

# WE FROM ARCTURUS

## Christopher Anvil

Boglis Kamm stood at the edge of the woods and squinted at the factories, the whizzing cars and the shiny aircraft slanting down toward the rich valley spread out before him. Unconsciously, he licked his lips.

"There are so many loose ends and unprotected flanks," he said, "You hardly know where to start to eat them up."

Slint, Kamm's companion in Test Infiltration #6, sank the hooks of the Sirian camouflage cloth into the sod around the little Arcturan-made personal-spacer.

"It looks easy," said Slint. "But what happened to Test Infiltrations 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5? They came down around here, too, you know. All in the last ninety days. And not a peep from any of them."

Kamm scowled, and cast around through various telepathic communications channels. "Nothing but static," he said. "And we've seen their transport and building techniques. All physical."

Slint picked up a crude shovel—made by his own race: with a ragged edge, no bend for leverage where the blade joined the handle, the blade braced by a pair of crisscrossed mending plates and the handle wrapped in a yard of tape at a weak point. Slint looked at the shovel with distaste, then shoved it under the camouflage cloth and straightened up.

"Let's hope this planet has a few mechanized hand tools. Every time we hit a rock too big to teleport, we end up working on it with a crowbar and that miserable shovel."

Kamm nodded. "The thing takes up altogether too much room. It's bad enough, having to convert to Arcturan form to use the spacer. But to have to ooze around that shovel and the damned crowbar every time you want to move is just too much."

A low rumble interrupted their conversation. Kamm glanced apprehensively at the big gray clouds gliding overhead.

Slint said, "How do I look? Okay for a native?"

Kamm critically studied Slint's regular human features, the hang of his arms and set of his head on his neck, the action of arms and legs as he walked, his quiet gray suit, white shirt and blue tie. He checked to be sure Slint had four fingers and one thumb on each hand.

"Look satisfactory."

"Okay. I'll check you."

Kamm strode briskly across the clearing and back again, till he was again looking down the hill.

Slint nodded. "Good. Matches the 'color TV' and what we've been able to pick up telepathically."

"Fine. A few more details and we can go."

Kamm reached into a side pocket, pulled out his Aldeberanian protoplasm-coagulator, checked it carefully and slid it back in his pocket.

Slint glanced at the sky, and hesitated. "Should we just go now, while there's time? Or do we have to—"

"Hmm," Kamm squinted at a formidable black cloud sliding across the sky in their direction. "But what if we get back and they question us on procedure?"

Slint groaned. "I'll get it out, and we can go through it out here. When it lets fly full-blast in that little constricted cabin—"

There was a heavy rumble of thunder.

Kamm nodded. "Okay. Nobody's around to overhear it, and they couldn't understand it anyway. Maybe the thunder will even drown it out for us."

"No such luck," growled Slint. He vanished as he teleported himself into the personnel spacer, then reappeared a moment later holding a small recorder of Centauran make, which he hung on a dead lower branch of a sizeable pine tree about twenty feet back from the edge of the clearing. He threw a switch.

"*Citizens!*" roared a voice from the recorder box, speaking their native tongue.

The Sirian camouflage cloth over the Arcturan spacer had now adapted itself to its surroundings, and looked like a gentle mossy swell of ground.

"*Soldiers!*" shouted the recorder.

There was a rumble of thunder.

Slint growled. "I hope it gets it over with quick."

"It never does," said Kamm.

"*Conquerors!*" screamed the box.

"Ho-hum," said Kamm.

"You go forth," bellowed the recorder, "to glory and to triumph! To rend another glowing jewel from the violet orb of space! To place it in the diadem of the Only True Race! Victory and glory are yours! Yours the triumph! Yours the splendor! Of the greatest race of conquerors ever to span the stars!"

"If," murmured Slint, "your gravitor doesn't conk out."

"Or your heat-control," said Kamm.

A heavy crash of thunder providentially drowned out the next part. When they could hear again, the recorder had finished off its opening generalities and got down to details.

"That," it intoned, "which distinguishes Us from all other known life-forms is Our adaptability.

