

The Handicapped

~~0~~

We flew on skycycles over a red desert, under the soft red sun of Down. I let Jilson stay ahead. He was my guide, and I hadn't been flying a skycycle long. I'm a flatlander. I had spent most of my life in the cities of Earth, where any flying vehicle is illegal unless fully automated.

I liked flying. I wasn't good at it yet, but there was plenty of room for mistakes with the desert so far below.

"There," said Jilson, pointing.

"Where?"

"Down there. Follow me." His skycycle swung easily to the left and began to slow and drop. I followed more clumsily, overcorrecting and dropping behind. Eventually I spotted something.

"That little cone?"

"That's it."

From up here the desert looked lifeless. It wasn't, any more than the deserts of most inhabited worlds are lifeless. Down there, invisible at this height, were spiky dry plants with water stored in their cores; flowers that bloomed after a rain and left their seeds to wait a year or ten years for the next rainfall; insect-things with four legs, unjointed; skinny warm-blooded quadrupeds from the size of a fox on down, who were always hungry.

There was a five-foot hairy cone with a bald, rounded top. Only its shadow made it visible as we dropped toward it. Its lank hair was the exact color of the reddish sand.

We landed next to it and got off.

I was beginning to think I'd been played for a fool. The thing didn't look like an animal. It looked like a big cactus. Sometimes a cactus had hair just like that.

"We're behind it," said Jilson. He was dark and massive and taciturn. On Down there was no such animal as the professional guide. I'd talked Jilson into taking me out into the desert for a fair

fee, but it hadn't bought his friendship. I think he was trying to make that clear. "Come around in front," he said.

We circled the hairy cone, and I started to laugh.

The Grog showed just five features.

Where it touched flat rock, the base of the cone was some four feet across. Long, straight hair brushed the rock like a floor-length skirt. A few inches up, two small, widely separated paws poked through the curtain of hair - the size and shape of a Great Dane's forepaws, but naked and pink. A yard higher two more paws poked through, but on these the toes were extended to curving, useless fingers. Finally, above the forepaws was a yard-long lipless gash of a mouth, half-hidden by hair, curved very slightly upward at the corners. No eyes. The cone looked like some Stone Age carved idol or like a cruel cartoon of a feudal monk.

Jilson waited patiently for me to stop laughing. "It's funny," he admitted with reluctance. "But it's intelligent. There's a brain under that bald top, bigger than yours and mine combined."

"It's never tried to communicate with you?"

"Not with me nor with anyone else."

"Does it make tools?"

"With what? Look at its hands!" He regarded me with amusement. "This is what you wanted to see, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I came a long way for nothing."

"Anyway, now you've seen it."

I laughed again. Eyeless, motionless, my potential customer sat like a fat lap dog in begging position. "Come on," I said, "let's go back."

A fool's errand. I'd spent two weeks in hyperspace to get here. The fare would come out of business expenses, but ultimately I'd pay it; I'd own the business one day.

Jilson took his check without comment, folded it twice and stuck it in his lighter pocket. He said, "Buy you a drink?"

"Sure."

We left our rented skycycles at the Downtown city limit and boarded a pedwalk. Jilson led the way from crossing to crossing until we were sliding past a great silver cube with a wriggling blue sign: CZILLER'S HOUSE OF IRISH COFFEE. Inside, the place was still a cube, a one-story building forty meters high. Padded horseshoe-

shaped sofas covered the entire floor, so close you could hardly squeeze between them, each with its little disk of a table nestling in the center. From the floor a tinsel abstraction rose like a great tree, spreading its wide, glittering arms protectively over the customers, rising forty meters to touch the ceiling. The bartending machinery was halfway up the tree.

"Interesting place," said Jilson. "These booths were built to float." He waited for me to express surprise. When I didn't, he went on: "It didn't work out. Lovely idea though. The chairs would swoop through the air; and if the people at two tables wanted to meet, they'd slide their booths together and lock them magnetically."

"Sounds like fun."

"It was fun. The guy who thought it up must have forgot that people come to a bar to get drunk. They'd crash the booths together like bumper cars. They'd go as high as they could and then pour out their drinks. The people underneath didn't like that, and maybe there'd be a fight. I remember seeing a guy get thrown out of a booth. He'd have been dead if that tinsel centerpiece hadn't caught him. I hear another guy did die; he missed the branches."

"So they grounded the booths."

"No. First they tried to make the course automatic. But you could still pour drinks on the people below, and there was more skill in it. It got to be a game. Then one night some idiot figured out how to short the autopilot, but he forgot the manual controls had been disconnected. His booth landed on another and injured three important people. *Then* they grounded the booths."

A floating tray served us two chilled glasses and a bottle of Blue Fire 2728. The bar was two-thirds empty this early, and quiet. When the freeze-distilled wine was half gone, I explained why they call Blue Fire the "Crashlander's Peacemaker": the shape of the flexible plastic bottle, narrow-necked with a flaring mouth, plus the weight of the fluid inside make it a dandy bludgeon.

Jilson was turning almost garrulous now that I was no longer his employer. I was talking a lot too. Not that I felt like it; it was just-well, hell, here I was, light-years from Earth and business and the good people I knew, way out at the edge of human space. Down: a former Kzinti world, mostly empty, with a few scattered dots of civilization and a few great scars of old war, a world where the

farmers had to use ultraviolet lamps to grow crops because of that red dwarf sun. Here I was. I was going to enjoy it if it killed me.

