

by Piers Anthony

There are no blanks in my narrative, or pointless untitled chapters.

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It lay there, an indentation in the soil, two inches deep and nine feet in diameter. It was flat, it was smooth, and the sand and the dirt were twined with rotted leaves and stems in a marbled pattern. The edge, cut sharp and clean exposed a miniature stratum leading up to the unpressed forest floor, and spoke of the weight that had on that spot, moulding the earth into the shape of its fundament.

It was the mark of a foot, or a hoof, or whatever it is that touches the ground when an animal ambulates. One print —

Charles Tinnerrnan shook his head sombrely. A single print could have been a freak of nature. This was one of many: a definite trail. They were spaced twenty or thirty feet apart, huge and level; ridges of spadiceous earth narrowed towards the centre of each, rounded and, tooth, as though squirted liquidly up between half-yard toes. Some were broken, toppled worms lying skew, scuffed when the hoof moved on.

Around the spoor rose the forest, in Gargantuan splendour; each trunk ascending gauntly into a mass of foliage so high and solid that the ground was cast into an almost nocturnal shadow.

At dusk the three men halted. "We could set up arc," Tinnerman said, reaching behind to pat his harness.

Don Abel grunted negatively. "Use a light, and everything on the planet will know where we are. We don't want the thing that made that," he gestured towards the trail, "to start hunting us."

The third man spoke impatiently. "It rains at night, remember? If we don't get close pretty soon, the water'll wash out the prints."

Tinnerman looked up. "Too late," he said. There was no thunder, but abruptly it was raining solidly, as it must to support a forest of this type. They could hear the steady deluge flaying the dense leaves far above. Not a drop reached the ground. "The trees won't hold it back forever," Abel remarked. "We'd better break out the pup tent in a hurry — "Hey!" Fritz Slaker's voice sang out ahead. "There's a banyan or something up here. Shelter!"

Columns of water hissed into the ground as the great leaves far above overflowed at last. The men galloped for cover, packs thumping as they dodged the sudden waterfalls.

They stripped their packs and broke out rations silently. Ale dry leaves and spongy loam made a comfortable seat, and after a day of hiking the relaxation was bliss. Tinnerman leaned back against the base of the nearest trunk, chewing and gazing up into the bole of the tree. It was dark; but he could make out a giant spherical opacity from which multiple stems projected downward, bending and swelling for a hundred feet until they touched the ground as trunks twelve feet in diameter.

Don Abel's voice came out of the shadow. "The monster passed right under here. I'm sitting on the edge of a print. What if it comes back?"

Slaker laughed, but not loudly. "Maybe we're in its nest? We'd hear it. A critter like that — just the shaking of the ground would knock us all a foot into the air." There was a sustained rustle.

"What are you doing?" Abel asked querulously. "Making a bed," Slaker snapped.

"Do you think it's safe?" Abel asked, though his tone indicated that he suspected one place was as unsafe as another. After a moment, the rustle signified that he too was making a bed.

Tinnerman smiled in the dark, amused. He really did not know the other men well; the three had organized an AWOL party on the spur of the moment, knowing that the survey ship would be planetbound for several days.

The bark of the tree was thick and rubbery, and Tinnerman found it oddly comfortable. He put his ear against it, bearing a faint melodic humming that seemed to emanate from the interior. It was as though he was auditing the actual life-processes of the alien vegetation — although on this world, he was. the alien — and this fascinated him. The other two were soon asleep. Sitting there in silence, the absolute blackness of a strange world's umbra pressing against his eyeballs, Tinnerman realized that this outing, dangerous as it was, offered him a satisfaction he had seldom known. Slaker and Abel had accepted him for what he was not: one of the fellows.

Those footprints. Obviously animal — yet so large. Would a pressure of a hundred pounds per square inch depress the earth that much? How much would the total creature weigh?

Tinnerman found his pack in the dark and rummaged for his miniature slide rule. The tiny numbers fluoresced as he set up his problem:  $144 \text{ times the square of } 4.5 \text{ times } p \text{ divided by } 20$ . It came to about 460 tons per print. And how many feet did it have, and how much weight did each carry when at rest?

