

By H. B. Fyfe
THE TALKATIVE
TREE

All things considered—the obscure star, the undetermined damage to the stellar drive and the way the small planet's murky atmosphere defied precision scanners—the pilot made a reasonably good landing. Despite sour feelings for the space service of Haurtoz, steward Peter Kolin had to admit that casualties might have been far worse.

Chief Steward Slichow led his little command, less two third-class ration keepers thought to have been trapped in the lower hold, to a point two hundred meters from the steaming hull of the Peace State. He lined them up as if on parade. Kolin made himself inconspicuous.

"Since the crew will be on emergency watches repairing the damage," announced the Chief in clipped, aggressive tones, "I have volunteered my section for preliminary scouting, as is suitable. It may be useful to discover temporary sources in this area of natural foods."

Volunteered HIS section! thought Kolin rebelliously.

Like the Supreme Director of Haurtoz! Being conscripted into this idiotic space fleet that never fights is bad enough without a tin god on jets like Slichow!

Prudently, he did not express this resentment overtly.

His well-schooled features revealed no trace of the idea—or of any other idea. The Planetary State of Haurtoz had been organized some fifteen light-years from old Earth, but many of the home world's less kindly techniques had been employed. Lack of complete loyalty to the state was likely to result in a siege of treatment that left the subject suitably "re-personalized." Kolin had heard of instances wherein mere unenthusiastic posture had betrayed intentions to harbor treasonable thoughts.

"You will scout in five details of three persons each," Chief Slichow said. "Every hour, each detail will send one person in to report, and he will be replaced by one of the five I shall keep here to issue rations."

Kolin permitted himself to wonder when anyone might get some rest, but assumed a mildly willing look. (Too eager an attitude could arouse suspicion of disguising an improper viewpoint.) The maintenance of a proper viewpoint was a necessity if the Planetary State were to survive the hostile plots of Earth and the latter's decadent colonies. That, at least, was the official line.

Kolin found himself in a group with Jak Ammet, a third cook, and Eva Yrtok, powdered foods storekeeper. Since the crew would be eating packaged rations during repairs, Yrtok could be spared to command a scout detail.

Each scout was issued a rocket pistol and a plastic water tube. Chief Slichow emphasized that the keepers of rations could hardly, in an emergency, give even the appearance of favoring themselves in regard to food. They would go without. Kolin maintained a standard expression as the Chief's sharp stare measured them.

Yrtok, a dark, lean-faced girl, led the way with a quiet monosyllable. She

carried the small radio they would be permitted to use for messages of utmost urgency. Ammet followed, and Kolin brought up the rear.

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o reach their assigned sector, they had to climb a forbidding ridge of rock within half a kilometer. Only a sparse creeper grew along their way, its elongated leaves shimmering with bronze-green reflections against a stony surface; but when they topped the ridge a thick forest was in sight.

Yrtok and Ammet paused momentarily before descending.

Kolin shared their sense of isolation. They would be out of sight of authority and responsible for their own actions. It was a strange sensation.

They marched down into the valley at a brisk pace, becoming more aware of the clouds and atmospheric haze. Distant objects seemed blurred by the mist, taking on a somber, brooding grayness. For all Kolin could tell, he and the others were isolated in a world bounded by the rocky ridge behind them and a semi-circle of damp trees and bushes several hundred meters away. He suspected that the hills rising mistily ahead were part of a continuous slope, but could not be sure.

Yrtok led the way along the most nearly level ground. Low creepers became more plentiful, interspersed with scrubby thickets of tangled, spike-armed bushes. Occasionally, small flying things flickered among the foliage. Once, a shrub puffed out an enormous cloud of tiny spores.

"Be a job to find anything edible here," grunted Ammet, and Kolin agreed.

Finally, after a longer hike than he had anticipated, they approached the edge of the deceptively distant forest. Yrtok paused to examine some purple berries glistening dangerously on a low shrub. Kolin regarded the trees with misgiving.

"Looks as tough to get through as a tropical jungle," he remarked.

"I think the stuff puts out shoots that grow back into the ground to root as they spread," said the woman. "Maybe we can find a way through."

In two or three minutes, they reached the abrupt border of the odd-looking trees.

Except for one thick trunked giant, all of them were about the same height. They craned their necks to estimate the altitude of the monster, but the top was hidden by the wide spread of branches. The depths behind it looked dark and impenetrable.

"We'd better explore along the edge," decided Yrtok. "Ammet, now is the time to go back and tell the Chief which way we're—Ammet!"

Kolin looked over his shoulder. Fifty meters away, Ammet sat beside the bush with the purple berries, utterly relaxed.

"He must have tasted some!" exclaimed Kolin. "I'll see how he is."

He ran back to the cook and shook him by the shoulder. Ammet's head lolled loosely to one side. His rather heavy features were vacant, lending him a doped appearance. Kolin straightened up and beckoned to Yrtok.

For some reason, he had trouble attracting her attention. Then he noticed that she was kneeling.

"Hope she didn't eat some stupid thing too!" he grumbled, trotting back.

As he reached her, whatever Yrtok was examining came to life and scooted into the underbrush with a flash of greenish fur. All Kolin saw was that it had several legs too many.