I *was* enjoying it. Jilson was good company, and the Blue Fire didn't hurt at all. We ordered another bottle. The noise level rose as cocktail hour drew near.

"Something I've been wondering," said Jilson. "Mind if we talk business?"

"No. Whose business?"

"Yours."

"Not at all. Why ask?"

"It's traditional, to us. Some people don't like giving away their tricks of the trade. Others like to forget work completely after hours."

"That makes sense. What's the question?"

"Why do you pronounce *Handicapped* as though it had a capital *H*?"

"Oh. Well, if I said it with a small *h*, you'd think I meant humans, wouldn't you? Potential paranoids, albino crashlanders, boosterspice allergics, people with missing limbs. and resistance to transplants - handicapped like that."

"Whereas what I deal with are sentient beings who evolved with minds but with nothing that would serve as hands."

"O-oh. Like dolphins?"

"Right. Are there dolphins on Down?"

"Hell yes. Who else would run our fishing industry?"

"You know those things you pay them off in? They look like a squirt-jet motorboat motor with two padded metal hands attached."

"The Dolphin's Hands. Sure. We sell 'em other stuff, tools and sonic things to move fish around, but the Dolphin's Hands are what they mainly need."

"I make them."

Jilson's eyes jerked up. Then ... I could feel him withdrawing, backing off as he realized that the man across from him could probably buy Down. Damn! But the best I could do now was ignore the fact.

"I should have said my father's company makes them. One day I'll direct Garvey Limited, but my great grandfather will have to die first. I doubt he ever will."

Jilson smiled, with little strain. "I know people like that."

"Yah. Some people seem to dry out as they get older. They get dryer and tougher instead of getting fat, until you think they'll never change again; and they seem to get more and more energetic, like there's a thermonuclear source inside them. Gee-Squared is like that. A great old man. I don't see enough of him."

"You sound proud of him. Why does he have to die?"

"It's like a custom. Dad's running the company now. If he gets in trouble, he can go to *his* father, who ran the company before him. If Gee-Prime can't handle it, they both go to Gee-Squared."

"Funny names."

"Not to me. That's like a tradition too."

"Sorry. What are you doing on Down?"

"We don't deal only with dolphins." The Blue Fire made me want to lecture. "Look, Jilson. We know of three sentient beings without hands. Right?"

"More than that. Puppeteers use their mouths. Outsiders-"

"But they build their own tools, dammit. I'm talking about beasts who can't even crack themselves a fist-ax or hold a lighter: dolphins, bandersnatchi, and that thing we saw today."

"The Grog. Well?"

"Well, don't you see that there must be Handicapped species all over the galaxy? Minds but no hands. I tell you, Jilson, it gives me the shivers. For as long as we expand to other stars, we're going to meet more and more handless, toolless, helpless civilizations. Sometimes we won't even recognize them. What are we going to do about them?"

"Build Dolphin's Hands for them."

"Well, yes, but we can't just give them away. Once one species starts depending on another, they become parasites."

"How about bandersnatchi? Do you build Hands for bandersnatchi?"

"Yes. Lots bigger, of course." A bandersnatch is twice the size of a brontosaur. Its skeleton is flexible but has no joints; the only breaks in its smooth white skin are the tufts of sensory bristles on either side of its tapering blank head. It moves on a rippling belly foot. Bandersnatchi live in the lowlands of Jinx, browsing off the gray yeast along the shorelines. You'd think they were the most

helpless things in known space ... until you saw one bearing down on you like a charging mountain. Once I saw an ancient armored-car crushed flat across a lowlands rock, straddled by the broken bones of the beast that ran it down."

"Okay. How do they pay for their machines?"

"Hunting privileges."

Jilson looked horrified. "I don't believe you."

"I hardly believed it myself, but it's true." I hunched forward across the tiny table. "Here's how it works. The bandersnatchi have to control their population; there's only so much shoreline to feed on in the lowlands. They also have to control boredom. Can you imagine how bored they must have been before men came to Jinx? So what they've done is, they've made a treaty with the Jinx government. Now, say a man wants a bandersnatchi skeleton, he's going to build a trophy room under it. He goes to the Jinx government and gets a license. The license tells him what equipment he can take down to the lowlands, which is inhabited only by bandersnatchi because the atmospheric pressure is enough to crush a man's lungs and the temperature is enough to cook him. If he gets caught taking extra weapons, he goes to prison for a long time.

"Maybe he makes it back with a body; maybe he doesn't come back. His equipment gives him odds of about sixty-forty. But either way, the bandersnatchi get eighty percent of the license fee, which is a thousand stars flat. With that, they buy things."

"Like Hands."

"Right. Oh, one more thing. A dolphin can control his Hands with his tongue, but a bandersnatch can't. We have to build the control setup directly into the nerves, by surgery. It's not difficult."

Jilson shook his head and dialed for another bottle.

"They do other things," I said. "The Institute of Knowledge has instruments in the lowlands-laboratories and such. There are things the Institute wants to know about what happens under lowland pressures and temperatures. The bandersnatchi run all the experiments, using the Hands."

"So you came here for a new market."

"I was told there was a new sentient life-form on Down, one that doesn't use tools."

"You've changed your mind?"

"Just about. Jilson, what makes you think they're sentient?"

"The brains. They're huge."

"Nothing else?"

"No."