"Anyone can strut and glory in mere physical force.

"Hundreds of races take pride in puny intellect.

"Scores boast the power of telepathic and clairvoyant communications, the telekinetic ability to exert force at a distance.

"Only we, of all known races, can also take the form, and reproduce the structure, of all the rest, and thus conquer silently, efficiently, destroying even the telepathic by our temporary assumption of identity with them!

"Such supernal capacity is not bought without a price.

"Magnificent protoplasm-condition must be rigidly maintained. Clean living is essential. Healthful conditions must be upheld or our unparalleled protoplasmic control is impaired. This is the only requirement. This is all. There is nothing more. But it is essential.

"You, as you go forth upon your mission, can, must and *will* maintain yourselves uncontaminated, for the glory of conquest!

"For the triumph of the race!

"For the—"

There was a blinding flash of light, and a crack of thunder that made the earth shake. Rain poured down, drenching them in an instant.

Slint ran to get the recorder, now blaring martial music through the downpour. Kamm and Slint teleported themselves into the little spacer, where they fit as uncomfortably as two sardines in a pea-pod. From overhead, the rain drummed on the camouflage cloth and gurgled as it ran down under the cloth and filled up the spaces between the spacer and the dirt it sat in. The recorder, after an instant of impressive silence, let go with a final crashing crescendo that left them all but deaf.

When they had the recorder jammed into its cubicle, Slint said angrily, "Now what do we do? Reconvert to Arcturan form so we can stand it in this shoebox?"

Kamm twisted to get one of the spiny control-handles the Arcturans were so fond of out of his ribs.

"Well, we can't see through that downpour. And I don't care to wind up inside a steam boiler, or halfway through a wall. So teleportation's out."

"Personnel Control and their fool idea that no one can go on a Test Infiltration if he's got good clairvoyance!"

Kamm experimentally tried to see mentally and got his usual fuzzy, vague, near-sighted image.

"Well," he said, "I'm certainly not going to trust myself to *that*."

"I suppose," growled Slint, "that they're afraid we'll only look from a distance, instead of really test-infiltrating, and some slick psi race might fool us."

"Lower creatures are sometimes superior in lower skills," said Kamm, trying to console himself for his miserable clairvoyance. "But," he added, changing the subject, "we're still stuck here."

"Tell you what," said Slint. "You remember those six-legged, web-footed mud-divers on Grinnel II? *They* wouldn't have any trouble with this weather."

"Good idea," said Kamm. "And we can make up a couple of waterproof suitcases to carry the clothes in. I saw on a late-night TV movie where you can get into a 'hotel' easier with a suitcase."

\* \* \*

Two hours later, a pair of monsters eased out from under the camouflage cloth and, walking on five legs

with another leg apiece clutching a suitcase, ambled out of the forest and down the hill.

Part way down the hill was a highway, and here a problem manifested itself.

"Look at that," growled Kamm, "there are *still* a lot of cars on that road, despite the rain."

"And heaven help us if they see us."

Kamm considered various details of information picked up from late shows on TV. This planet, being subjected to regular eruptions of giant apes, huge ants and spiders, enormous sea monsters and invaders from other planets of the local solar system, was no doubt all set up to squash a pair of web-footed mud-divers in nothing flat.

"On the other hand," he said, exasperated, "even though we can now *see* across this road, we can't teleport across it."

"Burn out the nervous system," agreed Slint.

"Hmm." Kamm looked around. "Well, we certainly can't risk being seen. Maybe we can detour *around* this road. The forest seems to run along the hill for quite a ways, to give us cover."

"Worth a try."

\* \* \*

Fifteen or twenty minutes of this disclosed another problem.

While the mud-diver's body was not at all disturbed by the downpour, the creature's feet were unaccustomed to the comparatively hard soil and its muscles and bones were designed for a planet with lighter gravity.

"Phew," said Kamm, shifting the suitcase from one limb to another. "I'm going to have to strengthen the creature's muscles."

"That will mean larger attachments at the bones, and a better blood-supply."

"Which will mean a larger heart—"

"And better lungs—"

"And we've already turned ourselves inside out, just fitting the creatures to speak simple words."

