

The War Against the Yukks

Keith Laumer

1

Professor Peter Elton swung his machete half-heartedly at a hanging vine as thick as his wrist; the blade rebounded with a dull clunk. He lowered the black pigskin suitcase in his left hand to the spongy layer of rotted vegetation that covered the ground, took out a large handkerchief with a faded machine-stitched monogram belonging to a fellow customer of the Collegiate Laundry and Cleaners, and mopped at his face.

“Constable Boyle,” he called to the stocky, khaki-clad man whacking at the dense verdure ahead. “Are you sure you know where we’re going?”

Boyle turned, flicked the sweat from the end of his nose.

“Absolutely, sir,” he called cheerily. “Chased tht ruddy great jaguar right through this same ruddy thicket. Lost him at the river’s edge—the Cholteca, that is. That would be about five miles ahead.”

Elton groaned. He hobbled to a convenient log, sat, pulled off his brand-new hiding boots and began massaging his foot.

“But *we* don’t have to go all that way, sir,” Constable Boyle reassured him. “It was on the way back I stumbled over it; it can’t be far from where we are at this moment.”

“I can’t help recalling my last ill-advised venture into the brush,” Elton said. “An unspoiled Aztec site just twenty miles south of Texaco. We reached it after a four-teen-hour burro ride. After clearing away the greenery, I uncovered a Dr. Pepper sign, several hundred beer bottles, and the principle chassis members of a Model T Ford.”

“This is the real thing, sir,” Boyle said heartily. “Just this column, like,

sticking up; bloody great slab o' rock the size of a Bentley Tower."

"And you're sure it shows signs of human handicraft?"

"Oh, that I can guarantee, sir." Boyle got out a well-worn hip flask, passed it across to Elton, who uncapped it and took a healing draught. "I hope you're not thinking of packing it home as a souvenir," Boyle went on. "You'd need a ruddy derrick."

"Nothing like that, constable," the professor said. "I've already told you I merely wish to examine it; make a few tests."

* * *

"I understand; that's what that bloody great case is in aid of . . . " He nodded at the heavy piece of expensive-looking luggage at Elton's feet. "I wish you'd let me carry it for you for a bit."

"No, no, I'll see to this, constable." Elton put a protective hand on the case. "The device I have here—which I developed myself—may well revolutionize the whole art of archaeological dating."

"That's a bit over my head, sir," the constable said.

Elton took another swig from the flask and handed it back. "With the chronalyzer—" he patted the case—"I'll be able to establish the ages of stone artifacts which have hitherto defied analysis. You see, the incidence of naturally occurring high-velocity particles on exposed rock surfaces induces submicroscopic changes in the internal crystal-line structure of the material; naturally, when a cut is made in a stone surface by man——"

"Who cares how old a blinking rock is?" Boyle cut in. "Now, *my* idea is, you can vet this thing, say whether it's worth the trouble of doing a bit of digging; then if we turn up anything—say a few solid-gold chamber pots——"

"Now, constable, I'm not interested in visionary schemes to defraud the authorities."

"Defraud, sir? That's rather a harsh term. As for meself, my salary as a blooming game warden is——"

"Is none of my business," Elton pulled his boots on and got to his feet. "I suggest we resume while the sunlight is good."

"As you say, sir. But it seems a shame, considering the fact that we're a good fifty miles from Tegucigalpa and there's boats on the river to be had for a song."

"I don't sing very well," Elton said severely. "I have an adequate position with a reasonably good, small university and a full professorship in

the offering if my chronalyzer proves out. That is the sole purpose of this expedition.”

Boyle squinted at the sun. “We’d best be moving if we want to be back to Yuscaran tonight.”

2

Late sunlight was filtering through high treetops where green parrots had set up a raucous evening serenade among the orchids when Boyle stumbled into a tiny clearing, yelled “Ha!” and pointed.

Elton came up beside him, his once natty bush jacket hanging damply, his solar topi on backward, his shins scratched. Before him, a two-yard thick cylinder thrust up from a tangle of flowering vines, its weathered surface almost obscured by a growth of grayish moss.

“Well, it appears to be artificial, just as you said,” Elton commented. He gazed at the ten-foot high monument, circled it, studying the surface.

“Not much over a thousand years old, I’d guess,” he said. “The Mayan stone-workers——”

“Why not try your apparatus on it and find out for sure?” Boyle suggested. “Then perhaps we might do just a bit of digging.”

“No digging,” Elton said firmly. He squatted by the case containing the chronalyzer, noting the scars and scratches in the once-splendid leather. He remembered the dinner the previous spring at which the luggage had been presented to him, along with a nice little check, on the occasion of his award-winning paper on *Some Evidences of an Advanced Technology Among Pre-Columbian Central Americans*. What would his colleagues say, he wondered, opening the case, if he returned from this trip with proof of the chronalyzer’s success?

“Crikey,” Boyle said, leaning over to peer into the case. “Looks like the insides of a reddy telly set.”

“Oh, it’s quite simple, really,” Elton said, erecting the folding tripod he had taken from the case. “I merely expose the surface in question to radiation of specific wavelength, and the resultant refraction patterns are interpreted by the sensor unit; the results are read directly from the screen here. Later, of course, it would be a simple matter to devise a direct-reading scale.”

He lifted the chronalyzer from the case, settled it in position on the tripod, then flipped a switch and checked indicator dials. Power was flowing at the correct levels. He sighted through an eye piece, fine-fo-

cused the crystal-guided light source, then flipped down the toggle switch which bombarded the target with high-range ultraviolet. A beam of pale light made a gray spot on the curve of mossy rock. The constable stood at Elton's shoulder, staring at the wavering green glow of the four-inch square indicator screen, watching the wave-forms dance.

"What's that wiggly line mean?" he inquired.

"Hmmm." Elton studied the pattern, compared it with the scale taped to the panel above the glass. "Curious; the surface seems to date about eight thousand years back. That is, it was exposed to the open air at about that date."

* * *

There was a harsh, grating sound, a sense of vibration deep underfoot. Elton stepped back, looking startled. Before him, the stone seemed to tremble . . .

"Here, what's that?" the constable's voice had a note of surprise. "You feel that, sir?"

The vibration was very perceptible now. The stone was quivering visibly. Elton hastily switched off the chronalyzer with a loud *click!* A hair-line crack became visible running from top to bottom of the looming cylinder. The crack widened; curved panels were opening out, sliding silently on oiled bearings. A bluish light winked on, revealing an interior chamber lined with fittings of an incomprehensible complexity.

"It's not . . . not one of these missiles, sir?"

A loud beep! came from the interior of the apparition. Elton jumped.

"Ascrabilik ahubarata" an inhuman, metallic voice said from inside the capsule.

"That's not Rooshian, is it, sir?"

"Definitely not Russian," Elton said, backing away.

"You had me fooled, sir," Boyle said. "Nice bit o' camouflage it was, too." He chuckled. "I'd of wagered you'd never been here before; a jolly good act you put on."

"Thank you, constable," Elton said in a squeaky voice, mentally picturing squads of armed security men pounding through the jungle to take him into custody. "*But how,*" he pictured himself asking, "*was I to know that there was a secret minuteman silo under this old rock . . . ?*"

"You scientist blokes," the cop said. "You're full of surprises." He shook his head admiringly.

“Yes,” Elton mumbled, going into motion suddenly. “Well, thanks for your cooperation, constable. We may as well be running along now.” He lifted the chronalyzer from its tripod, lowered it into the case.

“You’re going to leave it like this, sir?” The constable’s eyebrows went up.

“We’re pressed for time,” Elton said hurriedly. “We don’t want to be caught out in the jungle after dark . . . “

“Ascrabilik ahubarata,” the voice said again.

* * *

“Here sir, where’s the voice coming from?” The constable poked his head inside the blue-glowing interior, his voice taking on an echoic quality. “What’s——” A sharp buzz cut him off in mid-sentence. He stiffened, his arms jerking out from his sides; a dazed look spread over his face. A pair of bright metal clamps had extended from a receptacle, locked into the constable’s head. Elton jumped forward, grabbed his arm and hauled at him. The buzz stopped abruptly, the clamps retracted. The constable staggered back, his hands to his head.

“Wh-what happened?” he choked. “Felt like my ruddy brains was being wrung out like a bar rag!”

“Mobile Command Center Ten Ninety-four, standing by for instructions,” a harsh, high-pitched voice with a Middlesex accent said from inside the capsule.

“You might’ve warned me, sir,” the constable said in a hurt tone.

“Uh . . . well, after all, these secret installations . . . “

Elton improvised. “But I’ll explain it all as we hike out.”