"Their brains might not work like ours. The nerve cells might be different."

"Look, we're about to get technical. Let's drop it for tonight." And with that, Jilson pushed the bottles and glasses to one side and stood up on the table. He peered around Cziller's House of Irish Coffee, swinging his head in a slow arc. "Hah! Garvey, I've spotted a cousin and one of her friends. Let's join 'em. It's almost dinnertime."

I thought we'd be taking them to dinner. Not at all. Sharon and Lois built our dinner, handmade, starting with raw materials we picked up in a special store. Seeing raw food for the first time, practically in the state in which it had emerged from the ground or been cut from a dead beast, made me a little queasy. I hope I didn't show it. But dinner tasted fine.

After dinner and some polite drinking and talk, back to the hotel. I went to sleep planning to hop a ship the next morning.

I woke in total darkness around oh four hundred, staring at the invisible ceiling and seeing a round-topped cone with reddish lank hair and a faintly smiling mouth. Smiling at me in gentle derision. The cone had secrets. I'd come *that* close to guessing one this afternoon; I'd seen something without noticing it.

Don't ask me how I knew. With a crystalline certainty that I could not doubt, I *knew*.

But I couldn't remember what I'd seen.

I got up and dialed the kitchen for some hot chocolate and a tuna sandwich.

Why should they be intelligent? Why would sedentary cones evolve a brain?

I wondered how they reproduced. Not bisexually; they couldn't get to each other. Unless - but of course there must be a motile stage. Those leftover paws... What would they eat? They couldn't find food; they'd have to wait for it to come to them, like any sessile animal: clams, sea anemones, or the Gummidgey "orchid" I keep in my living room so I can shock hell out of guests.

They *had* a brain. Why? What did they do with it, sit and think about all they were missing? I needed data. Tomorrow I'd contact Jilson.

At eleven the next morning we were in the Downtown Zoo.

Behind a repulsor field something snapped and snarled at us: something like an idiot god's attempt to make a hairy bulldog. The animal had no nose, and its mouth was a flat, lipless slit hiding two serrated horseshoe-shaped cutting surfaces. Its long, coarse hair was the color of sand lit by red sunlight. The forepaws had four long, spreading toes, so that they looked like chicken feet.

"I recognize those feet."

"Yah," said Jilson. "It's a young Grog. In this stage they mate. Then the female finds a rock and settles down. When she's big enough, she starts having children. That's the theory, anyway. They won't do it in captivity."

"What about the males?"

"In the next cage."

The males, two of them, were the size of Chihuahuas, with about the same temperament. But they had the serrated horseshoe teeth and the coarse reddish hair.

"Jilson, if they're intelligent, why are they in cages?"

"If you think that's bad, wait'll you see the lab. Look, Garvey, what you've got to keep in mind is that nobody's proven they're intelligent. Until somebody does, they're experimental animals."

They had an odd, almost pleasant, odor, faint enough so that you stopped noticing it in two or three seconds. I peered in at the snapping motile-stage female. "What happens then? Does everyone suddenly get ashamed of himself?"

"I doubt it. Do you happen to know what humans did to dolphins while trying to prove they *were* intelligent?"

"Brain probes and imprisonment. But that was a long time ago."

"The scientists were trying to prove dolphins were intelligent, so they had to be treated like experimental animals. Why not? It makes sense: In the end they did the species a service. If their assumption had been wrong, they'd only have wasted time on

animals. And it gave the dolphins a hell of an incentive to prove they were intelligent."

We reached the lab shortly after noon. It was the Laboratory for Xenobiological Research, a rectangular building beyond the outskirts of the city, surrounded by brown fields marked with rectangular arrays of ultraviolet lamps on tall poles. In the distance we could see the Ho River, with flocks of water skiers skimming across its muddy surface behind puller units.

A Dr. Fuller showed us through the lab. He was an obvious crashlander: a towering albino, seven feet tall, with a slender torso and tapering, almost skeletal, limbs. "You're interested in the Grog? I don't blame you. They're very difficult to study, you know. Their behavior tells nothing. They sit. When something comes by, they eat it. And they bear young."

He had several presessile cones, the bulldog-sized quadrupeds, in cages. There was another cage containing two of the little males. They didn't bark at him, and he treated them with tenderness and something like love. It seemed to me that he was a happy man. I could sympathize with him. Down must look like paradise to an albino from We Made It. You can walk around outside all year, the soil grows things, and you don't need tannin pills under the red sun.

"They learn fast," he said earnestly, "that is, they do well in mazes. But they certainly aren't intelligent. About as intelligent as a dog. They grow fast, and they eat horrendously. Look at this one." He picked up a very fat, round-bottomed female. "In a few days she'll be looking for a place to anchor."

"What will you do then? Turn her loose?"

"We're going to raise her just outside the lab. We've picked her a good anchor rock and built a cage around it. She'll go into the cage until she changes form, and then we can remove the cage. We've tried this before," he added, "but it hasn't worked out. They die. They won't eat, even when we offer them live meat."

"What makes you think this one will live?"

"We have to keep trying. Perhaps we'll find out what we're doing wrong."

"Has a Grog ever attacked a human being?"

"To the best of my knowledge, never."

To me, that was as good an answer as No, because I was trying to find out if they were intelligent.