Slint groaned. "Let's sit down a minute."

"How? Where do you put all the legs, and these webbed claws?"

"I forgot. The things don't sit down to rest. They go out into deep water and float."

Kamm strained the mud-diver's vocabulary with some well-chosen comments.

The upshot was that half an hour later he and Slint came out from under a large, big-leaved tree, walking erect, looking human and carrying the suitcases in their left hands.

"Possibly," snarled Kamm, "the other five infiltration teams drowned to death."

"It might be," said Slint. "It certainly is a sorry thing that with all our superior abilities we can't even keep from getting wet."

"That's a thought." Kamm tried teleporting the rain drops as they fell, but they poured down so thick and fast that he was worn-out and frazzled in no time.

A particularly heavy crash was followed by a downpour like a waterfall.

They squished down the hill toward the road. The rain momentarily faded to a steady shower.

"Why," said Slint, "didn't we run off some of these 'umbrellas' on the fabricator. You know. Like what we saw on the TV. What they carry around in the London fog to hide under when they stop people on the late-night movies."

"We didn't run off any umbrellas because we were too busy following *your* idea of making the trip as mud-divers."

They trudged in a strained silence to the highway.

\* \* \*

At the highway, the first five cars gave them a wide berth, the sixth ran through a nearby puddle and soaked them again to the skin, the next three in quick succession accelerated past as if afraid they might be attacked, and then a car braked to a stop and backed up. The door opened, disclosing a beat-up interior, the rubber floor mat in bits and pieces, and the stuffing showing through worn spots in the seat cushions.

"Hop in, boys," said the driver jovially. "You're wet, but that won't hurt this jalopy."

"Thanks," said Kamm, climbing in.

"Thanks a lot," said Slint.

The driver reached over and slammed the door. "I've walked many a mile, rain and shine, and I know what it's like. Have a smoke?"

He took some whitish tubes in a little paper box and held it out to them. Having seen this on TV, they knew what was expected, and each took one of the little cylindrically shaped things and stuck it in his mouth.

Kamm murmured telepathically, *I think our luck has changed for the better. This native is friendly. We should be able to get some information.*

*Yes, but more immediately, we have to "light" these what-do-you-call-thems. How do we do that?*

*You notice the driver just pushed a little plug in the car's control board. When that pops out, we just hold it to the "cigarette" and smoke will come out. I saw it in a late movie.*

"Yes *sir*," said the driver amiably, "there's nothing like a car—so long as it runs. Yours is broke down, I suppose."

"Yes. Yes, that's the trouble."

They sat draining on the seat in a friendly silence.

Slint's thought came to Kamm. *I fail to see why the other five teams failed to report. Look how friendly and unsuspecting this specimen is.*

*They certainly seem like natural victims*, thought Kamm.

The amiable driver cleared his throat. "Don't happen to know what's wrong with your car?"

Slint spoke up, his voice faintly mimicking that of a stranded farmer they'd both seen on a TV show.

"Rod jumped out through the side of the block."

The driver grunted. "Too bad."

Slint thought, *Whatever that may be.*

*I wondered myself,* thought Kamm.

*They certainly are unsuspecting. I'll see what I can find out.* Aloud, Slint said, "Is that serious?"

The driver boggled, and the car almost ran off the road. "*Is it serious?*"

"Just thought I'd ask," murmured Slint, to pass the subject off. He tried to look nonchalant.

The driver took a fresh grip on the wheel and cast a sidewise glance at Slint and Kamm.

The little plug popped partway out, and Slint took it out and held the handle of the plug to the tip of his cigarette. He waited patiently for some smoke.

Kamm, thrown off-balance by the powerful aura of suspicion suddenly emanating from the driver, forgot himself and spoke out loud. "No, no. The other end."

Slint took the cigarette out of his mouth, turned it around, and tried the other end. "What's the difference?"

The driver reached under the seat, and came up with a short length of one-inch pipe, which he slipped out of sight under his coat, hoping he hadn't been seen.

