched importantly up the gangway. Captain Grayder followed, then Colonel Shelton, then the elocutionist. Next, their successors in correct order of precedence. Lastly, Gleed and his men. The airlock closed. The warning siren sounded. Despite its immense bulk the ship shivered briefly from end to end and soared without deafening uproar or spectacular display of flame.

Indeed, there was silence save for a little engine going *chuff-chuff* and the murmurings of the two men walking behind it. Neither took the trouble to look around to see what was happening.

‘Seven pounds of prime tobacco is a heck of a lot to give for one case of brandy,’ Ginger Whiskers protested.

‘Not for my brandy,’ said Zeke. ‘It’s stronger than a thousand Gands and smoother than an Earthman’s downfall.’



Chapter 2

The great ship’s next touchdown was made on a wide flat about two miles north of a town estimated to hold twelve to fifteen thousand people. Grayder would have preferred to survey the place from low altitude before making his landing but one cannot handle a huge space-going vessel as if it were an atmospheric tug. Only two things can be done when so close to

a planetary surface—the ship is taken straight up or brought straight down with no room for fiddling between-times.

So Grayder dumped the ship in the best spot he could find when finding is a matter of split-second decisions. It made a rut only ten feet deep, the ground being hard with a rock bed. The gangway was shoved out. The procession descended in the same order as before.

Casting an anticipatory look toward the town, the Ambassador registered irritation. ‘Something is badly out of kilter here. There’s the town not so far away. Here we are in plain view with a ship like a metal mountain. At least a thousand people must have seen us coming down even if all the rest are holding seances behind drawn curtains or playing poker in the cellars. Are they interested? Are they excited?’

‘It doesn’t seem so,’ contributed Shelton, pulling industriously at an eyelid for the sake of feeling it spring back.

‘I wasn’t asking you. I am telling you. They are not excited. They are not surprised. They are not even interested. One would almost think they’d had a ship here that was full of smallpox or that swindled them out of something. what’s wrong with them?’

‘Possibly they lack curiosity,’ Shelton ventured.

‘Either that or they’re afraid. Or maybe the entire gang of them is more cracked than any bunch on any other world. Practically all these planets were appropriated by dotty people who wanted to establish a haven where their eccentricities could run loose. And nutty notions become conventional after four hundred years of undisturbed continuity. It is then considered normal and proper to nurse the bats out of your grandfather’s attic. That and generations of inbreeding can create some queer types. But we’ll cure them before we’re through.’

‘Yes, Your Excellency, most certainly we will.’

'You don't look so well-balanced yourself, chasing that eyelid around your face,' reproved the Ambassador. He pointed south-east as Shelton stuck the fidgety hand firmly into a pocket. 'There's a road over there. Wide and well-built by the looks of it. They don't construct a highway for the mere fun of it. Ten to one it's an important artery.'

'That's how it looks to me,' Shelton agreed.

'Put that patrol across it, Colonel. If your men don't bring in a willing talker within reasonable time we'll send the entire battalion into the town itself.'

'A patrol,' said Shelton to Major Hame.

'Call out the patrol,' Hame ordered Lieutenant Deacon.

'That patrol again, Sergeant Major,' said Deacon.

Bidworthy raked out Gleed and his men, indicated the road, barked a bit and shoed them on their way.

They marched, Gleed in front. Their objective was half a mile away and angled toward the town. The left-hand file had a clear view of the nearest suburbs, eyed the buildings wistfully, wished Gleed in warmer regions with Bidworthy stoking the hell-fire beneath him.

Hardly had they reached their goal than a customer appeared. He came from the town's outskirts, zooming along at fast pace on a contraption vaguely like a motorcycle. It ran on a big pair of rubber balls and was pulled by a caged fan. Gleed spread his men across the road.

The oncomer's machine suddenly gave forth a harsh, penetrating sound that reminded everybody of Bidworthy in the presence of dirty boots.

‘Stay put,’ warned Gleed. ‘I’ll skin the fellow who gives way and leaves a gap.’

Again the shrill metallic warning. Nobody moved. The machine slowed, came up to them at a crawl and stopped. Its fan continued to spin at slow rate, the blades almost visible and giving out a steady hiss.

‘What’s the idea?’ demanded the rider. He was lean-featured, in his middle thirties, wore a gold ring in his nose and had a pigtail four feet long.

Blinking incredulously at this get-up, Gleed managed to jerk an indicative thumb toward the metal mountain and say, ‘Earthship.’

‘Well, what do you expect me to do about it?—throw a fit of hysterics?’

‘We expect you to co-operate,’ informed Gleed, still bemused by the pigtail. He had never seen such a thing before. It was in no way effeminate, he decided. Rather did it lend a touch of ferocity like that worn—according to the picture books—by certain North American aborigines in the dim and distant past.

‘Co-operation,’ mused the rider. ‘Now there is a beautiful word. You know exactly what it means, of course?’

‘I’m not a dope.’

‘The precise degree of your idiocy is not under discussion at the moment,’ the rider pointed out. His nose-ring waggled a bit as he spoke. ‘We are talking about co-operation. I take it you do quite a lot of it yourself?’

‘You bet I do,’ Gleed assured. ‘And so does everyone else who knows what’s good for him.’

‘Let’s keep to the subject, shall we? Let’s not sidetrack and go rambling all over the

conversational map.’ He revved up his fan a little then let it slow down again. ‘You are given orders and you obey them?’

‘Of course. I’d have a rough time if—’

‘That is what you call co-operation?’ put in the other. He hunched his shoulders, pursed his bottom lip. ‘Well, it’s nice to check the facts of history. The books could be wrong.’ His fan flashed into a circle of light and the machine surged forward. ‘Pardon me.’

The front rubber ball barged forcefully between two men, knocking them aside without injury. With a high whine the machine shot down the road, its fan-blast making its rider’s plaited hairdo point horizontally backward.

‘You substandard morons!’ raged Glead as the pair got up and dusted themselves. ‘I told you to stand fast What d’you mean by letting him run out on us like that?’

‘Didn’t have much choice about it, Sarge,’ answered one surlily.

‘I want none of your back-chat. You could have busted one of his balloons if you’d had your guns ready. That would have stopped him.’

‘You didn’t tell us to use our guns.’

‘Where was your own, anyway?’ added a sneaky voice.

Glead whirled on the others and demanded, ‘Who said that?’ His eyes raked a long row of impassive faces. It was impossible to detect the culprit ‘I’ll shake you up with the next quota of fatigues,’ he promised. ‘I’ll see to it that—’

‘The Sergeant Major’s coming,’ one of them warned.

Bidworthy was four hundred yards away and making martial progress towards them. Arriving in due time, he cast a cold, contemptuous glance over the patrol.

‘What happened?’

‘Giving me a lot of lip, he was,’ complained Gleed after providing a brief account of the incident. ‘He looked like one of those Chickasaws with an oil-well.’

‘Did he really?’ Bidworthy surveyed him a moment, then invited, ‘And what is a Chickasaw?’

‘I read about them somewhere once when I was a kid,’ explained Gleed, happy to bestow a modicum of learning. ‘They got rich on oil. They had long, plaited haircuts, wore blankets and rode around in gold-plated automobiles.’

‘Sounds crazy to me,’ said Bidworthy. ‘I gave up all that magic-carpet stuff when I was seven. I was deep in ballistics before I was twelve and military logistics when I was fourteen.’ He sniffed loudly and gave the other a jaundiced eye. ‘Some guys suffer from arrested development.’

‘They actually existed,’ Gleed maintained. ‘They—’

‘So did fairies,’ snapped Bidworthy. ‘My mother said so. My mother was a good woman. She didn’t tell me a lot of goddam lies—often.’ He spat on the road. ‘Be your age!’ Then he glowered at the patrol. ‘All right, get out your guns—assuming that you’ve got them and know where they are and which hand to hold them in. Take orders from me. I’ll deal personally with the next character who comes along.’

Sitting on a large rock by the roadside, he planted an expectant gaze on the town. Gleed posed near him, slightly pained. The patrol remained strung across the road with guns held ready. Half an hour crawled by without anything happening.

One of the men pleaded, 'Can we smoke, Sergeant Major?'

'No!'

They fell into lugubrious silence, licking their lips from time to time and doing plenty of thinking. They had lots about which to think. A town—any town of human occupation—had desirable features not to be found anywhere else in the cosmos. Lights, company, freedom, laughter, all the makings of life. And one can go hungry too long.

Eventually a large coach emerged from the town's outskirts, hit the high road and came bowling towards them. A long, shiny, streamlined job, it rolled on twenty balls in two rows of ten, gave forth a whine similar to but louder than that of the motorcycle, and had no visible fans. It was loaded with people.

At a point two hundred yards from the road-block a loud-speaker under the vehicle's bonnet blared an urgent, 'Make way! Make way!'

'This is it,' commented Bidworthy with much satisfaction. 'We've caught a dollop of them. One of them is going to confess or I'll resign from the space-service.' He got off his rock and stood in readiness.

'Make way! Make way!'

'Perforate his balloons if he tries to bull his way through,' ordered Bidworthy.

It wasn't necessary. The coach lost pace, stopped with its bonnet a yard from the waiting file. Its driver peered out of the side of his cab. Other faces snooped curiously farther back.

Composing himself and determined to try the effect of fraternal cordiality, Bidworthy went up to the driver and said with great difficulty, 'Good morning!'

'Your time-sense is shot to pot,' responded the other ungratefully. He had a heavy blue jowl, a broken nose, cauliflower ears and looked the sort who usually drives with others in hot and vengeful pursuit. 'Can't you afford a watch?'

'Eh?'

'It isn't morning. It's late afternoon.'

'So it is,' admitted Bidworthy, forcing a cracked smile.

'Good afternoon!'

'I'm not so sure about that,' mused the driver, leaning on his steering-wheel and moodily scratching his head. 'We get an afternoon in every day. It's always the same. Morning goes and what happens? You're stuck with an afternoon. I've become hardened to it. And this one is just another nearer the grave.'

'That may be,' conceded Bidworthy, little struck with this ghoulish angle, 'but I have other things to worry about and—'

'Fat lot of use worrying about anything, past, present or whatever,' advised the driver. 'Because there are far bigger worries to come. Stick around long enough and you'll have some real stinkers in your lap.'

'Perhaps so,' said Bidworthy, inwardly feeling that this was a poor time to contemplate the darker side of existence. 'But I prefer to deal with my own troubles in my own way.'

'Nobody's troubles are entirely their own, nor their methods of coping,' continued the tough-looking oracle. 'Are they now?'

'I don't know and I don't care,' growled Bidworthy, his composure thinning down as his

blood-pressure built up. He was irefully conscious of Gleed and the patrol watching, listening and probably grinning like stupid apes behind his back. There was also the load of gaping passengers. 'I think you're talking just to stall me. You might as well know that it won't work. I'm here for a purpose and that purpose is going to be served. The Terran Ambassador is waiting—'

'So are we,' emphasised the driver.

'He wants to speak to you,' Bidworthy went stubbornly on, 'and he's going to speak to you.'

'I'd be the last to prevent him. We've got free speech here. Let him step up and say his piece so that we can go our way.'

'You,' informed Bidworthy, 'are going to him.' He signed to the rest of the coach. 'The whole lot of you.'

'Not me,' denied a fat man sticking his head out of a side window. He wore thick-lensed glasses that made his eyes look like poached eggs. Moreover, he was adorned with a tall hat candy-striped in white and pink. 'Not me,' repeated this vision with considerable firmness.

'Me neither,' supported the driver.

'All right.' Bidworthy displayed maximum menace. 'Move this birdcage one inch backward or forward and we'll shoot your pot-bellied tyres to thin strips. Get out of that cab.'

'Ha-ha. I'm too comfortable. Try fetching me.'

Bidworthy beckoned to the nearest six men. 'You heard him—take him up on that.'

Tearing open the cab door, they grabbed. If they had expected the victim to put up a futile

fight against heavy odds, they were disappointed. He made no attempt to resist. They got him, lugged together and he yielded with good grace. His body leaned to one side and came halfway out of the door.

That was as far as they could get him.

‘Come on,’ urged Bidworthy, showing impatience. ‘Heave him loose. You don’t have to be feeble. Show him who’s who. He isn’t a fixture.’

One of the men climbed over the body, poked around inside the cab and announced, ‘He is, you know.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘He’s chained to the steering column.’

‘Nonsense. Let me see.’ He had a look and found that it was so. A chain and a small but heavy and complicated padlock linked the driver’s leg to his coach. ‘Where’s the key?’

‘Search me,’ invited the driver.

They did just that. The effort proved futile. No key.

‘Who’s got it?’

‘Myob!’

‘Shove him back into his seat,’ ordered Bidworthy, looking savage. ‘We’ll take the passengers. One yap is as good as another so far as I’m concerned.’ Striding to the doors, he jerked them open.

‘All out and make it snappy.’

Nobody budged. They studied him silently, with various expressions not one of which did anything to help his ego. The fat man with the candy-striped hat mooned at him sardonically. Bidworthy decided that he did not like the fat man and that a stiff course of military calisthenics might thin him down a bit.

‘You can come out on your feet,’ he suggested to the passengers in general and the fat man in particular, ‘or on your necks. Whichever you prefer. Make up your minds.’

‘If you can’t use your head you can at least use your eyes,’ commented the fat man happily. He shifted in his seat to the accompaniment of metallic clanking noises.

Bidworthy accepted the idea, leaning through the doors for a better look. Then he clambered into the vehicle, went its full length while carefully studying each passenger. His florid features were two shades darker when he emerged and spoke to Sergeant Gleed.

‘They are all chained. Every one of them.’ He glared at the driver. ‘What’s the purpose of manacling the lot?’

‘Myob!’ said the driver airily.

‘Who has the keys?’

‘Myob!’

Taking a deep breath, Bidworthy declaimed to nobody in particular, ‘Every once in a while I hear of somebody running amok and laying them out by the dozens. I’ve always wondered why—but now I know.’ He gnawed his knuckles, added to Gleed, ‘We can’t run this contraption to the ship with that dummy blocking the controls. Either we must find the keys or get tools and cut them loose.’

‘Or you could wave us on our way and then go take a pill,’ offered the driver.

‘Shut up! If I’m stuck here another million years I’ll see to it that—’

‘Here’s the Colonel,’ muttered Gleed, giving him a nudge.



