
Birthright
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The cab obtained clearance from certain machines and landed on the roof of the Winged Cross. Emil Dalmady paid and stepped put. When it took off, he felt suddenly very alone. The garden was fragrant around him in a warm deep-blue summer's dusk; at this height, the sounds of Chicago Integrate were a murmur as of a distant ocean; the other towers and the skyways between them were a forest through which flitted will-o'-the-wisp aircars and beneath which — as if Earth had gone transparent — a fantastic galaxy of many-colored lights was blinking awake farther than eye could reach. But the penthouse bulking ahead might have been a hill where a grizzly bear had its den.

The man squared his shoulders. *Haul in*, he told himself. *He won't eat you*. Anger lifted afresh. *I might just eat him*. He strode forward: a stocky, muscular figure in a blue zipskin, features broad and high of cheekbones, snubnosed, eyes green and slightly tilted, hair reddish black.

But despite stiffened will, the fact remained that he had not expected a personal interview with any merchant prince of the Polesotechnic League, and in one of the latter's own homes. When a live butler had admitted him, and he had crossed an improbably long stretch of trollcat rug to the ViewWall end of a luxury cluttered living room, and was confronting Nicholas van Rijn, his throat tightened and his palms grew wet.

"Good evening," the host rumbled. "Welcome." His corpulent corpus did not rise from the lounge. Dalmady didn't mind. Not only bulk but height would have dwarfed him. Van Rijn waved a hand at a facing seat; the other gripped a liter tankard of beer. "Sit. Relax. You look quivery like a blanc-mange before a firing squad. What you drink, smoke, chew, sniff, or otherwise make amusements with?"

Dalmady lowered himself to an edge. Vail Rijn's great hook-beaked, multi-chinned, moustached and goateed visage, framed in black shoulder-length ringlets, crinkled with a grin. Beneath the sloping brow, small jet eyes glittered at the newcomer. "Relax," he urged again. "Give the form-fitting a chance. Not so fun-making an embrace like a pretty girl, but less extracting, ha? I think maybe a little glass Genever and bitters over dry ice is a tranquilizer for you." He clapped.

"Sir," Dalmady said, harshly in his tension, "I don't want to seem ungracious, but —"

"But you came to Earth breathing flame and brimrocks, and went through six echelons of the toughest no-saying secretaries and officers what the Solar Spice and Liquors Company has got, like a bulldozer chasing a cowdozer, demanding to see

whoever the crockhead was what fired you after what you done yonderways. Nobody, had a chance to explain. Trouble was, they assumptioned you knew things what they take for granted. So natural, what they said sounded to you like a flushoff and you hurricaned your way from them to somebody else."

Van Rijn offered a cigar out of a gold humidor whose workmanship Dalmady couldn't identify except that it was nonhuman. The young man shook his head: The merchant selected one himself, bit off the end and spat that expertly into a receptor, and inhaled the tobacco to ignition. "Well," he continued, "somebody would have got through into you at last, only then I learned about you and ordered this meeting. I would have wanted to talk at you anyhow. Now I shall clarify everything like Hindu butter."

His geniality was well nigh as overwhelming as his wrath would have been, assuming the legends about him were true. *And he could be setting me up for a thunderbolt*, Dalmady thought, and clung to his indignation as he answered:

"Sir, if your outfit is dissatisfied with my conduct on Suleiman, it might at least have told me why, rather than sending a curt message that I was being replaced and should report to HQ. Unless you can prove to me that I, bungled, I will not accept demotion. It's a question of personal honor more than professional standing. They think that way where I come from. I'll quit. And...there are plenty of other companies in the League that will be glad to hire me."

"True, true, in spite of every candle I burn to St. Dismas." Van Rijn sighed through his cigar, engulfing Dalmady in smoke. "Always they try to pirate my executives what have not yet sworn fealty, like the thieves they are. And I, poor old lonely fat man, trying to run this enterprise personal what stretches across so many whole worlds, even with modern computer technology, I get melted down from overwork, and too few men for helpers what is not total gruntbrains, and some of them got to be occupied just luring good executives away from elsewhere." He took a noisy gulp of beer. "Well?"

"I suppose you've read my report, sir," was Dalmady's gambit.

"Today. So much information flowing from across the lightyears, how can this weary old noggle hold it without data flowing back out like ear wax? Let me review to make sure I got it tesseract. Which means – ho, ho! – straight in four dimensions."

Van Rijn wallowed deeper into his lounge, bridged hairy fingers, and closed his eyes. The butler appeared with a huge steaming and hissing goblet. *If this is his idea of a small drink!* – Dalmady thought. Grimly, he forced himself to sit at ease and sip.

"Now." The cigar waggled in time to the words. "This star what its discoverer called Osman is out past Antares, on the far edge of present day regular basis League activities. One planet is inhabited, called by humans Suleiman. Subjovian; life based on hydrogen, ammonia, methane; primitive natives, but friendly. Turned out, on the biggest continent grows a plant we call...um-m-m...bluejack, what the natives use for a spice and tonic. Analysis showed a complicated blend of chemicals, answering sort of to

hormonal stuffs for us, with synergistic effects. No good to oxygen breathers, but maybe we can sell to hydrogen breathers elsewhere.

"Well, we found very few markets, at least what had anythings to offer we wanted. You need a special biochemistry for bluejack to be beneficent. So synthesis would cost us more, counting investment and freight charges from chemical-lab centers, than direct harvesting by natives on Suleiman, paid for in trade goods. Given that, we could show a wee profit. Quite teensy – whole operation is near-as-damn marginal – but as long as things stayed peaceful, well, why not turn a few honest credits?

"And things was peaceful, too, for years. Natives cooperated fine, bringing in bluejack to warehouses. Outshipping was one of those milk runs where we don't knot up capital in our own vessels, we contract with a freighter line to make regular calls. Oh, *ja*, contretemps kept on countertiming – bad seasons, bandits raiding caravans, kings getting too greedy about taxes – usual stuffing, what any competent factor could handle on the spot, so no reports about it ever come to pester me.