He pulled Yrtok to her feet. She pawed at him weakly, eyes as vacant as Ammet's. When he let go in sudden horror, she folded gently to the ground. She lay comfortably on her side, twitching one hand as if to brush something away.

When she began to smile dreamily, Kolin backed away.

The corners of his mouth felt oddly stiff; they had involuntarily drawn back to expose his clenched teeth. He glanced warily about, but nothing appeared to threaten him.

"It's time to end this scout," he told himself. "It's dangerous. One good look and I'm jetting off! What I need is an easy tree to climb."

He considered the massive giant. Soaring thirty or forty meters into the thin fog and dwarfing other growth, it seemed the most promising choice.

At first, Kolin saw no way, but then the network of vines clinging to the rugged trunk suggested a route. He tried his weight gingerly, then began to climb.

"I should have brought Yrtok's radio," he muttered. "Oh, well, I can take it when I come down, if she hasn't snapped out of her spell by then. Funny ... I wonder if that green thing bit her."

Footholds were plentiful among the interlaced lianas. Kolin progressed rapidly. When he reached the first thick limbs, twice head height, he felt safer.

Later, at what he hoped was the halfway mark, he hooked one knee over a branch and paused to wipe sweat from his eyes. Peering down, he discovered the ground to be obscured by foliage.

"I should have checked from down there to see how open the top is," he mused. "I wonder how the view will be from up there?"

"Depends on what you're looking for, Sonny!" something remarked in a soughing wheeze.

Kolin, slipping, grabbed desperately for the branch. His fingers clutched a handful of twigs and leaves, which just barely supported him until he regained a grip with the other hand.

The branch quivered resentfully under him.

"Careful, there!" whooshed the eerie voice. "It took me all summer to grow those!"

Kolin could feel the skin crawling along his backbone.

"Who are you?" he gasped.

The answering sigh of laughter gave him a distinct chill despite its suggestion of amiability.

"Name's Johnny Ashlew. Kinda thought you'd start with what I am. Didn't figure you'd ever seen a man grown into a tree before."

Kolin looked about, seeing little but leaves and fog.

"I have to climb down," he told himself in a reasonable tone. "It's bad enough that the other two passed out without me going space happy too."

"What's your hurry?" demanded the voice. "I can talk to you just as easy all the way down, you know. Airholes in my bark—I'm not like an Earth tree."

Kolin examined the bark of the crotch in which he sat. It did seem to have assorted holes and hollows in its rough surface.

"I never saw an Earth tree," he admitted. "We came from Haurtoz."

"Where's that? Oh, never mind—some little planet. I don't bother with them all, since I came here and found out I could be anything I wanted."

"What do you mean, anything you wanted?" asked Kolin, testing the firmness of a vertical vine.

"Just what I said," continued the voice, sounding closer in his ear as his cheek brushed the ridged bark of the tree trunk. "And, if I do have to remind you, it would be nicer if you said 'Mr. Ashlew,' considering my age."

"Your age? How old—?"

"Can't really count it in Earth years any more. Lost track. I always figured bein' a tree was a nice, peaceful life; and when I remembered how long some of them live, that settled it. Sonny, this world ain't all it looks like."

"It isn't, Mr. Ashlew?" asked Kolin, twisting about in an effort to see what the higher branches might hide.

"Nope. Most everything here is run by the Life—that is, by the thing that first grew big enough to do some thinking, and set its roots down all over until it had control. That's the outskirts of it down below."

"The other trees? That jungle?"

"It's more'n a jungle, Sonny. When I landed here, along with the others from the Arcturan Spark, the planet looked pretty empty to me, just like it must have to—Watch it, there, Boy! If I didn't twist that branch over in time, you'd be bouncing off my roots right now!"

"Th-thanks!" grunted Kolin, hanging on grimly.

"Doggone vine!" commented the windy whisper. "He ain't one of my crowd. Landed years later in a ship from some star towards the center of the galaxy. You should have seen his looks before the Life got in touch with his mind and set up a mental field to help him change form. He looks twice as good as a vine!"

"He's very handy," agreed Kolin politely. He groped for a foothold.

"Well ... matter of fact, I can't get through to him much, even with the Life's mental field helping. Guess he started living with a different way of thinking. It burns me. I thought of being a tree, and then he came along to take advantage of it!"

Kolin braced himself securely to stretch tiring muscles.

"Maybe I'd better stay a while," he muttered. "I don't know where I am."

"You're about fifty feet up," the sighing voice informed him. "You ought to let me tell you how the Life helps you change form. You don't have to be a tree."

"No?"

"Uh-uh! Some of the boys that landed with me wanted to get around and see things. Lots changed to animals or birds. One even stayed a man—on the outside anyway. Most of them have to change as the bodies wear out, which I don't, and some made bad mistakes tryin' to be things they saw on other planets."

"I wouldn't want to do that, Mr. Ashlew."

"There's just one thing. The Life don't like taking chances on word about this place gettin' around. It sorta believes in peace and quiet. You might not get back to your ship in any form that could tell tales."