F-I-W

Colonel Shelton arrived, walked once slowly and officiously around the outside of the coach, examined its construction and weighed up its occupants. He flinched at the striped hat whose owner leered at him through the glass. Then he came over to the disgruntled group.

‘What’s the trouble this time, Sergeant Major?’

‘They’re as crazy as all the others, sir. They’re full of impudence and say, ‘Myob’ and couldn’t care less about His Excellency. They don’t want to come out and we can’t make them because they’re chained in their seats.’

‘Chained?’ Shelton’s eyebrow lifted halfway toward his hair. ‘What on earth for?’

‘I don’t know, sir. All I can tell you is that they’re fastened in like a bunch of gangsters being hauled to the pokey and—’

Shelton moved off without waiting to hear the rest. He had a look for himself, came back.

‘You may have something there, Sergeant Major. But I don’t think they are criminals.’

‘No, sir?’

‘No.’ He threw a significant glance towards the fat man’s colourful headgear and several other sartorial eccentricities including a ginger-haired individual’s foot-wide polka-dotted bow. ‘It’s more likely they’re a consignment of lunatics being taken to an asylum. I’ll ask the driver.’ Going to the cab, he said, ‘Do you mind telling me your destination?’

‘Yes,’ responded the other.

‘Very well, where is it?’

‘Look,’ said the driver, ‘are we talking the same language?’

‘Eh? Why?’

‘You’ve just asked me whether I mind and I said yes.’ He made a disparaging gesture. ‘I do mind.’

‘You refuse to tell?’

‘Your aim’s improving, Sonny.’

‘Sonny?’ put in Bidworthy, vibrant with outrage. ‘Do you realize that you are speaking to a colonel?’

‘What’s a colonel?’ asked the driver interestedly.

‘By hokey, if your—’

‘Leave this to me,’ insisted Shelton, waving the furious Bidworthy down. His expression was cold as he returned attention to the driver. ‘On your way. I’m sorry you’ve been detained.’

‘Think nothing of it,’ said the driver with exaggerated politeness. ‘I’ll do as much for you some day.’

With that enigmatic remark he let his machine roll for-ward. The patrol parted to make room. Building up its whine to the top note, the coach sped down the road and diminished into the dusty distance.

‘This planet,’ swore Bidworthy, staring purple-faced after it, ‘has more no-good bums in need of discipline than any place this side of—’

‘Calm yourself, Sergeant Major,’ urged Shelton. ‘I feel exactly the same way as you do—but I’m taking care of my arteries. Blowing them full of bumps like seaweed won’t solve any problems.’

‘Maybe so, sir, but-’

‘We’re up against something mighty peculiar here,’ Shelton went on. We’ve got to find out precisely what it is and how best to cope with. In all probability it means we’ll have to devise new tactics. So far the patrol has achieved nothing. It is wasting its time. Obviously we’ll have to concoct a more effective method of getting into touch with the powers-that-be. March the men back to the ship, Sergeant Major.’

‘Very well, sir.’ Bidworthy saluted, swung around, clicked his heels, opened a cavernous mouth.

‘Patro-o-ol . . . right form—’

Aboard ship the resulting conference lasted well into the night and halfway through the following morning. During these argumentative hours various oddments of traffic, mostly vehicular, passed along the road. But nothing paused to view the monster spaceship, nobody approached for a friendly word with its crew. The strange inhabitants of this world

seemed to be afflicted with a local form of mental blindness, unable to see a thing until it was thrust into their faces and then surveying it squint-eyed.

One passer-by in mid-morning was a long, low truck whining on two dozen balls and loaded with girls wearing bright head-scarves. The girls were tunefully singing something about one little kiss before we part, dear. A number of troops loafing near the gangway came eagerly to life, waved, whistled and yoohooed. Their effort was a total waste for the singing continued without break or pause and nobody waved back.

To add to the discomforture of the love-hungry, Bidworthy stuck his head out of the airlock and rasped, 'If you monkeys are bursting with surplus energy I can find a few jobs for you to do—nice, dirty ones.' He seared them one at a time before he withdrew.

Up near the ship's nose the top brass sat around the chart-room's horseshoe table and debated the situation. Most of them were content to repeat with extra emphasis what they had said the previous evening, there being no new points to bring up.

'Are you certain,' the Ambassador asked Grayder, 'that this planet has not been visited since the last emigration transport dumped its final load four centuries ago?'

'I'm quite positive, Your Excellency. Any such visit would be on record.'

'Yes, if made by a Terran ship. But what about others? I feel it in my bones that at sometime or other these people have fallen foul of one or more vessels calling unofficially and have been leery of spaceships ever since. Perhaps somebody got tough with them and tried to muscle in where he wasn't wanted. Or perhaps they've had to beat off a gang of pirates. Or maybe they've been swindled by unscrupulous traders.'

'Absolutely impossible, Your Excellency,' declared Grayder, suppressing a smile.

'Emigration was so widely scattered over so large a number of worlds that even today every one of them is under-populated, under-developed and utterly unable to build

spaceships of any kind no matter how rudimentary. Some may have the technical know-how but they lack the industrial facilities, of which they need plenty.'

'Yes, that is what I've always understood.'

Grayder went on, 'All Blieder-drive vessels are built in the system of Sol and registered as Terran ships. Complete track is kept of their movements and their whereabouts are always known. The only other spaceships in existence are eighty or ninety antiquated rocket jobs bought at scrap price by the Epsilon system for haulage work between its fourteen closely-spaced planets. An old-fashioned rocket-ship couldn't reach this world in a hundred years.'

'No, of course not.'

'Unofficial boats capable of this long range just don't exist,' Grayder assured. 'Neither do space buccaneers and for much the same reason. A Blieder-drive ship is so costly that a would-be pirate would have to be a billionaire to become a pirate.'

'Then,' said the Ambassador heavily, 'back we go to my original theory; that a lot of inbreeding has made them crazier than their colonizing ancestors.'

'There's plenty to be said in favour of that idea,' put in Shelton. 'You should have seen the coach-load I looked over. There was a fellow like a bankrupt mortician wearing odd shoes, one brown and one a repulsive yellow. Also a moon-faced gump sporting a hat apparently made from the skin of a barber's pole, a11. stripy.' With a sad attempt at wit, he finished, 'The only thing missing was his bubble-pipe-and probably he'll be given that when he arrives.'

'Arrives where?'

'I don't know, Your Excellency. They refused to tell us where they were going.'

Giving him a satirical look, the Ambassador remarked, ' Well, that is a valuable addition to the sum total of our knowledge. Our minds are now enriched by the thought that an anonymous individual may be presented with a futile object for an indefinable purpose when he reaches his unknown destination.'

Shelton subsided wishing that he had never seen the fat man or, for that matter, the fat man's cockeyed world.

'Somewhere they've got a capital, a civic seat, a centre of government wherein function the people who hold all the strings,' the Ambassador asserted. 'We've got to find that place before we can take over and reorganize on up-to-date lines. A capital is big by the standards of its own administrative area. It is never an ordinary, nondescript place. It has obvious physical features giving it importance above the average. It should be easily visible from the air. We must make a systematic search for it—in fact that's what we should have done in the first place. Other planets' capital cities have been identified without trouble. What's the hoodoo on this one?'

'See for yourself, Your Excellency.' Grayder poked several photographs across the table. 'The situation is rather similar to that on Hygeia.^[1] You can see the two hemispheres quite clearly. They reveal nothing resembling a superior city. There isn't even a town conspicuously larger than its fellows or possessing enough outstanding features to set it apart from the others.'

'I don't put great faith in pictures especially when taken at high speed or great altitude. The naked eye can always see more. We've got four lifeboats that should be able to search this world from pole to pole. Why don't we use them?'

'Because, Your Excellency, they were not designed for such a purpose.'

'Does that matter so long as they get results?'

Patiently, Grayder explained, 'They were built to be launched in free space and to hit up forty thousand miles an hour. They are ordinary, old-style rocket-ships to be used only in a grave emergency.'

'Well, what of it?'

'It is not possible to make efficient ground-survey with the naked eye at any speed in excess of about four hundred miles per hour. Keep the lifeboats down to that and you'd be trying to fly them at landing-speed, muffling their tubes, balling up their motors, creating a terrible waste of fuel and inviting a crash which you're likely to get before you're through.'

'Then,' commented the Ambassador, 'it is high time we had Blieder-drive lifeboats for Blieder- drive ships.'

'I couldn't agree more, Your Excellency. But the smallest Blieder apparatus has an Earth-mass of more than three hundred tons. That's far too much for little boats.' Picking up the photographs, Grayder slid them into a drawer. 'The trouble with us is that everything we've got moves a heck of a lot too fast. What we really need is an ancient, propeller-driven air-plane. It could do something that we can't-it could go slow.'

'You might as well yearn for a bicycle,' scoffed the Ambassador, feeling thwarted.

'We have a bicycle,' Grayder informed. 'Tenth Engineer Harrison owns one.'

'And he has actually brought it with him?'

'It goes everywhere he goes. There's a rumour that he sleeps with it.'

'A spaceman toting a bicycle! 'The Ambassador blew his nose with a loud honk. 'I take it that he is thrilled by the sense of immense velocity it gives him, an ecstatic feeling of rushing headlong through space?'

'I wouldn't know, Your Excellency.'

'H'm! Bring this Harrison here. I'd like to see him. Perhaps we can set a crackpot to catch a crackpot.'

Going to the caller-board, Grayder spoke over the ship's system. 'Tenth Engineer Harrison will report to the chart-room at once.'

Within ten minutes Harrison appeared, breathless and dishevelled. He had walked fast three-quarters of a mile from the Blieder room. He was thin and woebegone, expecting trouble. His ears were large enough to cut the pedalling with the wind behind him and he wiggled them nervously as he faced the assembled officers. The Ambassador examined him with curiosity, much as a zoologist would inspect a pink giraffe.

'Mister, I understand that you possess a bicycle.'

At once on the defensive, Harrison said, 'There's nothing against it in the regulations, sir, and therefore—'

'Damn the regulations,' swore the Ambassador. 'Can you ride the thing?'

'Of course, sir.'

'All right. We're stalled in the middle of a crazy situation and we're turning to crazy methods to get moving. Upon your ability and willingness to ride a bicycle the fate of an empire may stand or fall. Do you understand me, Mister?'

'I do, sir,' said Harrison, unable to make head or tail of this.

'So I want you to do an extremely important job for me. I want you to get out your bicycle, ride into town, find the mayor, sheriff, grand panjandrum, supreme galootie or whatever he

is called, and tell him that he is officially invited to evening dinner along with any other civic dignitaries he cares to bring. That, of course, includes their wives.'

'Very well, sir.'

'Informal attire,' added the Ambassador.

Harrison jerked up one ear and drooped the other. 'What was that, sir?'

'They can dress how they like.'

'I get it. Do I go right now, sir?'

'At once. Return as quickly as you can and bring me the reply.'

Saluting sloppily, Harrison went out. His Excellency found an easy-chair, reposed in it at full length, smiled with satisfaction.

'It's as easy as that.' Pulling out a long cigar, he bit off its end. 'If we can't touch their minds we'll appeal to their bellies.' He cocked a knowing eye at Grayder. 'Captain, see that there is plenty to drink. Strong stuff. Venusian cognac or something equally potent. Give them lots of hooch and an hour at a well-filled table and they'll talk all night. We won't be able to shut them up.' He lit the cigar, puffed luxuriously. 'That is the tried and trusted technique of high diplomacy—the insidious seduction of the distended gut. It always works. You'll see!'



Chapter 3

Peddalling briskly down the road, Tenth Engineer Harrison reached the first street on either side of which were small detached houses with neat gardens back and front. A plump, amiable looking woman was trimming a hedge halfway along. He pulled up near to her, politely touched his cap.

‘Scuse me, ma’am, I’m looking for the biggest man in town.’

She part-turned, gave him no more than a casual glance, pointed her clipping-shears southward.

‘That would be Jeff Baines. First on the right and second on the left. It’s a small delicatessen.’

‘Thank you.’

He moved on, hearing the steady snip-snip resume behind him. First on the right. He curved around a long, low, rubber-balled truck parked by the corner. Second on the left. Three children pointed at him dramatically and yelled shrill warnings that his back wheel was going round. He found the delicatessen, propped a pedal on the curb, gave his machine a reassuring pat before he went inside and had a look at Jeff.

There was plenty to see. Jeff had four chins, a twenty-two inch neck, and a paunch that stuck out half a yard. An ordinary mortal could have got into either leg of his pants without bothering to take off his diving suit. Jeff Baines weighed at least three hundred pounds and undoubtedly was the biggest man in town.

‘Wanting something?’ inquired Jeff, lugging it up from far down.

‘Not exactly.’ Harrison eyed the succulent food display and decided that anything unsold by nightfall was not thrown out to the cats. ‘I’m looking for a certain person.’

‘Are you now? Usually I avoid that sort—but every man to his taste.’ He plucked a fat lip while he mused a moment, then suggested. ‘Try Sid Wilcock over on Dane Avenue. He’s the most certain man I know.’

‘I didn’t mean it that way,’ said Harrison. ‘I meant that I’m searching for somebody particular.’

‘Then why the blazes didn’t you say so in the first place?’ Jeff Baines worked over the new problem, finally offered, ‘Tod Green ought to fit that specification topnotch. You’ll find him in the shoeshop at the end of this road. He’s particular enough for anyone. He’s downright finicky.’

‘You persist in misunderstanding me,’ Harrison told him and then went on to make it plainer, ‘I’m hunting a local bigwig so that I can invite him to a feed.’

Resting himself on a high stool which he overlapped by a foot all round, Jeff Baines eyed him peculiarly. ‘There’s something lopsided about this. Indeed, it seems crazy to me.’

‘Why?’

‘You’re going to use up a considerable slice of your life finding a fellow who wears a wig, especially if you insist that it’s got to be a big one. And then again, where’s the point of dumping an ob on him merely because he uses a bean-blanket?’

‘Eh?’

‘It’s plain horse-sense to plant an ob where it will cancel another one out, isn’t it?’

‘Is it?’ Harrison let his mouth hang open while his mind struggled with the strange problem of how to plant an ob.

‘So you don’t know? You’re exposing your tonsils and looking dopey because you don’t know?’