"And then – Ahmed, more beer! – real trouble. Best market for bluejack is on a planet we call Babur. Its star, Mogul, lies in the same general region, about thirty light-years from Osman. Its top country been dealing with Technic civilization off and on for decades. Trying to modernize, they was mainly interested in robotics for some reason; but at last they did pile together enough outplanet exchange for they could commission a few hyperdrive ships built and crews trained. So now the Solar Commonwealth and other powers got to treat them with a little more respect; blast cannon and nuclear missiles sure improve manners, by damn! They is still small tomatoes, but ambitious. And to them, with the big domestic demand, bluejack is not an incidental thing."

Van Rijn leaned forward, wrinkling the embroidered robe that circled his paunch. "You wonder why I tell you what you know, ha?" he said. "When I need direct reports on a situation, especial from a world as scarcely known as Suleiman, I can't study each report from decades. Data retrieval got to make me an abstract. I check with you now, who was spotted there, whether the machine give me all what is significant to our talking. Has I been correct so far?"

"Yes," Dalmady said. "But –"

Yvonne Vaillancourt looked up from a console as the factor passed the open door of her collation lab.

"What's wrong, Emil?" she asked. "I heard you clattering the whole way down the hall."

Dalmady stopped for a look. Clothing was usually at a minimum in the Earth-conditioned compound, but, while he had grown familiar with the skins of its inhabitants, he never tired of hers. Perhaps, he had thought, her blond shapeliness impressed him the more because he had been born and raised on Altai. The colonists of that chill planet went heavily dressed of necessity. The same need to survive forced

austere habits on them and, isolated in a largely unexplored frontier section, they received scant news about developments in the core civilization.

When you were one of half a dozen humans on a world whose very air was death to you – when you didn't even have visitors of your own species, because the ship that regularly called belonged to a Cynthian carrier – you had no choice but to live in free and easy style. Dalmady had had that explained to him while he was being trained for this post, and recognized it and went along with it. But he wondered if he would ever become accustomed to the *casualness* of the sophisticates whom he bossed.

"I don't know," he answered the girl. "The Thalassocrat wants me at the palace."

"Why, he knows perfectly well how to make a visi call."

"Yes, but a nomad's brought word of something nasty in the Uplands, and won't come near the set. Afraid it'll imprison his soul, I imagine."

"Hm-m-m, I think not. We're still trying to chart the basic Suleimanite psychology, you know, with only inadequate data from three or four cultures to go on...but they don't seem to have animistic tendencies like man's. Ceremony, yes, in abundance, but nothing we can properly identify as magic or religion."

Dalmady barked a nervous laugh. "Sometimes I think my whole staff considers our commerce an infernal nuisance that keeps getting in the way of their precious science."

"Sometimes you'd be right," Yvonne purred. "What'd hold us here except the chance to do research?"

"And how long would your research last if the company closed down this base?" he flared. "Which it will if we start losing money. My job's to see that we don't. I could use cooperation."

She slipped from her stool, came to him and kissed him lightly. Her hair smelled like remembered steppe grass warmed by an orange sun, rippling under the rings of Altai. "Don't we help?" she murmured. "I'm sorry, dear."

He bit his lip and stared past her, down the length of gaudy murals whose painting had beguiled much idle time over the years. "No, I'm sorry," he said with the stiff honesty of his folk. "Of course you're all loyal and – It's me. Here I am, the youngest among you, a half-barbarian herdboys, supposed to make a go of things...in one of the easiest, most routinized outposts in this sector...and after a bare fifteen months –"

If I fail, he thought, well, I can return home, no doubt, and dismiss the sacrifices my parents made to send me to managerial school off planet, scorn the luck that Solar Spice and Liquors had an opening here and no more experienced employee to fill it, forget every dream about walking in times to come on new and unknown worlds that really call forth every resource a man has to give. Oh, yes, failure isn't fatal, except in subtler ways than I have words for.

"You fret too much." Yvonne patted his cheek. "Probably this is just another tempest in a chicken-house. You'll bribe somebody, or arm somebody, or whatever's needful,

and that will once again be that."

"I hope so. But the Thalassocrat acted – well, not being committed to xenological scholarly precision, I'd say he acted worried, too." Dalmady stood a few seconds longer, scowling, before: "All right, I'd better be on my way." He gave her a hug. "Thanks, Yvonne."

She watched him till he was out of sight, then returned to her work.

Officially she was the trade post's secretary-treasurer, but such duties seldom came to her except when a freighter had landed. Otherwise she used the computers to try to find patterns in what fragments of knowledge her four colleagues could wrest from a world – an entire, infinitely varied world – and hoped that a few scientists elsewhere might eventually scan a report on Suleiman – one among thousands of planets – and be interested.

Airsuit donned, Dalmady left the compound by its main personnel lock. Wanting time to compose himself, he went afoot through the city to the palace – if they were city and palace.

He didn't know. Books, tapes, lectures, and neuroinductors had crammed him with information about this part of this continent; but those were the everyday facts and skills needed to manage operations. Long talks with his subordinates here had added a little insight, but only a little. Direct experience with the autochthons was occasionally enlightening, but just as apt to be confusing. No wonder that, once a satisfactory arrangement was made with Coast and Upland tribes, his predecessors had not attempted expansion or improvement. When you don't understand a machine, but it seems to be running reasonably smoothly, you don't tinker much.

Outside the compound's force field, local gravity dragged at him with forty percent greater pull than Earth's. Though his suit was light and his muscles hard, the air recycler necessarily included the extra mass of a unit for dealing with the hydrogen that seeped through any material. Soon he was sweating. Nevertheless it was as if the chill struck past all thermostatic coils, into his heavy bones.