He had heard that creatures substantially larger than the dinosaurs of ancient Earth could not exist on land. On an Earth type planet, which this one was with regard to gravity, atmosphere and climate, the limits were not so much biological as physical. A diminutive insect required many legs, not to support its weight, but to preserve balance. Brontosaurus, with legs many times as sturdy as those of an insect, even in proportion to its size, had to seek the swamp to ease the overbearing weight. A larger animal, in order to walk at all, would have to have disproportionately larger legs and feet. Mass cubed with increasing size while the cross section of the legs squared; to maintain a feasible ratio, most of the mass above a certain point would have to go to the feet.

Four hundred and sixty tons? The weight on each foot exceeded that of a family of whales. Bones should shatter and flesh tear free with every step.

The rain had ceased and the forest was quiet now. Tinnerman scraped up a belated bed of his own and lay down. But his mind refused to be pacified. Bright and clear and ominous the thoughts paraded, posing questions for which he had no answer. What thing had they blundered across?

A jumping animal! Tinnerman sat up, too excited to sleep. Like an overgrown showshoe rabbit, he thought — bounding high, hundreds of feet to nip the lofty greenery, then landing with terrific impact. It could be quite small — less than a ton, perhaps, with one grossly splayed balancing foot. At night it might sail into a selected roost... or onto...

He turned his eyes up to the impenetrable canopy above. In the flattened upper reaches of the banyan... a nest?

Tinnerman stood, moving silently away from the bodies of his companions. Locating his pack a second time he dug out cleats and hand spikes, fitting them to his body by feel. He found his trunk, shaping its firm curvature with both hands; then he began the ascent.

He climbed, digging the spikes into the heavy bark and gaining altitude in the blackness. The surface gradually became softer, more even, but remained firm; if it were to pull away from the inner wood the fall would kill him. He felt the curvature increase and knew that the diameter of the trunk was

shrinking: but still there was no light at all.

His muscles tensed as his body seemed to become heavier, more precariously exposed. Something was pulling him away from the trunk, weakening his purchase; but he could not yet circle any major portion of the column with his arms. Something was wrong; he would have to descend before being torn loose.

Relief washed over him as he realized the nature of the problem. He was near the top; the stem was bending in to join the main body of the tree, and he was on the underside. He worked his way to the outside and the strain eased; now gravity was pulling him into the trunk, helping him instead of leaving him hanging. Quickly he completed the ascent and stood at last against the massive nexus where limb melded into bole.

Here there was light, a dim glow from overhead. He mounted the vast gnarled bulk, a globular shape thirty feet in diameter covered with swellings and scars. It was difficult to picture it as it was, a hundred feet above the ground, for nothing at all could be seen beyond its damp mound. Although it was part of a living or once-living thing, there was no evidence of foliage. There was no nest.

The centre of the crude sphere rose onto another trunk or stalk, a column about ten feet in diameter, pointing straight up as far as he could see. He was not at the top at all. The bark was smooth and not very thick; it would be difficult to scale, even with the cleats.

Tinnerman rested for about ten minutes, lying down and putting his ear to the wood. Again the melody of the interior came to him, gentle yet deep. It brought a vision of many layers, pulsing and interweaving; of tumescence and flow, rich sap in the fibres. There was life of a sort going on within, either of the tree or in it.

He stood and mounted the central stalk. Quickly he climbed, spikes penetrating at fingers, knees and toes, bearing him antlike up the sheer column without hesitation. The light above became brighter, though it was only the lesser gloom of a starless night on a moonless planet. Ahead the straight trunk went on and on, narrowing but never branching. Huge limbs from neighbouring trees crossed nearby, bare and eerie, residual moisture shining dully; but his climb ignored them. Fifty feet; seventy-five; and now he was as high above the hole as it was above the ground. The stem to which he clung had diminished to a bare five foot diameter, but rose on towards the green upper forest.

Tinnerman's muscles bunched once more with strain. A wind came up; or perhaps he had come up to it. At this height, even the slightest tug and sway was alarming. He reached his arms around the shaft and hung on. Below, the spokes of other trees were a forest of their own, a fairyland of brush and blackness, crossing and recrossing, concealing everything except the slender reed he held. Above, the first leaves appeared, flat and heavy in the night. He climbed. Suddenly it ended. The trunk, barely three feet through, expanded into a second bole shaped like an upside-down pear with a five-foot thickness, and stopped. Tinnerman clambered on to the top and stood there, letting his weary arms relax, balancing against the sway. There was nothing else — just a vegetable knob two hundred feet above the ground. All around, the dark verdure rustled in the breeze, and the gloom below was a quiet sea.

