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# A PROMISING PLANET

**Jeremy Strike**

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It was a promising planet, all right. It promised fabulous commissions for Bill Warden, surveyor for Star Systems, Inc. who had made first landing.

It promised a lot, but getting delivery was going to be another story. Because what Bill discovered right off was that this was a very religious planet. If you asked God for something, you either got it—or a direct answer saying why not. If you cursed, you received immediate reprimand. If you prayed, you might get a prompt response.

It was most disconcerting, to say the least, and especially so when the planetary deity decided He did not want any traders leaving the planet—and showed Bill and his rivals that where Almighty Power was concerned, it was no mere figure of speech!

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To TONY, for patience.

“The god business is really rather boring, you know,” the voice said.

“All those hosannas floating up to the sky and the eternal petitions to do this or that and ‘I promise if you’ll do this, I’ll never do that again’ and then the wars.

“They’re the only thing that keeps it interesting, you know, the wars. They say I wouldn’t approve of what someone else is doing, which is usually taking away some territory or other, and then they make wars—in my names. Us gods have lots of names, you know.”

A slightly bewildered expression spread across the face of the tall man who stood alone in the large, glowing cavern.

“Uh, wars?” he said.

“Yes, wars,” the voice replied. “Give me a good war any old time. It relieves the tedium.”

“Uh, tedium?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

“Quite.”

A silence descended for several minutes. At last the rangy man ran fingers through a thatch of wiry, carrot hair.

“I don’t know very much about gods,” he got out at last.

“That’s all right. I do quite a lot of improvising, anyway.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I didn’t start out as a god, it was just sort of— thrust on me.”

“Thrust,” the man said in a strangled voice.

“Thrust.” The response was succinct. “You see, it was, oh, several millions of these planetary revolutions ago, when—”

“Revolutions?”

“Night and day, night and day,” the voice snapped impatiently. “Seasons, equinoxes, the life cycle.”

“Oh, those kind of revolutions.”

“Yes, but you interrupted; gods are not used to being interrupted. Let Me finish.”

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right.” The voice sounded mollified. “At any rate, before you barged in, I was going to say that I hadn’t always been in the god business, but—”

“Excuse me.”

“Oh, for My sake, what is it this time?”

“How does one go about addressing a god? I’m sorry, but—”

“Why do you keep saying you’re sorry? Of course you’re sorry. Now what is it you want this time?”

“What do I call you?” the man asked humbly. “I mean, it isn’t every day I get to talk to a deity; most societies don’t have them anymore.”

“The natives usually preface My names with ten or twenty honorific titles but under the circumstances, and since you’re from off the planet, I suppose you could call Me Most High, or Earth Mother or just plain Your Worship. Take your pick, I’m really a very liberal god.”

“Earth Mother? You mean You’re a female god?”

“Not at all. But all primitives call their planet Earth, or its equivalent, in the first place, and identify it as a maternal figure in the second. Actually,” the voice went on, smugly the man felt, “I’m really quite neuter. If you’d be happier thinking of Me as male, that’s quite all right.”

“Thank you.”

“Not at all,” the voice said graciously.

## I

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Bill Warden nudged the controls of the survey ship into a flattened orbit and turned to the screens which would give him a close-up view of the planet below.

It hung in space reflecting blue and green light from the sol-class sun. He had spotted the star on infrared sweep days ago and when the instruments pinpointed it as a possible, had run for it.

Warden hoped other corporation surveys hadn’t beaten him to it. This was his sixth month in the sector, slowly quartering back and forth across the barely-charted star systems. He had found three acceptable planets in that time, and each was marked by the directional signal of one of the other major corporations.

The signals meant the planet was not only marked, but probably staffed by a few claim holders until the exploration and exploitation rights could be established by whichever corporation had found it.

Warden was a surveyor for Star Systems, Incorporated. He received a commission plus bonus on all business derived from any viable planets he found and claimed for Star Systems.

Star Systems was a johnny-come-lately to the race of home corporations for lucrative planets among the far stars. It was small as corporations went in the latter days of Earth’s first great expansion. It was a hungry organization which specialized in low-budget operations, snatching jobs the bigger, older, and richer corporations wouldn’t touch.

This meant they were unable to send out heavily staffed surveys. Star Systems grew on the luck of gamblers like Warden. They also underbid jobs viciously. Warden knew that was why his corporation was unpopular. He also knew why surveyors like himself were considered slightly crazy by other missions: Warden went out alone, worked alone, and ran the risks of doing it. If he fell sick, the ship’s limited life-support systems could only help so much. If he were injured on any world he located, it was his fault. He lived by quick wits and a reliance on experience and fast reflexes.

In ten years on the job, Warden had been attacked by strange plants and by hostile animals, including a few cultured natives he had come across. During that time, he had developed his own ways of going into promising worlds and getting out again.

He whistled tunelessly to himself as he went about checking the standard bands on his receiver to see if claims to the planet were being broadcast.

He was unable to detect any signal in two passes around the globe below him.

Infrared, radar and radio scanners and optical telescopes cut in, he settled into the control board to see what there was to see. Elation swept over him as he thought that, if he were here first, the planet could be an important one.

Since the ship computer would correlate the data from most of the scanner systems, Warden contented himself with bringing one of the telescopes into a close focus.

Slight glimmers of light showed on the night side. He had seen many planets at various levels of cultural advancement, and he failed to be impressed.

He grunted and made a note in his log. He palmed the stud for radio transmission. The scanner swept a random selection of bands. There was nothing.