High overhead stood Osman, a furious white spark, twice as luminous as Sol but, at its distance, casting a bare sixteenth of what Earth gets. Clouds, tinged red by organic compounds, drifted on slow winds through a murky sky where one of the three moons was dimly visible. That atmosphere bore thrice a terrestrial standard pressure. It was mostly hydrogen and helium, with vapors of methane and ammonia and traces of other gas. Greenhouse effect did not extend to unfreezing water. .

Indeed, the planetary core was overlaid by a shell of ice, mixed with rock, penetrated by tilted metal-poor strata. The land glittered amidst its grayness and scrunched beneath Dalmady's boots. It sloped down to a dark, choppy sea of liquid ammonia whose horizon was too remote – given a 17,000 kilometer radius – for him to make out through the red-misted air.

Ice also were the buildings that rose blocky around him. They shimmered glasslike where doorways, or obscure carved symbols, did not break their smoothness. There were no streets in the usual sense, but aerial observation has disclosed an elaborate pattern in the layout of structures, about which the dwellers could not or would not speak. Wind moved ponderously between them. The air turned its sound, every sound, shrill.

Traffic surged. It was mainly pedestrian, natives on their business, carrying the oddly shaped tools and containers of a fireless neolithic nonhuman culture. A few wagons lumbered in with produce from the hinterland; their draught animals suggested miniature dinosaurs modeled by someone who had heard vague rumors of such creatures. A related, more slender species was ridden. Coracles bobbed across the sea; you might as well say the crews were fishing, though a true fish could live here unprotected no longer than a man.

Nothing reached Dalmady's earphones except the wind, the distant wave-rumble, the clop of feet and creak of wagons. Suleimanites did not talk casually. They did communicate, however, and without pause: by gesture, by ripple across erectile fur, by delicate exchanges between scent glands. They avoided coming near the human, but simply because his suit was hot to their touch. He gave and received many signals of greeting. After two years – twenty-five of Earth's – Coast and Uplands alike were becoming dependent on metal and plastic and energy-cell trade goods. Local labor had been eagerly available to help build a spaceport on the mesa overlooking town, and still did most of the work. That saved installing automatic machinery – one reason for the modest profit earned by this station.

Dalmady leaned into his uphill walk. After ten minutes he was at the palace.

The half-score natives posted outside the big, turreted building were not guards. While wars and robberies occurred on Suleiman, the slaying of a "king" seemed to be literally unthinkable. (An effect of pheromones? In every community the xenologists had observed thus far, the leader ate special foods which his followers insisted would, poison anyone else; and maybe the followers were right.) The drums, plumed canes, and less identifiable gear which these beings carried were for ceremonial use.

Dalmady controlled his impatience and watched with a trace of pleasure the ritual of opening doors and conducting him to the royal presence. The Suleimanites were a graceful and handsome species. They were plantigrade bipeds, rather like men although the body was thicker and the average only came to his shoulder. The hands each bore two fingers between two thumbs, and were supplemented by a prehensile tail. The head was round, with a parrotlike beak, tympani for hearing, one large golden-hued eye in the middle and two smaller, less developed ones for binocular and peripheral vision. Clothing was generally confined to a kind of sporran, elaborately patterned with symbols, to leave glands and mahogany fur available for signals. The fact that Suleimanite languages had so large a non-vocal component handicapped human efforts at understanding as much as anything else did.

The Thalassocrat addressed Dalmady by voice alone, in the blue-glimmering ice cavern of his audience room. Earphones reduced the upper frequencies to some the man could hear. Nonetheless, that squeak and gibber always rather spoiled the otherwise impressive effect of flower crown and carven staff. So did the dwarfs, hunchbacks, and cripples who squatted on rugs and skin-draped benches. It was not known why household servants were always recruited among the handicapped. Suleimanites had tried to explain when asked, but their meaning never came through,

"Fortune, power, and wisdom to you, Factor." They didn't use personal names on this world, and seemed unable to grasp the idea of an identification which was not a scent-symbol.

"May they continue to abide with you, Thalassocrat." The vocalizer on his back transformed Dalmady's version of local speech into sounds that his lips could not bring forth.

"We have here a Master of caravaneers," the monarch said.

Dalmady went through polite ritual with the Uplander, who was tall and rangy for a Suleimanite, armed with a stoneheaded tomahawk and a trade rifle designed for his planet, his barbarianism showing in gaudy jewels and bracelets. They were O.K., however, those hill country nomads. Once a bargain had been struck, they held to it with more literal-mindedness than humans could have managed. "And what is the trouble for which I am summoned, Master? Has your caravan met bandits on its way to the Coast? I will be glad to equip a force for their suppression."

Not being used to talking with men, the chief went into full Suleimanite language – his own dialect, at that – and became incomprehensible. One of the midgets stumped forward. Dalmady recognized him. A bright mind dwelt in that poor little body, drank deep of whatever knowledge about the universe was offered, and in return had frequently helped with counsel or knowledge. "Let me ask him out, Factor and Thalassocrat," he suggested.

"If you will, Advisor," his overlord agreed.

"I will be in your debt, Translator," Dalmady said, with his best imitation of the prancing thanks-gesture.

Beneath the courtesies, his mind whirred and he found himself holding his breath while he waited. Surely the news couldn't be really catastrophic!

He reviewed the facts, as if hoping for some hitherto unnoticed salvation in them. With little axial tilt, Suleiman lacked seasons. Bluejack needed the cool, dry climate of the Uplands, but there it grew the year around. Primitive natives, hunters and gatherers, picked it in the course of their wanderings. Every several months, terrestrial, such a tribe would make rendezvous with one of the more advanced nomadic herding communities, who bartered for the parched leaves and fruits. A caravan would then form and make the long trip to this city, where Solar's folk would acquire the bales in exchange for Technic merchandise. You could count on a load arriving about twice a month. Four times in an Earthside year, the Cynthian vessel took away the contents of Solar's

warehouse...and left a far more precious cargo of letters, tapes, journals, books, news from the stars that were so rarely seen in these gloomy heavens.