No branches approached within twenty feet of the knob, though the leaves closed in above, diffusing the glow of the sky. Tinnerman studied the hollow around him, wondering what kept the growth away. Was this a takeoff point for the hidden quarry?

Then it came to him, unnerving him completely. Fear hammered inside him like a bottled demon; he dared not let it out. Shaking, he began the descent.

Morning came, dim and unwilling; but it was not the wan light filtering down like sediment that

woke the explorers. Nor was it the warmth of day, soaking into the tops and running down the trunks in the fashion of the night water.

They woke to sound: a distant din, as of a large animal tearing branches and crunching leaves. It was the first purposeful noise they had heard since entering the forest; as such, it was unnatural, and brought all three to their feet in alarm.

The evening deluge had eradicated all trace of the prints leading up to the giant structure under which they had taken shelter. Beneath it the spoor remained, as deep and fresh as before; one print near the edge was half gone.

Slaker sized up the situation immediately. "Guarantees the trail was fresh," he said. "We don't know whether it was coming or going, but it was made between rains. Let's get over and spot that noise." He suited action to word and set off, pack dangling from one hand, half eaten space-ration in the other.

Abel was not so confident. "Fresh, yes — but we still don't know where the thing went. You don't look as though you got much sleep, Tinny."

Tinnerman didn't answer. They picked up their packs and followed Slaker, who was already almost out of sight.

They came up to him as he stood at the edge of an open space in the forest. Several mighty trees had fallen, and around their massive corpses myriad little shoots were reaching up. The sunlight streamed down here, intolerably bright after the obscurity underneath. The noise had stopped.

There was a motion in the bush ahead. A large body was moving through the thicket, just out of sight, coming towards them. A serpentine neck poked out of the copse, bearing a cactuslike head a foot in diameter. The head swung towards them, circularly machairodont, a ring of six-inch eyestalks extended.

The men froze, watching the creature. The head moved away, apparently losing its orientation in the silence. The neck was smooth and flexible, about ten feet in length; the body remained out of sight.

"Look at those teeth!" Slaker whispered fiercely. "That's our monster."

Immediately the head reacted, demonstrating acute hearing. It came forward rapidly, twenty feet above the ground; and in a moment the rest of the creature came into sight. The body was a globular mass about four feet across, mounted on a number of spindly legs. The creature walked with a peculiar caterpillar ripple, one ten-foot leg swinging around the body in a clockwise direction while the others were stationary, reminding Tinnerman of the problems of a wounded daddy-long-legs. The body spun, rotating with the legs; but the feet managed to make a kind of processional progress. The spin did not appear to interfere with balance or orientation; the ring of eyestalks kept all horizons covered.

Slaker whipped out his sidearm. "No!" Tinnerman cried, too late. Slaker's shot smacked into the central body, making a small but visible puncture.

The creature halted as if nonplussed, legs rising and falling rhythmically in place. It did not fall. Slaker's second bullet tore into it, and his third, before Tinnerman wrested away the gun. "It wasn't attacking," he said, not knowing how to explain what he knew.

They watched while the monster's motion gradually slowed, huge drops of ichor welling from its wounds. It shuddered; then the legs began pounding the ground in short, violent steps, several at a

time. Coordination was gone; slowly the body overbalanced and toppled. The great mouth opened like a flower, like a horn, and emitted a car shattering blast of sound, a tormented cry of pain and confusion; then the body fell heavily on its side.

For a moment the three men stood in silence, watching the death throes. The creature's legs writhed as though independently alive, and the head twisted savagely on the ground, knocking off the oddly brittle eyestalks. Tinnerman's heart sank, for the killing had been pointless. If he had told the others his nighttime revelation —

From the forest came a blast of incredible volume.

Tinnerman clapped both hands over his ears as the siren stridence deafened them with a power of twelve to fifteen bells.

It ended, leaving a wake of silence. It had been a call, similar to that of the creature just shot, but deeper and much louder. There was a larger monster in the forest, answering the call for help.

"Its mate?" Abel wondered out loud, his voice sounding thin.

"Its mother!" Tinnerman said succinctly. "And I think we'd better hide."

Slaker shrugged. "Bullets will stop it," he said. Tinnerman and Abel forged into the brush without comment. Slaker stood his ground confidently, aiming his weapon in the general direction of the approaching footfalls.