Consider the days when it was first suspected that the cetaceans were Earth's second sentient order of life. It was known, then, that dolphins had many times helped swimmers out of difficulty and that no dolphin had ever been known to attack a human being. Well, what difference did it make whether they had *not* attacked humans or whether they had done so only when there was no risk of being caught at it? Either statement was proof of intelligence.

"Of course, a man may simply be too big for a Grog to eat. Look at this," said Dr. Fuller, turning on a microscope screen. The screen showed a section of a nerve cell. "From a Grog's brain. We've done some work on the Grog's nervous system. The nerves transmit impulses more slowly than human nerves, but not much more. We've found that a strongly stimulated nerve can fire off the nerve next to it, just as in terrestrial chordates."

"Are the cones intelligent, in your opinion?"

Dr. Fuller didn't know. He took a long time saying it, but that's what it boiled down to. It distressed him; his ears turned red beneath the transparent skin. He wanted to know. Perhaps he felt he had a right to know.

"Then tell me this. Is there any evolutionary reason for them to have developed intelligence?"

"That's a much better question." But he hesitated over the answer. "I'll tell you this. There is a terrestrial marine animal which starts life as a free-swimming worm with a notochord. It later settles down as a sessile animal, and it gives up the notochord at the same time."

"Amazing! What's a notochord?"

He laughed. "Like your spinal cord. A notochord is a rope of nervous connection which branches into the trunk nerves of the body. More primitive forms have sensory connections, but arranged without order. More advanced forms wrap a spine around the notochord and become vertebrates."

"And this beast gives up its notochord?"

"Yes. It's retrograde development."

"But the Grogs are different."

"That's right. They don't develop their large brains until after they settle down. And, no, I can't imagine an evolutionary reason. They shouldn't need a brain. They shouldn't have a brain. All they do in life is sit and wait for morsels of food to hop by."

"You speak almost poetically when you turn your mind to it."

"Thank you - I think. Mr. Garvey, will you come this way? You too, Jil. I want to show you a Grog central nervous system. Then you'll be as confused as I am."

The brain was big, as advertised, and globular, and a strange color: almost the gray of human gray matter but with a yellow tinge. It might have been the preservative. The hindbrain was almost unnoticeable, and the spinal cord was a limp white string, uselessly thin, tapering almost to a thread before it ended in a multiple branching. What could that monstrous brain control, with practically no spinal cord to carry its messages?

"I gather most of the nerves to the body don't go through the spinal cord."

"I believe you're wrong, Mr. Garvey. I've tried without success to find supplementary nerves." He was smiling slightly. Now I had a piece of the problem. We could *both* stay awake nights."

"Is the nervous material any different from the motile form's brain?"

"No. The motile form has a smaller brain and a thicker spinal cord. As I said, its intelligence is about that of a dog. Its brain is somewhat larger, which is to be expected when you consider the slower rate of propagation of the nerve impulse."

"Right. Does it help you to know that you've ruined my day?"

"It does, yes." He smiled down at me. We were friends. He was flattered to know that I understood what he was talking about. Otherwise I wouldn't have looked so puzzled.

The big soft sun was halfway down the sky when we got out. We stopped to look at the anchor pen Dr. Fuller had set up outside: one big flat rock with sand heaped around it, all enclosed in a wide fence with a gate. A smaller pen against the fence housed a colony of white rabbits.

"One last question, Doctor. How do they eat? They can't just sit and wait for food to pop into their mouths."

"No, they have a very long, slender tongue. I wish I could see it in use sometime. They won't eat in captivity; they won't eat when a human being is anywhere near."

We said our good-byes and took our skycycles up.

"It's only fifteen ten," said Jilson. "Do you want another look at a wild Grog before you leave Down?"

"I think so, yes."

"We could get out into the desert and back before sunset."

And so we turned west The Ho River slipped beneath us and then a long stretch of cultivated fields. Long pink clouds striped the sky.

They can't be intelligent, I was thinking. They can't.

"What?"

"Sorry, Jilson. Was I talking out loud?"

"Yah. You saw that brain, didn't you?"

"I did."

"Then how can you say they're not intelligent?"

"They've got no *use* for intelligence."

"Does a dolphin? Or a sperm whale, or a bandersnatch?"

"Yes, yes, no. Think it through. A dolphin has to hunt down its food. It has to outwit hungry killer-whales. A sperm whale also has the killer-whale problem, or used to. Then there were whaling ships. The smarter they were, the longer they could live.

"Remember, cetaceans are mammals. They developed some brains on land. When they went back to the sea, they grew, and their brains grew too. The better their brains were, the better they could control their muscles, and the more agile they were in water. They needed brains, and they had a head start."

"What about bandersnatchi?"

"You know perfectly well that evolution didn't produce the bandersnatch."

A moment of silence. Then, "What?"

"You really don't know?"

"I've never heard of a life form being produced without evolution. How did it happen?"

I told him.

Once upon a time, a billion and a half years ago, there was an intelligent biped species. Intelligent - but not very. But they had a natural ability to control the minds of any sentient race they came across. Today we call them Slavers. At its peak the Slaver Empire included most of the galaxy.

One of their slave races had been the tnucltip, a highly advanced, highly intelligent species already practicing biological engineering when the Slavers found them. The Slavers gave them limited freedom, after they found the worth of those freethinking brains. In return the tnucltipun had built them biological tools. Air plants for their spacecraft, stage trees with shaped solid-fuel rocket cores, racing animals, bandersnatchi. The bandersnatch was a meat animal. It would eat anything, and everything but its skeleton was edible.