It wasn't the most efficient system imaginable, but it was the cheapest, once you calculated what the cost would be—in capital investment and civilized-labor salaries of starting plantations. And costs must be kept low or the enterprise would change from a minor asset to a liability, which would soon be liquidated. As matters were, Suleiman was a typical outpost of its kind: to the scientists, a fascinating study and a chance to win reputation in their fields; to the factors, a comparatively easy job, a first step on a ladder at the top of which waited the big, glamorous, gorgeously paid managerial assignments.

Or thus it had been until now.

The Translator turned to Dalmady. "The Master says this," he piped. "Lately in the Uplands have come what he calls...no, I do not believe that can be said in words alone—It is clear to me, they are machines that move about harvesting the bluejack."

"What?" The man realized he had exclaimed in Anglic. Through suddenly loud pulses, he heard the Translator go on:

"The wild folk were terrified and fled those parts. The machines came and took what they had stored against, their next rendezvous. That angered this Master's nomads, who deal there. They rode to protest. From afar they saw a vessel, like the great flying vessel that lands here, and a structure a—building. Those who oversaw that work were...low, with many legs and claws for hands...long noses—A gathering robot came and shot lightning past the nomads. They saw they, too, must flee, lest its warning shot become deadly. The Master himself took a string of remounts and posted hither as swiftly as might be. In words, I cannot say more of what he has to tell."

Dalmady gasped into the frigid blueness that enclosed him. His mouth felt dry, his knees weak, his stomach in upheaval. "Baburites," he mumbled. "Got to be. But why're they doing this to us?"

Brush, herbage, leaves on the infrequent trees, were many shades of black. Here and there a patch of red, or brown, or blue flowering relieved it, or an ammonia river cataracting down the hills. Farther off, a range of ice mountains flashed blindingly; Suleiman's twelve-hour day was drawing to a close, and Osman's rays struck level through a break in roiling ruddy cloud cover. Elsewhere a storm lifted like a dark wall on which lightning scribbled. The dense atmosphere brought its thunder-noise to Dalmady as a high drumroll. He paid scant attention. The gusts that hooted around his car, the air pockets into which it lurched, made piloting a full-time job. A cybernated vehicle would have been too expensive for this niggardly rewarding planet.

"There!" cried the Master. He squatted with the Translator in an after compartment, which was left under native conditions and possessed an observation dome. In deference to his superstitions, or whatever they were, only the audio part of the intercom, was turned on.

"Indeed," the Translator said: more calmly. "I descry it now. Somewhat to our right, Factor – in a valley by a lake...do you see?"

"A moment." Dalmady locked the altitude controls. The car would bounce around till his teeth rattled, but the grav-field wouldn't let it crash. He leaned forward in his harness, tried to ignore the brutal pull on him, and adjusted the scanner screen. His race had not evolved to see at those wavelengths which penetrated this atmosphere best; and the distance was considerable, as distances tend to be on a subjovian.

Converting light frequencies, amplifying, magnifying, the screen flung a picture at him. Tall above shrubs and turbulent ammonia stood a spaceship. He identified it as a Holbert-X freighter, a type commonly sold to hydrogen breathers. There had doubtless been some modifications to suit its particular home world, but he saw none except a gun turret and a couple of missile tube housings.

A prefabricated steel and ferrocrete building was being assembled nearby. The construction robots must be working fast, without pause; the cube was already more than half finished. Dalmady glimpsed flares of energy torches, like tiny blue novas. He couldn't make out individual shapes, and didn't want to risk coming near enough.

"You see?" he asked the image of Peter Thorson, and transmitted the picture to another screen.

Back at the base, his engineer's massive head nodded. Behind could be seen the four remaining humans. They looked as strained and anxious as Dalmady felt, Yvonne perhaps more so.

"Yeah. Not much we can do about it," Thorson declared. "They pack bigger weapons. And see, in the corners of the barn, those bays? That's for blast cannon, I swear. Add a heavy-duty forcefield generator for passive defense, and it's a nut we can't hope to crack."

"The home office – "

"Yeah, they *might* elect, to resent the invasion and dispatch a regular warcraft or three. But I don't believe it. Wouldn't pay, in economic terms: And it'd make every kind of hooraw, because remember, SSL hasn't got any legal monopoly here." Thorson shrugged. "My guess is, Old Nick'll simply close down on Suleiman, probably wangling a deal with the Baburites that'll cut his losses and figuring to diddle them good at a later date." He was a veteran mercantile professional, accustomed to occasional setbacks, indifferent to the scientific puzzles around him.

Yvonne, who was not, cried softly, "Oh, no! We can't! The insights we're gaining – "

And Dalmady, who could not afford a defeat this early in his career, clenched one fist and snapped, "We *can* at least talk to them, can't we? I'll try to raise them. Stand by." He switched the outercom to a universal band and set the Come In going. The last thing he had seen from the compound was her stricken eyes.

The Translator inquired from aft, "Do you know who the strangers are and what they intend, Factor?"

"I have no doubt they come from Babur, as we call it," the man replied absently. "That is a world" – the more enlightened Coast dwellers had acquired some knowledge of astronomy – "akin to yours. It is larger and warmer, with heavier air. Its folk could not endure this one for long without becoming sick. But they can move about unarmored for a while. They buy most of our bluejack. Evidently they have decided to go to the source."

"But why, Factor?"

"For profit, I suppose, Translator."

"Maybe just in their non human cost accounting. That's a giant investment they're making in a medicinal product: But they don't operate under capitalism, under anything that human history ever saw, or so I've heard. Therefore they may consider it an investment in...empire? No doubt they can expand their foothold here, once we're out of the way –"

The screen came to life.

The being that peered from it stood about waist high to a man in its erect torso. The rest of the body stretched behind in a vaguely caterpillar shape, on eight stumpy legs. Along that glabrous form was a row of opercula protecting tracheae which, in a dense hydrogen atmosphere, aerated the organism quite efficiently. Two arms ended in claws reminiscent of a lobster's; from the wrists below sprouted short, tough finger-tendrils. The head was dominated by a spongy snout. A Baburite had no mouth. It – individuals changed sex from time to time – macerated food with the claws and put it in a digestive pouch to be dissolved before the snout sucked it up. The eyes were four, and tiny. Speech was by diaphragms on either side of the skull, hearing and smell were associated with the tracheae. The skin was banded orange, blue, white, and black. Most of it was hidden by a gauzy robe.