Once more the foghorn voice sounded, impossibly loud, forcing all three to cover their ears before drums shattered and brains turned to jelly. Slaker could be seen ahead, one arm wrapped around his head to protect both ears, the other waving the gun.

The ground shook. High foliage burst open and large trees swayed aside, their branches crashing to the ground. A shape vast beyond imagination thundered into the clearing.

For a moment it paused, a four-legged monster a hundred feet high. Its low head was twelve feet thick, with a Cat shiny snout. A broad eye opened, several feet across, casting about myopically. A ring of fibres sprouted, each pencil-thick, flexing slightly as the head moved.

Slaker fired. The head shot forward, thudding into the ground thirty feet in front of him. The body moved, rotating grandly, as another member lifted and swung forward. They were not heads., but feet! Five feet with eyes. The monster was a hugely sophisticated adult of the quinquepedalian species Slaker had killed.

The man finally saw the futility of his stand, and ran. A towering giant followed, feet jarring the ground with rhythmic impacts, hoofs leaving nine-foot indents. It spun majestically, a dance of terrible gravity, pounding the brush and trees and dirt beneath it into nothingness. As each foot lifted, the heavy skin rolled back, uncovering the eye, and the sensory fibrils shot out. As each foot fell, the hide wrinkled closed, protecting the organs from the shock of impact.

The creature was slow, but its feet were fast. A fifth fall came down on the running figure, and Slaker was gone.

The quinquepedalian hesitated, one foot raised, searching. It was aware of them; it would not allow the killers of its child to escape. The eye roved, socketless, its glassy stare directed by a slow twisting of the foot. The circle of filaments combed the air, feeling for a sound or smell, or whatever trace of the fugitives they were adapted to detect.

After a few minutes the eye closed and the fibrils withdrew. The foot went high; plummeted. The earth rocked with the force of the blow. It lifted again, to smash down a few feet over, leaving a tangent print. After a dozen such stomps the creature reversed course and came back, making a second row ahead of the first. This, Tinnerman realized, was carpet-bombing; and the two men were directly in the swath.

If they ran, the five-footed nemesis would cut them down easily. If they stayed, it would get them anyway, unless one or both of them happened to be fortunate enough to fit into the diamond between four prints. The odds were negative. And quite possibly it would sense a near miss, and rectify the error with a small extra tap.

They waited, motionless, while it laid down another barrage, and another. Now it was within fifty feet, mechanically covering the area. Behind it a flat highway was developing.

Saturation stomping, Tinnerman thought, and found the concept insanely funny. Man discovers a unique five-footed monster — the Quink — and it steps on him. Would the history books record the irony?

He saw the answer. He gave a cry and lurched to his feet, flinging his pack aside and plunging directly at the monster.

The foot halted, quite fast on the uptake, and rotated its eye to cover him. It gathered itself, crashed down, an irresistible juggernaut. The earth jumped with its fury; but Tinnerman, running in an unexpected direction, had passed its are.

He halted directly under the main body of the quinquepedalian. If his guess were correct, it would be unable to reach him there. It would have to move — and he would move with it.

Far above, the main body hovered, a black boulder suspended on toothpicks. Above that, he knew, the neck and head extended on into the sky. A head shaped like a pear — when its mouth was closed. The first foot turned inward, its eye bearing on him. It hung there, several feet above the ground, studying him with disquieting intelligence. It did not try to pin him. Balance, Tinnerman judged, was after all of paramount importance to a creature two hundred feet tall. If it lost its footing, the fall of its body would destroy it. So long as it kept three or four feet correctly positioned and firmly planted, it could not fall; but if it were to pull its members into too small a circle it could get into serious trouble. Several hundred tons are not lightly tossed about.

The quinquepedalian moved. The feet swung clockwise, one at a time, striking the ground with an elephantine touch. The bars of Tinnerman's cage lifted and fell, crushing the terrain with an almost musical beat; the body turned, gaining momentum. The feet on one side seemed to retreat; on the other they advanced, forcing him to walk rapidly to keep himself centred.

The pace increased. Now the feet landed just seconds apart, spinning the vast body forward. Tinnerman had to break into a run.