“MCC Ten Ninety-four, awaiting instructions,” the voice said again.

“On five minute standby alert, counting

“Where’s the chap manning this show, anyway?” the constable asked. “They oughtn’t to go off and leave it like this.”

“Probably they just stepped out for coffee. No concern of ours, constable. Now, if you’ll just give me a hand with the bag.”

“Abandoned their post? Very strange, I’d call that, sir. Un-British. But then I suppose they’re Wogs.”

“MCC Ten Ninety-four awaiting instructions. Battle status, active.”

“You hear that, sir? Blimey, do you suppose it’s started? I knew that we couldn’t trust those Russkis!”

“Just a routine exercise, I should think,” Elton soothed, edging off into

the surrounding undergrowth. “Now if you’re ready——”

“Here,” the constable said loudly, addressing his remarks to the capsule. “Constable Boyle here. What’s this about a batde?”

“Battle report follows,” the voice answered. “First Grand Fleet, annihilated, casualties total; Second Grand Fleet annihilated, casualties total; Third Grand Fleet . . . “

The voice went on, reeling off statistics.

* * *

“This is It, right enough!” Constable Boyle smacked a fist into his palm. “A hell of a fight going on somewhere . . . “

“ . . . Grand Fleet annihilated, casualties total,” the voice droned on. “Sixth Grand Fleet, casualties ninety-eight percent; surviving units retired to defensive dome at station 92, under Yukk siege——”

“Ever heard of these Grand Fleets?” Boyle called to Elton. “That would be your lot, I reckon?”

“Certainly not,” Elton said quickly. “Just code names; you know; the Blue Army versus the Red Army——”

“Never had any use for bloody Reds meself,” Boyle stated flatly. “Well, if it’s not you Yanks, it must be British units involved. Always knew we were keeping a secret weapon tucked away someplace. Who’d have thought it’d be here in Honduras? But our chaps are in trouble, from the sound of it.”

“ . . . Tenth Grand Fleet; Mobile Command Center Ten ninety-four standing by.”

“Ten ninety-four? That’s this apparatus here!” Boyle said excitedly. “And its ruddy crew’s stepped out for tea!”

“If we hurry,” Elton called cheerily.

“I don’t like the sound of this,” Boyle said. “Looks like the bloody Reds have had all the best of it, so far.” He raised his voice to shout into the interior of the capsule.

“What kind of shape are the other blighters in?”

“Yukk Primary Echelon, annihilated, casualties total; Yukk Secondary Echelon, heavy casualties. Yukk Dreadnought *Abominable* operational, standing by off station 90——”

“Yukks, eh? Code name for the Russkis, shouldn’t wonder,” Boyle said. “And their dreadnought’s got a group of our lads hemmed in at someplace called station 92. They’ll be wanting a spot of help, sir!”

“Elements of Sixth Grand Fleet under siege at station 92. Besieging Yukk Dreadnought heavily outweighs units in ton/seconds firepower.”

“We’ve got to get cracking, sir!” Boyle yelled. “We can’t let the Bolsheviks wipe our chaps out!”

“Awaiting instructions,” the voice said. “Three minute alert.”

* * *

“Here, where’s your station complement?” Boyle demanded.

“Station personnel departed to conduct local reconnaissance,” the voice stated.

The constable whirled on Elton. “It’s clear enough, sir; these chaps have buggered off and left their mates in the lurch. Lucky we happened along. It’s awaiting our instructions!”

“Now, constable,” Elton said reasonably. “Surely it’s not talking to us _____”

“Who bloody else? It popped open when we came along, didn’t it?”

“I suppose my U-V triggered something,” Elton muttered.

Boyle looked suddenly knowing. “Ah-hah, I think I see, sir. Security. You can’t take action while I’m hanging about.”

“Well, constable,” Elton grabbed at the straw, “you don’t expect me to violate NATO cosmic security?”

“I’ll never breathe a word, sir, cross my heart!” Boyle was standing at attention, chin in, toes out. “We’ve got to give them a leg up, sir!”

“Out of the question, constable,” Elton said, looking around for the first signs of flashing red lights, whooping sirens and pouncing military police.

“You’re a cool one, sir,” Boyle said stiffly. “Have to be, I suppose, in the counterespionage game. But it’s not the British way to desert one’s mates in time of need.”

“One’s mates? What in the world are you talking about? We’ve stumbled into some sort of war games, constable; if we’re here when the authorities arrive, we’ll end up in a maximum-security prison!”

“I’m saying it’s the real thing, sir. Our boys are under fire. They’re counting on us, sir!”

“What the devil do you expect me to do?” A strident note had entered Elton’s voice, reminding him of his last interview with Dean Longspoon, in which the irascible department head had suggested that Elton spend more time in the classroom and less in what he termed exotic peregrina-

tions. How right, Elton thought, the dean had been.

“We’ll fill in for these blinking tea-drinkers!” Boyle proposed. “And I’ll have a word for their superiors when this is over!”

“But—but——”

“Two-minute alert,” the voice stated.

“I always thought when the chips were down you Yanks would stand with us,” Boyle said. “I’m going in—alone, if I have to.”

“But—it might be dangerous.”

“Chance we have to take,” Boyle said curtly. “Coming?”

Elton came slowly across to Boyle’s side, looked into the dim blue interior of the capsule, at a maze of pinpoint indicator lights, conduits, pushbuttons, fittings.

“Hmmm. Interesting layout. New type oscilloscope, subminiature fluorescents——”

“Awaiting instructions; one-minute alert before reverting to inactive status,” the voice said.

“Go ahead, sir!” Boyle urged “I’m right behind you!”

Elton looked around; there were still no signs of aroused security forces bearing down. He put the suitcase on the ground, sighed and stepped hesitantly through the open entry.

3

At once, a folding seat deployed from the floor, nudged the back of Elton’s knees, and he sat abruptly. Boyle crowded in behind him. Elton stared at the array of tiny dial faces and toggles, packed together like a display in a bargain jeweler’s window.

“Say, you’ve got to hand it to those Air Ministry bods,” Boyle said. “Not half crafty, that lot. Not a word in the papers about all this.” He was looking around admiringly at the wilderness of quivering needles.

“Thirty-second alert,” the voice stated.

“Wonder what that means?” Elton frowned.

“In twenty-five seconds, Mobile Center will revert to permanent inactive status if not activated,” the voice said.

“You mean—we’ll be out of the fight?” Boyle expostulated.

“Affirmative. Action must be taken within prescribed time limit, in accordance with standard anti-Yukk operational procedures.”

“Suppose we don’t?”

“Mobile Center will detonate. Fifteen-second warning.”

Elton started out of his seat. "Fifteen seconds—let's get out of here!"

"We can't, sir!" Boyle caught his arm. "It's too late now to run! If it blows, it'll take us to kingdom come!"

"What'll I do?"

"Anything, sir! Just jab a button at random!"

Elton dithered, then lunged for the panel, depressed a fat red button directly before him. Instandy, metal bands snapped around his midsection, clamping him to the seat. Behind him, Boyle grunted, similarly restrained.

"Prepare for immediate jump to Battle Sector," the voice said emotionlessly. The curved door slid shut with a smooth sigh. The blue glow died, leaving only the jewel sparkle of the instruments.

"Hold on here," Elton yelled, tugging at the seat belt. There was an abrupt jar, an instant's pause—then a silent concussion that seemed to burst painlessly inside his skull. Boyle gave a choked shout—then all was silent and still again.

"S-sir?" Boyle got out.

"What . . . happened?" Elton managed.

"Sir, I've got a feeling . . . we're floating, sort of."

* * *

"Nonsense; the thing malfunctioned, obviously. Whatever was supposed to happen didn't. Perhaps it was never intended to. I'm beginning to suspect that we're the victims of the most idiotic practical joke of the decade!" Elton tugged at the seat clasp. "Now I suppose we're trapped here until they decide to come along——"

"On station, Battle Sector Nine," the voice announced. "Request permission to deploy view screens."

"By all means, deploy the view screens," Elton said wearily. "And, by the way, just who the devil are you? Where are you speaking from? What's this farce all about, anyway? My name is Elton, and I demand ____"

"This is the Lunar Battie Computer," the voice said. "I am positioned nine point three four two miles under the Lunar surface feature known as Mount Tycho. At your instruction, I have placed Mobile Command Center Ten ninety-four on station in Battle Sector Nine, four thousand miles off Callisto, on an intercept course with the Yukk Dreadnought *Abominable*. Request permission to deploy forward batteries."

"You mean—you really—I mean——" Elton tried twice to swallow,

made it on the third attempt. "This *is* all some ghastly joke?" he croaked.