Jeff Baines massaged a couple of his chins and sighed. He pointed at the other’s middle. ‘Is that a uniform you’re wearing?’

‘Yes.’

‘A genuine, pukka, dyed-in-the-wool uniform?’

‘Of course.’

‘Ah, said Jeff, ‘That’s where you’ve fooled me—coming here by yourself, on your ownsome. If there had been a gang of you dressed identically the same I’d have known at once that it was a uniform. That’s what uniform means: all alike. Doesn’t it?’

‘I suppose so,’ agreed Harrison, who had never given it a thought.

‘So you’re from that ship. I ought to have guessed it in the beginning. I must be slow on the uptake today. But I didn’t expect to see one, just one, messing around on a pedal contraption. It goes to show, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ said Harrison, glancing warily backward to make sure that no opportunist had swiped his bicycle while he was engaged in conversation. ‘It goes to show.’

‘All right, let’s have it. Why have you come here and what do you want?’

‘I’ve been trying to tell you all along. ‘I’ve been sent to—’

‘Been sent?’ Jeff’s eyes widened a little. ‘Mean to say you actually let yourself be sent?’

Harrison gaped at him. 'Of course. Why not?'

'Oh, I get it now,' said Jeff, his puzzled features suddenly clearing. 'You confuse me with the queer way you talk. What you really mean is that you planted an ob on somebody, eh?'

Desperately, Harrison asked, 'For heaven's sake, what's an ob?'

'He doesn't know,' commented Jeff Baines, looking prayerfully at the ceiling. 'He doesn't even know that!' For a short while he contemplated the ignoramus with condescending pity before he said, 'You hungry by any chance?'

'Going on that way.'

'All right. I could tell you what an ob is. But I'll do something better—I'll show you.' Heaving himself off the stool, he waddled to the door at back. 'God alone knows why I should bother to educate a uniform. It's just that I'm bored. C'mon, follow me.'

Obediently, Harrison, went behind the counter, paused to give his bicycle a reassuring nod, trailed the other through a passage and into a yard.

Jeff Baines pointed to a stack of cases. 'Canned goods.' He indicated an adjacent store. 'Bust them open and pile the stuff in there. Stack the empties outside. Please yourself whether you do it or not. That's freedom, isn't it?' He lumbered back into the shop.



F - I W

Left to himself, Harrison scratched his large ears and thought it over. Somewhere, he felt, there was an obscure sort of confidence trick. A candidate named Harrison was being tempted to qualify for his sucker certificate. But if the play was beneficial to its organizer it

might be worth learning because it could then be passed on to other victims. One must speculate in order to accumulate.

So he dealt with the cases as required. It cost him twenty minutes of hard, slogging work after which he returned to the shop.

‘Now,’ explained Baines, ‘you’ve done something for me. That means you’ve planted an ob on me. I don’t thank you for what you have done. There’s no need to. All I have to do is get rid of the ob.’

‘Ob?’

‘Obligation. Why use a long word when a short one is plenty good enough? An obligation is an ob. I shift it this way: Seth Warburton, next door but one, has got half a dozen of my obs saddled on him. So I get rid of mine to you and relieve him of one of his to me by sending you around for a meal.’ He scribbled briefly on a slip of paper. ‘Give him this.’

Harrison stared at it. In casual scrawl it read, ‘Feed this bum.’

Slightly dazed, he wandered out, stood by his bicycle and again examined the paper. Bum, it said. He could think of several on the ship who’d explode with wrath at the sight of that. Then his attention drifted to the second shop farther along. It had a window crammed with comestibles and two big words on the sign-strip above: *Seth’s Gulper*.

Coming to a decision which was encouraged by his insides, he walked into Seth’s holding the paper as if it were a death warrant. Beyond the door there was a long counter, some steam and a clatter of crockery. He chose a seat at a marble-topped table occupied by a gray-eyed brunette.

‘Do you mind?’ He inquired politely as he lowered himself into the chair.

‘Do I mind what?’ She examined his ears as if they were curious phenomena. ‘Rabies, dogs, aged relatives or standing around in the rain?’

‘Do you mind me sitting here?’

‘I can please myself whether or not I endure it. That’s freedom, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ said Harrison, ‘sure it is.’ He fidgeted in his seat, feeling that he’d made a move and promptly lost a pawn. He sought around for something else to say and at that point a thin-featured man in a white coat dumped before him a large plate loaded with fried chicken and three kinds of unfamiliar food. The sight unnerved him. He couldn’t remember how many years it had been since he’d last seen fried chicken or how many months since he’d been offered vegetables in other than powder form.

‘Well,’ demanded the waiter, mistaking his fascinated reaction, ‘doesn’t it please you?’

‘Yes.’ Harrison handed over the slip of paper. ‘Sure it does. You bet it does.’

Glancing at the note, the other called to somebody semi-visible at one end of the counter. ‘You’ve wiped out one of Jeff’s.’ He strolled away, tearing the slip into small pieces.

‘That was a fast pass,’ commented the brunette, nodding at the loaded plate. ‘He dumps a heavy feed-ob on you and you bounce it straight back, leaving all quits. I’ll have to wash dishes to get rid of mine. Or kill one Seth has got on somebody else.’

‘I stacked a ton of canned stuff.’ Harrison picked up knife and fork, his mouth watering. There were no knives and forks on the ship; they weren’t needed for powders and pills. ‘Don’t give you much choice here, do they? You take what you get.’

‘Not if you’ve got an ob on Seth,’ she informed. ‘When you have, he must work it off the best way he can. You should have put that to him instead of waiting for fate and complaining

afterward.'

'But I'm not complaining.'

'It's your right. That's freedom, isn't it?' She mused a bit, went on, 'It isn't often I'm an ob ahead of Seth but when I am I scream for iced pineapple and he comes running. When he's one ahead I do the running.' Her gray eyes narrowed in sudden suspicion. 'You're listening as if all this is new to you.'

'Are you a stranger here?'

He nodded, his mouth full of chicken. A little later he managed, 'I'm off that spaceship.'

'Good grief!' She froze considerably. 'An Antigand! I wouldn't have thought it. Why, you look almost human.'

'I've long taken pride in that similarity.' He chewed, swallowed, looked inquiringly around. The white-coated man came up. 'What's to drink?' Harrison asked.

'Dith, double-dith, shemak or coffee.'

'Coffee. Big and black.'

'Shemak is better,' advised the brunette as the waiter went to get it. 'But why should I tell you?'

The coffee came in a pint-sized mug. Putting it down, the waiter said, 'It's your choice seeing that Seth is working one off. What'll you have for after—apple pie, yimpik delice, grated tarfelsoufers or canimelon in syrup?'

'Iced pineapple.'

'Ugh!' The other blinked at him, gave the brunette an accusing stare, brought it and dumped it on the table.

Harrison pushed it across. 'Take the plunge and enjoy yourself.'

'It's yours.'

'Couldn't eat it if I tried.' He dug up another load of chicken, stirred his coffee, he began to feel at perfect peace with this world. 'Got as much as I can manage right here.' He made an inviting motion with his fork. 'Go on, be greedy and to heck with the waistline.'

'No.' Firmly she pushed the pineapple back at him. 'If I ate my way through that I'd be saddled with an ob.'

'So what?'

'I don't let strangers dump obs on me.'

'Quite right, too. Very proper of you,' approved Harrison. 'Strangers often have strange notions.'

'You've been around,' she remarked. 'Though I don't know what's strange about the notions.'

'Cynic!' The pineapple got another pass in her direction. 'If you feel that I'll be burdening you with an ob that you'll have to pay off you can do it in seemly manner here and now. All I want is some information.'

'What is it?'

'Just tell me where I can put my finger on the ripest cheese in this locality.'

'That's easy. Go round to Alec Peters' place, middle of Tenth Street.' With that she helped herself to the dish.

'Thanks. I was beginning to think that everyone was dumb or afflicted with the funnies.'



F - I W

He carried on with his own meal, finished it, lay back expansively. Unaccustomed nourishment persuaded his brain to work a bit more dexterously for after a minute an expression of chronic doubt clouded his face and he inquired, 'Does this Peters run a cheese warehouse?'

'Of course.' Emitting a sigh of pleasure, she pushed the empty dish aside.

He groaned low down, then informed, 'I'm chasing the mayor.'

'What is that?'

'Number one. The big boss. The sheriff, pohanko, or what-ever you call him.'

'I'm still no wiser,' she said, genuinely puzzled.

'The man who runs this town. The leading citizen.'

'Make it a little clearer,' she suggested, trying hard to help him. 'Who or what should this citizen be leading?'

'You and Seth and everyone else.' He waved a hand to encompass the entire burg.

Frowning, she asked, 'Leading us where?'

'Wherever you're going.'

She gave up, beaten, and signed the white-coated waiter to come to her assistance.

'Matt, are we going any place?'

'How should I know?'

'Well, ask Seth then.'

He went away, came back with, 'Seth says he's going home at six o'clock and what's it to you?'

'Anyone leading him there?' she inquired.

'Don't be daft,' Matt advised. 'He knows his own way and he's cold sober.'

Harrison chipped in. 'Look, I don't see why there should be so much difficulty about all this. Just tell me where I can find an official, any official—the police chief, the city treasurer, the mortuary keeper or even a mere justice of the peace.'

'What's an official?' asked Matt, openly baffled.

'What's a justice of the peace?' added the brunette.

His mind side-slipped and did a couple of spins. It took him quite a time to reassemble his thoughts and try another tack.

'Let us suppose,' he said to Matt, 'that this joint catches fire. What would you do?'

'Fan it to keep it going,' retorted Matt, fed up and making no effort to conceal the fact. He returned to the counter with the air of one not inclined to waste words on a congenital halfwit.

'He'd put it out,' informed the brunette . 'What else would you expect him to do?'

'Suppose that he couldn't?'

'He'd call in others to help him.'

'And would they?'

'Of course.' She surveyed him with a touch of pity. 'They'd jump at the chance. They'd be planting a nice, big crop of strong obs, wouldn't they?'

'Yes, I guess so.' He began to feel completely stalled, but made a last desperate shot at the problem. 'What if the fire were much too big and fast for passers-by to tackle?'

'Seth would summon the fire squad.'

Defeat receded, triumph replaced it.

'Ah, so there is a fire squad? That's what I mean by some-thing official. That's what I've been after all along. Quick, tell me where I can find its headquarters.'

'Bottom end of Twelfth Avenue. You can't miss it.'

'Thanks!' He got up in a hurry. 'See you again sometime.' Going out fast, he grabbed his bicycle, shoved off from the curb.

The fire depot proved to be a big place containing four telescopic ladders, a spray tower

and two multiple pumps, all motorized on the usual array of fat rubber balls. Inside, Harrison came face to face with a small man wearing immense plus fours.

‘Looking for someone?’ asked the small man.

‘Yes, the fire chief.’

‘Who’s he?’

By now prepared for this sort of thing, Harrison spoke as one would to a child. ‘See here, Mister, this is a fire-fighting outfit. Somebody bosses it. Somebody organizes the whole affair, fills forms, presses buttons, shouts orders, recommends promotions, kicks the shiftless, grabs all the credit, transfers all the blame and generally lords it around. He’s the most important man in the bunch and everybody knows it.’ His forefinger tapped imperatively on the other’s chest. ‘And he is the fellow I’m going to talk to if it’s the last thing I do.’

‘Nobody is more important than anyone else. How can he be? I think you’re crazy.’

‘You’re welcome to think what you please but I am telling you that—’

A shrill bell clamoured, cutting off his sentence. Twenty men appeared as if by magic, boarded a ladder and a multiple pump, roared into the street.

Squat, basin-shaped helmets formed the only article of attire that the crew had in common. Apart from these, they plumbed the depths of sartorial iniquity. The man with the plus fours, having gained the pump in one bold leap, was whirled out standing between a fat fire-fighter wearing a rainbow-hued cummerbund and a thin one sporting a canary yellow kilt. A late-comer decorated with ear-rings resembling little bells hotly pursued the pump, snatched at its tailboard, missed, sourly watched the outfit disappear from sight. He mooched back, swinging his helmet from one hand.

‘Just my lousy luck,’ he griped at the gaping Harrison. ‘The sweetest, loveliest call of the year. A big brewery. The sooner they get there the bigger the obs they’ll plant on it.’ Licking his lips at the thought, he sat on a coil of canvas hose. ‘Oh, well, maybe it’s for the good of my health.’

‘Tell me something, Harrison probed, ‘How do you earn a living?’

‘There’s a dopey question. You can see for yourself. I’m on the fire squad.’

‘I know. What I mean is, who pays you?’

‘Pays me?’

‘Gives you money for all this.’

‘You talk mighty peculiar. What is money?’

Harrison rubbed his cranium to assist the circulation of blood through the brain. What is money? Yeouw! He tried another angle.

‘If your wife needs a new coat, how does she get it?’

‘Goes to a store that’s carrying fire-obs, of course. She knocks off one or two for them.’

‘But what if no clothing store has had a fire?’

‘You’re pretty ignorant, brother. Where in this world do you come from?’ His ear-bells swung as he studied the other a moment. ‘Almost all stores have fire-obs. If they’ve any sense they allocate so many per month by way of insurance. They look ahead, just in case, see? They plant obs on us in advance so that when we rush to the rescue we’ve got to wipe out a dollop of theirs before we can plant any new ones of our own. That stops us overdoing it

and making hogs of ourselves. Sort of cuts down the stores' liabilities. It makes sense, doesn't it?'

'Maybe, but—'

'I get it now,' interrupted the other, narrowing his eyes. 'You're from that spaceship. You're a lousy Antigand.'

'I'm a Terran,' informed Harrison with suitable dignity. 'What's more, all the folk who originally settled this planet were Terrans.'

'Are you trying to teach me history?' He gave a harsh laugh. 'You're wrong. There was a five per cent strain of Martian.'

'Even the Martians are descended from Terran stock,' Harrison riposted.

'So what? That was a devil of a long time ago. Things change, in case you haven't heard. We've no Terrans or Martians on this world except for your crowd which has barged in unasked. We're all Gands here. And you noseypokes are Antigands.'

'We aren't anti-anything that I know of. Where did you get that idea?'

'Myob!' said the other, suddenly determined to refuse further argument. He tossed his helmet to one side, spat on the floor.

'You heard me. Go trundle your scooter.'