Small trees impeded his progress; every time he dodged around an obstruction, the hind feet gained. On an open plain he might have been able to outrun the monster; but now it had manoeuvred him on to rough ground. If it didn't tire soon, it would have him. In time it could force him over a cliff that its own legs could straddle, or into a bog. Or it might forget him and go after Abel — and he would have to stay under it, not daring to place himself outside its circle. His respect for it mounted; he was in the eye of a hurricane, and would soon have to find some other place of safety.

Tinnerman studied the pattern of motion. At this velocity, the individual feet did not have time for more than peremptory adjustments; the maintenance of forward motion dictated an involved but

predictable pattern. One foot had to vacate the spot for the next; he was not sure whether two feet ever left the ground at the same time, but could see sharp limitations. If he were to cross a print just vacated —

He timed his approach and took off to the side, almost touching the ascending foot. It twisted in flight, its eye spotting him quickly; but it was unable to act immediately. It struck the ground far ahead, casting up debris with the force of its braking action, and the following member lifted in pursuit.

Tinnerinan ran straight out at breakneck speed. He had underestimated Quink's versatility; the second foot went after him much more alertly than an ordinary nervous system should have permitted. In a creature of this size, many seconds should have elapsed before the brain assimilated the new information and decided upon a course of action; yet the feet seemed to react promptly with individual intelligence. This thing was far too large and far-flung for the operation of any effective nervous system — yet it operated most effectively.

The shadow of a leg passed over him, and Tinnerman thought for a detached moment that he had been caught. But the impact was twenty feet to his rear. The next one would get him, unless —

He cut sharply towards a medium large tree at the edge of the clearing. He dared not look; but he was sure the creature behind was milling in temporary confusion. It could not dodge as fast as he — he hoped.

He reached the tree and ducked behind its fifteen-foot diameter, feeling safe for the moment.

Quink brought up before the tree. One foot quested around the side, searching for him. He could see its enormously thick hoof, completely flat on the underside: polished steel, with a reddish tinge in the centre. Probably natural colouration; but he thought of Slaker, and shuddered.

Ale wooden skin drew back, uncovering the eye. The ankle above the hoof widened, the skin bunching in a great roll. He knew now that it settled when the foot rested, coming down to make contact with the ground. He had rested against that swelling last night; he had climbed that leg...

As though satisfied that it could not reach him so long as he hid behind the tree, the quinquepedalian paused for an odd shuffle. Tinnerman peeked around the trunk and saw the legs bunch together in a fashion that destroyed some previous theories, then spread out in a trapezoidal formation. One foot hung near the tree, supporting no weight, and seemingly over-balancing the body somewhat. Then the near foot hefted itself high, swinging like a pendulum, and threw itself against the tree with resounding force.

The entire trunk reverberated with the blow, and a shower of twigs and leaves fluttered down from the upper reaches. The foot struck again higher; again the tree quaked and loosed a larger fall of detritus. Tinnerman kept a cautious eye on it; he could be laid low by a comparatively small branch.

The single foot continued its attack, striking the tree regularly about fifty feet above the ground. At that height the foot was about the same diameter as the tree, and the weight behind it was formidable. Yet such action seemed pointless, because damage to the tree would not affect the man behind it.

Or was he underestimating Quink again? The pounding ceased, and he poked his head cautiously around once more. Was the thing retreating? Somehow he did not expect it to give up easily; it had demonstrated too much savvy and determination for that. It was a remarkable animal, not only for its size.

Three legs stood in a tripod, while two came up simultaneously. Tinnerman's brow wrinkled; it did

not seem possible for it to maintain its balance that way. But it was acting with assurance; it had something in mind.

The two feet rose, together, one held just above the other. In awe, Tinnerman watched the lofty body topple forward, unable to stand upright in such a position. Suddenly the two feet thrust forward with staggering power; the entire body rocked backward as they smashed into the tree. And this time the timber felt it. A gunshot explosion rent the air as the fibres of the trunk split and severed, wood splaying; and the large roots broke the ground like sea monsters as the entire tree hinged on its roots.

Now Tinnerman could see how the clearing had been formed. The parent opened a hole in the forest, so that the baby could feed on the little saplings. As the vegetation grew, so did the child, until tall enough to reach the foliage of full-sized trees.

A few more blows would fell this one. Tinnerman waited for the next impact, then fled, hidden from view, he hoped, by the tilting trunk. The creature continued its attack, unaware that the real quarry had gone.