"Negative," the voice said flatly. It seemed to issue from a small slot set among the flashing lights—which were now blinking with renewed enthusiasm. A large amber X in midpanel winked on and off frantically.

"Callisto," Boyle said. "I've heard of it. Somewhere near Jamaica, I believe."

"Someone's idea of humor," Elton croaked. He managed a stifled laugh. "Why, if we were really four thousand miles off Callisto, we'd be hundreds of millions of miles away deep in space."

"Space, sir?"

"Callisto is—" he swallowed—"one of the moons of Saturn—or is it Jupiter?"

"Jupiter," the voice said tonelessly.

"Jupiter? Well, now, I knew our lads were holding something back," Boyle said complacently. "You Yanks and your moon shots are all very well, but here we British are, all the way out on Jupiter. Goes to show . . ."

* * *

"Goes to show what?" Elton yelped. "Suppose this thing knows what it's talking about? Do you know anything about piloting a satellite . . ." his voice trailed off in a squeak. Two translucent panels which had slid down from slots above, opened out, glowed briefly, then snapped into the crystal clarity of the finest photograph. Against a background of utter black, blazing points of light flared and sparkled. To the left, a brilliant curve of light like an enormous full moon edged into the picture. The screen above showed a similar scene, with the familiar tiny ringed disc of Saturn glowing, bright-edged, off to one side. In the center of the screen a moving blip glowed.

"There you are," Boyle said proudly, indicating Jupiter. "British soil, the whole lot."

There was a long *ping!*

"What was that?"

"Yukk suppressor rays have locked on Command Center," the voice said in the same emotionless tone. "Likelihood of immediate salvo fire."

"Fire? You mean they're shooting at us? Goodness. Who would want to do that—?"

"Yukk dreadnought on closing course," the Lunar Computer

announced. "Request instructions."

"Take evasive action!" Elton yelled. "Get us out of here!"

"Drive mechanism nonfunctional in field of Yukk suppressor rays," the voice said.

"Uh—fire the forward batteries!" Elton yelled.

"Guns nonoperative in field of Yukk suppressor rays."

On the screen the blip grew; it swelled visibly, bearing down at a head-long clip. Elton could make out details of the image now. A clumsy, double-pyramid shape, slab-sided, angular, rushing at him from dead ahead.

"Nothing for it but to ram, sir!" Boyle yelled. "God save the Queen!"

Elton lurched forward as the capsule seemed to brake suddenly. The pressure grew. Elton grunted as the seat clamp cut into his stomach.

"Yukk tractor rays now grappling Command Center," the voice said indifferently. "Request permission to self-destruct."

"Not bloody likely!" Boyle bawled. "We're not ruddy Kami Kazis!"

* * *

The pressure slacked off. The forward screen went dark, filled by the bulk of the Yukk dreadnought. In the rear screen the stars glittered and winked. A tremor ran through Elton's seat—a sharp jar, a sense of sliding, then silence again.

"We—we've stopped," Elton said uncertainly.

"What do you suppose it means, sir?" Boyle said in a strained voice. "I'd have wagered a fiver we were bound to collide with that monster."

"We're practically bumping into it now."

"We must be hove to alongside," Boyle said.

"I . . . I suppose they'll be along to collect us any minute now," Elton said.

"Captured," Boyle said disgustedly. "Without firing a shot."

"By the Yukks," Elton added. "We'll be brainwashed • • •"

"There'll be help on the way, sir," Boyle said cheerfully. "When the chaps we're filling for get back and find their machine missing, they'll be through to Air Ministry like a shot."

"I wonder what they're waiting for?"

Elton stared at the dark screen, unable to make out details of their captor. "I'd like to get on to the name-rank-and-serial-number part, and possibly get in touch with the Red Cross."

“Pity we’re not armed,” Boyle said. “We could have put up a spirited defense, and maybe taken a couple of the blighters with us.”

Elton didn’t answer; he was swallowing hard, running over speeches:

*I am a civilian, captain; as a noncombatant, I insist—*No, that would be hard to put over under the circumstances. How about: *Well, fellows, the fortunes of war, eh? Wonderful job you did at Stalingrad . . .*

“Maybe if you twiddle the knobs a bit, you can see something of what’s going on out there,” Boyle suggested. Elton tried the controls beside the dark forward screen; suddenly it lightened; a pitted surface of iodine-colored metal curved before them, sliding slowly past.

“That’s better,” Boyle muttered. “Don’t imagine the Reds had anything like that! Bloody vast thing, isn’t it?”

“Bigger than anything we’ve got,” Elton said. “Alien-looking, isn’t it? I wonder if Washington knows about this?”

“I should think Whitehall has likely let them in on it, sir.”

* * *

“Listen,” Elton said, “do you suppose that we somehow eluded their radar? After all, we’re rather small, and they may have been expecting something their own size.”

“You may have something there, sir.” Boyle smacked his fist into his palm. “Hard lines we can’t activate this blasted pogo stick we’re sitting in.”

“Look here, Lunar Computer,” Elton said. “Isn’t there a chance you can get us out of this spot we’re in? It appears——”

“All systems now functional,” the voice said.

“What! Why didn’t you say so!”

“Data not requested,” the voice snapped.

“Well, what about it. Can we jump away from here—get back where we started from?”

“Yukk suppressors are activated by high-velocity bodies moving within sensitivity range of instruments,” the voice said flatly.

“Suppose we sneak away? Just sort of edge off-stage, so to speak?”

“What about the Commies, sir?” Boyle remonstrated. “If you’re feeling a bit better now, we can renew the fight.”

“Fight? Look here, Boyle, this has gone far enough. I must have been under the influence of alcohol. What kind of fight can this—this wandering phone booth put up against that Leviathan? No, thank you, I’ll

be happy just to get back, pay my fines, and leave quietly tomorrow aboard the *S.S. Togetherness* as planned——”

“Sir! Look there!” Boyle’s fingers dug into Elton’s arm; he pointed to the screen. In the section of the Yukk hull passing across the screen, a vast, gaping rent showed. Inside, Elton caught a glimpse of twisted structural members, buckled deck plates.

“No wonder they paid us no heed!” Boyle blurted. “Looks as though they had a spot of bother of their own.” A second vast wound in the immense hull drifted into view. Great, blackened tubes that could only have been weapons hung in their carriages, silent.

“Crikey!” Boyle commented happily. “They’ve jolly well had it!”

“They’re still active enough to deactivate our guns, shut down our engines, and take us in tow,” Elton said. “The crew are probably all in the undamaged part, ready to blast us at the first sign of life.”

“What about that, Looney Control?” Boyle barked.

“It’s Lunar Control,” Elton put in.

“Affirmative,” the voice said.

“You see?” Elton said.

“Are they on the lookout for us?” Boyle pressed on.

“Negative.”

“Why not?” Elton demanded.

“There are no survivors aboard the Yukk ship,” the voice said casually.

“No survivors?” Boyle and Elton echoed together.

“Then,” Elton said perplexedly, “who’s been operating the suppressor, and tractor rays, and——”

“Yukk defensive armaments activated automatically at the approach of possible hostile bodies.”

“Now you tell us!” Elton sagged in his seat. “Well, Boyle, I think that lets us off the hook. We can go back now.”

“I wouldn’t say so, sir,” Boyle cut in. “What about those chaps under siege? We can’t just go off and forget them.”

“What siege? The Yukks have been wiped out. There’s no one here to besiege them!”

“Perhaps they’re not aware of their victory, sir! We’ve got to carry the good news to them. It’ll be a feather in our cap, sir.”

“I don’t care for feathery caps,” Elton said. “Let Lunar Control tell them, if it wants too—it seems to be damnably cagy when it comes to withholding information.”

“All you’ve got to do is ask the right question, sir.” Boyle’s voice was

smug. "After all, it's only a machine; admitted that itself. We're the only personnel here—and I say we have a duty to perform."

"All right, all right." Elton addressed Lunar Control. "Can you take us there—to wherever this Lost Battalion is supposed to be pinned down?"

"Station 92," the voice said "Affirmative."

"All right, I guess we'll give it a try. But creep along slowly, so as not to wake any sleeping electronic dogs. Where is this station 92, anyway?"

"On the surface of the moon Callisto."

4

"Miserable place to be marooned," Elton said, staring at the bleak expanse of wan-lit, cratered rock below. "Callisto is much too small to support an atmosphere, and at this distance from the sun I imagine the rock never warms much above absolute zero."

The ground was moving up swiftly; the screens swept the close ragged horizon, fixed on the black of the sky. There was a lurch, followed by a thump.