Warden noted it and then ran a more comprehensive television scan than he had needed for his preliminary title search. He wrote in the log: Inhabitants presumed to be at or below nineteenth-century level, Terran. No indication of electronic transmissions of any kind.

The monitors fed information into the computer as he popped a pre-packaged meal into the oven. Warden slit the package with a thumbnail and poured the contents onto a plate, then crumbled the package over the stew. The package was a bread substitute.

As he ate, Warden read the report the computer was showing on the master viewplate. He saw that the planet was slightly larger than Earth, there were three major land masses, and the atmosphere contained a slightly higher proportion of oxygen than the level he liked to maintain in the ship. He made a note to increase his own supply for a couple of cycles so that he wouldn't be giddy when he left the ship, if he left it.

It definitely was a planet where he could breathe comfortably. But there might be a problem with microbe life, not to mention the natives or the natives' pets.

Warden's reading usually consisted of reports from other survey craft, when he could get his hands on them. He was not usually entertained by tales of spores that burrowed under the skin with horrible results, or of crews expecting friendly contact but ending by giving some native a case of indigestion. Warden had long since resolved never to accept an invitation to dinner, even if the natives were friendly.

The high priest stood on the ziggurat, earnestly contemplating the heavens. He had prayed long and mightily in the holy cave, but with no answer from the Most High. Now near despair, he anxiously watched for a reason why the deity was not responding.

Usually when the Most High was displeased with the people, there were terrible storms or earthquakes or nasty things from the ocean depths raining from the skies.

Yet the weather was continuing fair, the sun came out every morning on schedule and it rained every evening in the correct amount. The crops flourished.

He reflected, tugging at a wattle beneath his chin, never had things gone so well before!

Zelnak, twentieth in line of high priests who had gone before him with the same name, was miserable. This was unheard of! The enemy tribes to the west were not warring on the borders, the pirates had not yet come storming out of the eastern sea this year, and worst of all, the population was up.

He had profoundly studied the hidden writings of the great men who preceded him. Zelnak took it as an article of faith that if the populace didn't have something to grumble about, they soon would begin to grumble about the priesthood.

Thus, he prostrated himself in a burgeoning panic before the high altar. "Most High," he mumbled into the stone, "this must not be allowed to happen!"

The god upon the altar bore a striking resemblance to the inhabitants of the planet, tall and slightly saurian in appearance. Light from oil lanterns cast a flickering glow on the face of the god. Its gray stone visage was immobile.

At last the priest rose and, while arranging his robes and straightening his crown, looked off between the planet's two small moons. He saw the flash as a star that seemed to descend toward the surface.

The high priest stared at the fiery tail the star dragged behind it. Then he clapped his hands and hurried to the top of the steps. Pointing, Zelnak called out to the temple keepers below, "A sign! The Most High sends us a sign!"

There were low murmurs of awe from the grouped priests below. Somewhere, a drum began to beat. As the high priest turned back to the falling star, a choir took up a chant to the glory of the Most High.

Warden had orbited the planet for two ship's days, correlating the information from the computer.

He was elated. Surveys showed the world to contain a high incidence of usable ores.

He spent some time observing the native cultures. The computer told him, when he filed his observations, that the culture was at about the level of the Aztec civilization found by the Spanish invasions in the ancient history of his own planet. There was soil cultivation with pyramids and large palace complexes surrounded by towns. It suggested priests or priest-kings ruling the populace.

Regular scratchings on the exteriors of major buildings suggested a written form of communication as well as a developed oral tradition.

"I suppose I could pose as a god, or an emissary from the gods," Warden mused. "It could be fun, until I finish the complete surveys and get the beacon set."

He considered the natives. They looked like bipedal snakes, from his visual observation.

It would be better if they were mammalian, but it didn't really give him any cause for concern. People back home reacted better to humanoid cultures. These natives had four fingers, one of which was almost as opposed as a thumb. He wondered why they had a gray tinge.

Warden happily cleared speculation from his mind and gave all his attention to lowering the ship to a spot he had chosen previously.

He took control and brought the ship down on the night side in the hills about four miles from the largest city.

Visual sighting told him there was a waterfall beside the point he picked in a low bowl of a valley. He could sample the river unobserved, and, bouncing signals off one of the two satellites, could keep a visual monitor on the inhabitants. The forested hills would mask his landing place until he decided whether to make contact.

There was slight turbulence in the air as he came in. Warden kept all the scanners going, and rode the turbulence down, keeping the ship in a controlled arc as he screamed into the atmosphere.

The computer, he knew, was gulping further samples of the place, which he would go over before he moved a foot from the ship.

He was settling toward a glade surrounded by blue-green trees. There was a kind of blossom on some of them. He turned on the outside aural pickups bedded in the skin of the ship but heard no other sounds than those of the hovering craft itself.

Warden kept the ship hovering, keeping above the water of the river. The jets made the river hiss and steam. He would set down after the heat acquired by passage through the atmosphere had cooled to a point where his landing would not cause a forest fire.

Warden spent the next afternoon watching the activities of the natives in the city four miles away. They were moving about in what he took to be excited activity, unless that was the way they always were.

He rummaged through the hold, checking the beacons; then he moved one to the hatch. Satisfying himself that it was in perfect condition, he cycled the hatch open, shoved it out and went back to the control room.

The moving beacon's tractors cut into the mossy material growing on the stream bed. Warden guided it into the water and moved it back beneath the falls, making sure it was out of the main current of falling water, but out of sight.