Tinnerman picked up the trail, human prints this time. Abel should have escaped during the distraction, and would be heading for the ship.

The mighty forest was quiet now, except for a slight rustle ahead. That would be Abel. Tinnerman moved without noise instinctively, disinclined to interrupt the medication of the great trees' eternal beauty. And knew that he was a fool, for the forest hardly cared, and the quinquipedalian, with all its decibels, would not worry about the distant patter of human feet.

"Don," he called, not loudly. Abel turned at once, a smile on his face.

"Tinny! I'm glad you got away." He too was careful of his volume, probably the monster could not bear, but it was pointless to ask for trouble. "You seemed to know what you were doing. But I was afraid you had not made it. I would have waited for you if —"

"I know, Don." Abel was no coward; if there had been any way to help, he would have done so. When dealing with the quinquipedalian, loitering was futile and dangerous; the person involved either got away or he did not. The most practical recourse was to trek immediately for the ship, so that at least one person would live to tell the story.

"Ship takes off in twelve hours," Abel said, shaking his pack into greater comfort. "If we move right along, we can make it in six hours. Can't be more than twenty miles."

"Going to make a full report, Don?" Tinnerman was uneasy, without being certain why.

"Fritz was killed," Abel said simply. Tinnerman put out a hand and brought him to a stop. "We can't do it, Don."

Abel studied him with concern. "I'll give you a hand, if you got clipped. I thought you were OK."

"I'm all right. Don, we killed that thing's baby. It did what any parent would do. If we report it, the captain will lift ship and fry it with the main jet."

"Code of space, Tinny. Anything that attacks a man — "It didn't attack. It came to the defence of its child. We don't have the right to sentence it."

Abel's eyes grew cold. "Fritz was my friend. I thought he was yours too. If I could have killed that monster myself I'd have done it. You coming along?"



"Sorry, Don. I have no quarrel with you. But I can't let you report Quink to the captain."

Abel sized him up, then took off his pack. He didn't ask questions. "If that's the way it has to be," he said evenly.

Don Abel was a slow man, cautious in his language and conservative in action. But he had never been mistaken for a weakling. His fists were like lightning.

Tinnerman was knocked back by two blows to the chin and a roundhouse on the ear. He held back, parrying with his forearm; Abel landed a solid punch to the midriff, bringing down his guard, and following that with a bruising smack directly on the mouth. Tinnerman feinted with his left, but got knocked off his feet with a body check before getting a chance to connect with his right.

He rolled over, grasping for the feet, and got lifted by a blinding knee to the chin. His head reeled with a red haze; and still the blows fell, pounding his head and neck, while Abel's foot stunned the large muscle of the thigh, aiming for the groin.

Tinnerman's reticence fell aside, and he began to fight. He bulled upward, ignoring the punishment, and flung his arms around the other man's waist. Abel retaliated with a double-handed judo chop to the back of the neck; but he held on, linking his forearms in a bear hug, pulling forward. Abel took a fistful of hair, jerking Tinnerman's head from side to side; but slowly the hug lifted him off his feet.

Abel was free suddenly, using a body motion Tinnerman hadn't met before, and once again fists flew.

It took about fifteen minutes. Abel finally lay panting on the ground, exhausted but conscious, while Tinnerman rummaged in the pack for first aid. "I knew you could take me," Abel said. "It had to be fast, or that damn endurance of yours would figure in. You ever been tired in your life, Tinny?"

Tinnerman handed him the sponge, to clean up the blood. "Last night I climbed the Quink," he said. "I stood on its head — and it never made a motion."

"Quink? Oh, you mean the monster." Abel sat up suddenly. "Are you trying to tell me — " A look of awe came over his face. "That thing with the legs, the big one — you mean we slept under — " He paused for more reflection. "Those tracks — it does figure. If it hadn't been so dark, we would have seen that the monster was still standing in them! That's why there were leaves under there, and a couple of prints from the front feet. It must have been asleep..." His mind came belatedly to grips with the second problem. "You climbed it?"

Tinnerman nodded soberly. "It couldn't have slept through that. I used the spikes... I didn't catch on until I saw the way the leaves had been eaten around the head. All it had to do was open its mouth — but it let me go. Live and let live."

Abel came to his feet. "OK, Charlie — we'll wait six hours before heading for the ship. That'll give us time to look this thing over. Don't get me wrong — I haven't made up my mind. I may still tell the captain... but not right away."