The creature would have been an absurdity, a biological impossibility, on an Earth-type world. In its own ship, in strong gravity and thick cold air and murk through which shadowy forms moved, it had dignity and power.

It thrummed noises which a vocalizer rendered into fairly good League Latin: "We were expecting you. Do not approach closer."

Dalmady moistened his lips. He felt cruelly young and helpless. "G-g-greeting. I am the factor."

The Baburite made no comment.

After a while, Dalmady plowed on: "We have been told that you...well, you are seizing the blue-jack territory. I cannot believe that is correct."

"It is not, precisely," said the flat mechanical tone. "For the nonce, the natives may use these lands as heretofore, except that they will not find much bluejack to harvest."

Our robots are too effective. Observe."

The screen flashed over to a view of a squat, cylindrical machine. Propelled by a simple grav drive, it floated several centimeters off the ground. Its eight arms terminated in sensors, pluckers, trimmers, brush cutters. On its back was welded a large basket. On its top was a maser transceiver and a swivel-mounted blaster.

"It runs off accumulators," the unseen Baburite stated. "These need only be recharged once in thirty-odd hours, at the fusion generator we are installing, unless a special energy expenditure occurs...like a battle, for instance. High-hovering relay units keep the robots in constant touch with each other and with a central computer, currently in the ship, later to be in the blockhouse. It controls them all simultaneously, greatly reducing the cost per unit." With no trace of sardonicism: "You will understand that such a beamcasting system cannot feasibly be jammed. The computer will be provided with missiles as well as guns and defensive fields. It is programmed to strike back at any attempt to hamper its operations."

The robot's image disappeared, the being's returned. Dalmady felt faint. "But that would...would be...an act of war!" he stuttered.

"No. It would be self-protection, legitimate under the rules of the Polesotechnic League. You may credit us with the intelligence to investigate the social as well as physical state of things before we acted and, indeed, to become an associate member of the League. No one will suffer except your company. That will not displease its competitors. They have assured our representatives that they can muster enough Council votes to prevent sanctions. It is not as if the loss were very great. Let us recommend to you personally that you seek employment elsewhere."

Uh-huh...after I dropped a planet...I might maybe get a job cleaning latrines some place, went through the back of Dalmady's head. "No," he protested, "what about the autochthons? They're hurting already."

"When the land has been cleared, bluejack plantations will be established," the Baburite said.

"Doubtless work can be found for some of the displaced savages, if they are sufficiently docile. Doubtless other resources, ignored by you oxygen breathers, await exploitation, We may in the end breed colonists adapted to Suleiman. But that will be of no concern to the League. We have investigated the practical effect of its prohibition on imperialism by members. Where no one else is interested in a case, a treaty with a native government is considered sufficient, and native governments with helpful attitudes are not hard to set up. Suleiman is such a case. A written-off operation that was never much more than marginal, out on an extreme frontier, is not worth the League's worrying about."

"The principle — "

"True. We would not provoke war, nor even our own expulsion and a boycott.

However, recall that you are not being ordered off this planet. You have simply met a superior competitor, superior by virtue of living closer to the scene, being better suited to the environment and far more interested in succeeding, here. We have the same right to launch ventures as you."

"What do you mean, 'we'?" Dalmady whispered. "Who are you? What are you? A private company or —"

"Nominally, we are so organized, though like many other League associates we make no secret of this being *pro forma*," the Baburite told him. "Actually, the terms on which our society must deal with the Technic aggregate have little relevance to the terms of its interior structure. Considering the differences — sociological,, psychological, biological — between us and you and your close allies, our desire to be free of your civilization poses no real threat to the latter and hence will never provoke any real reaction. At the same time, we will never win the freedom of the stars without the resources of modern technology.

"To industrialize with minimum delay, we must obtain the initial capacity through purchases from the Technic worlds. This requires Technic currency. Thus, while we spend what appears to be a disproportionate amount of effort and goods on this bluejack project, it will result in saving outplanet exchange for much more important things.

"We tell you what we tell you in order to make clear, not only our harmlessness to the League as a whole, but our determination. We trust you have taped this discussion. It may prevent your employer from wasting our time and energy in counteracting any foredoomed attempts by him to recoup. While you remain on Suleiman, observe well. When you go back, report faithfully."

The screen blanked. Dalmady tried for minutes to make the connection again, but got no answer.

Thirty days later, which would have been fifteen of Earth's, a conference met in the compound. Around a table, in a room, hazed and acrid with smoke, sat the humans. In a full-size screen were the images of the Thalassocrat and the Translator, a three-dimensional realism that seemed to breathe out the cold of the ice chamber where they crouched.

Dalmady ran a hand through his hair. "I'll summarize," he told them wearily. The Translator's fur began to move, his voice to make low-whistles, as he rendered from the Anglic for his king. "The reports of our native scouts were waiting for me, recorded by Yvonne, when I returned from my own latest flit a couple of hours ago. Each datum confirms every other.

"We'd hoped, you recall, that the computer would be inadequate to cope with us, once the Baburite ship had left."

"Why should the live crew depart?" Sanjuro Nakamura asked.

"That's obvious," Thorson said. "They may not run their domestic economy the way

we run ours, but that doesn't exempt them from the laws of economics. A planet like Babur – actually, a single dominant country on it, or whatever they have – still backward, still poor, has limits on what it can afford! They may enjoy shorter lines of communication than we do, but we, at home, enjoy a lot more productivity. At their present stage, they can't spend what it takes to create and maintain a permanent, live-staffed base like ours. Suleiman isn't too healthy for them, either, you know; and they lack even our small background of accumulated experience. So they've got to automate at first, and just send somebody once in a while to check up and collect the harvest."