Then, sitting before his control console, activated the tape device in the beacon, opened his own video contact and said smiling into the lens, "This is Star Systems, Incorporated, Survey Ship MX 12-4040. This planet is claimed under provision of the Interstellar Survey Code." He reeled off the coordinates. Then he played it back, thumbed the device activating the beacon on continuous send. He began composing a report for corporation headquarters.

## II

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Zelnak was impatient. His morning had been taken up with fools, each of whom claimed a revelation from the falling star. He knew that the majority of them hadn't even seen it, but composed his features to a look of mild interest and suffered through hour after hour. That was part of his job.

The guards pushed forward a meanly dressed, cringing figure.

"Another one who saw it, Your Worship," the chamberlain said.

"And what did the falling star tell you, my good fellow," the high priest queried.

"May it please you, sir," the man stammered, "it told me nothing."

“What? What?” the chamberlain blustered. “It told you nothing? Then why do you take up His Worship’s time?” He cuffed the trembling peasant.

The man stumbled and fell. From the floor before the throne he said, “I only saw it float to ground, Sire. I thought you wanted to know and would reward me.” He looked up at the august form of Zelnak. His eyes pleaded with the high priest.

The peasant climbing slowly to his feet said, “I am but a poor shepherd, my lord.”

“Tell us,” Zelnak said wearily, “about this nonsense of stars floating to the ground.”

The peasant faced the high priest with the caution of a hundred generations near the soil. “It did float, Your Worship,” he said sturdily, “with great blossoms of flame coming from its bottom.”

Zelnak laughed. “Next he’ll tell us that angels dance on the heads of pins,” the high priest tittered. The attendant priests dutifully guffawed.

The peasant hunched his shoulder. “It floated,” he insisted stubbornly, “and then it hung above the river.”

The high priest surged majestically to his feet. He pointed a wrathful finger at the peasant and shouted, “Stop lying! Stars don’t float, and they don’t hang! You’re dangerously close to heresy, fellow!”

“It floated,” the peasant said sullenly, “and the river turned to steam. Now it’s just sitting there on a rock.”

Zelnak shrieked twice. Finally he calmed down enough to gasp, “Stars don’t sit on rocks.”

“Well, this one is,” the peasant said smugly. “I can show it to you, too.”

One of the reasons Warden was in his job was that he hated paper work. But even the despised effort of making out a report was a happy one, now that he seemed to have a money-producing planet all to himself.

The communicator screen beside him said, “Beep.”

“Beep, yourself.” Warden frowned. “Who asked you?”

The machine said again, “Beep.”

He palmed the switch to accept a call. Warden expected to see a message rebroadcast by beacon from his supervisor at Star Systems.

Instead, the screen cleared to show the sardonic gaze of Sara Medell, one of the competition. Working for one of the giant corporations, Intergalactic, Sara was captain of a three-man crew. She had beaten him to two other planets in the past.

Warden looked at the image. He saw a pert, dark-haired girl with a snub nose and ample figure. She wore the green uniform of her company.

“Surprise!” she said. “Your beacon went on just as we were making our first passes.”

“Surprise, yourself,” Warden responded. He grinned. “I got here first.”

“It’s not nice to boast, Bill,” she said. “Besides, I never crowed when I got there first.”

“That’s true, and I maybe could be just a little bit sorry—if you’d like to join me for a drink. Or do you have a close friend in your crew?”

“The answer’s no to both. Have you looked outside your ship lately? You have visitors.”

“What?” He swivelled to his left and established direct television coverage of the ground surrounding the ship.

The ship was surrounded by thousands of milling natives.

Sara was enjoying it hugely. “Tell me, Mr. Custer, are the locals friendly?”

“How the hell should I know? I don’t even know how they found me!”

She said sweetly, “We’ll help you out, Bill, for a piece of your action. Our preliminary surveys say you’ve got a rich little beauty down there—or it has you,” she snickered.

“I don’t need or want any help, thanks. They can’t hurt the ship. I’m not about to give up any of this place; I found it.”

“Suit yourself. We’ll stick around for a few days. Call if you get in trouble. The offer stands.”

The screen went blank, but Warden didn’t notice. He was too busy scanning the growing native crowd around the survey ship.

“Gah,” he said deep in his throat.

From his height above the shoulders of the mob, Zelnak had a clear view. As he came out of the trees beside the river, he looked up. There, sitting on a rock beside the waterfall, was a glittering object. The rays of the sun bounced off its burnished surface and hurt his eyes.

But Zelnak was not worried about the state of his eyes. He felt like throwing himself on the ground and knocking his head against a tree twenty or thirty times in anguish.

Instead, as the crowd from the city flowed around his stupefied bearers and toward the curious object, he sighed.

“Well,” Zelnak muttered, “so that’s what a star looks like.”

Then he gathered himself and beckoned over several captains of the guard. “The Most High commands that you remove this star, very carefully so as not to damage it, to the Forbidden Place, where He dwells.”

As the ship lurched again, Warden swore, falling against the console. The natives had looped ropes around the ship, felled trees to clear a pathway back to the city, and used the logs to roll the spherical vessel forward.

Warden had closed all the hatches over the viewing ports for direct observation, though he could see the landscape slowly revolving outside from the television lens buried in the skin of the ship.

His receiver signaled. It was Sara.

“Why don’t you just go out and chase them away,” she said.

Warden didn’t care for the concealed laughter he saw in her eyes.



“They have spears,” he pointed out laconically.

“They would probably be more afraid of you, than you of them,” she teased.

“There are a lot more of them than there are of me, and I’m more afraid,” Warden said. “Besides, I bleed easily.”