Tinnerman relaxed. "Let's see what we can learn," he said. He reassembled Abel's pack, then glanced up.

The foot was there, poised with Demoelesian ponderosity fifteen feet above their heads. The eye was open, fibrils extended. The quinquepedalian had come upon them silently. "Split!" Tinnerman yelled. The two men dived in opposite directions. Once more the ground bounced with concussion, as he raced for the nearest tree. He slid around it, safe for the moment.

A glance back showed the monster hauling its foot back into the air. Only half of Don Abel had made it to safety. Then the huge hoof hovered and dropped, and the grisly sight was gone. There was only another flat print in the earth.

Abel might have been fast enough, if he hadn't been weakened by the fight. Just as Slaker would have been more careful, had he been warned. The quinquepedalian was the agent; but Tinnerman knew that he was the cause of the two deaths.

Now Quink approached the tree, spinning in her stately dance, hoofs kissing the shadowed ground without a sound. She stood.

Why hadn't she crushed them both as they fought, oblivious to the danger above? She must have been there for several minutes, watching, listening. One gentle stomp, and vengeance would have been complete. Why had she waited?

Fair play? Was this thing really intelligent? Did it have ethics of its own — her own?

The familiar foot came around the trunk, pereceptors out. He stood calmly, knowing that he was safe from immediate harm. He stooped to pick up a handful of dirt, tossing it at the light-sensitive area. The eye folded shut immediately, letting the earth rattle over the bare hide. Fast reflexes.

Too fast. An animal of this size had to be handicapped by the distance between brain and appendages. It was manifestly impossible to have an instantaneous reflex at the end of a limb one hundred feet long. No neural track could provide anything like the speed he had witnessed.

Tinnerman moved to the other side of the trunk, as though getting ready for a dash to another tree. The foot swung around at once, intercepting him from the other direction. There was no doubt that it learned from experience, and could act on it immediately.

But how could that impulse travel from eye to brain and back again so quickly? Usually, an animal's eye was situated quite close to the brain, to cut down neural delay. Unless Quink had a brain in her foot —

The answer struck him stunningly. There was a brain in the foot. There had to be. How else could the pedal members be placed so accurately, while maintaining perfect balance? There would be a coordinating ganglion in the central body, issuing general orders concerning overall motion and order of precedence for the lifting of the feet; there could be another small brain in the head, to handle ingestion and vocalization. And each foot would make its own decisions as to exact placement and manner of descent. Seven brains in all — organized into a mighty whole.

The foot-brains could sleep when not on duty, firmly planted on the ground and covered by a thick overlap of impervious skin. They were probably not too bright as individuals — their job was specialized — but with the far more powerful central brain to back them up, any part of Quink was intelligent.

"Creature of the forest," Tinnerman said to it in wonder. "Quinquepedalian, septecerebrian — you are probably smarter than I." And certainly stronger. He thought about that, discovering a weird pleasure in the contemplation of it. All his life he had remained aloof from his fellows, searching for something he could honestly look up to. Now he had found it.

Eleven hours later, on schedule, the ship took off. It would be three, four, five years before a squat colony ship came to set up frontier operations.

Quink was stalking him with ageless determination and rapidly increasing sagacity. Already she had

learned to anticipate the geometric patterns he traced. He had led her through a simple square, triangle and star, giving up each figure when she solved it and set her body to intercept him ahead. Soon she would come to the conclusion that the prey was something more than a vicious rodent. Once, she realized that she was dealing with intelligence, communication could begin.

Perhaps in time she would forgive him for the death of her child, and know that vengeance had been doubly extracted already. The time might come when he could walk in the open once more and not be afraid of a foot. At night, while she slept, he was safe; but by day —

Perhaps, when the colonists came, they would be greeted by a man riding the mightiest steed of all time. Or by the quinquepedalian, carrying its pet. It did not matter who was ascendant, so long as the liaison was established.

"Creature of the forest," he said again, doubling back as he perceived her bulk in wait at an intersection of the triquetra pattern. For a moment he stood and looked at her, so vast and beautiful, spinning in the dance of his destruction. "Creature of the forest," he said, "Thou art mighty.

"Thou art mightier than I." There was an answering blast bells in magnitude, like a goddess awakening beyond the horizon.