"We're down," Boyle announced. "All right, open up," he called. "And _____"

"No!" Elton yelled—too late. The seat clamps snapped back, the doors slid open—and a breath of cool, perfumed air wafted in from outside.

"It's—but—how . . . ?"

"Contact at station 92," the voice said. "You are now within the defensive force dome."

"Oh, that explains it," Elton let out the breath he had been holding. "The dome keeps the Yukks out, and holds the air and heat in."

"Now to spread the good word," Boyle said heartily. "Ready, sir?"

"I suppose you were right about coming over to let them know they've won." Elton stepped out, felt grass underfoot, sniffed the air. "My, won't they be delighted." He stared up at the heavens; Jupiter was a vast, pale crescent moon, glowing in banded pastel colors. Other, smaller moons moved visibly nearby. Vast numbers of fat, close stars glittered overhead.

"I wonder where they are?" Elton squinted into the deep gloom of the Callistan night.

"How many men have survived?" Boyle called to the capsule.

"Seven hundred and five individuals now occupy the redoubt," the slightly bored-sounding voice said. "None of them are Men."

"Did you say," Elton got out, "they're not . . . men?"

“Affirmative,” the voice was bland. “Blimey,” Boyle said. “A bunch of ruddy Martians?”

“No wonder the Yukk ship looked alien,” Elton groaned. “This is some kind of interplanetary war between intelligent oysters, or something. What are *we* doing mixed up in it?”

“Questions relating to organic motivations are not within my scope,” the computer said.

* * *

“And the Yukks aren’t Commies at all?” Boyle sounded disappointed.

“Negative, in the sense in which you employ the term; however, the Yukk practice a form of communal life, based on”

“There you are, sir! Commies, as I said. These Reds are a crafty lot. As I see it, we British have made contact with the Martians, who’ve become our allies. It’s a group of their lads out here, and it’s our plain duty to carry on.”

Elton scrambled back inside the capsule. “I don’t know about you, constable!” he yelled, “but I’m leaving.”

“Writing,” the voice said. “Yukk batteries command entire volume of space within ten million miles. Any attempt to jump will result in approach to Yukk vessel and consequent concentrated automatic Yukk fire with high negative probability of survival of Mobile Command Center.”

Elton scrambled back out of the capsule. “Dandy,” he said. “Marvelous. Rush to the assistance of our Martian allies, eh? *Now* look at the pickle you’ve gotten us in!”

“Me, sir? Why, I’ve merely lent a hand——”

“All right! But here we are—wherever we are—sitting ducks for the Yukk—whatever they are.”

“Yukks; some kind of Bolsheviks, I don’t doubt. But it’s all the same to me. What we’ve got to do now, sir, we’ve got to make contact with our side and work out a plan of action.”

“Never mind that,” Elton said. “We’ve got troubles of our own. There’s got to be *some* way to slip out from under the guns of that derelict.”

“Not without first contacting these Martian chaps,” Boyle protested. “We can take time to propose a toast or two, exchange cigarettes, that sort of thing . . .” Boyle’s voice faded.

He stood, head cocked, listening.

“Do you hear anything, sir?” he whispered.

“Only you, making another fatuous suggestion,” Elton replied tartly. “Personally, I favor asking questions of this mobile whatever-it-is until we get some useful answer, and then leaving as hastily as possible.”

“There it is again, sir!” Boyle said.

“What?”

There was a sudden quick padding of feet, a loud whoosh!, a sharp chemical odor; Elton took a breath to shout, choked, felt the world swim out from underneath and fall on him like a vast feather mattress.

5

Professor Elton moved to get away from an unpleasant jogging sensation, discovered tight folds of coarse netting binding his arms to his sides and holding his legs in a tight crouched position. His left ear was pressing into the rough strands, and there was a sharp pain in his neck.

“Help!” he croaked. “Boyle, where are you?”

“Here, sir,” a weak voice came back.

“What happened? I’m wrapped up like a mummy in some sort of seine.”

“Same here, sir. We were took unawares, it appears.”

“By your Martian friends, I suppose?”

“Look on the bright side, sir. We haven’t been done in yet. That’s something.”

They were in a dim-lit corridor, Elton saw. By twisting his head, he made out the silhouettes of slender biped figures with immense heads. He was, he saw, trussed in a net slung like a hammock from the shoulders of a pair of the creatures.

There were shrill shouts from ahead, answering cries from his captors. More of the bipeds crowded around; Elton strained to get a clear view through the mesh, but carried as he was in a head-down position, he was unable to make out any more detail.

There was an abrupt lurching as he was carried up a short flight of stairs. He squinted his eyes against the sudden, brilliant light, then he oofed as the support dropped from under him, slamming him against a cool, hard floor. He pushed at the enveloping net, kicking it free of his feet, fighting it over his head.

“Good Heavens!” Boyle’s voice burst out.

“Hang on, Boyle! I’m coming!” Elton shouted encouragingly. He

flung the net from him, whirled——

“It said they weren’t men,” Boyle croaked.

Standing in a semi-circle facing the captives were six exceedingly pretty girls.

“Rubavilup mockerump hifswimp,” one of the girls said. Elton reached up dazedly to adjust his tie, his gaze glued to the large greenish eyes in the pert face before him. Below the face was a slender neck, adorned with multiple strands of turquoise-like beads. A close-fitting, short-skirted tunic hugged nicely curved hips; a pair of shapely legs led Elton’s eyes to the polished floor, where they paused for a moment, blinked and started back up.

* * *

“They’re not bad-looking sir,” Boyle said approvingly, “considering they’re Martians.”

The girl in the center of the group frowned. “Asibolimp hubshut ook?” she asked Elton.

“I’m terribly sorry, Miss,” he said. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“Here,” Boyle said loudly. “Who’s in charge here?”

“Aridomop urramin ralafoo glip?”

“Who’s . . . IN . . . CHARGE HERE . . . ?” Boyle repeated, with gestures. The girls spoke briefly among themselves. One pointed to a door across the room, then took Boyle’s arm, urged him on. He jerked free.

“Look here, my girl——” he started, shaking a finger under her nose. A sharp slap sent him back a step; his mouth opened and closed; then he reached for her. An instant later, having described a somersault over the girl’s shoulder, Boyle gazed up from a supine position on the floor.

“Ralafoo glip,” the girl said and jerked her head toward the door.

“I think when she says ralafoo glip she means it; better do as she says,” Elton suggested, starting toward the indicated door.

“All very well for you Yanks, you’re used to this sort of thing.”

In the inner room, Elton followed gestures toward a massive chair placed against the wall, seated himself gingerly. Something cool touched the sides of his face just in front of his ears, pressed firmly. There was a sharp prickling sensation. Abrupdy, his head seemed full with a screech like a tape recorder running backward at high speed. Elton flopped in the chair, caught by the head. As suddenly as it had begun, the screech ended;

the clamps retracted. Elton stumbled to his feet.

“What in the name of the Fallen Towers of Hubilik was that?” he demanded, rubbing his ears.

“The language indoctrinator,” the nearest girl said.

“I don’t understand,” Elton stated, staring from the girl to the chair. “How in the name of the Five Sacred Snakes of Bomakook did my sitting in that thing teach you to speak Grimblkpsk?”

“Umma oobabba ungha,” Boyle yelled incomprehensibly, pointing at Elton. Two girls seized his arms, thrust him toward the chair. He braced his feet, still shouting nonsense. Elton saw the bright metal clamps swing down and grip the constable’s head. They held him as he kicked out wildly, mouth open; then the chair released him. The girls stepped back.

* * *

“Now, if you’ll behave yourself,” the leading girl said to Boyle.

“Calm yourself, Boyle,” Elton snapped. “I’m sure your behavior isn’t helping us.” He faced the auburn-haired girl who had first spoken.

“Now, young lady, if you’ll just let me explain: My name is Rflfx . . . ” he paused, frowning. “Rlfxk? Is that my name?”

“If you’re honest, you have nothing to worry about, dearies,” the auburn-haired girl said, taking his arm in a firm grip and steering him back out into the hall. “Our detectors showed us something has passed through the screen. Naturally, we couldn’t afford to take any chances. After all, you could have been Yukks—just like we learned in Training.”

“Us Yukks,” Elton managed a chuckle. “Why, my dear, we came here to assist you.”

“Fat lot of good it did us,” Boyle muttered behind him. “These bloody Amazons don’t want helping.”

“Assist us how?” Elton’s auburn-haired captor inquired.