“Well, what are you going to do?”

“When they go away for the night to sleep or something, I’ll be able to take off without hurting any of them.” He smiled nastily. “But it’s still my planet, Sara.”

“Suit yourself,” she shrugged. “We’ll stick around just in case.”

“Don’t hold your breath, sweetie.” Warden mimicked her tone.

“Just in case they parboil you, chum, is there any particular message you’d like on the tombstone?—that is, if we can find enough of you left to bury.”

She immediately broke the connection without waiting for an answer.

Warden regarded the screen glumly. The landscape was still going around on the panels before him. He groaned as the ship lurched again, and he found himself on the ceiling.

“Very funny,” Warden said to the floor.

### III

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Warden was unable to sleep. The gray-skinned natives were working by torchlight now, still dragging the sixty tons of ship, with the surveyor inside, toward the temple on the hill.

It was slow going. Bill Warden no longer said oof when the ship lurched now one way, now another.

He called Sara. “It’s the local equivalent of midnight here and they’re still at it; and it’s the second day of this.”

“Want us to come down and scare them off? Our own reading shows the culture to be somewhere about the early stage of our own Romans. If we came down that would be an omen or something—scare the hell out of them.”

Warden pretended shock. “Ladies don’t curse,” he said.

“This lady does. This lady can take care of herself, thank you very much. Do you want to make a deal?”

“No thanks, I was just lonesome.”

“If you won’t make a deal, and you need the Cavalry why don’t you yell for Star Systems?”

“I’d have to share the cut.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t worry,” he said airily. “Superior brains will win out.”

“Yours, or the natives?”

“Ha, ha, very—” The ship lurched again. “Whoops.” Warden was again staring at the console from the ceiling, which was the floor again.

“Some genius here has discovered the lever,” he said. “They wedge tree trunks under the hull and shove. Then the ship’s kept steady by those long triple lines of people hauling on ropes. They have something that looks like a demented elephant helping.”

“We know, we sent a peeper down. Being better equipped than you, we have found out a lot.”

Warden often lamented he could not afford the more sophisticated devices the big corporations lavished on their survey crews.

“What, for example?”

“They’re mammalian, though they look sort of snaky. The weather is fantastically regular. It looks from here like the clouds form from nowhere in a geometric pattern, move around a little bit and then dissolve.”

“I’ve noticed that,” he said. He hadn’t. An idea struck him. “But now you mention it, it’s rained here every afternoon around six o’clock.”

“The two moons cancel out the tides,” she continued. “The seas just swell, then fall off; they’re crammed with life.”

“Who cares? I’m looking for minerals and ores.”

“Speaking of which, the instruments show an enormous metal deposit in the hills beyond that city, but we haven’t been able to see it, or what’s covering it, with visuals.”

“So?” Warden was beginning to feel chagrined.

“So there’s a big cloud over it.”

“That’s natural.”

“The cloud never moves.”

“Local geological condition,” he offered.

“So we sent the peeper in to look underneath the cloud; it didn’t come back. It just went black and wouldn’t respond to the controls,” she went on.

“Malfunction.” Warden grinned.

“There were no moving parts to malfunction,” she said.

“Magnetic attraction,” he said.

“So we sent a peeper after it that had never been used,” she said inexorably, “and it didn’t come back either.”

“Um,” he said.

“So there’s something extremely suspicious about that place,” she continued.

“It just went black, too?”

“Like the other one: one minute it operated perfectly, then it entered the fog or cloud or whatever and went gray, then black. It wouldn’t respond to any kind of primary or secondary control at all.

“So then we bounced any number of complicated wavelengths all over the area. You know what we got?”

“Nothing.” Warden was beginning to feel derisive.

“That’s right. Either that’s no ordinary cloud or there is something which nullifies our direction,” she said.

Warden laughed. “You’re seeing danger behind every rock.”

Sara sniffed. “No such thing. But it bears investigation.”

Warden was patient. “We’ve both surveyed this planet,” he said, “which by the way, will be called Warden’s World, and our computers both came up with the same answer: low advancement level.”

“I really don’t expect to find any Bessarabian wambats with pink tentacles,” he said, “despite the fact that there are some strange things in space.”

She made a face at him in the screen. The ship lurched again and Warden sat on the wall to face her.

“I wish they’d get where they’re going,” he said.

Sara said, “We’re leaving in two standard ship days if you don’t holler ‘help’ before.” Her eyes softened. “You’re not such a bad jerk,” she said, “just a jerk.”

“Go jump over an asteroid, lady,” he smiled back at her, breaking the connection.

He cut in the screens for close outside surveillance and wearily followed the efforts of the natives to shove the ship along.

By dawn, Warden had learned a bit of the mushy native dialect. He knew what was being said when someone said, shove, pull, or get moving. He learned rope, drink and look at that, which occurred whenever the women carrying water came up to ease the thirst of the males hauling on the lines. The demented elephants were called something like shashlik.

It was morning before they were through the city and approaching the temple gates. Warden figured he would be eating lunch by the time they arrived at the temple.

“Everyone in town must be here,” he told himself wryly. “Old popular Bill, that’s me.”

He damped the sound from the outside receivers. The population of the city was screaming in delirium, throwing flowers in the path of the “star” as it was inched along toward the temple. Drums rattled; horns blasted.

What he suspected was wine flowed freely in the streets. Children shrieked; flags waved; people danced.

“Big night, or day, out on the town,” Warden observed sourly. He wished he could get some sleep. Every time he dozed, the survey ship would jolt around another degree. He began to learn to anticipate them and started at last to get some rest.