"Listen!" Kolin blurted out. "I wasn't so much enjoying being what I was that getting back matters to me!"

"Don't like your home planet, whatever the name was?"

"Haurtoz. It's a rotten place. A Planetary State! You have to think and even look the way that's standard thirty hours a day, asleep or awake. You get scared to sleep for fear you might dream treason and they'd find out somehow."

"Whooeee! Heard about them places. Must be tough just to live."

Suddenly, Kolin found himself telling the tree about life on Haurtoz, and of the officially announced threats to the Planetary State's planned expansion. He dwelt upon the desperation of having no place to hide in case of trouble with the authorities. A multiple system of such worlds was agonizing to imagine.

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omehow, the oddity of talking to a tree wore off. Kolin heard opinions spouting out which he had prudently kept bottled up for years.

The more he talked and stormed and complained, the more relaxed he felt.

"If there was ever a fellow ready for this planet," decided the tree named Ashlew, "you're it, Sonny! Hang on there while I signal the Life by root!"

Kolin sensed a lack of direct attention. The rustle about him was natural, caused by an ordinary breeze. He noticed his hands shaking.

"Don't know what got into me, talking that way to a tree," he muttered. "If Yrtok snapped out of it and heard, I'm as good as re-personalized right now."

As he brooded upon the sorry choice of arousing a search by hiding where he was or going back to bluff things out, the tree spoke.

"Maybe you're all set, Sonny. The Life has been thinkin' of learning about other worlds. If you can think of a safe form to jet off in, you might make yourself a deal. How'd you like to stay here?"

"I don't know," said Kolin. "The penalty for desertion—"

"Whoosh! Who'd find you? You could be a bird, a tree, even a cloud."

Silenced but doubting, Kolin permitted himself to try the dream on for size.

He considered what form might most easily escape the notice of search parties and still be tough enough to live a long time without renewal. Another factor slipped into his musings: mere hope of escape was unsatisfying after the outburst that had defined his fuming hatred for Haurtoz.

I'd better watch myself! he thought. Don't drop diamonds to grab at stars!

"What I wish I could do is not just get away but get even for the way they make us live ... the whole damn set-up. They could just as easy make peace with the Earth colonies. You know why they don't?"

"Why?" wheezed Ashlew.

"They're scared that without talk of war, and scouting for Earth fleets that never come, people would have time to think about the way they have to live and who's running things in the Planetary State. Then the gravy train would get blown up—and I mean blown up!"

The tree was silent for a moment. Kolin felt the branches stir meditatively. Then Ashlew offered a suggestion.

"I could tell the Life your side of it," he hissed. "Once in with us, you can always make thinking connections, no matter how far away. Maybe you could make a deal to kill two birds with one stone, as they used to say on Earth..."

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Chief Steward Slichow paced up and down beside the ration crate turned up to serve him as a field desk. He scowled in turn, impartially, at his watch and at the weary stewards of his headquarters detail. The latter stumbled about, stacking and distributing small packets of emergency rations.

The line of crewmen released temporarily from repair work was transient as to individuals but immutable as to length. Slichow muttered something profane about disregard of orders as he glared at the rocky ridges surrounding the landing place.

He was so intent upon planning greetings with which to favor the tardy scouting parties that he failed to notice the loose cloud drifting over the ridge.

It was tenuous, almost a haze. Close examination would have revealed it to be made up of myriads of tiny spores. They resembled those cast forth by one of the bushes Kolin's party had passed. Along the edges, the haze faded raggedly into thin air, but the units evidently formed a cohesive body. They drifted together, approaching the men as if taking intelligent advantage of the

breeze.

One of Chief Slichow's staggering flunkies, stealing a few seconds of relaxation on the pretext of dumping an armful of light plastic packing, wandered into the haze.

He froze.

After a few heartbeats, he dropped the trash and stared at ship and men as if he had never seen either. A hail from his master moved him.

"Coming, Chief!" he called but, returning at a moderate pace, he murmured, "My name is Frazer. I'm a second assistant steward. I'll think as Unit One."

Throughout the cloud of spores, the mind formerly known as Peter Kolin congratulated itself upon its choice of form.

Nearer to the original shape of the Life than Ashlew got, he thought.

He paused to consider the state of the tree named Ashlew, half immortal but rooted to one spot, unable to float on a breeze or through space itself on the pressure of light. Especially, it was unable to insinuate any part of itself into the control center of another form of life, as a second spore was taking charge of the body of Chief Slichow at that very instant.

There are not enough men, thought Kolin. Some of me must drift through the airlock. In space, I can spread through the air system to the command group.

Repairs to the Peace State and the return to Haurtoz passed like weeks to some of the crew but like brief moments in infinity to other units. At last, the ship parted the air above Headquarters City and landed.

The unit known as Captain Theodor Kessel hesitated before descending the ramp. He surveyed the field, the city and the waiting team of inspecting officers.

"Could hardly be better, could it?" he chuckled to the companion unit called Security Officer Tarth.

"Hardly, sir. All ready for the liberation of Haurtoz."

"Reformation of the Planetary State," mused the captain, smiling dreamily as he grasped the handrail. "And then—formation of the Planetary Mind!"

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