“Why, in the fight with the Yukks; but of course——”

“Ixnay, ir-say,” Boyle said quickly. “One-day ell-tay em-they ut-way ee-way ound-fay”

“Well, back to the language indoctrinator,” a red-head said.

“That won’t be necessary,” Elton said hastily. “My friend was just uh . . . reciting an old poem. By the way, where are we going?”

“A good luck spell? I hope it’s a good one—not that they work.”

“You’re on your way to see the Mother.”

“This is out of our jurisdiction,” another added.

The girl holding Elton's arm looked up at him with a reassuring smile; her delicately curved lips were parted, showing even white teeth; her hair looked as soft as angora; her lashes were long and dark. With an effort he kept his eyes from the warm, rounded shape poking against his arm.

"We don't often get visitors from the other domes," she said. "It's kind of exciting, having you here."

"Why did you come?" another asked. "Is it about the fungus competition?"

"Now Nid, the Mother, will handle the interrogation."

6

The two men followed their escort along the high-vaulted corridor, up more steps and under a filigreed arch into a wide room, where dim light from lamps placed at random among deep chairs glowed on small tables with bowls of exotic fruits, cushioned chaise lounges, and, at the center of the room, a fountain that leaped up to fall back into a shallow pool in which a vast, pale-white figure reclined.

Two of the girls went forward, spoke briefly to the fat woman in the water. Elton could hear an answer in a hearty, policematron voice; the girls twittered again, pointing toward the two strangers.

"Let's have a look at 'em," the fat woman said.

Elton and Boyle moved up to the pool edge, averted their eyes in embarrassment as the matronly figure, totally nude, reached out for a fruit bowl at the poolside, selected a mango-like ovoid, took a large bite, chewed noisily.

"All right," the Mother said. "You did right, girls; they're an odd-looking pair; look a little weather-beaten; not what you'd call beauties; but they're not Yukks, that's easy to see. You there——" Elton knew she was talking to him. He faced her, arranging a faculty-type smile.

"We haven't seen strangers here in a long time," the woman said. "Especially the kind that barge in without warning. Why didn't your Mother call me? Never mind; good experience for the girls. Hearing about something in Training is one thing, actually seeing it's another. Now——" She took another bite of fruit—"you two girls just tell me in your own words what you're doing here."

"What do you mean, you two oof!" Boyle subsided as Elton's elbow caught him in the side.

"Well, ah . . . " Elton started.

"I don't believe I've seen your type before," the Mother said. "Flat-chested, aren't you? And narrow through the hips. You must have a hard time with your babies." She shot Elton a sharp look.

"Oh, ah, terrible," Elton nodded. "Actually, I've never——"

"What dome is it you're from?"

"As a matter of fact, we came here from Shrulp," Elton said. He blinked, trying the name again. "Shrulp?"

"Here, sir," Boyle put in. "Why not just tell them we're from . . . Shrulp." He looked puzzled.

* * *

"I've heard of Mumbulip Dome," the Mother was saying. "And we had a delegation from Rilifub Dome in my Mother's time, after a rock tremor knocked out one of their air plants. They had a terrible time of it, crossing Outside in one of those old Travelers, afraid it would break down any minute; but Shrulp—that's a new one on me. Must be away over on Far Side." The Mother frowned. "You're not here to stir up trouble, I hope?"

"Goodness, no," Elton felt the smile slipping, twisted it back into position. "We understood that you needed help in the fight against the Yukks."

"Praise Mother," the woman made a cryptic sign with her hands, which the girls standing in her line of vision copied. She frowned at Elton. "Where did you get the idea we don't know how to deal with a Yukk?"

"Frankly——" Elton ignored Boyle's look, took the plunge——"the Lunar Batde Computer told us——" he broke off, seeing the expression on the Mother's face.

"Look here, young lady," the Mother snapped. "I'm as devout as the next person, but I won't stand for any superstitious nonsense. Now, I think you'd better explain your invasion of my Dome—and don't take me for a gullible old fool. I showed Mother Rilifub just how far she'd get trying to take the fungus arrangement championship away from us with her slick tricks."

"But it's nothing like that."

"Not that I don't respect the old ways, mind you. If it weren't for you troublemakers, the World would be a peaceful place—and Girl has her place in it. But I'm not standing by to see charlatans get my girls all aroused. First thing you know, they'll be openly advocating Strange Ways _____"

A gasp ran through the assembled girls. The old woman ignored the reaction, signaled to a pair of handmaidens standing by. They stepped forward, gripped the fat arms of the Mother and heaved her to her feet. She puffed, wading to shore.

“Tikki, Nid,” she said to the attendant girls, “I’m tired. I’ll talk to these girls later; they’ve put me all on edge, and I want to be calm if it comes to a Judgment. Take them along and mind you keep them under close surveillance.” She accepted a vast huck towel, draped it across her shoulders, waddled to a chair.

“You’d better give them a blanket apiece and lock them in a storeroom,” she added. “You know how crowded we are for space . . . “ She shot a hard look past Elton at the girl Tikki. “Yes, I hardly know how we’re going to find room for them, with crowding the way it is. But we’ll manage somehow. Meanwhile, I intend to check with this Shrulp Dome wherever it is. If they’re here to spread Strange propaganda . . . “ She gave Elton a look which reminded him of a portly Dean of Women he had once known, who had suspected him of intent to impregnate her charges.

“But we haven’t told you——” Elton started.

“Silence!” the fat woman snapped. “I’ll talk to you later. Maybe tomorrow.”

“See here, we came here to do you a good turn, and without even listening, you’re talking about locking us in storerooms.”

“If they haven’t taught you proper respect for Mother at Shrulp Dome, you’ll learn it here!” The Mother said sharply. “Take them away, girls!”

Back out in the corridor, Elton cleared his throat and tried again.

“Pardon me, but aren’t you girls concerned about the Yukk dreadnought out there, aiming its guns at you right now?”

“You girls must be overly preoccupied with theology eover at Shrulp Dome,” the girl the Mother had called Tikki said. “Sure, we know all about the Yukks, but after all . . . “ she winked at Elton. “Nobody’s ever really seen one. So why should we worry?”

“I don’t understand,” Elton said. “Here you are, right in the midst of a terrible battle with some sort of ghastly monsters with huge ships the size of mountains—and you don’t seem to care.”

“If we’re good girls, they can’t hurt us,” the girl dismissed the subject. “Listen, you seem like nice enough girls. The Mother said to lock you in a storeroom, but . . . maybe we could work something out.” She turned to speak in a low tone to the girl beside her. They turned into a side corridor

lined on both sides with identical doors; it had a deserted air. Through a half-open door, Elton caught a glimpse of an empty room, daintily furnished in bright, flashing colors.

“Look,” Tikki said, “I’ll tuck you in my room. Even though we’re awfully crowded, as the Mother said,” she added. “It won’t hurt if we double up, if you don’t mind sharing the bed. You must be simply worn out from the trip. I’ll bet it’s just awful outside the Dome,” she shuddered.

“Sharing . . . your bed?” Elton asked.

“It will just be for tonight. Your friend will go with Nid. Tomorrow one of the other girls will have you, and the night after that another.”

Elton took a deep breath. “Well, if you’re sure it won’t put you out?”

“It’ll be fun,” the girl said. “We can just cuddle up and have a nice long talk. I want to hear all about Shrup.”

7

It was a small, neat room, with fluffy curtains at the window, a shaggy rug oil the floor, a flounced spread on the bed, and a rack in one corner on which hung a dozen bright-colored short tunics. Elton’s hostess took off her turquoise beads and hung them on the rack, eyeing Elton’s battered bush jacket.

“My, those are certainly strange-looking clothes you have on. I suppose you needed them for the trip, but you can get out of them now. I’ll draw us a tub. Would you like a little ginger in it or maybe a touch of mint? I always like mint, myself.”

“Tub?” Through an open door Elton saw a pink-tiled room, and tropical-looking flowers in planters lining a ten-foot square sunken pool with bright chrome fittings.

“We can just relax and scrub each other’s backs,” Tikki said. She finished undoing the snaps down the back of her tunic, shucked it off, dropped it in a wall slot, faced Elton wearing a diaphanous one-piece undergarment.

Elton’s collar suddenly felt tight. He felt his face break into a silly smile. “Well, whatever you say . . . “

Tikki plucked a small box from a table, offered Elton what looked like a plastic cigarette. He groped, took one, jabbed it at his mouth. Tikki took one, drew on it, blew out perfumed smoke. “I’m afraid you bugged the Mother, with all that talk about the Yukks. She’s a dear, really, but very hard-headed when it comes to religion. She says it’s time we did away

with outmoded concepts and recognized that the Yukks are merely an externalized personification of an inner yearning for defilement, or something.”