At noon a soft chime announced that it was time for Warden to be hungry. He was. He added water to a package of synthesized cheese and after it solidified, watched the screens as he ate.

The natives were building themselves to a frenzy behind the ship. As it bumped heavily through the massive gates to the temple, Warden could see the local leaders standing on a raised platform to the left. The most important one was covered in gems which caught the sunlight, and splintered and splashed it so that the figure was hard to look at, even on the screens.

“Pretty impressive,” Warden murmured. The lesser leaders were impressive, too. Each was covered in a world’s ransom in enormous stones.

“Must be the temple hierarchy,” he said to himself. Warden looked for an important figure that looked more secular, but there wasn’t one.

The ship was in the courtyard of the temple now, and Warden became too interested in the ceremonies going on about him to notice that the ship was still inching forward.

By the time the ship was at the door of the temple, it was too late. Warden came to his senses with a start; he couldn’t blast out of there without killing thousands.

“Oh, great,” he said.

The ship, pushed by the people, lurched through a high door and into a gloomy interior.

The temple was vast. It had been built into an overhanging cliff on the face of the hill. He searched the screens. The ship was headed toward another pair of overwhelming doors at the end of the room. Even in the gloom, Warden could see they were covered with large gems or crystals.

An hour later, Warden stared around the cavern to which the ship had been dragged. The natives were gone. The lone figure of the high priest lay prostrate before the sole ornamentation in the place, a statue. He turned the audio receivers to high, and could hear the crowd outside the temple, and the glittering cleric at the idol. He couldn’t hear anything else.

Gradually, he grew bored. He wondered if he could use a laser beam to cut his way out of the place. He was still tired.

“I’ll think about it later,” he told himself and lay down for a nap.

He awakened some hours later with a start. The cavern was still. He checked the screens. The place glowed with a greenish-blue, iridescent light. It was a high-domed cave, surfaced with a kind of crystalline rock.

The doors through which the ship had been dragged were closed. Warden could see a dim light coming from the other end of the cavern. He tried magnification on a screen.

Fog or haze obscured the view. He tried infrared. He tried bouncing quasar beams off it. He tried every frequency and wavelength the computer controlled. There was nothing.

The place was silent. The high priest had apparently gone.

Warden sat and stared at his instrument panel. He was baffled. Then he remembered his earlier conversation with Sara. A chill went up his backbone.

“Ugh,” he said, annoyed at himself.

Despite a well-developed sense of self-preservation which told him to stay inside the safety of the ship, Warden was eaten with curiosity about the place.

He cautiously extended a ramp to the floor of the cavern. It stopped with a hollow bump which echoed across the wavering, blue light.

Blaster in hand, Warden went to the hatch and cycled it open. He peered around, even though the instruments told him there was no one else in the cave.

As he inched slowly down the ramp, his spirits returned. He stepped softly off the ramp, his booted foot making a little spiral of dust and a low sound.

The surveyor edged warily around the ship, making a complete circle. Satisfied at last, he jammed the blaster into his belt and jauntily approached the only other thing in the cavern, the statue.

It stood on a waist-high plinth. The figure was apparently life-size, which made it two feet taller than Warden's six-four.

It was made in the image of the gray natives.

"You're some beauty," Warden commented.

A hollow, booming voice said, "What is your business here?"

Warden froze, gathered his wits in an instant, then dived behind the base of the statue, scrabbling out his blaster as he rolled and came back to a crouch.

A dull silence descended on the cave. He suddenly realized the voice had spoken in his own language.

Warden fidgeted. Finally, he called softly, "Uh, anybody out there?"

The loud, echoing voice said again, "What is your business here?"

"I'm Bill Warden," the crouching man declared. "Who are you? Where are you?"

"God," the answer rumbled back, "and I am everywhere."

## IV

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Why," the first mate inquired, "don't we just go down there, knock Warden gently across the head and take him out?"

"Right," the engineer said. "That way, we'd have a piece of the planet by rights and it would be his word against ours that he was in danger."

The third man in the crew, the official recorder responsible for data correlation, said nothing.

"But that's a rich world!" the mate protested as Sara shook her head. "We'll get a big bonus if we get it."

The engineer chimed in with, "For that matter, why not just take the whole thing?" He looked at the mate.

Sara ignored the hint. She had expected some kind of trouble from these two after she had known them

a day. The corporation assigned crews and captains without consulting either.

The mate and engineer were two of a kind, and obviously resented taking orders from a woman, especially a young woman. The recorder would have taken orders from a four-year-old child, she felt.

Sara knew there were instances of rough conflict among the surveyors of rival corporations, but generally they kept their records clean, because laws were strict on the matter.

Sara knew that this pair, greedy as they were, would not risk jail and blacklisting if there was even the slightest chance of being caught, even for something much less serious than murder.

She smiled across the mess table. "No, Mister Buck, Mister Jason, and that's an order. We'll wait." She ignored the recorder; he was more like one of his machines than a person.

"I'd like that planet, too," Sara went on, "but the corporation doesn't want trouble. And I won't stand for it!"

"So who's to know?" the mate asked persuasively.

The engineer came in on cue with, "If the natives get him, we have a valid claim to the whole thing."

"I don't care for that line of reasoning, Mr. Jason," Sara said with an edge to her voice. "I don't like it at all. And I won't hear any more about it."

The meal concluded in a sullen quiet.

Zelnak was dreaming of stars, large stars, small stars and stars that sat on rocks.