No, no, Kamm was saying telepathically. *The plug. The other end of the plug. Turn it around. Careful!*

Slint worked the plug and cigarette clumsily, got smoke coming out of the cigarette, and then for some reason immediately went into a coughing fit.

The driver's thought came over fuzzily, obviously impelled by some powerful emotion:

*Couple of nuts escaped from the State Hospital. Have to unload them first chance I get.*

Kamm had the bare words of the thought, but couldn't make out the background ideas and shadings. Seeking to calm the driver, he put the plug back in its hole, pushed it in knowledgeably, and remarked in a friendly tone, "If you can get us to a—er—" A desperate search through remembered television shows failed to turn up the exact word he was looking for, so he borrowed a couple of words, that he was sure meant the same thing, from a commercial. "Automotive specialist," he concluded.

"Sure," said the driver, his left hand under his coat.

The plug popped out, and Kamm, striving to act like a natural Earthman, casually pulled the plug out, stuck it against the cigarette, sucked, blew, sucked, blew, sucked—

Glowing spots swam before his eyes. His stomach rolled over, throat constricted, and tears ran down his cheeks. Hot volcanic gases seemed to circulate through his insides. The fumes traveled around his lungs,

and he had a sensation like a sledgehammer smashing him between the eyes.

The car swerved to the side.

The driver leaned across and opened the door. His voice, filled with false cheer, boomed out. "Here we are, boys. Service station. They'll take care of your car here."

Kamm and Slint reeled out of the car. A door slammed, brakes screeched momentarily, then the whine of the engine dwindled and faded into the distance.

Kamm looked through a soaking drizzle at a large rough bench, a trash can, and a sign, "Parking Area."

There was a crash of thunder, a blast of cold wind, and the rain picked up again.

Slint groaned. "This is no service station."

"There's got to be one along the road somewhere."

"I just want to lie down and—"

"Walk," said Kamm dizzily. "If we lay down in this rain, these human-type bodies will get a 'chill,' there'll be 'congestion'—" he remembered a TV ad—"Maybe even 'sinus!'"

"All right," said Slint wearily. "I'll walk."

They staggered out onto the road, and the cars passed by monotonously.

Thirty-five minutes later, they trudged into a service station. The big door of the shop was slid up, and they went in.

An attendant appeared from somewhere, cigarette dangling from lower lip, and stared at them. He disappeared into a kind of office. There was a sound of gurgling liquid, and he returned carrying two paper cups.

"Cold medicine." He grinned. "The best. You guys look like you need it. Car broke down?"

"Thanks," said Kamm, taking the cup of brownish liquid.

Slint also murmured his thanks, and added, "Yeah, our car's broke down." He added warily, "We don't know what's wrong with it."

They gulped the cold medicine, aware from the TV ads that a human body with a cold wasn't pleasant.

The cold medicine slid down their throats, and momentarily coiled in their stomachs.

There was the clang of a bell.

"Customer," said the attendant. "Be right back." He ran out.

The cold medicine seemed to flash into hot vaporous fumes surrounding them.

The top of Kamm's head felt as if it rose up about three inches, to let steam blow out his ears.

"Strange sensation," came Slint's voice, from somewhere.

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The garage was traveling in slow circles around them as the attendant came back in.

"You're in luck. My partner was out to eat, but he just got back. Tell you what. Go in that washroom, if you want, and wring your clothes out. Only take a few minutes. Then go out there to that truck and show him where your car is, and he can tow it back. I'll wait till he gets back, then take you up to the Roadside Inn with me, and you can dry off in there. It's warm, and if you want you can hire a cabin and rest up while we get your car fixed. Okay? You're not wrecked, are you?"

Kamm felt pretty well wrecked, but Slint got the meaning better.

"No, the car just—It doesn't work."

Kamm and Slint wrung their clothes out, dried off with a convenient endless roll of paper towel and put the clothes back on, after which they felt colder and wetter than before. Then they staggered out to the truck, where "Sam" called out cheerfully, "Climb in, boys. She ain't comfort, but she's sure transportation."