Harrison gave up and did just that. Gloomily he cycled back to the ship.

His Excellency pinned him with an authoritative optic. 'So you're back at last, Mister. How many are coming and at what time?'

‘None, sir,’ said Harrison, feeling kind of feeble.

‘None?’ August eyebrows lifted querulously. ‘Do you mean that they have refused my invitation?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Come out with it. Mister,’ urged the Ambassador. ‘Don’t stand there gawping as if your push-and-puff contraption has just given birth to a roller-skate. You say they have not refused my invitation—but nobody is coming. What am I supposed to make of that?’

‘I didn’t ask anyone.’

‘So you didn’t ask?’ Turning, he said to Grayder, Shelton and the others, ‘He didn’t ask!’ His attention came back to Harrison. ‘You forgot all about it, I presume? Intoxicated by liberty and the power of man over machine, you flashed around the town at nothing less than eighteen miles per hour, creating consternation among the citizenry, tossing their traffic laws into the ash-can, putting children and elderly persons in peril of their lives, not even troubling to ring your bell or—’

‘I don’t have a bell, sir,’ stated Harrison, inwardly resenting this list of enormities. ‘I have a whistle operated by the rotation of the rear wheel.’

‘There!’ said the Ambassador like one abandoning all hope. He sat down and smacked his forehead several times. ‘I am reliably informed that somebody is going to get a bubble-pipe.’ He pointed at Harrison. ‘And now I learn that he possesses a whistle.’

‘I designed it myself, sir,’ Harrison said helpfully.

‘I’m sure you did. I can imagine it. I would expect it of you.’ The Ambassador took a fresh grip on himself. ‘See here, Mister, I would like you to tell me something in strict confidence,

just between the two of us.’ Leaning forward, he put the question in a whisper that ricocheted seven times around the room. ‘Why didn’t you ask anyone?’

‘I couldn’t find out who to ask, sir. I did my level best but nobody seemed to know what I was talking about. Or they pretended they didn’t.’

‘Humph!’ The Ambassador glanced out of the nearest port, consulted his watch. ‘The light is fading already. Night will be upon us pretty soon. It’s too late for further action.’ An annoyed grunt. ‘Another day gone to pot. Two days here and we’re still fiddling around.’ Then he added with grim resignation. ‘All right, Mister. We’re wasting time anyway so we might as well hear your story in full. Tell us what happened in complete detail. That way, we may be able to dig some sense out of it.’

Harrison told it, finishing, ‘It seemed to me, sir, that I could carry on for weeks trying to argue it out with people whose brains are oriented east-west while mine points north-south. One can talk with them from now to doomsday, become really friendly and enjoy the conversation—without either side fully understanding what the other is saying.’

‘So it appears,’ said the Ambassador dryly. He turned to Grayder. ‘You’ve been around a lot and seen many new worlds in your time. What do you make of all this twaddle, if anything?’

‘It’s a problem in semantics,’ diagnosed Grayder, who had been compelled by circumstances to study that subject. ‘One comes across it on many worlds that have been long out of touch, though usually it hasn’t developed far enough to become tough and unsolvable. For instance, the first fellow we met on Basileus said, cordially and in what he imagined to be perfect Terran, “Joy you unboot now!” ’

‘Yes? And what did that mean?’

‘Come inside, put on your slippers and be happy. In other words, welcome. It wasn’t difficult

to understand, Your Excellency, especially when one expects that sort of thing.’ Grayder cast a thoughtful glance at Harrison and continued, ‘Here, the problem seems to have developed to a greater extreme. The language remains fluent and retains enough surface similarities to conceal underlying changes, but basic meanings have been altered, concepts discarded and new ones substituted, thought-forms re-angled and, of course, there is the inevitable impact of locally created slang.’

‘Such as “myob”,’ offered the Ambassador. ‘Now there is a queer word without recognizable Earth-root. I don’t like the sarcastic way they use it. They make it sound downright insulting. Obviously it has some kind of connection with these obs they keep throwing around. It means “my obligation” or something like that, but the real significance eludes me.’

‘There is no connection, sir,’ put in Harrison. He hesitated, saw that they were waiting for him to go on. ‘On my way back I met the lady who had directed me to Baines’ place. She asked whether I’d found him and I told her I had. We chatted a short while. I asked her what “myob” meant. She said it was initial-slang.’ He stopped and fidgeted uneasily.

‘Keep going,’ urged the Ambassador. ‘After some of the sulphurous comments I’ve heard emerging from the Blieder-room ventilation-shaft, I can stomach anything. What does it mean?’

‘M-y-o-b,’ informed Harrison, slightly embarrassed. ‘Mind-your-own-business.’

‘Ah!’ The other gained colour. ‘So that is what they’ve been telling me all along?’

‘I’m afraid so, sir.’

‘Evidently they’ve a lot to learn.’ His neck swelled with undiplomatic fury, he smacked a fat hand upon the table and declaimed loudly. ‘And they’re going to learn it!’

‘Yes, sir,’ agreed Harrison, becoming more uneasy and anxious to get out. ‘May I go now and tend to my bicycle?’

‘Yes, you may,’ said the Ambassador in the same noisy tones. He performed a couple of meaningless gestures, turned a florid face on Captain Grayder. ‘Bicycle! Does anyone on this vessel own a slingshot?’

‘I doubt it, Your Excellency, but I will make inquiries, if you wish.’

‘Don’t be an imbecile,’ ordered the Ambassador. ‘We have our full quota of hollow-heads already.’



Chapter 4

Postponed until early morning, the next conference was relatively short and sweet. The Ambassador took a seat, harumphed importantly, straightened his tie, frowned around the table.

‘Let us have another look at what we’ve got. We know that this planet’s mules call themselves Gands, don’t take any interest in their Terran origin and insist on referring to us as Antigands. This implies an education and resultant outlook inimical to ourselves. They’ve been trained from childhood to take it for granted that whenever we appeared upon the scene we would prove to be against whatever they are for.’

‘And we haven’t the remotest notion of what they are for,’ put in Colonel Shelton, quite unnecessarily. But it served to show that he was among those present, paying attention,

and ready to lend the full support of his powerful intellect.

‘I am only too aware of our ignorance in that respect,’ said the Ambassador, with a touch of acid. ‘They are maintaining a conspiracy of silence about their prime motivation. We have got to break it somehow.’

‘That,’ offered Shelton, unabashed, ‘is the problem.’

Taking no notice, the Ambassador continued, ‘They have a peculiar, moneyless economic system which, in my opinion, manages to function only because it is afflicted with large surpluses. It won’t survive a day when over-population brings serious shortages. This economic set-up appears to be based on a mixture of co-operative techniques, private enterprise, a kindergarten’s honour system and plain unadorned gimme. That makes it a good deal crazier than the food-in-the-bank system they use on Epsilon’s four outer planets.’

‘But it works,’ observed Grayder pointedly.

‘After a fashion. That flap-eared engineer’s bicycle works—and so does he while riding it. A motorized job would save him a lot of sweat.’ Highly pleased with this analogy, the Ambassador enjoyed the flavour of it for a few seconds before he continued. ‘This local scheme of economics—if you can call it a scheme—almost certainly is the end-result of the haphazard development of some hick eccentricity imported by the original settlers. It is long overdue for motorizing, so to speak. They know it as well as we do. But they don’t want it because mentally they’re four hundred years behind the times. They are afraid of change, improvement, efficiency—like many backward peoples. Moreover, there’s little doubt that some of them have a vested interest in keeping things exactly as they are.’ He sniffed loudly to express his contempt. ‘They are antagonistic toward us simply because they don’t want to be disturbed.’

His stare went round the table, daring one of them to remark that this might be as good a reason as any other. They were too disciplined to fall into that trap. None offered a comment and so he went on.

‘In due time, after we have gained a proper grip on affairs, we’re going to have a long and tedious task on our hands. We’ll have to overhaul their entire educational system with a view to eliminating anti-Terran prejudices and bringing them up to date on the facts of life. That’s had to be done on several other planets though not to anything like the extent as will be necessary here.’

‘We’ll cope,’ promised someone.

Ignoring him, the Ambassador finished, ‘However, all that is in the future. Our real problem is in the present. It is in our laps right now, namely, where are the reins of power and who is holding them? We must solve that before we can make genuine progress. How are we going to do it?’ Folding hands over his paunch, he added, ‘Get your wits to work and let us have some bright suggestions.’

Grayder stood up, a big, leather-bound book in his hands. ‘Your Excellency, I don’t think we need exercise our minds about new plans for making contact and gaining essential information. The next move is likely to be imposed upon us.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I have a good many old-timers in my crew. There are some among the troops as well. Space-lawyers, every one of them.’ He tapped the book significantly. ‘They know Space Regulations as well as I do. Sometimes I think they know too much.’

‘And so—?’

Grayder opened the book. ‘Regulation 127 says that on a hostile world the crew serves on

a war-footing until back in free space. On a non-hostile world they serve on a peace-footing.'

'What of it?'

'Regulation 131A says that on a peace-footing the crew—with the exception of a minimum number required to keep the vessel's services in trim—is entitled to liberty immediately after unloading cargo or within seventy-two Earth-hours of arrival, whichever period is the shorter.' He glanced up. 'By mid-day the men will be all set for land-leave and itching to go. There will be trouble if they are not allowed out.'

'Oh, will there?' The Ambassador smiled lopsidedly. 'What if we declare this world to be hostile? That will pin their ears back, won't it?'

Impassively consulting his book, Grayder said, 'Regulation 148 says that a hostile world is defined as any planet that systematically opposes Terran citizens by force.' He turned to the next page. 'For the purpose of these regulations, force is defined as any course of action calculated to inflict physical injury, regardless of whether or not the said action succeeds in its intent.'

'I don't agree.' The Ambassador frowned his strong disapproval. 'A world can be psychologically hostile without resorting to force. We have an example right here. It can't be called a friendly world.'

'There are no friendly worlds within the meaning of Space Regulations,' Grayder informed. 'Every planet falls into one of two classifications: hostile or non-hostile.' He tapped the bare leather cover. 'It's all in the book.'

'We'd be prize fools to let a mere book order us around or allow the crew to boss us, either. Throw it out of the port. Stick it into the disintegrator. Get rid of it any way you like and forget it.'

‘Begging your pardon, Your Excellency, but I can’t do that.’ Grayder opened the tome at its beginning. ‘Basic regulations 1A, 1B and 1C include the following: whether in space or on land, a vessel’s personnel remain under direct command of its captain or his nominee who will be guided solely and at all times by Space Regulations and will be responsible only to the Space Committee situated on Terra. The same applies to all troops, officials and civilian passengers aboard a space-traversing vessel, whether said vessel is in flight or grounded, regardless of rank or authority they are subordinate to the captain or his nominee. A nominee is defined as a ship’s first, second or third officer performing the duties of a captain when the latter is incapacitated or absent.’

‘What all that rigmarole means is that you are king of your castle,’ remarked the Ambassador, none too pleased. ‘If we don’t like it we must get out of the ship.’

‘With the greatest respect, Your Excellency, I must agree that that is the position. I cannot help it—regulations are regulations. And the men know it!’ Grayder placed the book on the table, poked it away from him. ‘It’s highly likely that the men will wait until mid-day, pressing their pants, creaming their hair and generally prettying themselves up. They will then make approach to me in proper manner to which I cannot object. They will request the first mate to submit their leave roster for my approval.’ He gave a deep sigh. ‘The worst I could do would be to quibble about a few names and switch some of them around. But I cannot refuse leave to a full quota.’

‘Liberty to paint the town red might be a good thing after all,’ suggested Shelton, not averse to doing some painting himself. ‘A dump like this wakes up with a vengeance when the fleet’s in port. We should make useful contacts by the dozens. And that’s what we want, isn’t it?’

‘We want to pin down this planet’s political leaders,’ retorted the Ambassador. ‘I can’t see them powdering their faces, putting on their best hats and rushing out to give the yoo-hoo to

a crowd of hungry sailors.’ His plump features quirked. ‘We’ve got to find the needles in this haystack and that job won’t be done by ratings on the rampage.’

‘You may be right, Your Excellency,’ put in Grayder. ‘But we’ll have to take a chance on it. If the men insist on going out I lack the power to prevent them. Only one thing can give me the power.’

‘And what is that?’

‘Clear, indisputable evidence enabling me to define this world as hostile within the meaning of Space Regulations.’

‘Well, can’t we arrange that somehow?’ Without waiting for a reply, the Ambassador pursued, ‘Every crew has its stupid and incurable trouble-maker. Find yours, give him a double shot of Venusian cognac, tell him he’s being granted immediate liberty—then warn him that he may not enjoy it because these lousy Gands view us as a reason why people dig up the drains. After that, push him out of the airlock. When he returns with a black eye and a boastful story about the other fellow’s condition, declare this world hostile.’ He waved an expressive hand. ‘And there you are. Physical violence. All according to the book.’

‘Regulation 148A,’ said Grayder, ‘emphasizing that opposition by force must be systematic, warns that individual brawls may not be construed as evidence of hostility.’

The Ambassador turned an irate face upon the senior civil servant. ‘When you return to Terra—if ever you do get back—you can tell the appropriate department how the space service is balled up, hamstrung, semi-paralysed and generally handicapped by bureaucrats who write books.’

Before the other could think up a reply in defence of his own kind, without contradicting the Ambassador, a knock came at the door. First Mate Morgan entered, saluted smartly, offered Grayder a sheet of paper.

‘First leave roster, sir. Do you approve it?’

F - I W

More than four hundred men went to town in the early afternoon. They advanced upon it in the usual manner of people long overdue for the bright lights, that is to say, eagerly, expectantly, in gangs of two, three, six or ten.

Gleed attached himself to Harrison. They were two odd rankers, Gleed being the only sergeant on liberty while Harrison was the only tenth engineer. They were also the only two fish out of water since both were in civilian clothes and Gleed missed his uniform, Harrison felt naked without his bicycle.

These trifling features gave them enough in common to justify at least one day’s companionship.

‘This one’s a honey,’ declared Gleed with great enthusiasm. ‘I’ve been on a good many liberty jaunts in my time but this one’s a honey. On all other trips the boys ran up against the same problem: what to use for money. They had to go forth like a battalion of Santa Clauses, loaded up with anything that might serve for barter. Almost always nine-tenths of it wasn’t of any use and had to be carted back to the ship.’