There had come a day, a billion and a half years ago, when the Slavers found that most of the tnucltip gifts were traps. The rebellion had been a long time building, and the Slavers had underestimated their slaves. To win that war they had been forced to use a weapon which exterminated not only the tnucltipun, but every other sentient species then in the galaxy. Then, without slaves, the Slavers too had died.

Scattered through known space, on odd worlds and between stars, were the relics of the Slaver Empire. Some were Slaver artifacts, protected against time by stasis fields. Others were more or less mutated tnucltip creations: sunflowers, stage trees, ships' air plants floating naked in space in cellophane bubbles; and bandersnatchi.

The bandersnatch had been a tnucltip trap. It had been built sentient so that it could be used as a spy. Somehow the tnucltipun had made it immune to the Slaver power. Thus it had lived through the revolution.

For what?

The Jinxian bandersnatchi spent their lives in a soupy, pressurized fog, browsing off the ancient food yeast that still covered the ocean a foot deep in cheesy gray scum. No data reached their senses but for the taste of yeast and the everlasting gray mist. They had brains to think with but nothing to think about.. . until the coming of man.

"And it can't mutate," I concluded. "So you can forget the bandersnatch. He's the exception that proves the rule. All other known Handicapped needed brains before their brains developed."

"And they're all cetaceans from Earth's oceans."

"Well--"

Jilson made a razzing noise. Hell, he was right. They *were* all cetaceans.

We'd left the plowed lands far behind. Gradually the plains became a desert. I was beginning to feel more comfortable with the beast under me - this platform with a saddle, and an oversized lift-belt motor, an air pump, and a force-field generator to stop the wind. Feeling less likely to make a mistake, I could fly lower, with less room to correct before I hit sand. From this close the desert was alive. There, rolling before the wind, was a wild cousin to the tumbleweeds I'd seen in the Zoo of Earth. There, a straight stalk with orange leaves around the base, fleshy leaves with knife-sharp edges to discourage herbivores. There, another, and a fox-sized herbivore cleverly eating out the center of a leaf. It looked up, saw us, and disappeared into motion. There, a vivid flash of scarlet, some desert plant which had picked an odd time to bloom.

The soft red sun made everything look like the decor in a nightclub I know. It's decorated as Mars ought to be, as Mars was before space flight. A distance illusion: red sand; straight canals running with improbably clear, pure water; crystal towers reaching high, high, toward big fat crescent moons. Suddenly I wanted a drink.

I dug in my saddlebags, hoping to find a flask. It was there, and it was heavy with fluid. I pinched the top open, tilted it to my lips-and almost choked. Martini! A halfpint martini, a little too sweet, but far colder than ice cold. I sipped at it, twice, and put it away. "I like Downers," I said.

"Good. Why?"

"No flatlander would think to put a martini in a rental skycycle unless he was asked to."

"Harry's a nice guy. Woop, there's a cone."

I looked down and right, searching for sand-colored hair against sand. The cone was in its own shadow; it practically jumped at me. And equally suddenly, I knew what had awakened me in the dark morning.

"What's wrong?" asked Jilson. I realized that I'd gasped.

"Nothing. Jilson, I don't know all I should about Downer animals. Do they excrete solids?"

"Do they-? Hey, that was nicely put. Yes, they do." He tilted his vehicle down toward the cone.

It sat firmly on a tilted flat rock, which lifted one edge out of the sand. The rock was absolutely clean.

"Then Grog do too."

"Right." Jilson landed.

I drifted in beside him, dropping the skycycle joltingly hard. The Grog sat facing us, faintly smiling.

"Well, where's the evidence? Who cleans up after this thing?"

Jilson scratched his head. He walked around the base of the Grog and came back, looking puzzled. "Funny, I never thought of that. Scavengers?"

"Maybe."

"Is it important?"

"Maybe. Most sessile animals live in water. The water carries everything away."

"There's a sessile thing from Gummidgy-"

"I've got one. But the orchid-thing lives in trees. It attaches itself to a nice thick horizontal tree-branch, with its tail hanging over the edge."

"Mmm." He seemed uninterested. No doubt he was right; some scavenger cleaned up after the Grog. But it didn't sound right. Why would the parasite animal do such a good job?

The Grog and I faced each other.

As a rule the Handicapped seem to suffer from sensory deprivation. Cetaceans live underwater; bandersnatchi live in heated, pressurized fog. Maybe it's too early to make such rules, but it's for sure that a Handicapped will have trouble experimenting with his environment. Experiments generally require tools.

But the Grog had real troubles. Blind, numb in all its extremities - due to the nearly useless spinal cord - unable even to move to a different location, what could be its picture of the universe?

Somehow I found myself staring at its hands.

Hands. Useless, of course, but still hands. Four fingers with tiny claws set around the tiny palm like the fingers of a mechanical grab.

"It didn't evolve at all. It devolved!"

Jilson looked up. He was using his skycycle as the only convenient thing to sit on for miles around. "What are you talking about?"

"The Grog. It's got vestigial hands. Once it must have been a higher form of life."

"Or a climbing animal, like a monkey."

"I don't think so. I think it had a brain and hands and mobility. Then something happened, and it lost its civilization. Now it's lost its mobility and its hands."

"Why would it stop moving?"

"Maybe there was a shortage of food. Not moving conserved energy." And because that was the sheerest guesswork, I added, "Or maybe it got in the habit of watching too much tridee. I know people who don't move for weeks."