"Besides," Alice Bergen pointed out, "the nomads are sworn to us. They wouldn't make a deal with another party. Not that the Baburties could use them profitably anyway. We're sitting in the only suitable depot area, the only one whose people have a culture that makes it easy to train them in service jobs for us. So the Baburites have to operate right on the spot where the bluejack grows. The nomads resent having their caravan trade ended, and would stage guerrilla attacks on live workers."

"*Whew!*" Nakamura said, with an attempted grin. "I assure you, my question was only rhetorical. I simply wanted to point out that the opposition would not have left everything in charge of a computer if they weren't confident the setup would function, including holding us at bay. I begin to see why their planners concentrated on developing robotics at the beginning of modernization. No doubt they intend to use machines in quite a few larcenous little undertakings."

"Do you know how many robots there are?" Isabel asked.

"We estimate a hundred," Dalmady told her, "though we can't get an accurate count. They operate fast, you see, covering a huge territory – in fact, the entire territory where bluejack grows thickly enough to be worth gathering – and they're identical in appearance except for the relay hoverers."

"That must be some computer, to juggle so many at once, over such varying conditions," Alice remarked. Cybernetics was not her field.

Yvonne shook her head; the gold tresses swirled. "Nothing extraordinary. We have long-range telephotos, taken during its installation. It's a standard multi-channel design, only the electronics modified for ambient conditions. Rudimentary awareness: more isn't required, and would be uneconomic to provide, when its task is basically simple."

"Can't we outwit it, then?" Alice asked.

Dalmady grimaced. "What do you think my native helpers and I have been trying to do thereabouts, this past week? It's open country; the relayers detect you coming a huge ways off, and the computer dispatches robots. Not many are needed. If you come too close to the blockhouse, they fire warning blasts. That's terrified the natives. Few of them will approach anywhere near, and in fact the savages are starting to evacuate, which'll present us with a nice bunch of hungry refugees. Not that I blame them. A low-temperature organism cooks easier than you or me. I did push ahead, and was fired on for real. I ran away before my armor should be pierced."

"What about airborne attack?" Isabel wondered.

Thorson snorted. "In three rattly cars, with handguns? Those robots fly, too, remember. Besides, the centrum has forcefields, blast cannon, missiles. A naval vessel would have trouble reducing it."

Furthermore," interjected the Thalassocrat, "I am told of a threat to destroy this town by airborne weapons, should a serious assault be made on yonder place. That cannot be risked. Sooner would I order you to depart for aye, and strike what bargain I was able with your enemies."

He can make that stick, Dalmady thought, by the simple process of telling our native workers to quit. Not that that would necessarily make any difference. He recalled the last statement of a nomad Master, as the retreat from a reconnaissance took place, Suleimanites on their animals, man on a gravscooter. "We have abided by our alliance with you, but you not by yours with us. Your predecessors swore we should have protection from skyborne invaders. If you fail to drive off these, how shall we trust you?"

Dalmady had pleaded for time and had grudgingly been granted it since the caravaneers did value their trade with him. *But if we don't solve this problem soon, I doubt the system can ever be renewed.*

"We shall not imperil you," he promised the Thalassocrat.

"How real is the threat?" Nakamura asked. "The League wouldn't take kindly to slaughter of harmless autochthons."

"But the League would not necessarily do more than complain," Thorson said, "especially if the Baburites argue that we forced them into it. They're banking on its indifference, and I suspect their judgment is shrewd."

"Right or wrong," Alice said, "their assessment of the psycho-politics will condition what they themselves do. And what assessment have they made? What do we know about their ways of thinking?"

"More than you might suppose," Yvonne replied. "After all, they've been in contact for generations, and you don't negotiate commercial agreements without having done some studies in depth first. The reason you've not seen much of me, these past days, is that I've buried myself in our files. We possess, right here, a bucketful of information about Babur."

Dalmady straightened in his chair. His pulse picked up the least bit. It was no surprise that a large and varied xenological library existed in this insignificant outback base. Microtapes were cheaply reproduced, and you never knew who might chance by or what might happen, so you were routinely supplied with references for your entire sector. "What do we have?" he barked.

Yvonne smiled wryly. "Nothing spectacular, I'm afraid. The usual: three or four of the principal languages, sketches of history and important contemporary cultures, state-of-technology analyses, statistics on stuff like population and productivity – besides the planetology, biology, psychoprofiling, et cetera. I tried and

tried to find a weak point, but couldn't. Oh, I can show that this operation must be straining their resources, and will have to be abandoned if it doesn't quickly pay off. But that's just as true of us."

Thorson fumed on his pipe. "If we could fix a gadget — We have a reasonably well-equipped workshop. That's where I've been sweating, myself."

"What had you in mind?" Dalmady inquired. The dullness of the engineer's voice was echoed in his own.

"Well, at first I wondered about a robot to go out and hunt theirs down. I could build one, a single one, more heavily armed and armored." Thorson's hand flopped empty, palm up, on the table. "But the computer has a hundred; and it's more sophisticated by orders of magnitude than any brain I could cobble together from spare-cybernetics parts; and as the Thalassocrat says, we can't risk a missile dropped on our spaceport in retaliation, because it'd take out most of the city.

"Afterward I thought about jamming, or about somehow lousing the computer itself, but that's totally hopeless. It'd never let you get near."

He sighed. "My friends, let's admit that we've had the course, and plan how to leave with minimum loss."

The Thalassocrat stayed imperturbable, as became a monarch. But the Translator's main eye filmed over, his tiny body shrank into itself, and he cried: "We had hoped...one year our descendants, learning from you, joining you among the uncounted suns — Is there instead to be endless rule by aliens?"

Dalmady and Yvonne exchanged looks. Their hands clasped. He believed the same thought must be twisting in her: We, being of the League, cannot pretend to altruism. But we are not monsters either. Some cold accountant in an office on Earth may order our departure. But can we who have been here, who like these people and were trusted by them, abandon them and continue to live with ourselves? Would we not forever feel that any blessings given us were stolen?