‘On Persephone,’ informed Harrison, ‘a long-shanked Milik offered me a twenty-carat, blue-tinted, first-water diamond for my bike.’

‘Jeepers, didn’t you take it?’

‘What was the good? I’d have had to go back sixteen light-years for another bike.’

‘But, man, you could exist without a bike for a while.’

‘I can exist without a diamond. I can’t ride around on a diamond.’

‘Neither can you sell a bicycle for the price of a sportster Moon-boat.’

‘Yes, I can. I just told you this Milik offered me a rock like an egg.’

‘It’s a crying shame. You could have got a fortune for that blinder, if it had no flaws.’ Sergeant Gleed smacked his lips at the thought of it. ‘Money and plenty of it, that’s what I like. And that’s what makes this trip a winner. Every other time we’ve gone out Grayder, Shelton and Bidworthy have lectured us in turn about creating a favourable impression, behaving in a spacemanlike manner and so forth. But this time Grayder talks about money.’

‘The Ambassador put him up to it.’

‘I like it all the same,’ enthused Gleed. ‘An extra one week’s pay, a bottle of cognac and double liberty for any man who brings back to the ship an adult Gand, male or female, who is sociable and willing to talk.’

‘It won’t be easily earned.’

‘One month’s extra pay for whoever gets the name and address of the town’s chief civic dignitary. Two months’ for the name and accurate location of the world’s capital city.’ He whistled happily, added, ‘somebody is going to make it rich and it won’t be Bidworthy. His name didn’t come out of the hat. I know—I was holding it.’

Ceasing his chatter, he turned to watch a tall, lithe blonde striding past. Harrison pulled at his arm.

‘Here’s Baines’ place that I told you about. Let’s go in.’

'Oh, all right.' Gleed followed with reluctance, his attention still directed down the street.

'Good afternoon,' said Harrison to Jeff Baines.

'Which it isn't,' contradicted Baines. 'Trade's bad. There's a semi-final being played and it has drawn half the town away. They'll come home and start thinking about their bellies long after I've closed. Probably they'll make a rush on me to-morrow morning and I won't be able to serve them fast enough.'

'How can trade be bad if you don't make money even when it's good?' inquired Gleed, reasonably applying the information Harrison had given him.

Jeff's big moon eyes went over him slowly then turned to Harrison. 'So he's another bum off your boat, eh? What's he talking about?'

'Money,' explained Harrison. 'It's stuff we use to simplify trade. It's printed stuff, like documentary obs of various sizes.'

'That tells me a lot,' Jeff Baines observed. 'It tells a crowd that has to make a printed record of every ob is not to be trusted - because they don't even trust each other.' He waddled to his high stool and squatted on it. His breathing was laboured and wheezy. 'And that confirms what our schools have always taught, namely, that an Antigand would swindle his widowed mother.'

'Your schools have got it wrong,' assured Harrison.

'Maybe they have.' Jeff saw no reason to argue the point. 'But we'll play safe until we know different.' He looked them over. 'What do you two want, anyway?'

'Some advice,' Gleed shoved in quickly. 'We're out on the spree. We'd like to know the best places for food and fun.'

‘How long have you got?’

‘Until nightfall tomorrow.’

‘No use.’ Jeff Baines shook his head sorrowfully. ‘It would take you from now until then to plant enough obs to qualify for anything worth having. Besides, plenty of people would rather drop dead than let an Antigand dump an ob on them. They have their pride, see?’

Harrison asked, ‘Can’t we get so much as a square meal?’

‘Well, I don’t know about that.’ Jeff thought it over while massaging his several chins. ‘You might manage it—but I can’t help you this time. There’s nothing I want of you and so you can’t use any obs I’ve got stashed around.’

‘Can you offer any suggestions?’

‘If you were local citizens it would be lots different. You could get all you want right now by taking on a load of obs to be wiped out sometime in the future as and when the chances come along. But I can’t see anybody giving credit to Antigands who are here today and gone tomorrow.’

‘Not so much of the gone tomorrow talk,’ advised Gleed. ‘When an Imperial Ambassador arrives it means that Terrans are here for keeps.’

‘Who says so?’

‘The Terran Empire says so. You’re part of it, aren’t you?’

‘No,’ said Jeff positively. ‘We are not part of anything, don’t want to be and don’t intend to be. What’s more, nobody’s going to make us part of anything.’

Leaning on the counter, Gleed gazed absently at a large can of pork.' Seeing that I'm out of uniform and not on duty, I sympathize with you though I still shouldn't say it. I wouldn't care myself to be taken over body and soul by a gang of other-world bureaucrats. But you folk are going to have a mighty tough time beating us off. That's the way it is.'

'Not with what we've got,' opined Jeff confidently.

'You haven't got much,' scoffed Gleed, more in friendly criticism than open contempt. He sought confirmation from Harrison. 'Have they?'

'It wouldn't seem so,' said Harrison.

'Don't go by appearances,' warned Jeff. 'We've more than you bums can handle.'

'Such as what?'

'Well, just for a start, we've got the mightiest weapon ever thought up by the mind of man. We're Gands, see? So we don't need ships and guns and similar playthings. We've something better. It's effective. There's no defence against it.'

'Man, I'd like to see it,' Gleed challenged. Data concerning a new and exceptionally powerful weapon should be a good deal more valuable than the mayor's address. Grayder might be sufficiently impressed by the importance thereof to arrange a fabulous reward. With some sarcasm, he added, 'But, of course, we can't expect you to give away precious secrets.'

'There is nothing secret about it,' said Jeff, very surprisingly. 'You can have it free, gratis and for nothing any time you want. Any Gand would give it to you for the mere asking. Like to know why?'

'You bet.'

‘Because it works one way only. We can use it against you but you can’t use it against us.’

‘Nonsense!’ declared Gleed. ‘There is no such thing. There is no weapon inventable that the other fellow can’t employ once he gets his hands on it and learns how to operate it.’

‘Are you sure about that?’

‘I am positive. I’ve been in the space service for twenty years and you can’t be a trooper that long without learning all about weapons of every conceivable kind from string bows to H-bombs. You’re trying to kid me. Nothing doing. I’m too grey in the hair and sharp in the tooth. A one-way weapon is impossible. And that means im-poss-ible.’

‘Don’t argue with him,’ Harrison told Baines. ‘He’ll never be convinced until he’s shown.’

‘I can see that.’ Jeff Baines’ face creased into a massive grin. ‘I’ve told you that you can have our wonder-weapon for the asking. Why don’t you ask?’

‘All right, I’m asking.’ Gleed put it without any enthusiasm. A weapon that would be presented on request, without even the necessity of first planting a minor ob, couldn’t be so mighty after all. His imaginary large reward shrank to a hand-full of small change and thence to nothing. ‘Hand it over and let me look at it.’



F-I-W

Edging ponderously around on his stool, Jeff reached to the wall, removed a small, shiny plaque from its hook and passed it across the counter.

‘You may keep it,’ he said. ‘And much good may it do you.’

Gleed examined it, turning it over and over between his fingers. It was nothing more than an oblong strip of substance resembling ivory. One side was polished and bare. The other bore three letters deeply engraved in bold style:

F.—I.W.

Glancing up at Baines, his features puzzled, he said, 'You call this a weapon?'

'Certainly.'

'Then I don't get it.' He passed the plaque to Harrison. 'Do you?'

'No.' Harrison examined it with care. 'What does this F.—I.W. mean?'

'Initial-slang,' informed Baines. 'Made correct by common usage. It has become a worldwide motto. You'll see it all over the place if you haven't noticed it already.'

'I have seen it here and there but attached no importance to it and thought nothing more about it. I remember now that it was inscribed in several places including Seth's and the fire depot.'

'It was on the sides of that bus we couldn't empty,' put in Gleed. 'It didn't mean anything to me.'

It means plenty,' said Jeff, '*Freedom-I won't!*'

'That kills me,' Gleed responded. 'I'm stone dead already. I've dropped in my tracks.' He watched Harrison thoughtfully pocketing the plaque. 'A piece of abracadabra. What a weapon!'

'Ignorance is bliss,' asserted Baines, strangely sure of himself. 'Especially when you don't

know that what you're playing with is the safety catch of something that goes bang.'

'All right 'challenged Gleed, taking him up on that. 'Tell us how it works.'

'I won't.' Baines' grin reappeared. He seemed to be highly satisfied about something.

'That's a fat lot of help.' Gleed felt let down, especially over that momentary hoped-for reward. 'You brag and boast about a one-way weapon, toss across a slip of stuff with three letters on it and then go dumb. Any folly will do for braggarts and any braggart can talk through the seat of his pants. How about backing up your talk?'

'I won't,' repeated Baines, his grin broader than ever. He gave the onlooking Harrison a fat, significant wink.

It made something spark vividly within Harrison's mind. His jaw dropped, he dragged the plaque from his pocket and stared at it as if seeing it for the first time.

'Give it me back,' requested Baines, watching him.

Replacing it in his pocket, Harrison said very firmly. 'I won't.'

Baines chuckled.' some people catch on quicker than others.'

Resenting that, Gleed held his hand out to Harrison. 'Let me have another look at that thing.'

'I won't,' said Harrison, meeting him eye to eye.

'Hey, don't start being awkward with me. That's not the way—' Gleed's protesting voice petered out. He stood there a moment, his optics slightly glassy, while his brain performed several loops. Then in hushed tones he said, 'Good grief!'

‘Precisely,’ approved Baines. ‘Grief and plenty of it. You were a bit slow on the uptake.’

Overcome by the flood of insubordinate ideas now pouring upon him, Gleed said hoarsely to Harrison, ‘Come on, let’s get out of here. I’ve got to think. I want to sit somewhere nice and quiet while I think.’

There was a tiny park with seats and lawns and flowers and a little fountain around which a small group of children were playing. Choosing a place facing a colourful carpet of exotic un-Terran blooms, they sat and brooded for quite a time.

Eventually, Gleed commented, ‘For one solitary, mulish character it would be martyrdom, but for a whole world—’ His voice drifted off, came back. ‘I’ve been taking this as far as I can make it go and the results give me the leaping fantods.’

Harrison said nothing.

‘For instance,’ Gleed continued. ‘Suppose that when I go back to the ship that snorting rhinoceros Bidworthy gives me an order. And I give him the frozen eye and say, ‘I won’t.’ What happens? It follows as an inviolable law of Nature that he either drops dead or throws me in the clink.’

‘That would do you a lot of good.’

‘Wait a bit—I haven’t finished yet. I’m in the pokey, demoted and a disgrace to the service, but the job still needs doing. So Bidworthy picks on somebody else. The victim, being a soul-mate of mine, also donates the icy optic and says, ‘I won’t.’ Into the jug he goes and I’ve got company. Bidworthy tries again. And again and again and again. There are more of us crammed in the brig. It will hold only twenty. So they take over the engineers’ mess.’

‘Leave our mess out of this,’ requested Harrison.

‘They take over the mess,’ insisted Gleed, thoroughly determined to penalize the engineers. ‘Pretty soon it’s filled to the roof with I-won’ters. Bidworthy is still raking them in as fast as he can go—if by then he hasn’t burst a dozen blood vessels. So they take over the Blieder dormitories.’

‘Why keep picking on my crowd?’

‘And pile them ceiling-high with bodies,’ Gleed said, deriving sadistic pleasure from the picture. ‘Until in the end Bidworthy has to get buckets and brushes and go down on his knees and do his own deck-scrubbing while Grayder, Shelton and the rest take turn for guard-duty. By that time His Loftiness the Ambassador is in the galley busily cooking for the prisoners and is being assisted by a disconcerted bunch of yessing pen-pushers.’ He had another look at this mental scene. ‘Holy smoke!’

A coloured ball rolled his way. Stooping, he picked it up, held on to it. Promptly a boy of about seven ran near, eyed him gravely.

‘Give me my ball, please.’

‘I won’t,’ said Gleed, his fingers firmly around it.

There was no protest, no anger, no tears. The child merely registered disappointment and turned away.

‘Here you are, sonny.’ He tossed the ball.

‘Thanks.’ Grabbing it, the other chased off.

Harrison said, ‘What if every living being in the Terran Empire, from Prometheus to Kaldor Four, across eighteen hundred light-years of space, should get an income-tax demand, tear it up and say, “I won’t.” What happens then?’

‘No tax. Authority does without it because it darned well has to.’

‘There would be chaos.’ Harrison nodded toward the fountain and the children playing around it. ‘But it doesn’t look anything like chaos here. Not to my eyes. Evidently they don’t overdo this blank refusal business. They apply it judiciously on some mutually recognized basis. But what that basis might be beats me completely.’

‘Me, too.’

An elderly man paused near them, surveyed them hesitantly, decided to pick on a passing youth.

‘Can you tell me where I can find the roller for Martinstown?’

‘Other end of Eighth,’ directed the youth. ‘One every hour. They’ll fix your manacles before they start.’

‘Manacles?’ The oldster raised white eyebrows. ‘Whatever for?’

‘That route runs past the spaceship. The Antigands may try to drag you out.’

‘Oh, yes, of course.’ He ambled on, glanced again at Glead and Harrison, remarked in passing, ‘These Antigands—such a nuisance.’

‘Definitely,’ supported Glead. ‘We keep telling them to clear out and they keep saying, “We won’t”.’

The old gentleman missed a step, recovered, gave him a peculiar look, continued on his way.

‘One or two seem to cotton on to our accent,’ Harrison said. ‘Though nobody balked at

mine when I was having that meal in Seth's.'

Gleed perked up with sudden interest. 'Where you've had one feed you should be able to get another. Come on, let's try. What have we to lose?'

'Our patience.' Harrison got off his seat, stretched himself. 'We'll pick on Seth. If he won't play we'll have a try at somebody else. And if nobody will play we'll scoot back to the ship before we starve to death.'

'Which appears to be exactly what they want us to do,' Gleed pointed out with some annoyance. 'I can tell you something here and now—they'll get their way over my dead body.'



'That's how,' agreed Harrison. 'Over your dead body.'



Chapter 5

Matt came up with a cloth over one arm. 'I'm serving no Antigands.'

'You served me last time,' Harrison reminded.

'That may be. I didn't know you were off that ship. But I know now.' He flicked the cloth across one corner of the table, brushing away imaginary crumbs. 'No Antigands served by me.'