"During the Interworld Playoffs my cousin Bernie - Hell with it! You think that's the answer, do you?"

"Yes. It's in a trap. No eyes, no sensory input, no way to do anything with what it does think about. It's like blind, deaf, and dumb baby with glove anesthesia all over."

"It's still got the brain."

"Like our appendix. It'll lose that too."

"You're the one who was worried about the Handicapped. Can't you do anything for it?"

"Euthanasia, maybe. No, not even that. Let's go back to Downtown." I walked through sand toward my cycle sick with discouragement. Bandersnatchi had needed me to tell them about the stars. But what could you tell a hairy cone?

No, it was back to Downtown for me, and then back to Earth. There are people no doctor and no psychiatrist can help, and there are species equally beyond aid. With the Grog there was no place to start.

A few feet from the cycle I sat down cross-legged in the sand. Jilson got down beside me. We faced the Grog, waiting.

By and by Jilson said, "What are we waiting for?"

I shrugged. I didn't know. But Jilson didn't move, and neither did I. I knew with a crystalline certainty that we were doing the right thing.

Simultaneously, we turned from the Grog to look into the desert.

Something the size of a rat came hopping toward us, kicking up dust. Behind it, another and another. They hopped laboriously across the sand, springing high, and stopped in an arc facing the Grog.

The Grog turned toward them - not the way you'd turn your neck, but turning all over. It looked sightlessly at the sand rats, and the sand rats perched on their hind legs and looked back.

The Grog's mouth opened. It was a cavern, and the tongue was coiled on its pink floor. The tongue moved like a lash, invisibly fast, flick, flick. Two of the rats were gone. The mouth (*not* too small for a man) dropped shut, smiling gently.

The third rat was there on its hind legs. None of them had tried to run. They might just as well have --

Again the Grog's mouth dropped open. The last sand rat took a running leap and landed on the coiled tongue. The mouth closed for the last time, and the cone turned back to face us.

I had the answers all at once, intuitively, with the same force of conviction that now had me sitting cross-legged on the sand.

The Grog was psychic or something similar. It could control minds, even minds as insignificant as a sand rat's.

That was the purpose of the Grog's large brain. Its intelligence was a side effect of its power. For aeons the Grogs had called their food to them. They did not hunt after childhood. Once the brain had developed, they never needed to move again.

They didn't need eyes; they had little need of other sensory perceptions. They used the senses of other animals.

They directed the scavengers who cleaned their rocks, and their pelts too, when necessary. Their mind control brought meat animals to their preessile female young, directed their breeding habits, and guided them to proper anchor rocks.

They were now feeding information directly into my brain.

I said, "But why me?"

I knew, with a crystalline certainty I was learning to recognize. The Groggs were aware of what they were missing. They had read the minds of passers-by: first Kzinti warriors, then human miners, explorers, sightseers. And my business was the Handicapped. They had learned of the Dolphin's Hands, They had primed Jilson and others to *know*, without evidence, that the Groggs were sentient, and to say so when the right person should appear.

Without evidence: that was important. They had to know what they were getting into before they committed themselves. Men like Dr. Fuller could investigate if they liked; it would look suspicious if they were prevented. But *something* kept them from noticing the handlike appearance of those tiny forepaws, the lack of biological wastes around a wild Grog.

Could I help them?

The question was suddenly an obsession. I shook my head to fight it off. "I don't know. Why did you wait so long to show yourselves?"

Fear.

"Why? Are we that terrifying?"

I waited for an answer. None came. There was no sudden, utterly convincing bit of information in my brain.

Then they feared even me. Me, helpless before a flicking tongue and an iron mind. Why?

I was sure that the Groggs had devolved from some higher, bipedal form of life. The tiny hands, like mechanical grabs, were characteristic. As was that eerie mental control...

I tried to stand up, to run. My legs wouldn't lift me. I tried to blank my thoughts, to hide what I'd guessed, but that was useless. They could read my mind. They knew.

"It's the Slaver power. Your ancestors were Slavers." And here I sat, with-my mind wide open and helpless.

Soothingly, with characteristic crystal certainty, I realized:

That the Groggs knew nothing of Slavers. That as far as they knew, they had been there forever.

That the Groggs *couldn't* be idiot enough to try for a takeover bid. They were sessile. They couldn't move. Their leftover Slaver power could reach less than halfway around the world, with all the Grog individuals working together. How could they dream of

attacking a species who controlled all space in a thirty-light-year-diameter sphere? Fear alone had kept them from letting mankind know what they were-fear of extermination.

"You could be lying about how far you can reach. I'd never know."

Nothing. Nothing touched my mind. I stood up. Jilson watched me, then got up and mechanically brushed himself off. He looked at the Grog, opened his mouth, closed it, gulped, and said, "Garvey! What did it do to us?"

"Didn't it tell you?" In the same moment I was certain it hadn't.

"It made me sit down; it put on a show with sand rats ... you saw it too, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Then it left us sitting awhile. You talked to it. Then suddenly we could get up."

"That's right. But it talked to me, too."

"I *told* you it was intelligent!"

"Jilson, can you find your way back here in the morning?"

"Absolutely not. But I'll set your skycycle to record your course so you can get back. If you're sure you want to."

"I'm not. But I want the choice."

The sun was a smoky red glow in the west, fading over a blue-black horizon.