The battered door clanged shut, the gears ground, the engine roared and Sam rolled up his window and turned the heater on high. "Almost forgot. Don't want you boys to catch cold." He relit the end of a short thick black cigar and puffed convulsively. Clouds of greasy gray smoke began to circulate around the inside of the cab. The gears ground again, the truck rolled faster, and Sam shouted over the engine noise, "South, ain't she? Down that way?"

Kamm nodded, his eyes smarting as Sam puffed.

"Hokay," said Sam cheerfully, "here we go."

The gears ground again, the engine speeded up, the heater threw a blast of recirculated hot air, Sam puffed busily, and shouted over the roar of the engine, "How far?"

"Oh—" said Kamm dizzily. "About—"

"Mile? Mile and a half?"

Slint spoke up, his voice growing louder and fainter. "Down at that—at the—"

Kamm caught on as Slint signaled telepathically for help.

"The Parking Area," said Kamm.

"Oh. To the left of the road?"

Kamm didn't know for certain what "left" was, but he caught the mental picture. "Yeah."

The truck ground noisily along, bouncing two inches at every one-inch bump in the road. The heater labored heroically at the captive air. Sam lit a fresh thick black cigar, and stuck the smouldering stub of his old one in an open ash receptacle on the panel just in front of Kamm. Slint, next to the door, had his nose against a crack between door and cab, but Kamm got fresh and stale smoke both.

Ahead of them, a big truck labored under a pall of black smoke coming out a pipe thrust up in the air, and blowing straight back at them.

"Diesel," grunted Sam, around the end of his cigar. "Ain't they stinkers, though?"

Slint recoiled from his crack.



A new odor blended with the fresh cigar, wet clothes, stale cigar, cold-cure fumes, hot grease and faint leak of exhaust gas from a hidden crack somewhere. Dutifully the heater blended and recirculated them all, at a slightly higher temperature.

A desperate question jumped from Kamm's mind to Slint and back again.

Simultaneously, they teleported back to the clearing. Leaning against a tree trunk, they gasped for air.

\* \* \*

"Great space," groaned Kamm.

"We're whipped," said Slint, choking in big gasps of air. "If this planet is like this all over, we're done for. We'll have to go back and admit it's hopeless."

"It *can't* be that bad," said Kamm. "We've just had bad luck, that's all. Look, it's stopped raining. We can teleport right into the city."

Slint looked up. There was a cold wind blowing, and ragged dark clouds rushing by, but that was all. A flicker of hope passed over his dispirited features. "It *has* stopped raining, hasn't it? Of course, with these soggy clothes—"

"Nothing simpler. We'll run them through the fabricator, and they'll come out minus the water."

As with one mind, they teleported into the spacer, where they were immediately jabbed by all manner of jutting levers and handles, most of them fitted with the jagged projections that the Arcturans were so fond of, because they helped them get a firm grip.

"Uh," grunted Slint. "Can't get them off in here. But there's that icy wind outside—"

Kamm was draped around trying to get at his shoe, but the jagged end of the Number Four gravitor-control bar was in the way.

"Phew," he said, "nothing to do but reconvert to Arcturan form. If we start thrashing around in here and hit the wrong thing, we'll be in a mess. You can't control the miserable ship unless you're jellyfished out like an egg on a pan, gripping half-a-dozen levers in opposite ends of the cabin, and working them all at the same time. Let us knock just one of these out of position, and we'll get flipped end-for-end, and wrecked."

"Yeah, nothing else to do," groaned Slint. "We'll have to reconvert."

Kamm relaxed and made an effort. Slint muttered something under his breath.

Kamm grunted with effort.

Slint spat out a curse.

Sweat ran down Kamm's face.

Nothing happened.

Slint said, "I can't do it!"

Dizzily, Kamm tried again.

Again, nothing happened.

Slint burst out furiously, "*Now I see it!*"

"*Watch out!*" yelled Kamm. "Don't move! You'll wreck us!"

"Let's get out of here."

"All right. But no sudden moves."

They teleported to the outside.

"The trouble," said Slint savagely, "is that we're protoplasmically poisoned. That's the very thing that imbecilic recorder warned us to look out for before we started."