'Is there any other place where we might get a meal?'

‘Not unless somebody will let you plant an ob on them. They won’t do that if they know who you are but there’s a chance they might make the same mistake as I did.’ Another flick across the corner.

‘I don’t make them twice.’

‘You’re making one right now.’ announced Gleed, his voice hard and edgy. He nudged Harrison. ‘Watch this.’ His hand came out of a side pocket holding a tiny gun. Pointing it at Matt’s middle, he said, ‘Ordinarily I could get into trouble for this, if those on the ship were in the mood to make trouble. But they aren’t. They’re more than tired of you two-legged mules.’ He motioned with the weapon.

‘So start walking and fetch us two full plates.’

‘I won’t,’ said Matt, firming his lips and ignoring the gun. Gleed thumbed the safety-catch which moved with an audible click. ‘It’s touchy now. It’d go off at a sneeze. Get moving.’

‘I won’t,’ said Matt.

With unconcealed disgust, Gleed shoved the weapon back into his pocket. ‘I was only kidding you. It isn’t loaded.’

‘Wouldn’t have made the slightest difference if it had been,’ Matt assured. ‘I serve no Antigands and that is that.’

‘What if I’d lost control of myself and blown several large holes in you?’

‘How could I have served you then?’ asked Matt. ‘A dead person is of no use to anyone. It’s time You Antigands learned a little logic.’ With which parting shot he meandered off.

‘He’s got something there,’ offered Harrison, patently depressed. ‘What can you do with a

corpse? Nothing whatever. A body is in nobody's power.'

'Oh, I don't know. A couple of stiffs lying around might sharpen the others. They'd become really eager.'

'You're thinking of them in Terran terms,' Harrison said. 'It's a mistake. They are not Terrans no matter where they came from originally. They are Gands.'

'Well, just what are Gands supposed to be?'

'I don't know. It's a safe bet they're some kind of fanatics. Terra exported one-track-minders by the millions around the time of the Great Explosion. Look at that crazy crowd on Hygeia, for instance.'

'Ah, Hygeia. That was the only time I've ever strutted around wearing nothing but a dignified pose. I was looking forward to seeing Shelton and Bidworthy in their birthday suits. But those two heroes both lacked the guts.' He chuckled to himself went on, 'Those Hygeians think that complete nakedness creates real democracy, as distinct from our fake version. I'm far from sure that they're wrong.'

'The creation of an empire has also created a cockeyed proposition,' meditated Harrison. 'Namely, that Terra is always right while more than sixteen hundred planets are invariably wrong. Everyone is out of step but Terra.'

'You're becoming kind of seditious, aren't you?'

Harrison offered no reply. Gleed glanced at him, found his attention diverted elsewhere, followed his gaze to a brunette who had just entered.

'Nice,' approved Gleed. 'Not too old, not too young. Not too fat, not too thin. Just right.'

'I know her.' Harrison waved to attract her attention.

She tripped lightly across the room, took a chair at their table. Harrison made the introduction.

'Friend of mine, Sergeant Gleed.'

'Arthur,' corrected Gleed, guzzling her with his eyes.

'Mine's Elissa,' she told him. 'What's a sergeant supposed to be?'

'A sort of over-above under-thing,' said Gleed. 'I pass along the telling to the fellows who do the doing.'

She viewed him with frank surprise. 'Do you mean that people actually allow themselves to be told?'

'Of course. Why not?'

'They must have been born servile.' Her gaze shifted to Harrison. 'I'll be ignorant of your name forever, I suppose?'

Flushing slightly, he hastened to repair the omission, adding, 'But I don't like James. I prefer Jim.'

'Then we'll let it be Jim. Has Matt tended to you two yet?'

'He refuses to serve us.'

She shrugged soft, warm shoulders. 'It's his right. That's freedom, isn't it?'

'We call it mutiny,' said Gleed.

‘Don’t be childish,’ she reproved. She stood up, moved away. ‘You wait here. I’ll see what Seth says.’

‘I don’t understand this,’ admitted Gleed when she had passed out of earshot. ‘According to that fat fellow in the delicatessen, their technique is to give us the cold shoulder until we run away in a huff. But she’s . . . she’s— ’ He stopped while he sought around for a suitable word, found it and said, ‘she’s un-Gandian.’

‘Not so,’ Harrison contradicted. ‘They’ve the right to say, “I won’t” any way they like. She’s practising it.’

‘By gosh, yes. I hadn’t thought of that. They can work it backward or forward, whichever way they please.’

‘That’s right.’ Harrison lowered his voice. ‘Here she comes.’ Resuming her seat, she primped her hair and said, ‘Seth will serve us personally.’

‘Another traitor,’ remarked Gleed, grinning.

‘On one condition,’ she went on. ‘You two must wait and have a talk with him before you leave.’

‘It’s cheap at the price,’ Harrison decided. Another thought struck him. ‘Does this mean you’ll have to wipe out several obs for all three of us?’

‘Only one for myself.’

‘How’s that?’

‘Seth’s got ideas of his own. He doesn’t feel happy about Antigands any more than anyone

else does.'

'And so?'

'But he has the missionary instinct. He doesn't agree entirely with the habit of giving all Antigands the ghost-treatment. He thinks it should be reserved only for those too stubborn or stupid to be converted.' She smiled at Gleed, making his top hairs quiver. 'Seth thinks that any really intelligent Antigand is a would-be Gand.'

'What is a Gand, anyway?' asked Harrison.

'An inhabitant of this world, of course.'

'I mean how did they get that name? From where did they dig it up?'

'From Gandhi,' she said.

Harrison looked blank. 'Who the deuce was he?'

'An ancient Terran. The one who invented The Weapon.'

'Never heard of him.'

'That doesn't surprise me,' she remarked.

'Doesn't it?' He was irritated by this confidence in his ignorance. 'Let me tell you that in these days we Terrans get as good an education as—'

'Calm down, Jim,' she advised, making it more soothing by pronouncing it, 'Jeem.' She patted his arm. 'What I mean is that it's highly likely that he's been blanked out of your history books. He might have given you unwanted ideas, see? You couldn't be expected to

know what you've never been given the chance to learn.'

'If you're saying that Terran history is censored, I don't believe it.'

'It's your right to refuse to believe. That's freedom, isn't it?'

'Up to a point.'

'To what point?'

'A man has duties. He has no right to refuse those.'

'No?' She raised tantalizing eyebrows, delicately curved. 'Who defines those duties—himself or somebody else?'

'His superiors most times.'

'Superiors,' she scoffed with devastating scorn. 'No man is superior to another. No man has the slightest right to define another man's duties. If anyone on Terra exercises such impudent power it is only because idiots permit him to do so. They fear freedom. They prefer to be told. They like to be ordered around. They love their chains and kiss their manacles. What men!'

'I shouldn't listen to you,' protested Gleed, chipping in. His leathery face was flushed. 'You're as naughty as you're pretty.'

'Afraid of your own thoughts?' she jibed, ignoring his lopsided compliment.

He went redder. 'Not on your life. But I—' His voice tailed off as Seth arrived with three loaded plates and dumped them on the table.

‘See you afterward,’ reminded Seth. He was medium-sized, with thin features and sharp, quick-moving eyes. ‘Got something to say to you.’



F-IW

Seth joined them shortly after they’d finished their meal. Taking a chair, he wiped condensed steam off his face, looked them over calculatingly.

‘How much do you two know?’

‘Enough to fight over it,’ put in Elissa. ‘They are bothered about duties, who defines them and who performs them.’

‘With good reason,’ Harrison counter-attacked. ‘You can’t escape them yourselves.’

‘Is that so?’ said Seth. ‘How d’you make that out?’

‘This world runs on some strange system of swapping obligations. How would any person cancel an ob unless he recognized it as his duty to do so?’

‘Duty nothing,’ declared Seth. ‘Duty hasn’t anything to do with it. And if it did happen to be a matter of duty every man would be left to recognize it for himself. It would be outrageous impertinence for anyone to remind him, unthinkable that anyone should order him.’

‘Some guys must make an easy living,’ interjected Gleed. ‘There’s nothing to stop them that I can see.’ He studied Seth briefly before he asked, ‘How can you cope with a citizen who has no conscience?’

‘Easy as pie.’

Elissa suggested, ‘Tell them the story of Idle Jack.’

‘It’s a kid’s yarn,’ explained Seth. ‘All children here know it by heart. It’s a classic fable like . . . like—’ He screwed up his face. ‘I’ve lost track of the Terran tales the first-comers brought with them.’

‘Red Riding Hood,’ offered Harrison.

‘Yes.’ Seth seized upon it gratefully. ‘Something like that one. A nursery story.’ He licked his lips, began, ‘This Idle Jack came from Terra as a baby, grew up in our new world, gained an understanding of our economic system and thought he’d be mighty smart. He decided to become a scratcher.’

‘What’s a scratcher?’ asked Glead.

‘One who lives by accepting obs but does nothing about wiping them out or planting any of his own. One who takes everything that’s going and gives nothing in return.’

‘We’ve still got ’em,’ said Glead.

‘Up to age sixteen Jack got away with it all along the line. He was only a kid, see? All kids tend to scratch to a certain extent. We expect it and allow for it. But after sixteen he was soon in the soup.’

‘How?’ urged Harrison, more interested than he was willing to admit.

‘He loafed around the town gathering obs by the armful. Meals, clothes and all sorts for the mere asking. It wasn’t a big town. There are no big ones on this planet. They are just small enough for everybody to know everybody—and everyone does plenty of gabbing. Within a few months the entire town knew that Jack was a determined and incorrigible scratcher.’

‘Go on,’ said Harrison impatiently.

‘Everything dried up,’ responded Seth. ‘Wherever Jack went people gave him the, “I won’t.” He got no meals, no clothes, no company, no entertainment, nothing. He was avoided like a leper. Soon he became terribly hungry, busted into someone’s larder one night, treated himself to the first square meal in a week.’

‘What did they do about that?’

‘Nothing, not a thing.’

‘That must have encouraged him some, mustn’t it?’

‘How could it?’ asked Seth with a thin smile. ‘It did him no good. Next day his belly was empty again. He was forced to repeat the performance. And the next day. And the next. People then became leery, locked up their stuff and kept watch on it. Circumstances grew harder and harder. They grew so unbearably hard that soon it was a lot easier to leave the town and try another one. So Idle Jack went away.’

‘To do the same again,’ Harrison prompted.

‘With the same results for the same reasons,’ Seth threw back at him. ‘On he went to a third town, a fourth, a fifth, a twentieth. He was stubborn enough to be witless.’

‘But he was getting by,’ Harrison insisted. ‘Taking all for nothing at the cost of moving around.’

‘Oh, no he wasn’t. Our towns are small, as I said. And people do plenty of visiting from one to another. In the second town Jack had to risk being seen and talked about by visitors from the first town. In the third town he had to cope with talkers from both the first and second ones. As he went on it became a whole lot worse. In the twentieth he had to chance being condemned by anyone coming from any of the previous nineteen.’ Seth leaned forward, said with emphasis, ‘He never reached town number twenty-eight.’

‘No?’

‘He lasted two weeks in number twenty-five, eight days in number twenty-six, one day in twenty-seven. That was almost the end. He knew he’d be recognized the moment he showed his face in number twenty-eight.’

‘What did he do then?’

‘He took to the open country, tried to live like an animal feeding on roots and wild berries. Then he disappeared—until one day some walkers found him swinging from a tree. His body was emaciated and clad in rags. Loneliness, self-neglect and his own stupidity had combined to kill him. That was Idle Jack, the scratcher. He wasn’t twenty years old.’

‘On Terra,’ remarked Gleed virtuously, ‘we don’t hang people merely for being shiftless and lazy.’

‘Neither do we,’ said Seth. ‘We give them every encouragement to go hang themselves. And when they do it’s good riddance to bad rubbish.’ He eyed them shrewdly as he went on, ‘But don’t let it worry you. Nobody has been driven to such drastic measures in my lifetime, leastways, not that I’ve heard about. People honour their obs as a matter of economic necessity and not from any sense of duty. Nobody gives orders, nobody pushes anyone around, but there’s a kind of compulsion built into the circumstances of this planet’s way of life. People play square—or they suffer. Nobody enjoys suffering, not even a numbskull.’

‘Yes, I suppose you’re right,’ agreed Harrison, much exercised in mind.

‘You bet I’m right,’ Seth assured. ‘But what I want to talk to you about is something more important. It’s this: what is your real ambition in life?’

Without hesitation, Gleed said, 'To ride the spaceways while remaining in one piece.'

'Same here.' Harrison contributed.

'I guessed that much. You'd not be in the space service if it wasn't your choice. But you can't stay in it for ever. All things come to an end. What then?'

Harrison fidgeted uneasily. 'I don't care to think of it.'

'Some day you'll have to,' Seth pointed out. 'How much longer have you got?'

'Four and a half Earth-years.'

Seth's gaze turned to Gleed.

'Three Earth-years.'

'Not long,' said Seth. 'I didn't expect you'd have much time left. It's a safe bet that any ship penetrating this deeply into space has a crew composed mostly of experienced old-timers getting near to the end of their terms. The practiced hands usually are chosen for the awkward jobs. By the day your boat lands on Terra it will be the end of the trail for many of them, won't it?'

'It will be for me,' admitted Gleed, none too happy at the thought of it.

'Time, time, the older you get the faster it goes. Yet when you leave the service you'll still be comparatively young.' He put on a faint, taunting smile. 'I suppose you'll buy yourself a private space- vessel and continue to roam the cosmos on your own?'

'Don't talk silly.' snapped Gleed. 'A Moon-boat is the best a very rich man could afford. Puttering to and fro between a satellite and its primary is no fun when you're used to

Blieder-zips across the galaxy. The smallest space-going craft is far beyond reach of the wealthiest. Only governments can foot the bill for them.'

'By "governments" you mean communities?'

'In a way.'

'Well, then, what are you going to treat yourself to when your space-roaming days are over?'

'I'm not like Big Ears here.' Gleed jerked an indicative thumb at Harrison. 'I'm a trooper and not a technician. So my choice will be limited by my lack of qualifications.' He scratched his head and looked wistful. 'I was born and brought up on a farm. I still know a good deal about farming. So I think I'd like to get a small one of my own and settle down.'