I'd laughed.

The hotel rooms didn't have sleeping plates. If you slept at all, you slept on a flat, cushiony surface, and liked it. I'd slept all right last night, until the Grog's call came to wake me in the small hours. But how could I sleep now?

Unbeknownst to yours truly, Sharon and Lois had been expecting us for dinner. Jilson had phoned them before we set out for the zoo. Tonight we'd eaten some kind, of small bird, one each. Delicious. You didn't dare touch anything afterward, not until you'd wiped your hands on hot towels.

And we'd talked about the Grog's. The cone had left Jilson's mind practically untouched, so that he'd have something like an

unbiased opinion. His unbiased opinion was that he wasn't going back there for anything, and I shouldn't either. The girls agreed.

I'd laughed at the Grog. Who wouldn't?

Dolphins, bandersnatchi, Grogs - you laugh at them, the Handicapped. You laugh *with* a dolphin, really; he's the greatest clown in known space. You laugh the first time you see a bandersnatch. He looks like something God forgot to finish; there's no detail, just that white shape. But you're laughing partly out of nervousness, because that moving white mound would no more notice you than a land tank would notice a snail under its treads. And you laugh at a Grog. No nervousness there. A Grog is a cartoon.

Like a doctor using a stomach pump in reverse, the Grog had shoved its information down my throat. I could feel the bits of cold certainty floating in my mind like icebergs in dark water.

I could doubt what I had been told. I could doubt, for instance, that all the Grogs on Down could not reach out to twist the minds of humans on, say, Jinx. I could doubt their terror, their utter helplessness, their need for my help. But I had to keep remembering to doubt. Otherwise the doubt would go, and the cold bits of certainty remained.

Not funny.

We ought to exterminate them. Now. Get all men off Down, then do something to the sun. Or bring in an old STL ramscoop-fusion ship and land it somewhere, leave the ramscoop running, twist every vertebrate on the planet inside out.

But: They had come to me. To me!

They were so secretive, so mortally afraid of being treated like savage, resurrected Slavers. Dr. Fuller could have been told half the truth, and he would have stopped his experimenting; or he could have been stopped in his tracks by the reaching Grog minds. But, no; they preferred to starve, to keep their secrets.

Yet they'd come to me at the first opportunity.

The Grogs were eager. Man, what a chance they'd taken! But they needed - something. Something only mankind could provide. I wasn't sure what, but of one thing I was sure: It was a seller's market. They wanted to do business. It was no guarantee of their good faith; but if I could think of such guarantees, I could force them through.

Then I felt those crystalline certainties again, floating in my mind. I didn't want any more of those.

I got up and ordered a peanut-butter, bacon, tomato, and lettuce sandwich. It arrived without mayonnaise. I tried to order mayonnaise, but the kitchen dispenser had never heard of it.

A good thing the Grog hadn't revealed themselves to the Kzinti, back when they owned the planet. The Kzinti would have wiped them out or, worse, used them as allies against human space. Had the Kzinti used Grog for food? If they had, then... But no. The Grog would make poor prey. They couldn't run.

My eyes were still seeing red light, so that the stars beyond the porch seemed blue and bright above a black plain. I thought of going down to the port and renting a room on some grounded ship, so that at least I could float between sleeping plates. Nuts.

I could not face a Grog. Not when it had to talk to me by --

That was at least part of the answer. I phoned the desk computer and told it what I wanted.

By and by other parts of the answer came. There was a mutated alfalfa grass which would grow under red sunlight; the seeds had been in the cargo hold of the ship that brought me. It was part of Down's agricultural program. Well...

I flew back to the desert the next morning, alone. The guy who owned the skycycles had set mine aside, with the course record intact so I could find my way back.

The Grog was there. Or I'd found another by accident. I couldn't tell, and it didn't matter. I grounded the skycycle and got off, tensing for the feel of little tendrils probing at my mind. There was nothing. I was sure it was reading my mind, but I couldn't feel it.

With crystalline certainty there came the knowledge that I was welcome. I said, "Get out of there. Get out and stay out."

The Grog did nothing. Like the knowledge I'd gained yesterday afternoon, the conviction stayed: I was welcome, welcome, *welcome*. Great.

I dug in my saddlebags and pulled out a heavy oblong. "I had a lot of trouble finding this," I told the Grog. "It's a museum piece. If Downers weren't so hell-bent on doing everything with their hands, I'd never have found one at all."

I opened it a few feet from the Grog's mouth, inserted a piece of paper in the rollers, and plugged the cord into a hand battery. "My mind will tell you how to work this. Let's see how good your tongue is." I looked for a good seat, finally settling my back against the Grog, under its mouth. I could read the print from there. There was no feeling of lese majesty. If the Grog wanted me, I was doomed - period.

The tongue lashed out, invisibly fast. PLEASE KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE TYPEWRITER, it printed. OTHERWISE I CANNOT SEE IT. WOULD YOU MOVE THE MACHINE FARTHER AWAY.

I did. "How's that?"

GOOD ENOUGH. YOU ARE OVERCONCERNED WITH PRIVACY.

"Maybe. This seems to work. Now, before we begin, would you read my mind about ramscoop motors?"

I SEE CONSIDER THE POINT MADE.

"Then I will. What can you offer us in trade?"