And the old, old legend crashed into his awareness.

He sat for a minute or two, unconscious of the talk that growled and groaned around him. Yvonne first noticed the blankness in his gaze. "Emil," she murmured, "are you well?"

Dalmady sprang to his feet with a whoop.

"What in space?" Nakamura said.

The factor controlled himself. He trembled, and small chills ran back and forth along his nerves; but his words came steady. "I have an idea."

Above the robes that billowed around him in the wind, the Translator carried an inconspicuous miniature audiovisual two-way. Dalmady in the car which he had landed

behind a hill some distance off, Thorson in the car which hovered to relay, Yvonne and Alice and Isabel and Nakamura and the Thalassocrat in the city, observed a bobbing, swaying landscape on their tuned-in screens. Black leaves streamed, long and ragged, on bushes whose twigs clicked an answer to the whining air, boulders and ice chunks humped among them; an ammonia fall boomed on the right, casting spray across the field of view. The men in the cars could likewise feel the planet's traction and the shudder of hulls under that slow, thick wind.

"I still think we should've waited for outside help," Thorsen declared on a separate screen. "That rig's a real lash-up."

"And I still say," Dalmady retorted, "your job's made you needlessly fussy in this particular case. Besides, the natives couldn't've been stalled much longer." *Furthermore, if we can rout them with nothing but what was on hand, that ought to shine in my record. I'd like to think that's less important to me, but I can't deny it's real. One way or another, the decision had to be mine. I am the factor. It's a lonesome feeling. I wish Yvonne were here beside me.*

"Quiet," he ordered. "Something's about to happen."

The Translator had crossed a ridge and was gravscooting down the opposite slope. He required no help at that; a few days of instruction had made him a very fair driver, even in costume. He was entering the robot-held area, and already a skyborne unit slanted to intercept him. In the keen Osman-light, against ochorous clouds, it gleamed like fire.

Dalmady crouched in his seat. He was airsuited. If his friend got into trouble, he'd slap down his faceplate, open the cockpit, and swoop to an attempted rescue. A blaster lay knobby in his lap. The thought he might come too late made a taste of sickness in his mouth. The robot paused at hover, arms extended, weapon pointed. The Translator continued to glide at a steady rate. When near collision, the two-way spoke for him: "Stand aside. We are instituting a change of program."

Spoke, to the listening computer, in the principal language of Babur.

Yvonne had worked out the plausible phrases, and spent patient hours with vocalizer and recorder until they seemed right. Engineer Thorson, xenologists Nakamura and Alice Bergen, artistically inclined biologist Isabel da Fonseca, Dalmady himself and several Suleimanite advisors who had spied on the Baburites, had created the disguise. Largely muffled in cloth, it didn't have to be too elaborate — a torso shaven and painted; a simple mechanical caterpillar body behind, steered by the hidden tail, automatically pacing its six legs with the wearer's two; a flexible mask with piezoelectric controls guided by the facial muscles beneath; claws and tendrils built over the natural arms, fake feet over the pair of real ones.

A human, or an ordinary Suleimanite, could not successfully have worn such an outfit. If nothing else, they were too big. But presumably it had not occurred to the Baburites to allow for midgets existing on this planet. The disguise was far from perfect; but presumably the computer was not programmed to check for any such contingency; furthermore, an intelligent, well-rehearsed actor, adapting his role moment by moment as no robot ever can, creates a gestalt transcending any minor errors of detail.

And...logically, the computer *must* be programmed to allow Baburites into its presence, to service it and collect the bluejack stored nearby.

Nonetheless, Dalmady's jaws ached from the tension on them.

The robot shifted out of the viewfield. In the receiving screens, ground continued to glide away underneath the scooter.

Dalmady switched off audio transmission from base. Though none save Yvonne, alone in a special room, was now sending to the Translator, and she via a bone conduction receiver – still, the cheers that had filled the car struck him as premature.

But the kilometers passed and passed. And the blockhouse hove, in view, dark, cubical, bristling with sensors and antennae, cornered with the sinister shapes of gun emplacements and missile silos. No forcefield went up. Yvonne said through the Translator's unit: "Open; do not close again until told," and the idiot-savant computer directed a massive gate to swing wide.

What happened beyond was likewise Yvonne's job. She scanned through the portal by the two-way, summoned what she had learned of Baburite automation technology, and directed the Translator. Afterward she said it hadn't been difficult except for poor visibility; the builders had used standard layouts and programming languages. But to the factor it was an hour of sweating, cursing, pushing fingers and belly muscles against each other, staring and staring at the image of enigmatic units which loomed between blank walls, under bluish light that was at once harsh and wan.

When the Translator emerged and the gate closed behind him, Dalmady almost collapsed.

Afterward, though – well, League people were pretty good at throwing a celebration!

"Yes," Dalmady said. "But –"

"Butter me no butts," van Rijn said. "Fact is, you reset that expensive computer so it should make those expensive robots stand idle. Why not leastwise use them for Solar?"

"That would have ruined relations with the natives, sir. Primitives don't take blandly to the notion of technological unemployment. So scientific studies would have become impossible. How then would you attract personnel?"

"What personnel would we need?"

"Some on the spot, constantly. Otherwise the Baburites, close as they are, could come back and, for example, organize and arm justly disgruntled Suteimanites against us. Robots or no, we'd soon find the bluejack costing us more than it earned us...Besides, machines wear out and it costs to replace them. Live native help will reproduce for nothing."

"Well, you got that much sense, anyhow," van Rijn rumbled. "But why did you tell

the computer it and its robots should attack *any* kind of machine, like a car or spacecraft, what comes near, and anybody of any shape what tells it to let him in? Supposing situations change, our people can't do nothings with it now neither."