'Think you'll manage to do it?' asked Seth, watching him intently.

'On Falder or Hygeia or Norton's Pink Heaven or some other planet. But not on Terra. My savings won't extend to that. I couldn't find half enough to meet Earth costs.'

'Meaning you can't pile up sufficient obs?'

'I can't,' agreed Gleed lugubriously. 'Not even if I save until I've got a white beard four feet long.'

'So that is Terra's reward for a long, long spell of faithful service—forego your heart's desire or get out?'

'Shut up!'

'I won't,' said Seth. 'Why do you think four million Gands came here, Doukhobors and

Naturists to Hygeia, Quakers and others to all their selected haunts? Because Terra's reward for good citizenship has always been a peremptory order to knuckle down or get out. So we got out.'



F-I-W



Chapter 6

The battleship's caller-system bawled imperatively, 'Fanshaw, Folsom, Fuller, Carson, Glead, Gregory, Haines, Harrison, Hope—' and so on down through the alphabet.

A steady trickle of men flowed along the passages, catwalks and alleyways toward the forward chartroom. They gathered outside it in small clusters, chattering in undertones and sending odd scraps of conversation echoing down the corridor.

'Wouldn't say anything to us but, "Myob!" We became sick and tired of it after a while.'

'You should have split up, like we did. That show-place on the outskirts just doesn't know what a Terran looks like. I walked in and took a seat with no trouble at all.'

'If ten of you stick together, all in the same uniform, you must expect to be identified on sight. That and your depraved faces is a complete giveaway.'

'Did you hear about Meakin? He mended a leaky roof, chose a bottle of double-dith in payment and mopped the lot. He was dead flat when we found him. Snoring like a hog. Had to be carried back.'

‘Some guys have all the luck. We got the brush-off wherever we showed our faces. Man, it was wearing.’

‘You should have separated, like I said.’

‘Half the mess must still be lying in the gutter—they haven’t turned up yet.’

‘Grayder will be hopping mad. He’d have stopped this morning’s second quota if he’d known in time.’

‘When my turn comes the technique will be to get down that gangway and run like hell before they’ve a chance to call me back.’

‘Sammy, you’ll be mighty lucky if you get a turn.’ Every now and again First Mate Morgan stuck his head out of the chartroom doorway and yelled a name already voiced on the caller. Frequently there was no response.

‘Harrison!’ he bawled.

With a puzzled expression, Harrison went inside. Captain Grayder was there seated behind his desk and gazing moodily at a list lying before him. Colonel Shelton was stiff and erect to one side with Major Hame slightly behind. Both wore the pained look of those tolerating a bad smell while a half-witted plumber searches in vain for the leak.

In front of the desk the Ambassador was tramping steadily to and fro, muttering deep down in his chins. ‘Barely five days and already the rot has set in.’ He halted as Harrison entered, fired off sharply, ‘So it’s you, Mister. When did you return from leave?’

‘The evening before last, sir.’

‘Ahead of time, eh? That’s curious. Did you get a puncture or something?’

‘No sir. I didn’t take my bicycle with me.’

‘Which is just as well,’ approved the Ambassador. ‘If you had done so you’d now be a thousand miles away and still pushing hard.’

‘Why, sir?’

‘Why? He asks me why! That is precisely what I want to know—*why?*’ He fumed a bit, then inquired, ‘Did you visit this town by yourself or in company?’

‘I went with Sergeant Gleed, sir.’

‘Call him,’ ordered the Ambassador, looking at Morgan.

Opening the door, Morgan shouted, ‘Gleed! Gleed!’

No answer.

He tried again, without result. Once more they put it over the caller-system. The name resounded all over the ship from nose to tail. Sergeant Gleed refused to be among those present.

‘Has he signed in?’

Grayder consulted his list. ‘Yes. In early. Twenty-four hours ahead of time. He may have sneaked out again with the second liberty quota this morning and omitted to put it in the book. That’s a double crime.’

‘If he’s not on the ship he’s off the ship, crime or no crime.’

‘Yes, Your Excellency.’ Grayder registered slight weariness.

'GLEED!' howled Morgan outside the door. A moment later he poked his head within and said, 'Your Excellency, one of the men tells me that Sergeant Gleed cannot be aboard because he saw him in town an hour ago.'

'Send him in.' The Ambassador made an impatient gesture at Harrison. 'Stay where you are, Mister, and keep those confounded ears from flapping. I've not finished with you yet.'

A tall, gangling grease-monkey came in, blinked around obviously awed by the assembly of top brass.

'What do you know about Sergeant Gleed?' demanded the Ambassador.

The other nervously licked his lips, sorry that he had mentioned the missing man. 'It's like this, your honour,—'

'Call me "sir."'

'Yes, your honour.' More disconcerted blinking. 'I went out with the second party early this morning but came back a short time ago because my stomach was acting up. On the way here I saw Sergeant Gleed and spoke to him.'

'Where?'

'In town, your honour, sir. He was sitting in one of those big, long-distance coaches. I thought it a bit queer.'

'Get down to the roots of it, man! What did he tell you, if anything?'

'Not much, sir, your honour. He seemed pretty chipper about something. Mentioned a young widow struggling to look after two hundred acres. Someone had told him about her and he thought he'd take a peek.' He hesitated, backed off warily and finished, 'He also

said that I'd see him in irons or never.'

'One of your men,' said the Ambassador to Shelton. 'A hardened space-trooper, allegedly experienced, loyal and well-disciplined. One with long service, three stripes and a pension to lose.' His attention returned to the informant. 'Did he say exactly where he was going?'

'No, sir, your. . . uh. I asked him but he grinned like an ape and said, "Myob!" So I came back to the ship.'

'All right. You may go.' The Ambassador watched the other depart then continued with Harrison.

'You were one of that first quota?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Let me tell you something, Mister. Over four hundred men went out. About two hundred have returned. Forty of those were in various stages of alcoholic turpitude. Ten of them are locked in the brig yelling, "I won't" in steady chorus. Doubtless they'll continue to scream it until they've sobered up.'

He stared at Harrison as if holding that worthy personally responsible for the mess, then went on, 'There is something paradoxical about this situation. I can understand the drunks. There are always a few morons who blow their tops first day on land. But of the two hundred who have condescended to come back about half returned before time, the same as you did. Their reasons were identical: the town was unfriendly, everyone treated them like ghosts until they'd had enough.'

Harrison made no comment.

'So we have two diametrically opposed reactions,' the Ambassador complained. 'One lot

of men say the place stinks so much they'd far rather be back on the ship. Another lot finds the town so hospitable that either they get filled to the gills with some horrible muck called double-dith or they stay sober and desert the service. I want an explanation. There has to be one somewhere. You've been twice in this town. What can you tell us?'

Carefully, Harrison said, 'It all depends upon whether or not one is immediately recognizable as a Terran. Also on whether you happen to make contact with Gands who'd rather convert you than give you the brush-off.' He pondered a few seconds, added, 'Uniforms are a bad factor. The Gands seem to hate the sight of them.'

'You mean they're allergic to uniforms?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Any idea why?'

'I couldn't say for certain, sir. I don't know enough about them yet. As a guess, I think they may have been taught to associate uniforms with the Terran regime from which their ancestors escaped.'

'Escaped? Nonsense!' exclaimed the Ambassador. 'They grabbed the benefit of Terran inventions, Terran techniques, and Terran manufacturing ability to go someplace where they'd have more elbow-room.' He gave Harrison the sour eye. 'Don't any of them wear uniforms?'

'Not that I could recognize as such. They seem to take pleasure in expressing their individual personalities by wearing anything from pigtails to pink boots; oddity in attire is the norm among the Gands. To them, uniformity is the real oddity—they think it's submissive and degrading.'

'You refer to them as Gands. From where did they get that name?'

Harrison told him, thinking back to Elissa and her explanation. In his mind's eye he could see her now. And Seth's place with its inviting tables and steam rising behind the counter and mouth-watering smells oozing from the background. Now that he came to visualize the scene again it appeared to embody a subtle, elusive but essential something that the ship had never possessed.

'And this person,' he concluded, 'invented what they call The Weapon.'

'H'm-m-m! And they say he was a Terran, eh? What did he look like? Did you see a photograph or statue?'

'They don't erect statues, sir. They don't consider that any person is more important than any other.'

'Bunkum!' snapped the Ambassador, instinctively rejecting that viewpoint. 'Did it occur to you to gather any revealing details about him or, at least, find out at what period in history this wonderful weapon first appeared?'

'No, sir,' confessed Harrison. 'I didn't think it important.'

'You wouldn't. Some of you men are too slow to catch a Callistrian sloth wandering in its sleep. I don't criticize your abilities as spacemen but as intelligence-agents you're a dead loss.'

'I'm sorry, sir,' said Harrison.

Sorry? You louse! whispered something deep within his own mind. *Why should you be sorry? He's only a pompous fat man who couldn't cancel an ob if he tried. He's no better than you. Those raw boys prancing around on Hygeia would maintain that he's not as good as you because he's got a pot-belly. Yet you keep staring at his pot-belly and*

saying, 'Sir 'and, 'I'm sorry.' If he tried to ride your bike he'd fall off before he'd gone ten yards. He's just another Terran freak. Go spit in his eye and say, I won't! 'You're not scared, are you?

'No!' announced Harrison, loudly and emphatically.

Captain Grayder glanced up in surprise. 'If you're going to start answering questions before they've been asked, you'd better see the medic. Or have we a telepath on board?'

'I was thinking,' Harrison said.

'I approve of that,' put in the Ambassador. He lugged a couple of huge tomes off the wall-shelves, began to thumb rapidly through them. 'Do plenty of thinking whenever you've the chance and it will become a habit. It will get easier and easier in time until eventually a day may come when it can be performed without great pain.'

Shoving the books back, he pulled out two more, spoke to Major Hame who happened to be at his elbow. 'Don't pose there glassy-eyed like a relic propped up in a military museum. Lend a hand with this mountain of knowledge. I want Gandhi, anywhere from four hundred to a thousand Earth-years ago.'

Hame came to life, started dragging out books and searching through them. So did Colonel Shelton. Grayder remained at his desk and continued to mourn the missing.

'Ah, here it is, nearly six hundred years back.' The Ambassador ran a plump finger along the printed lines. 'Gandhi, sometimes called Bapu, or Father. Citizen of Hindi. Politico-philosopher. Opposed authority by means of an ingenious system called Civil Disobedience. Last remnants disappeared with the Great Explosion but may still persist on some planet out of contact.'

'Evidently it does,' commented Grayder dryly.

‘Civil disobedience,’ repeated the Ambassador, screwing up his eyes. He had the air of trying to study something turned upside-down and inside-out. ‘They can’t make that a social basis. It just won’t work.’

‘It does work,’ asserted Harrison, forgetting to put in the sir.

‘Are you contradicting me, Mister?’

‘I’m stating a fact.’

‘Your Excellency,’ put in Grayder, ‘I suggest—’

‘Leave this to me.’ His colour deepening, the Ambassador waved him away. His gaze remained angrily on Harrison. ‘You are very far from being an expert upon socio-economic problems. Get that into your head, Mister. Anyone of your calibre can be fooled by superficial appearances.’

‘It works,’ persisted Harrison, finding cause to marvel at his own stubbornness.

‘So does your damnfool bicycle. You’ve a bicycle mentality.’ Something snapped and a voice remarkably like his own said, ‘Nuts!’ Astounded by this phenomenon, Harrison waggled his ears.

‘What was that, Mister?’

‘Nuts!’ he repeated, feeling that what has been done cannot be undone.

Beating the purpling Ambassador to the draw, Grayder stood up, his expression severe, and exercised his own authority.

‘Regardless of further leave-quotas, if any, you are confined to the ship. Now get out!’

Harrison departed, his mind in a whirl but his soul strangely satisfied. Outside, First Mate Morgan glowered at him.

‘How long d’you think it’s going to take me to work through this list of names when guys like you squat in there for a week?’ He grunted with ire, cupped hands around his mouth and bellowed, ‘Hope! Hope!’

No reply.

‘Hope’s been abandoned,’ informed Trooper Kinvig. ‘That’s really funny,’ sneered Morgan. ‘Look at me rolling all over the deck.’ He cupped hands again and tried the next name. ‘Hyland! Hyland!’

No response.

Four more days, long, tedious, dragging ones. That made nine in all since the battleship formed the rut in which it was still sitting.

There was trouble on board. Put off repeatedly, the third and fourth leave-quotas were becoming impatient, irritable.

‘Morgan showed him the third roster again this morning. Same result. Grayder was forced to admit that this world cannot be defined as hostile and that we’re legally entitled to run free.’

‘Well, why the blazes doesn’t he keep to the book? The Space Committee could crucify him for ignoring it.’

‘Same excuse. He says he’s not denying leave, he’s merely postponing it. That’s a crafty evasion, isn’t it? He says he’ll allow us to go out immediately the missing men come back.’

‘That might be never. Darn him, he’s using them as a pretext to gyp me out of my liberty.’

It was a powerful and legitimate complaint. Weeks, months, years of close confinement in a constantly vibrating metal bottle, no matter how big and comfortable, demands ultimate release. Men need fresh air, the good earth, the broad, clear-cut horizon, bulk-food, feminine companionship, new faces.

‘He would ram home the stopper just when we’ve learned the best way to get around. Civilian clothes and behave like Gands, that’s the secret. Even the first-quota boys are ready for another try.’

‘Grayder daren’t take the risk. He’s lost too many men already. One more quota cut in half and he won’t have sufficient crew to lift the ship and take it home. We’d be stuck here for keeps. How’d you like that, freak?’

‘I wouldn’t grieve.’

‘He could train the bureaucrats to run the ship. It’s high time those myopic bums did some honest work.’

‘That would take three years. Your training lasted three years, didn’t it?’

Harrison came along holding a small envelope. Three of them picked on him at sight.

‘Look who sauced His Loftiness and got confined to ship—same as us.’

‘That’s what I like about it,’ observed Harrison. ‘Better to be fastened down for something than for nothing.’

‘It won’t be for much longer, you’ll see! We’re not going to hang around bellyaching for ever. Mighty soon we’ll do something.’

‘Such as what?’

‘We’re thinking it over,’ evaded the other, not liking to be taken up so quickly. He noticed the envelope. ‘What’s that you’ve got there?—the morning mail?’