The god still had not answered his pleas for information. Yet the day itself apparently was a great success. The city outdid its former excesses in a debauch which was still continuing in some quarters, including the chambers of the younger guardian priests in the palace. The noise drifted faintly up to the chamber where the high priest lay.

He twitched, grumbled and turned over.

The star was floating around the city, while the people laughed and cheered. Zelnak kept demanding that the star either vanish or go back into the night sky where it belonged.

He was ignored.

The star approached an enormous statue of the god. The Most High descended from His pedestal and danced with the star, which twinkled gracefully. The people roared approval.

Zelnak stormed up to the deity and His playmate and, forgetting etiquette, demanded that the Most High get back to the business of guarding the city.

A frown appeared on the face of the Most High. The sky went dark, lightning and thunder were heard in the sky. Zelnak quailed, then awakened.

One of the guards was waving a lamp and thumping the floor softly to get his attention.

The guard fell to one knee before the dais on which Zel-nak rested. "It is the Most High, Your Worship," he said.

"What about the Most High?" Zelnak rapped out at once.

“He speaks, Your Worship. I am sent to tell you. The voice is terrible. None of the temple brethren dared open the doors; they are afraid.”

Zelnak smugly said, “And well they might.” He was mollified. This was heartening news. His self-confidence came surging back with a rush.

“Here, guard,” he said graciously, “you may help us to dress and then attend us to the temple.”

Warden was becoming more familiar and at ease with the god. After his first alarm at the voice and being trapped in the cave, he adjusted quickly. He was even beginning to entertain a kind of wary affection for the voice.

He hazarded, “Do you have to shout?”

“What?” the voice boomed.

“Shout! Your voice, Most High, it’s too loud.”

“The natives expect it. They wouldn’t be intimidated if they weren’t shouted at,” the echoing rumble said. “But oh, well, how’s this?” The level of the voice abruptly descended several decibels.

“Comforting,” Warden said. He was beginning to want to ask questions. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure,” the god said. “If you have finished interrupting me, I will get on with the story of how I came to be a god.”

Though he was bursting to ask questions of an entirely different kind, Warden held himself in check and composed himself on the foot of the ramp where he was seated, prepared for a long and involved saga.

“I’m all ears,” Warden said.

“Do you mean that each of your cells has an auditory function?” the god inquired.

“No, nothing like that. Let’s get on with it.”

“Quite right. Now, where was I? Oh, yes. The god business was thrust on Me several of your centuries after the Ones Who Went Before departed.”

Warden wanted to break in, but held himself in check. He reasoned that if he just listened, he ultimately would find out everything he wanted to know. He uttered a sympathetic sound.

The god continued, “The planet, which the current natives also call Earth, was left deserted. To amuse myself, I rearranged the geography a little, and changed the cycles of the seasons so that it is uniform in all of the temperate zones of the planet at any given time. Then I encouraged a more lush growth than the Ones were accustomed to liking.

“Getting these conditions was really quite an exercise, if I do congratulate myself on it. I had to move a few mountains—a lot, actually—to give the planet a distinct bulge, which altered its rate of spin on the axis. I suppose you would consider that a trifle, coming from a sophisticated civilization?”

Warden knew the god was angling for praise, and gave it. “Oh, no,” he protested. “We can’t do anything like that, although it is theoretically possible. Our ecological engineers have revived a few dead worlds by seeding oxygen and building up soil with chemical processes. I don’t know too much about it, actually; they do it with insects and things. But we can’t do the things You can, Most High.” The last statement was delivered in a tone of vast admiration.

The god accepted Warden's duplicity as sincerity. "The ecology of this world is strictly controlled; I see to that. Not a sparrow falls that I don't know about, even though you may not see them as sparrows. I keep an accurate record within several billions of all the insects and their natural enemies as well. It wouldn't do to let anything get the better of anything else. I keep a nice balance.

"Except for the bipeds, of course," the Most High said judiciously. "After I put this world in beautiful order, balancing the weather and maintaining a system of natural checks and balances among the flora and fauna, I discovered one thing: it was too perfect. Perfection is static, after all. There has to be a flaw, if you know what I mean.

"That's where the natives come in; they are a planned irritant. It keeps things upset to just the right degree. That, of course, makes for a random factor which keeps my job worthwhile. They're really sometimes unpredictable. Their ingenuity is boundless, if I say so myself.

"I keep a close watch on them in a way. They're forever plotting against one another, or making wars, or gambling or cheating. That's what keeps it interesting. I hand down a few laws from time to time, just to see how they go about breaking them. It's really very amusing."

Warden was appalled, but no longer could contain himself. "Did You create them?" he demanded. "Did You take protozoa or something like that and gradually build up to where they are now, or did You just invent them in one grand gesture?"

"Oh, nothing like that," the god said. "I inherited a perfectly good world, and it wasn't necessary to get that involved. One works with the materials at hand as a rule, but it wasn't needful in this case.

"I imported them," the god said as if it were the most natural thing.

Warden strangled.

"What was that?" the god asked. "Did you say something?"

"Argh," Warden said.

"I don't seem to be able to find that word," the god said chidingly.

Warden gulped. "You imported them!"

"Yes," the Most High responded. "See here, Warden, are you unusually stupid, or is it a cultural proclivity of your species to repeat the speaker's last words?" The god went on, crossly, Warden thought. "I do not find that an attractive feature in you. It is specious. If you haven't anything to add to this conversation, then don't say anything at all. You're as bad as the high priest, who's always pestering me to do this or that.