“Look,” Elton said abruptly. “Let’s play a little game. We’ll pretend I just arrived from . . . from someplace so far away that I never even heard of the Yukks, or the Mother, or the domes—and you tell me all about it,” Elton said.

“That sounds like a very strange game,” Tikki said doubtfully. She opened the door to an adjoining room, stepped inside; a moment later a sound of rushing water started up. Steam wafted into the room, carrying a scent of Life-savers. Tikki came back, holding a large cake of violet soap.

“Is that what you play back at Shrulp?”

“Yes, we spend a lot of time telling each other things we already know. The trick is to catch the other . . . ah . . . girl in a mistake.”

* * *

“Well, it doesn’t really sound like much fun. If you feel like playing, wouldn’t you rather just wrestle? I’ll bet you know some interesting holds.”

“Maybe later,” Elton gulped. “Now, you were going to tell me all about the Yukks, remember?”

Tikki put a finger to her cheek, nibbled at her lower lip, looking thoughtfully at the ceiling. Elton found the expression perfectly delightful.

So was the slim, tanned body below it.

“Well, nine hundred and sixty-four—or is it sixty-five . . . ? Let me see.” Tikki nibbled a fingertip. “It must be sixty-five because I finished Baby Training when I was ten, and Girl Training when I was eighteen, and it was sixty-one then, and that was four——”

“Sixty-five it is,” Elton put in. “You’re doing fine.”

“Anyway, nine hundred and sixty-five cycles ago, when the war with the Yukks was in its nineteenth cycle, there was a great battle fought between two fleets. Now, in those days there were many among the girls who were badly tainted with Strange Ways.”

Her voice, Elton noticed, had taken on the tone of a pupil reciting lessons. “Because of this, the girls weren’t able to destroy the wicked Yukks, as they deserved. Instead, the Great Mother sent a terrible thing called a Disruptor that caused the machines of the girls to malfunction,

and all of the girls were killed or captured—except one shipload. The captain was a righteous Mother, and so she and her girls were spared. They landed here on the World, and set up the Force Domes, and the defensive screens, to keep the Yukks at bay. That’s why it’s our duty to tend the Field Generators, and defend girlhood, and weed out any traces of . . . “ she blushed, “ . . . Strange Ways. Not that anybody has any,” she added.

“Any what?” Elton asked.

“Strange Ways,” Tikki said primly. “You know.”

“But we’re playing that I don’t know, remember?”

“Here,” Tikki said reaching for Elton’s top jacket button. “I’ll help you get these things off. The tub’s ready by now.” The stream had formed a pinkish haze at eye level. “Is this what holds it?” She undid the button clumsily. “I’m not very good at this . . . “ She undid another button.

“What about the Yukks?” Elton’s voice sounded strained. Tikki undid the last coat button and pulled the garment off him.

* * *

“Well, the Yukks are evil beings who tried to enslave all Girlhood, once, long ago, before we were driven out of the Heavenly Garden. They were great big ugly creatures, with hair growing all over their faces, and huge, bony hands—six of them, I think—and whenever they could catch a poor, defenseless girl, they’d . . . “ Tikki swallowed, her face pink. “They’d do Strange Things to her.”

“Strange Things?” Elton’s voice was a squeak. Tikki was just finishing the last shirt button. She peeled it back over his shoulders.

“And the terrible power they had was, that they made perfectly nice girls *want* them to do the Strange Things. Even now, there’s always the danger that a girl will fall into Strange Ways—like dreaming about a Yukk chasing her, with all six hands reaching for her—and even catching her . . . “ Tikki took a deep breath. “That’s what makes the Yukks so terrible, and that’s why if there really ARE any Yukks, and one of them ever managed to get into the Dome—” Her eyes were flashing with anger; her nostrils flared—“everyone would tear the horrible hairy thing into tiny little pieces before he could spread any Strange Ways!”

“Tiny little pieces?” Elton stammered. He grabbed for his shirt, pulled it back on. Tikki’s eyes strayed to his chest. “My you *are* flat-chested,” she said, in an envious tone. She put a hand under each of her magnificently

formed mammaries, looked sadly down at them. “These DO get in the way . . . “

Elton was backing toward the door. “Ah . . . I’ve just remembered something,” he blurted, fumbling the door open. “Where did they take my friend? I have to find hi—her—right away!”

“Oh, she’s just next door,” Tikki said. “But——”

Elton whirled to the adjoining door, banged on it, twisted the knob. It flew open. Boyle, shirtless, was just reaching for the tanned curve of his hostess’s hip.

“No!” Elton shouted.

Boyle yipped and jumped a foot into the air.

“I’ve got to talk to you!” Elton hissed, “privately,”

“Look here, can’t it wait?” Boyle’s face had assumed a beefy color. “Bloody cheek, I call it, bursting in here just when I was about to . . . to . . . make friends.”

“That’s what I have to talk to you about.” Elton glanced at Boyle’s roommate, then at Tikki, standing in the doorway, looking puzzled. “Do you mind, girls? Just for a moment?” He ushered the girls out, closed the door. “I’ve made a discovery,” he started.

“Me too,” Boyle said, smirking. “I think we’re on to a good thing. A different one every night, at that. Now if you’d just toddle off, there’s a good lad——”

“Do you know what they do to Yukks if they catch one?” Elton cut in.

“Tear ‘em to bits, Nid said—that’s my young lady. They’ve no more use for bloody Reds than——”

“Correct,” Elton said. “They tear them to pieces. Small, hairy pieces.”

“So what’s that to do with us?”

“Plenty,” Elton said. “We’re Yukks.”

8

Boyle was sitting on the bed, mopping at his face with a tiny lacy hanky he had found under the pillow.

“That was a near thing,” he said. “Another five minutes——”

“And you’d have stood revealed as the ancient archenemy of girlhood,” Elton said decisively.

“But look here, from what Nid said, they’ve been living here on this Tup’ny world for nine-hundred cycles, whatever those are.”

“Nine hundred and sixty-five,” Elton corrected him. “I think the term

probably refers to Jupiter's revolutions around the sun. That would be about . . . hmm . . . eight thousand two hundred years, Shrup time."

"Eight blinking thousand years? But that Looney Control affair said the crew had just stepped out."

"They did, too—about the time the ice was melting off Wisconsin. Probably ran into a party of early head-hunters or a wandering hyaenodon. I'm afraid Lunar Control has little or no awareness of the meaning of time."

Boyle shook his head. "Eight thousand with no Yukks? Then how in the Six Rivers of Blue Mud do they have blinking babies?"

"I'd imagine they have a supply of frozen sperm—or possibly they've developed a method of parthenogenesis."

"How do you suppose this bloody system ever got started?" Boyle looked bewildered. "What this lot needs is a firm masculine hand to put things in order. I've a mind to——"

"To be torn to bits? Please, Boyle, this situation requires careful handling. We've got to get away from here—that much is clear. And there's no time to lose. Sooner or later someone is going to put two and two together."

"And it may as well be me," Boyle said with sudden decision. "Leave that Nid to me for a night or two and I fancy——"

"Strange Ways," Elton said. "That's what they call that sort of thing. I suppose it all started with some sort of idiotic feminist movement, somewhere. The women developed a method of reproducing without men, and declared their independence. Naturally, war followed; a war fought in space."

"Why space? And how? There weren't any bleeding space vessels eight thousand years ago."

* * *

"Apparently there were. As a matter of fact, I did a paper once—but never mind that. Being women, the girls wouldn't want to do anything as untidy as fighting a war right there on Earth—and then too, I suppose the important logistical targets were off-planet; control of the spaceways was the key to success. And so a great battie was fought, and both sides virtually wiped each other out. The surviving girls reached Callisto here, and set up these force domes and a defensive screen to keep off what was left of the Yukks; and the Yukks, with only one damaged ship left mounted a

siege; then they died off—but the girls never knew.”

“I see . . . and back home, everybody made up and forgot the whole thing.”

“Not quite; there’s still a certain residual hostility. But the economic drain of the war and the loss of personnel plunged society back to a minimal cultural level—and we’re only now reattaining their level of technology.”

“All right, granted you’re on the right track; what do we do now? Slip out of here and leg it back to the Mobile Whatsit?”

“We don’t even know where it is—and anyway, the Yukks have us pinned down, remember? The minute we come out from under the defensive screen, blooie!”

Boyle chewed the inside of his cheek; a shrewd expression settled over his features. “They won’t shoot—not if we let them know we’re Yukks ourselves.”

“Maybe,” Elton said, looking thoughtful. “We *could* give it a try, I suppose.”