"You're right," said Kamm. "But what was it? The cigarette, the cold cure, the cigar smoke, or that truck?"

"I don't know *what* it was, but we've had it."

"Phew!" said Kamm. "Then we're stranded. No one but an Arcturan can run that ship. And if we can't convert to Arcturan form—"

"We'll just have to purify ourselves," said Slint. "We'll have to stick right with the ship, eat from the fabricator, breathe fumeless air—"

Kamm squinted at the city in the distance, noticing the smoke blown away from the tall smokestacks.

"How do we work that?" he demanded. "Look there. And exactly how do we eat from the fabricator if we can't reconvert? Those controls are *recessed*, remember? Like the communicator controls."

Slint groaned. "How do we let anyone know the spot we're in?"

"I don't think I'd want to. They'd assume we went native."

"Well, we can't just stay here and *starve*. We've got to do *something*."

"Let's head for that city. Maybe it's not so bad as it seems."

\* \* \*

They teleported into the city in two fast jumps, landing on a sidewalk near a busy street corner.

The traffic light changed, and cars streamed past two abreast on both sides of the street. The air filled with a faint blue smoke. Gasoline fumes surrounded them.

"No good," snarled Kamm.

They teleported back to the clearing.

Slint stared exasperated at the city.

"That stuff will infiltrate everywhere. There are *thousands* of those vehicles. *Tens* of thousands. *Hundreds*—"

"That's out," said Kamm.

"Well, what do we do? How about the country? A nice quiet farm? We could work as laborers, herd the animals, eat pure natural food—"

"Good idea!" said Kamm. "Let's go."

By a series of teleport jumps, they got out at open country, located a farm—

—Where a tractor *put-putted* across several hundred acres of open fields, dragging behind it a contraption that sprinkled greenish-white dust over the rows of little plants. By the farmhouse, a woman guided a machine with an attachment that squirted a cloud of bug spray at the side of the house. A lanky youth in blue jeans came out of the house with cigarette trailing out of the corner of his mouth, threw it on the grass, stepped on it and leaned into the open engine compartment of a car. With one hand, he reached in the car window and pushed on something as he worked the flat of his hand up and down on some kind of cylindrical opening.

Gray smoke rolled out the tailpipe. The boy worked furiously, jumped inside the car, got the smoke pouring out, emerged jubilantly, stuck a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, lit up—

"Uh-uh," said Kamm. "Chemical dust on the plants, spray on the house, gas fumes, cigarette smoke—Maybe a—what do they call it?—'Home on the range'—you know, where they ride along slowly—"

"That's no good either," said Slint. "I saw a—I think it's a 'documentary?' Well, anyway, now they don't use horses. They use something called 'eeps.' They run on gas."

"There must be some place on this planet. Something primitive, but yet where we can fit in easy, so we won't starve or get irreversibly poisoned, or have to fight savages with blowguns, like in that late-night movie where the two men and the girl—"

Slint snapped his fingers.

"I've got it. All we have to do is round up maybe a hundred fake documents, and with *our* talents, that should be easy!"

"What is it?" demanded Kamm, hardly daring to hope.

"I'll tell you. On the TV the other night, there was this item, remember?" He threw it to Kamm telepathically, and Kamm's head spun with the beauty of the idea.

"Come on. Let's not waste time!"

\* \* \*

The recruiter was beaming as he shook hands with them. Not everyone eagerly volunteered for the most primitive possible territories. The special feather in his cap was that this was the sixth pair of husky, upstanding, highly-recommended young idealists to volunteer through *his* office in just the last ninety days.

"Men," he said, "you may find it rough and tough, the pay low and the conditions miserable. But the important fact is the comradeship and the service to all humanity. That, of course, is what you volunteered for. To serve humanity."

He blew out a cloud of cigarette smoke as their eyes filled with some unnamed emotion.

"Men," he said, "I'm proud of you."

And thinking of the near-miraculous reports that had filtered back about the other five pairs of volunteers from his district, he beamed emotionally upon them, ground out the cigarette and gripped them by the

arms.

"Welcome to the Peace Corps!"