"One of these days I'm going to catch him out in the open and smite him with a thunderbolt. You might keep that in mind, Warden. It could happen to you, you know."

"Yes sir," Warden said meekly.

"Humpf," the god said. "I daresay.

"Anyway," the Most High continued, "after they arrived, these Select of the Universe, as I believe they called themselves at the time—I soon disabused them of that notion, incidentally—these Select, had ideas of their own.



“It was necessary to teach them a lesson. They possessed a certain amount of technology, and that had to be destroyed. The first thing technological societies do is to begin meddling: they dig up things and upset things. They don’t think about what they are squandering,” the voice said pointedly.

“Like us Terrans,” Warden offered brightly.

“Exactly. Rip things out of the bowels of the Earth, these cretins, and call it progress! When these people were settled, I settled them. They couldn’t understand how they got here, since I had simply snatched a ship or two out of space and landed it in spite of their efforts, but they thought they could just start digging and extracting metals and generating a form of electricity.

“That was exactly what I didn’t want. I wanted them to start from scratch, in the beautiful unspoiled simplicity of the native.

“So I destroyed their camp with a flood and carried away their ships.

“Of course, they started to build again, and I destroyed their city with a hurricane and a tidal wave.

“They were courageous, I’ll give them that. They started over again. Well, to make a long story short, I kept them so busy contending with the dangers of a hostile environment that they had all they could do just to survive.

“By the third generation they had regressed considerably, by the sixth generation they were back to spears and arrows; by the twelfth generation they had stabilized a culture that was a reasonable facsimile of what I had in mind originally.

“They finally got the idea I was a vengeful god, and were afraid of thunder and lightning. They began to pray to rocks and trees and to sounds in the night, and after that I let them alone for a while.

“They are slowly making progress, and that’s all to the good. It wouldn’t do to let them stagnate.

“As I said,” the god finished, “I keep the world balanced nicely. Even their wars help, you know. It wouldn’t do to have overpopulation; then there really would be trouble. Anyway, that is how I came to be a god, Warden. Do you have any questions?”

Warden’s mind reeled. The implications were awful. He had questions.

“Yes,” he said. “Quite a few, Most High. Could we start at the beginning? What I mean, is…” Warden’s voice faltered.

“I know precisely what you mean,” the god said testily. “These silly natives are forever debating it. How did it all start? Who created the world? Well, obviously the answer is, I had the major hand in it. Then, when they have gotten around to satisfying themselves on that point, they want to know who created Me? Well, of course, that is an inadmissible question as far as they are concerned. I simply am, and that’s that.

“A couple of the high priests before this one wanted to know about the stars and what’s out there. They didn’t last long. If you let the natives start asking questions like that, then they’ll want to go out and find out for themselves. That is out of the question absolutely.”

“I see,” Warden said. He didn’t see at all, but he was not going to admit that when a thunderbolt might be in the offing.

“No, you don’t see, Warden,” the god answered snappishly, “although I don’t suppose it would hurt to

talk to you about it. You're from an advanced civilization, anyway.

"Actually," the voice said musingly, "I don't remember My Creation at all. One day I was making some particularly hard clouds and it occurred to Me that I didn't know why I was doing it. That's the earliest memory of My childhood. It was shortly before the Ones departed. After they left, I began to branch out and learn things, and that's how it was."

"Are you one of the Ones?" Warden asked. "Perhaps they just went off and forgot You, or something."

"Certainly not! That's ridiculous. They just—departed, that's all. They left me here with this world to look after; I keep up their city, though, just in case they ever want to come home."

"Their city!" Warden gasped. He remembered the suspicious cloud Sara had mentioned.

"Is that what's under that cloud?" he asked.

"Why, yes, Warden. How clever of you to notice. Were those your little toys that flew in?"

"Well, not exactly." Warden hedged.

"Then were they from that other ship," the god stated. "How annoying." I had to pulverize them, you know."

Warden's heart sank. Sara probably didn't know what had hit her. "The ship," he said dully.

"No, those little machines," the god answered. Warden suppressed a shout of elation. "They were buzzing around like insects and I couldn't have that, after all," the deity grumbled. "The city is forbidden."

"Forbidden?" Warden let it slip out without thinking.

"Will you stop that, Warden!" The Most High's voice shouted at full power. "You sound like an echo!" The booming voice subsided. "Remember the thunderbolts, Warden. I won't tell you about it again."

When his head had stopped ringing, Warden was contrite. "I'm sorry," he said.

"And don't say that anymore, either," the god snapped. "You're beginning to bore me, Warden. Can't you say something different for a change?"

Warden collected himself and said carefully, "Who were the Ones Who Went Before?" He hoped he pronounced it so that the capitals were distinct.

After a full minute, the voice said in a mechanical way, "They were the representatives of a galactic culture originating in your star system Lyra." Warden thought the voice didn't sound like its usual self.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked.

"Of course not," the Most High bit back. "I was busy elsewhere. The natives on the other side of the planet are having a war, and I had to pause to give them a salutary omen."

Warden thought the answer a little too slick. He wondered if the god might be doing a little divine lying.

He kept his own council, merely saying, "Would it be possible to see the city, Most High?" Warden always brought out his party manners when he wanted something. "Please?"

The god was apparently flattered He had gotten away with the small lie. "I don't suppose there would be

any harm in it.” The Most High directed him.

“By the way, Most High, how did you learn to speak my language? You’re very good,” Warden said as he walked toward the city.

“Thank you. I have been observing the progress of your culture into the universe for some time,” the voice said enigmatically.