“No time like the present.” Boyle went to the door, opened it. Nid and Tikki came in, two slim creatures as unself-conscious as a pair of young antelope.

“What are you two girls talking about in here?” Tikki asked.

“I’ll bet you have some important message from your Mother?” Nid hazarded.

“As a matter of fact, we do,” Elton said. “Of course, this is a very confidential matter. You mustn’t tell anybody.”

“Not even Mother?”

“We tell Mother everything,” Nid said.

“Even about your—Strange Thoughts?” Elton hazarded.

* * *

Nid and Tikki blushed a delicate shade of purple.

“We’ll have to confide in you ladies,” Boyle said solemnly. “We’ve got wind of a big push the Reds are planning. High Command is counting on us. We have to go back to our traveler.”

“You mean—there really *are* Yukks?” Nid’s eyes were large with wonder.

“Absolutely,” Elton nodded.

“I . . . I feel all sort of wiggly inside.” Tikki put her hands to her

stomach.

“Can’t you wait till in the morning?” Nid asked anxiously. “It’s only a month away.”

“No, we have to go right now.”

“Even before our bath?”

“Definitely.”

“You’re such brave girls,” Nid said admiringly.

“I . . . I can’t go,” Tikki said. “I’m afraid I might—” Her Up quivered. “I might turn out to be—unreliable.” She burst into tears.

“There, there.” Elton patted her shoulder, dismayed. “What’s there to be afraid of? You’ll be with us.”

“You don’t know what an awful girl I am,” Tikki sniffled. “I have Strange Thoughts all the time . . . and I’m afraid . . . might . . . I might .. disgrace Mother.” Her sobs took over. Nid took her hand. “Now, Tikki, you’re not the only one. I don’t know a girl who doesn’t have a Strange Thought now and then.”

“B-but I have them all the time . . . “

“I’ll tell you a secret: So do I; but——”

“But I *like* them!”

“Look, we’ll keep an eye on you,” Boyle said. “You’ll have to shut down that salt-water factory now, we’e got to get cracking.”

Tikki dabbed at her eyes and looked at Boyle resentfully.

“Why, you’re the meanest girl I ever met,” she said.

Elton stepped up and put a protective arm around her.

“Just leave Tikki alone, Boyle. Can’t you see she’s upset?”

“Too right,” Boyle muttered. “Let’s be off, Nid, me lass. No time to waste, you know. Mother’s orders and all that.”

Nid opened the door and peeked out. “Coast is clear,” she said. “What about you, Tikki? Coming?”

Tikki looked up at Elton. “I’ll go,” she said, still sniffing. “If you’ll promise to . . . to watch me.”

“I won’t take my eyes off you.”

“Good. I’ll feel safe then.” She squeezed Elton’s hand. They stepped out and started off along the hall.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, the foursome rounded a fountain tinkling in the dark, stumbled past a six-foot hedge, saw the blue glow of the Mobile

Command Center ahead.

Elton halted. "There aren't any guards on it, I hope?" he whispered.

"Of course not? Why should there be?" Tikki said aloud.

"Shhh!" Elton cautioned. "This is a top secret mission, remember."

They came up to the capsule sitting quietly, doors open, waiting.

"Looks like everything's shipshape," Boyle said. "Just like we left her."

Elton leaned close to him. "Stand by with the girls a few yards back.

I'll try to arrange a truce."

"Right," Boyle moved to comply. Elton stepped into the cramped chamber, settled into the seat.

"Ah . . . look here, Lunar Computer. I'd like to contact the Yukk ship, get a message to their computer; whatever it is that controls the vessel. Is that possible?"

"Messages can be transmitted on the Yukk wavelength."

"All right; I want to tell them I'm taking off, and not to shoot. I want them to know we're on their side. Tell them we're Yukks, just like they are, and——"

"MADAY, MADAY," the metallic voice screeched. "Yukks occupying Mobile Combat Command Center Ten Ninety-four! Executing emergency procedure forty-one!" Elton's seat lifted, dumping him out onto the grass. With a hiss and a sharp *smack!* the doors closed, snipping off the blue glow. There was an abrupt *zing!* followed by a small thundercap. A gust of wind ruffled Elton's hair. The capsule was gone.

"Here!" Boyle yelled. "What do you think you're doing?"

Nid and Tikki stood staring.

"It . . . it went off and left us," Elton said weakly.

"Did I hear it say . . . Yukks?" Nid demanded.

"W-where are they?" Tikki asked, looking around.

"Now we've had it," Boyle groaned. "Stranded, among these Yukk-eating females!"

"What did you say?" Nid demanded.

"Never mind, my dear. You've been as nice a little friend as a girl could have. Now just run along and let me think."

"Hold on, Boyle," Elton said, getting to his feet. "Don't panic." He turned to Tikki. "You girls don't happen to have another Traveler like ours—do you?" he asked hopefully.

The girl shook her head. "I never saw one like that before."

"Do you have any kind of . . . of space vessel?" Elton said desperately. "Anything you can use to travel up there?" He jabbed a finger at the night

sky.

“We have one . . . “ Nid said doubtfully. “But——”

“That’s all we need,” Boyle said promptly. “Just lead the way, there’s a good girl.”

“Well . . . it’s a funny time to be going to church.”

Distantly, Elton heard the shrill of a siren. Far away, someone shouted.

“Oh, dear,” Tikki said. “Someone’s discovered you girls have gone out without permission, I’ll bet. Mother’s going to be upset.”

“Let’s just hurry along to the ship—quietly,” Elton urged. “After all, we can’t let anything interfere with the mission, can we?”

“I think we’d better tell Mother,” Nid said doubtfully.

“No time,” Boyle said. “Every minute counts. Mother will understand, won’t she, professor?”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. Let’s get going!”

“This way,” Nid said, and slipped away into the shadows, the others at her heels.

* * *

A vast, clumsy pyramidal shape loomed up, the base stretching away into darkness. Elton came up to it breathing hard, listening to the clang of bells, the shouts of *Yukks* and the shrill ululation of the siren.

“They’re pretty well stirred up,” Boyle said. “How do you reckon we get inside this beast?”

“Where’s the door, girls?” Elton inquired, peering through the gloom.

“Over here,” Nid called. At Elton’s side, Tikki shivered. “It’s scary,” she said. “I have the feeling the *Yukks* are right here beside us.”

Ahead, Boyle muttered a curse. “Watch that bottom step, professor; rotted through.” Elton gave Tikki a hand up, followed her up a short flight of crumbling wooden steps; as he stepped through the wide entry, his shoes clanged on metal.

“Where’s the bridge, or the cockpit, or whatever you call it?” Boyle asked in a hoarse whisper.

“You mean the Mother’s seat?” Nid asked. “This way . . . “

• • •

Elton and Boyle grunted and puffed, clambering up narrow campaignways in the dark, banging their heads on low passages, snorting dust from their nostrils.

“Bit of rum odor about the place,” Boyle commented.

“It reminds me of the smell of the Royal Chamber in Cheops’ pyramid,” Elton said.

“Here we are,” Tikki said. “What are you going to do now?”

There was a shout from below, an answering call, then a mutter of conversation.

“How do we close the entry port—the doorway?” Elton hissed.

“That’s this big handle over here,” Nid said. “Are you going to hold a Service now?”

Elton grabbed the dimly seen lever, hauled it down. There was a growl of metal. Below, a heavy *clang!* cut off the voices.

“Wish there was a bit of light here,” Boyle said.

* * *

A wavering, yellowish illumination sprang up. Tikki smiled from the panel, where scattered indicator lights glowed wanly. Elton went over, stared at the layout.

“Tikki, do you understand all this?”

“Oh, certainly; we had all this in Training.”

“How do you start the engines?”

“Oh, goody, we’re going to have a Service.” Tikki turned to the panel, reeling off details of the countdown checklist. Boyle came over, holding a thick book in his hand.

“Have a look at this, sir; the log, I imagine.”

“Later,” Elton said. “You’d better give me a hand here, Boyle. This is pretty complicated.”

Boyle listened in silence for a moment.

“Hold up there, Tikki,” he said. “Look here, professor, this is hopeless. It would take a ruddy genius to gen up on this drill in the time we’ve got. You see what we have to do, don’t you?”

Elton looked at him. Tikki had stopped her recital and was listening, eyes wide.

“You mean?” Elton said.

“Right! They’ve got to go along. Couldn’t let them back outside anyway, without letting that lot down below in.”

“But—that would be kidnapping.”

“Tikki!” Nid’s voice came suddenly, a shrill yelp. “Look!”