JUST WHAT YOU THINK. WE WILL HERD YOUR CATTLE. IN TIME THERE MAY BE OTHER THINGS WE CAN DO. WE COULD MONITOR THE HEALTH OF ZOO ANIMALS AND BE EXHIBITS AT THE SAME TIME. WE CAN DO POLICE WORK. WE WILL GUARD DOWN. AN ENEMY COULD DESTROY DOWN, BUT NO ENEMY COULD INVADE DOWN. Despite the speed of its flicking tongue, the Grog typed as slowly as a one-finger typer.

"Okay. You wouldn't object to our seeding your property with mutated grass?"

NO, NOR TO YOUR MOVING CATTLE INTO OUR TERRITORY. WE WILL NEED SOME OF THE CATTLE FOR FOOD, AND WE WOULD PREFER THAT THE PRESENT DESERT ANIMALS REMAIN. WE DO NOT WISH TO LOSE ANY OF OUR PRESENT TERRITORY.

"Will you need new land?"

NO. PLANNED PARENTHOOD IS EASY FOR US, WE NEED ONLY RESTRICT THE PRESESSILES.

"We don't trust you, you know. We'll be taking steps to see that you don't control human minds. I'm going to get myself checked over very carefully when I go home."

NATURALLY. YOU WILL BE HAPPY TO KNOW THAT WE CANNOT LEAVE THIS WORLD WITHOUT SPECIAL PROTECTION. ULTRAVIOLET WOULD KILL US. IF YOU WISH A GROG IN THE ZOO OF EARTH.

"We can take care of that. It's a good idea, too. Now, what can we do for you? How about some modified Dolphin's Hands?"

NO, THANK YOU. A DESERT ANIMAL WITH SOMETHING LIKE HANDS WOULD BE BETTER. WHAT WE REQUIRE IS KNOWLEDGE. A TAPE ENCYCLOPEDIA, ACCESS TO HUMAN LIBRARIES. BETTER YET, HUMAN GUEST LECTURERS WHO DO NOT MIND HAVING THEIR MINDS READ.

"Guest lecturers. That'll be expensive."

HOW EXPENSIVE? HOW MUCH ARE OUR SERVICES WORTH AS HERDERS?

"Good point." I settled myself more comfortably against the Grog's hairy side. "Okay. Let's talk business."

It was a year before I touched Down again. By then, Garvey Limited was almost ready to show a profit.

I'd driven through the roughest deal I could think of. As far as the planet Down was concerned, Garvey Limited had a monopoly on Grogs. They couldn't have bought a pack of tabac sticks except through us. We paid fat taxes to the Downer human government, but that expense was almost minor.

We'd had major expenses.

The worst was publicity. I hadn't tried to keep the secret of the Grog power. That would have been futile. And that power was scary. Our only defense against a panic that could have covered human space like a blanket was the Grogs themselves.

Grogs were funny.

I'd kept pushing, pushing, pushing pictures: Grogs operating typewriters, Grogs guiding Down's expanding herds of cattle, Grogs in a spacecraft cabin, a Grog standing by during a tricky operation on a sick Kodiak bear. The Grog always looked just the same. To see,

one was to laugh, and never to fear ... unless there were unnatural crystalline certainties poking into the crevices of your brain.

The really important jobs for Groggs were just coming into existence. Already Wunderland had changed its laws to allow Groggs to testify in a courtroom, as expert lie-detectors. A Grog would be present at the next summit meeting between human and Kzinti space. Ships venturing into unknown space would probably carry Groggs, in case they met aliens and needed a translator.

Fuzzy Grog dolls were being sold in the toy stores. We didn't make a dime on that.

I took a day to rest up after landing, to say Hi to Jilson and Sharon and Lois. Next morning I flew out into the desert. Now there was grass covering a lot of what had been barren land. I found a circle of white far below, and on a hunch, I dropped.

The white was a flock of sheep. In the center of the circle nestled a Grog. She boomed up at me in all amplified voice: "Welcome, Garvey."

"Thanks," I said, not trying to shout. She would be reading my mind, and answering through the nerve-implanted vocal equipment we'd started manufacturing in quantity two months ago. That had been another major expense, and a necessary one.

"What's all this about dolls?"

"We can't make any money on that. It's not as if there was a copyright on the Grog form." I circled the skycycle, landed, and got off.

We talked of things other than business. She wanted a Grog doll, for instance, and I promised her one. We went through a list of "lecturers," arranging them in order of priority. Getting them here would involve nothing more than paying their way and paying them for their time. None of them would have to make any kind of speech.

Neither one of us mentioned the ramscoop.

It was not on Down. Put a weapon on Down and the Groggs could simply have made it their own; it would be no defense. We'd put it in close orbit around the Downer sun, closer than Mercury would have been. If the Groggs ever became a threat, the electromagnetic ramscoop-field would go on, and Down's sun would begin behaving very strangely.

Neither of us mentioned it. What for? She knew my reasons.

It was not that I feared the Groggs. I feared myself. The ramscoop was there to prove that I had been allowed to act against the Groggs' best interests, that I was my own man.

And I *still* wasn't sure. Could the last man aboard have sabotaged the motor? Could the Groggs reach that far? There was no way to find out. If it was true, then anyone who boarded the old ship would report that it was A-okay, ready to fire, don't worry about it, Garvey. Forget it. Sleep easy.

Maybe I will. It's easy enough to believe that the Groggs are innocuous, helpful, desperate for friendship.

I wonder what we'll meet next.