"I told you, they don't need to," Dalmady rasped. "We get along – not dazzlingly, but we get along, we show a profit – with our traditional arrangements. As long as we maintain those, we exclude the Baburites from them. If we ourselves had access to the computer, we'd have to mount an expensive guard over it. Otherwise the Baburites could probably pull a similar trick on us, right? As is, the system interdicts any attempt to modernize operations in the bluejack area. Which is to say, it protects our monopoly – free – and will protect it for years to come."

He started to rise. "Sir," he continued bitterly, "the whole thing strikes me as involving the most elementary economic calculations. Maybe you have something subtler in mind, but if you do –"

"Whoa!", van Rijn boomed. "Squat yourself. Reel in some more of your drink, boy, and listen at me. Old and fat I am, but lungs and tongue I got. Also in working order is two other organs, one what don't concern you but one which is my brain, and my brain wants I should get information from you and stuff it."

Dalmady found he had obeyed.

"You need to see past a narrow specialism," van Rijn said. "Sometimes a man is too stupid good at his one job. He booms it, no matter the consequentials to everything else, and makes trouble for the whole organization he is supposed to serve. Like, you considered how Babur would react?"

"Of course. Freelady Vaillancourt – *When will I be with her again?* – and Drs. Bergen and Nakamura in particular, did an exhaustive analysis of materials on hand. As a result, we gave the computer an additional directive: that it warn any approaching vehicle before opening fire. The conversation I had later, with the spaceship captain, or whatever he was, bore out our prediction."

(A quivering snout. A bleak gleam in four minikin eyes. But the voice, strained through a machine, emotionless: "Under the rules your civilization has devised, you have not given us cause for war; and the League always responds to what it considers unprovoked attack. Accordingly, we shall not bombard.")

"No doubt they feel their equivalent of fury," Dalmady said; "But what can they do? They're realists. Unless they think of some new stunt, they'll write Suleiman off and try elsewhere."

"And they buy our bluejack yet?"

"Yes."

"We should maybe lift the price, like teaching them a lesson they shouldn't make fumblydiddles with us?"

"You can do that, if you want to make them decide they'd rather synthesize the stuff."

My report recommends against it."

This time Dalmady did rise. "Sir," he declared in anger, "I may be a yokel, my professional training may have been in a jerkwater college, but I'm not a congenital idiot who's mislaid his pills and I do take my pride seriously. I made the best decision I was able on Suleiman. You haven't tried to show me where I went wrong, you've simply had me dismissed from my post, and tonight you drone about issues that anybody would understand who's graduated from diapers. Let's not waste more of our time. Good evening."

Van Rijn avalanched upward to his own feet. "Ho, ho!" he bawled. "Spirit, too! I like, I like!"

Dumfounded, Dalmady could only gape.

Van Rijn clapped him on the shoulder, nearly felling him. "Boy," the merchant said, "I didn't mean to rub your nose in nothings except sweet violets. I did have to know, did you stumble onto your answer, which is beautiful, or can you think original? Because you take my saying, maybe everybody understands like you what is not wearing diapers no more; but if that is true, why, ninety-nine point nine nine percent of every sophont race is wearing diapers, at least on their brains, and it leaks out of their mouths. I find you is in the oh point oh one percent, and I want you. Hoo-ha, how I want you!"

He thrust the gin-filled goblet back into Dalmady's hand. His tankard clanked against it. "Drink! Drink!"

Dalmady took a sip. Van Rijn began to prowl.

"You is from a frontier planet and so is naive," the merchant said, "but that can be outlived like pimples. See, when my underlings at HQ learned you had pulled our nuts from the fire on Suleiman, they sent you a standard message, not realizing an Altaian like you would not know that in such cases the proceeding is SOP," which he pronounced "sop." He waved a gorilla arm, splashing beer on the floor. "Like I say, we had to check if you was lucky only. If so, we would promote you to be manager some place better and forget about you. But if you was, actual, extra smart and tough, we don't want you for a manager. You is too rare and precious for that. Would be like using a Hokusai print in a catbox."

Dalmady raised goblet to mouth, unsteadily. "What do you mean?" he croaked.

"Entrepreneur! You will keep title of factor, because we can't make jealousies, but what you do is what the old Americans would have called a horse of a different dollar.

"Look." Van Rijn reclaimed his cigar from the disposal rim, took a puff, and made forensic gestures with it and tankard alike while he continued his earthquake pacing. "Suleiman was supposed to be a nice routine post, but you told me how little we know on it and how sudden the devil himself came to lunch. Well, what about the real new, real hairy – and real fortune-making – places? Ha?"

"You don't want a manager for them, not till they been whipped into shape. A good manager is a very high-powered man, and we need a lot of him. But in his bottom, he is

a routinier; his aim is to make things go smooth. No, for the wild places you need an innovator in charge, a man what likes to take risks, a heterodoxy if she is female – somebody what can meet wholly new problems in unholy new ways – you see?

"Only such is rare, I tell you. They command high prices: high as they can earn for themselves. Natural, I want them earning for me, too. So I don't put that kind of factor on salary and dangle a promotion ladder in front of him, No, the entrepreneur kind, first I get his John Bullcock on a ten-year oath of fealty. Next I turn him loose with a stake and my backup, to do what he wants, on straight commission of ninety percent.

"Too bad nobody typed you before you went in managerial school. Now you must have a while in an entrepreneurial school I got tucked away where nobody notices. Not dull for you; I hear they throw fine orgies; but mainly I think you will enjoy your classes, if you don't mind working till brainsweat runs out your nose. Afterward you go get rich, if you survive, and have a big ball of fun even if you don't. Hokay?"

Dalmady thought for an instant of Yvonne; and then he thought, *What the deuce, if nothing better develops, in a few years I can set any hiring policies I feel like*; and: "Hokay!" he exclaimed, and tossed off his drink in a single gulp.

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Sociology Through Science Fiction [1974]

The Earth Book of Stormgate

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Two bad proofs combined together to help make one much better proof. When one proof was incomprehensible, the other provided the answer. Sometimes you just get lucky -- mnq