Tikki jumped up. Nid rushed to her, thrust a faded and curled sheet of

flexible plastic into her hand. Elton craned to see it.

KNOW YOUR ENEMY! the heading read. Under the legend was a clear, glossy full-length photograph of a nude Yukk.

Tikki looked from Elton to Boyle, back to the picture. "It . . . it looks . . . like the new girls," she said in a quavering voice.

"Just look at that flat chest," Nid gasped. "And those skinny hips; and—and . . ."

There was a heavy thumping from below. Boyle whirled to Nid. "Look here, love, there's no time to give you the full story now; just get this machine going, there's a good girl!"

"We . . . we really ought to go for help," Nid quavered.

"Start the ship up, Tikki," Elton pleaded. "Even if we are Yukks, we're not such monsters, are we now?"

"But I don't . . . I mean, why——?"

"With that crew snapping at our heels, I should think it would be bloody obvious!" Boyle snapped. "You said you know how to operate this thing! Hop to it, or we've bought the ruddy farm!"

"I'm a wicked, wicked girl," Tikki said weakly. "I'll do it . . ."

* * *

She went to the control panel, seated herself in the padded chair, punched buttons, closed switches; lights winked and glowed sluggishly; instrument needles stirred from pegs; there was a dry *click!* somewhere. Tikki got to her feet.

"There," she said. "But I just don't see how you can think of ritual at a time like this——"

"What ritual? We just want to depart as quickly as possible," Elton reached for Tikki's hand. "I hate to kidnap you like this, my dear, but——"

Tikki shivered and leaned against Elton. "I keep having the Strangest Thoughts . . ."

There was a final thump from below, a screech of reluctant hinges, then a babble of voices. Feet thumped on stair rungs.

"They're inside!" Elton urged Tikki toward the panel. "Quick!"

A girl appeared at the control room door; Boyle jumped at her, came staggering back as she stiff-armed him. More girls crowded into the room; a heavy-set fortyish woman pushed through, stood with hands on hips eyeing Elton and Boyle.

“So you’re Yukks,” she said in a loud, deep voice. “You don’t look so tough to me!”

Elton lunged for the panel, punched buttons at random. Two of the girls pulled him away.

“A religious nut,” the deep-voiced woman barked. “Well, it’s too late for that, you! And anyway, you Yukks have no business desecrating the Church!”

“Church? She said it was a ship,” Elton stammered. “The only one there was . . . “

Boyle groaned. “It just came to me,” he said. “No wonder nothing happened when Tikki twoddled the controls. This must be the ruddy vessel this lot came here in, eight thousand years ago.”

“So the story goes,” the captain said. “Now let’s get moving, you two.” She shot Tikki and Nid a hard look. “And there’ll be an investigation into the role you girls played in this escapade, too.”

“We . . . we kidnaped them,” Elton said. “A likely story.” The woman jerked a thumb toward the frightened girls. “Put all four of them under guard and march ‘em back to the dorm. It looks like the Mother’s going to be sitting in Judgment tonight.”

9

The Mother was reclining in a heavily padded chaise lounge, with a box of pink and yellow candies at one elbow and a plate of cookies at the other. Heavy robes with elaborate flounces obscured her ample contours. She looked at Elton severely.

“Lying to the Mother,” she said. “You ought to be ashamed, even if you are Yukks—and I never thought the Enemy would turn out to be so insignificant-looking.”

“They’re worse than they look,” the captain of the guard said. “You see the state they’ve got this pair of ninnies in,” she indicated Tikki and Nid, standing by with drooping expressions.

The Mother’s face tightened. “I thought from the first there was something Strange about them.” The assembled girls—several hundred of them, Elton estimated, all ages, crowded into the wide Mother’s Room—sighed in unison.

“Silence in the courtroom!” the Mother snapped. “This is an open-and-shut case. These two are Yukks—that’s plain enough. They led a pair of formerly decent girls astray,” she eyed Tikki and Nid. “I’m going to let

you two off lighdy; cold baths every three hours for the next two days; that ought to cool those Strange Ideas off.” She turned back to Elton and Boyle.

“As for you, there’s only one way to deal with a Yukk: it’s out in die Cold for you——”

The crowd of Girls gasped; a murmur ran through them. Tikki sprang forward.

“That’s perfectiy horrid!” she cried. “If they’re going out in the Cold, I’m going too!” Strong-arm girls jumped for her, dragged her back in line. Nid was sobbing quiedy. Doyle shot her a sickly smile. “There, there, lass, don’t fret.”

Elton cleared his throat. “Just a minute, Mother,” he said loudly. “Berore you take this drastic step, I think there are a few things you should know.”

“What’s that? What could a Yukk have to say that would interest a Mother?”

Elton folded his arms, a calm, self-confident expression on his face.

“If you’ll clear these others from the room,” he said easily, “I’d like to tell you the Facts of Life.”

Elton was lounging at ease in a deep-cushioned chair that was a twin to the one the Mother had occupied at the Judgment, eating large hot-house grapes that were being popped into his mouth one at a time by Tikki, while other girls crowded close.

Wide double doors opened across the room. Boyle appeared, shaved, his hair curled, a neat short tunic flapping at his thighs. A bevy of shapely girls surged around him, all chattering at once. Two ran forward, scattered varicolored cushions in a heap by the side of the wide pool set in the floor.

“I’ve got to give you credit, professor,” he said. “You look like a blooming oriental potentate. How in the name of the Nine Gates of Ishalik did you do it?”

Elton wrinkled his nose. “I think they overdid it a bit with the perfume, Boyle,” he said easily. “Otherwise you look well.”

“The old bitch was ready to shove us outside the dome without even a set of earmuffs,” Boyle stated. “We’d have frozen solid before we had a chance to asphyxiate. What did you say to her to rate us all this?”

“Girls, leave us!” Elton said, waving a hand. “You can come back in a few minutes, dears.”

They fled, casting longing glances back.

“WeU?” Boyle demanded.

“Elementary, my dear Boyle. Surely you noticed the large number of rooms in the dormitory wings? Several hundred in our wing alone, and I saw at least a dozen wings——”

“Don’t talk ruddy architecture. Get to the point!”

“This *is* the point. There are only seven hundred and four girls here—and yet the building was obviously designed for many more. And then there was the business of the Mother chattering about the crowded conditions; consigning us to a broom closet.”

“That was just a bit of bloody cheek,” Boyle said.

* * *

“No, it was important to her to give us the impression that the dome was overflowing with girls; these domes don’t get along too well with each other, remember. She didn’t want strangers to find out her fighting strength had fallen so low.”

“Well, if it’s low, it’s her own ruddy fault. I reckon she’s the one that controls the birthrate.”

“Hmmm, yes—as far as she can. But did you notice Boyle, that there are no children around? Tikki and Nid are about twenty-one; there’s quite a number about the same age. The next grouping is at about the forty-five age level; the older generation, I suppose. Then there are a few old ladies who——

“But there’s no new generation, Boyle, and none of the girls are pregnant.”

“So?”

“They’ve been using an artificial insemination method—using frozen sperm cells, all of the x-x variety—thus only girls were born. But unfortunately, the supplies ran out twenty-odd years ago.”

“Blimey! Then——”

“Exactly. After eight thousand years, it was all over—until we came along.”

“So now it’s up to us?”

“Correct, Mr. Boyle. I suggest we work out some sort of equitable division. It should take us a year or so to work our way through, and then start over.”

“Of course,” Boyle said doubtfully, “it means we’re stranded.”

“Not forever. I learned from the Mother that there are very extensive

libraries here, well-equipped laboratories——”

“Hold it!” Boyle leaned on one elbow, looking worried. “These little ones we’ll be fathering: half of them will be little Yukks!”

“Of course. Things will come back to normal in about twenty years—and by that time I think we’ll be ready to retire. We’ll set up schools, start training a new generation of technicians. They’ll be able to get the old ship going again—or build a new one. We can neutralize the Yuk ship, return to Earth in style with enough technology to make us too rich to talk to.” Elton picked up a dusty book from the floor.

“But, this is my greatest prize,” he said. “The log book from the ship. It gives an excellent picture of the prehistory of human affairs on Earth from about 15,000 B.C. up until the war seven thousand years later.”

“Twenty years, eh?” Boyle mused. “But look here, professor, I just happened to think! All the old bag had to do was take a specimen from one of us—there’s millions of germ cells.”

“But she didn’t know that, Boyle—so we’ll just let it be our little secret.”

“I think you’ve hit on it, professor,” Boyle called. “Never tell ‘em all you know.”

“Correct,” Elton said. “And in the meantime, we’ll deal with our problems . . . one at a time.”