‘Exactly that,’ Harrison agreed.

‘Have it your own way. I wasn’t being nosey. I thought perhaps you’d got some more written orders. You engineers usually pick up the paper-stuff first.’

‘It is mail,’ said Harrison.

‘Don’t be daft. Nobody receives letters in this part of the cosmos.’

‘I do.’

‘Well, how did you get that one?’

‘Worrall brought it in from town a few minutes ago. A friend of mine gave him dinner and let him bring the letter to wipe out the ob.’ He pulled a large ear and smirked at them.

‘Influence, that’s what you boys need.’

Showing annoyance, one demanded, ‘What’s Worrall doing off the boat? Is he privileged?’

‘In a way. He’s married and has three kids.’

‘So what?’

‘The Ambassador figures that some people can be trusted more than others. They’re not as likely to disappear, having too much to lose. So a few have been sorted out and sent into town to seek information about the missing ones.’

‘Have they found out anything?’

‘Not much. Worrall says the quest is sheer waste of time. He traced a few of our men here and there, tried to persuade them to return but each said, “I won’t.” The Gands all said, “Myob!” And that was that.’

‘There must be something in this Gand business,’ said one of them thoughtfully. ‘I’d give a lot to look into it for myself.’

‘That’s what Grayder is afraid of.’

‘We’ll give him more than that to worry about if he doesn’t become reasonable pretty soon. Our patience is evaporating fast.’

‘Mutinous talk,’ Harrison reproved. He shook his head and displayed great sorrow. ‘You fellows shock me.’

Continuing along the corridor, he reached his tiny cabin, fingered the envelope in pleased anticipation. The writing inside might be feminine. He hoped so. Tearing it open, he had a look. It wasn’t.

Signed by Glead, the missive said, ‘Never mind where I am or what I’m doing—this note might get into the wrong hands. All I’ll tell you is that I expect to be fixed up topnotch providing I wait a decent interval to improve acquaintance. The rest of this directly concerns you.’

‘Huh?’ He lay back on his bunk and held the letter nearer the light. ‘I found a little fat guy running an empty shop. He does nothing but sit there waiting. Next, I learned that he has established possession by occupation of the premises. He’s doing it on behalf of a factory that makes two-ball rollers, you know, those fan-driven motor-bikes. They want someone to

operate the place as a local roller sales and service depot. The little fat man has had four applications to date but none from anyone with engineering ability and experience. The one who eventually gains this post will thereby plant a functional ob on the town, whatever that means. Anyway, this lovely business proposition is measured to your size. It's yours for the taking. Don't be freaky, freak. Jump in with me—the water's fine!

'Zipping meteors!' said Harrison. His eyes moved on to the footnote at bottom.

'P.S. Seth will give you the address. P.P.S. This place where I am right now is your brunette's home town and she's thinking of coming back. She wants to live near her sister. So do I, man! The said sister is a honey!'

Stirring restlessly, he read it through a second time and a third, got up and paced around the cabin.

There were sixteen hundred occupied worlds within the scope of the Terran Empire. He'd seen less than one-twentieth of them. No spaceman could live long enough to visit the lot. The service was divided into cosmic groups each dealing with its own relatively small section of the galaxy.

Except by hearsay—of which there was plenty and most of it highly coloured—he would never know what heavens or pseudo-heavens existed in the other sections. In any case, it would be a blind gamble to pick on an unfamiliar world for landbound life solely on somebody else's recommendation. Not all think alike or have the same tastes. One man's meat may be another's poison.

The choice for retirement—which was the ugly name for beginning another, different but vigorous life—was high-priced Terra or some more desirable planet in his own section. There was the Epsilon group, for instance, fourteen of them, all attractive providing you could suffer the gravity and endure lumbering around like a tired elephant. And there was

Norton's Pink Paradise if, for the sake of getting by in peace, you could pander to Septimus Norton's rajah-complex and put up with his delusions of grandeur.

Out near the edge of the Milky Way was a matriarchy bossed by blonde Amazons, and a world of self-styled wizards, and a Pentecostal planet, and a globe where semi-sentient vegetables cultivated themselves in obedience to human masters. All these scattered across many light-years of space but readily accessible by Blieder-drive.

There were more than fifty known to him by personal experience, though only a tithe of the whole. All offered life and that human company which is the essence of life. But this world of the Gands had something all the others lacked; it had the quality of being present, in the here and now. It was part of the existing environment from which he drew data on which to build his decisions. The others were not. They lost virtue by being absent and far away.

Quietly he made his way to the Blieder-room lockers, spent an hour cleaning and oiling his bicycle. Twilight was approaching when he returned. Taking a thin plaque from his pocket, he hung it on the wall, lay on his bunk and contemplated it.

F.—I.W.

The caller-system clicked, cleared its throat and announced, 'All personnel will stand by for general instructions at eight hours tomorrow.'

'I won't,' said Harrison, and closed his eyes.

It was seven-twenty in the morning but nobody thought it early. There is little sense of earliness or lateness among space-roamers; to regain it they have to be landbound a month, watching a sun rise and set.

The chartroom was empty but there was considerable activity in the control-cabin. Grayder was there with Shelton and Hame, also Chief Navigators Adamson, Werth and Yates, and,

of course, His Excellency.

‘I never thought the day would come,’ groused the latter, scowling at the star-map over which the navigators pored. ‘Less than a couple of weeks and we retreat, admitting complete defeat.’

‘With all respect, Your Excellency, it doesn’t look like that to me,’ said Grayder. ‘One can be defeated only by avowed enemies. These people are not enemies. That is where, they’ve got us by the short hairs. They’re not definable as hostile.’

‘That may be. I still say it’s defeat. What else can you call it?’

‘We’ve been outwitted by awkward relatives. There’s nothing we can do about it. A man doesn’t beat up his nephews and nieces merely because they refuse to speak to him.’

‘That is your viewpoint as a ship’s commander. You have been confronted with a situation that requires you to return to base and report. It’s routine. The entire space service is hidebound with routine.’ The Ambassador again eyed the star map as if he considered it offensive. ‘My own status is different. If I get out without so much as leaving a consul, it’s diplomatic defeat, an insult to the dignity and prestige of Terra. I’m far from sure that I ought to go. It might be better if I stayed put even though circumstances would prevent me from functioning effectively and even though my presence would give these Gands endless opportunities for further insults.’

‘I wouldn’t presume to advise you what to do for the best,’ Grayder said. ‘All I know is this: we carry troops and armaments for any protective or policing purposes that might be necessary here. But we cannot use them offensively against the Gands because they have provided no real excuse for doing so, also because we cannot influence a government that doesn’t exist, and also because our full strength isn’t enough to crush a population numbering many millions. We’d need an armada to make an impression upon this world.’

Even then we'd be fighting at the extreme limit of our reach and the reward of victory would be an area of destruction not worth having.'

'Don't remind me. I have examined the problem from every angle until I'm sick of it.'

Grayder shrugged. He was a man of action so long as it was action in deep space. Planetary shenanigans were not properly his responsibility. Now that the decisive moment was drawing near, when he would be back in his own attenuated element, he was becoming phlegmatic. To him, the Gand world was a visiting-place among a big number of them. And there were plenty more to come.

'Your Excellency, if you're in serious doubt about remaining here or returning with us, I'd appreciate it if you'd reach a decision fairly soon. First Mate Morgan has given me the tip that if I haven't approved the third leave-quota by ten o'clock the men intend to take matters into their own hands and walk out.'

'That kind of conduct would get them into trouble of a really hot kind, wouldn't it?'

'I don't know, really I just don't know,' confessed Grayder.

'You mean they can actually defy you and get away with it?'

'Their idea is to turn my own quibbling against me. Since I've said repeatedly that I'm not officially forbidding leave, a walk-out cannot be construed as mutiny. As you know, Your Excellency, I have been postponing leave. Therefore the men could plead before the Space Committee that I have ignored regulations. It is quite possible that the plea might succeed if the Space Committee happened to be in the mood to assert its authority.'

'The Space Committee ought to be taken on a few long flights,' opined the Ambassador. 'They'd discover a lot of things they'll never learn behind a desk.' He became mockingly hopeful. 'How about us accidentally dropping our cargo of bureaucrats overboard on the

way home? Such a misfortune should benefit the spaceways if not humanity in general.'

'The suggestion strikes me as Gandish,' said Grayder.

'The Gands wouldn't think of it. Their one and only technique is to say no, no, a thousand times no. That's all. But to judge by what has happened here it is more than enough.'

Morosely, the Ambassador pondered his predicament decided, 'I'm coming with you. It goes against the grain because it smacks of abject surrender. To stay would be a defiant gesture but I have to face the fact that it wouldn't serve any useful purpose at the present stage.'

'Would you like us to return you to Hygeia?'

'No. The consul there is welcome to that crowd of nakes. Besides, I think I should give Terra the benefit of my personal report about this trip.'

'Very well, Your Excellency.' Going to a port, Grayder looked through it toward the town.

'We have lost approximately four hundred men. Some of them have deserted for keeps.

The others will return in their own good time and if I wait long enough. The latter have struck lucky, got their legs under somebody's table and are likely to extend their leave for as long as the fun lasts. They'll come back when it suits them, thinking they may as well be hung for sheep as for lambs. I have that sort of trouble on every long trip. It isn't so bad on the short ones.' Moodily he surveyed a terrain bare of returning prodigals. 'But we dare not wait for them. Not here.'

'No, I reckon not.'

'If we hang around much longer we're going to lose another two hundred. There won't be enough skilled men to take the boat up. The only way in which I can beat them to the draw is to give the order to prepare for take-off. They'll all come under flight regulations from that

moment.’ He put on a pained smile. ‘That will give the space-lawyers among them plenty to think about.’

‘All right, make the order as soon as you like,’ approved the Ambassador. He joined the other at the port, studied the distant road, watched three Gand coaches whirl along it without stopping. He frowned, still upset by the type of mind which insists on pretending that a metal mountain is not there. Then his attention turned aside toward the tail-end. ‘What are those men doing outside?’

Shooting a swift glance in the same direction, Grayder grabbed the caller-microphone and rapped, ‘All personnel will prepare for take-off at once!’ Then he seized his intercom phone and spoke on that. ‘Who’s there? Sergeant Major Bidworthy? Look, Sergeant Major, there are half a dozen men loafing outside the midway lock. Order them in immediately—we’re lifting as soon as everything is ready.’

By now the fore and aft gangways had been rolled into their stowage spaces. The midway one swiftly followed. Some fast-thinking quartermaster prevented further escapes by operating the midship ladder-wind, thus trapping Bidworthy along with an unknown number of would-be sinners.

Finding himself stalled by the fifty-foot drop, Bidworthy stood in the rim of the airlock and glared at those outside. His moustache not only bristled, but quivered. Five of the objects of his fierce attention had been members of the first leave-quota. One of them was Trooper Casartelli. That got Bidworthy’s rag out, a trooper. The sixth was Harrison, complete with bicycle polished and shining.

Searing the lot of them, especially the trooper, Bidworthy grated, ‘Get back on board. No funny business. We’re about to go up.’

‘Hear that Mortimer?’ asked one, nudging the nearest. ‘Get back on board. If you can’t jump

fifty feet you'd better flap your arms and fly.'

'No sauce from you,' roared Bidworthy. 'I have my orders.'

'Ye gods, he actually takes orders! At his age!'

Bidworthy scabbled at the lock's smooth rim in vain search of something to grasp. A ridge, a knob, any kind of projection was needed to help take the strain.

'I warn you men that if you try me too—'

'Quiet, freak.'

'Save your breath, Rufus,' put in Casartelli. 'From now on I'm a Gand.' With that, he turned away and walked rapidly toward the road. Four followed him.

Getting astride his bike, Harrison put a foot on the pedal. His back tyre promptly sank with a loud whee-e-e.

'Come back!' howled Bidworthy at the retreating five. 'Come back!' He made extravagant motions, tried to tear the ladder from its automatic grips. A siren keened thinly inside the vessel and that upped his agitation by several ergs.

'Hear that?' His expression murderous, he watched Harrison calmly tighten the rear valve and apply a hand-pump. 'We're about to lift. For the last time—'

Again the siren, this time in a rapid series of shrill toots. Bidworthy jumped backward as the airlock seal came down. The lock closed. Harrison again mounted his machine, settled a foot on a pedal but remained watching.

The metal monster shivered from nose to tail then arose slowly and in complete silence.

There was stately magnificence in this ascent of such enormous bulk. The ship gradually increased its rate of climb, went faster, faster, became a toy, a dot, and finally disappeared.

For a brief moment Harrison felt a touch of doubt, a hint of regret. It soon passed away. He glanced toward the road.

The five self-elected Gands had thumbed a coach which was now picking them up. That was helpfulness apparently precipitated by the ship's vanishing. Quick on the uptake, these people. He saw it move off on huge rubber balls bearing the five with it. A fan-cycle raced in the opposite direction, hummed into the distance.

'Your brunette,' was how Gleed had described her. What had given him that idea? Had she made some remark that he'd construed as complimentary because it had contained no reference to outsize ears?

He had a last look around. The earth bore a great curved rut one mile long by ten feet deep. Two thousand Terrans had been there.

Then about eighteen hundred.

Then sixteen hundred.

Less five.

'One left', he said to himself. 'Me.'

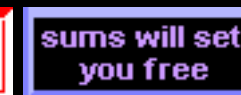
Giving a fatalistic shrug, he put on the pressure and rode to town.

And then there were none.



Other sci-fi short stories at abelard.org:

- [Profession by Isaac Asimov](#)
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- [from Starship Troopers by Robert Heinlein](#)
- [Kantsaywhere by Francis Galton](#)
- [from In the Wet by Neville Shute](#)



END NOTES

- 1 Hygeia: a planet full of nudist health freaks
- 2 For information on Eric Frank Russell, his life and a bibliography of his writings [Shadow Man](#), a site created by Narrelle Harris, is recommended.

[The bibliography of EFR](#) on Narrelle Harris' site. On this introductory page there are links to pages including those on novels, short stories and articles.
- 3 Another science-fiction story available on this site is [Profession](#) by Isaac Asimov. This

is an allegorical description of the manner in which education currently functions in our primitive western societies.

A short selection of socio-psychologically oriented science-fiction is included in [*recommended reading*](#).

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