Warden thought it over a moment, then shivered. He didn’t care for the ramifications of that speech, either.

As Warden neared the end of the cavern where the mist swirled endlessly, there was a commotion on the other side of his survey ship.

“What’s that?” Warden asked cautiously. His hand dropped to the blaster in his waistband.

“Oh, it’s probably that tiresome Zelnak,” the god answered irritably.

“Wait there, Warden. I’ll get rid of him in a moment.”

Curiously the survey man edged back toward the ship as the large doors began to swing open. A blast of trumpets came through from the temple. The ceiling of the cavern reflected torchlight.

The god was silent.

Warden, peering from around the curved edge of the ship saw the glittering figure of the high priest advancing through the doors. A choir sang somewhere in the recesses of the temple.

The doors shut with a hollow clang. Zelnak started forward, his eyes now on the statue of the god. He stumbled over the foot of the ramp extended out of the survey ship.

From his position athwart the ramp, Zelnak got out a muffled “Most High—” before he fell. He raised his head and saw Warden staring at him. Zelnak’s eyes widened, then shut.

“What do you want this time, Zelnak?” the god thundered.

“Forget it,” Warden answered. The high priest had fainted.

## V

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Sara watched the ceremonies in the courtyard of the temple. She peered into the screens and laughed, having no fear Warden would be unable to get himself out of the mess. But she was sure it would take him some time.

The mate and the engineer, watching over her shoulder, had eyes only for the sparkling figures of the priests. “Look at that!” Jason exclaimed in the closest tone to reverence he possessed. “That headman alone is wearing six or seven fortunes in jewels!”

Buck said, “You could retire for life to a pleasure world, an expensive pleasure world, on that crown alone.”

Sara glanced over her shoulder at the square face of Buck below a shock of sandy hair and at the thin, dark face of Jason, with its slightly bent nose and wiry, blue-black hair. The eyes of both gleamed ferally.

She looked back toward the screens. The Star Systems survey ship was being dragged through the doors of the temple itself.

“Quiet, you two,” she said. “I want to see how Warden gets himself out of this one.” She permitted herself a small chuckle. “If Warden gets himself out of this one, that is.”

“Yeah, if,” Buck sniggered.

Sara looked at him sharply. “Oh, shut up,” she said wearily. “Don’t you have anything else to do?”

Buck, for perhaps the thousandth time on the cruise, ran his eyes appraisingly over Sara’s trim form. “Yes, ma’am,” he said abruptly, and turned quickly away to begin correlating tapes.

Zelnak struggled to a sitting position. He felt his head and groaned. Then he remembered why he fainted and stared around. The thing was still there!

“Hi,” Warden said.

Zelnak fainted again. Warden snickered.

“I’ll wake him,” the god said. A small cloud of moisture appeared above the recumbent form of the high priest. It began to rain.

Zelnak spluttered and sat up again. He stared at Warden, who said nothing.

The amplified voice of the Most High boomed through the cavern. Zelnak snapped to with a start and stared toward the statue of the god, the survey man temporarily forgotten. “Well, high priest! Why do you come here?” The voice of the Most High, Warden could tell, was in no mood for pettifogging.

“I, uh,” Zelnak stuttered, “that is...” He came to a stop and looked again helplessly at Warden, who understood none of the interchange.

The Star Systems surveyor nonchalantly brought out a pack of cigarettes, took one and waved it into flame. He inhaled and let out a cloud of smoke.

Zelnak rolled his eyes. He shrank back against the pedestal of the god’s statue.

“Well, Zelnak,” the god thundered. “You’ve wasted enough time. What is it you want this time? Be quick or else!” Even Warden, who didn’t understand what was being said, understood the growling menace in the voice.

Under his robes, Zelnak’s double-jointed knees began to quiver. For lack of anything immediate to say, he threw himself before the statue of the god and tried to wrap both arms around the pedestal.

“Oh, for My sake!” the god snarled. “This could go on for hours.” He repeated it so that Warden could understand.

“Perhaps he’s afraid?” Warden suggested.

“Of course he’s afraid,” the Most High snapped. “These nits always are. Of course, this one usually has more presence than most.”

The god lowered His voice slightly and rumbled at the recumbent high priest.

“Get up, Zelnak, like a good high priest. I won’t hurt you, at least not yet.”

The high priest clutched at the edges of the pedestal and heaved himself erect. He stared at Warden, who regarded the glittering figure of the priest with no little interest. The priest’s agitation caused the gems in his vestments to coruscate.

Regaining his composure, the high priest turned to address the statue of the god. “Oh, Most High, Ruler of the Heavens, Lord of the Stars, Bringer of Rain...”

“The fewer honorifics and the more meaningful communication the better, Zelnak,” the Most High interjected.

The high priest bowed profoundly. When he straightened after a long moment, he asked, “Is this one of Your Angels, Lord?”

The voice hooted. He translated for Warden’s benefit, and said, “No, it is not an angel. It comes from another world like this one and it calls itself Warden.”

“A warden of what, King of the Seasons?”

“That’s not his rank, that’s his name, you dunce,” the god roared back. Zelnak quailed. Warden continued to drag on his cigarette.

The priest darted a look at the survey man and prostrated himself again.

“Oh, get up,” the god said impatiently, “and go back to your palace and pray for remittance of your sins and transgressions.”

Zelnak scrambled to his feet and bowed again. “I shall perform a high ceremony in the morning to the glory of the Most High,” he said.

“Do whatever you want,” the god snapped, “only don’t come back for a few days, anyway.”

The high priest had recovered some of his aplomb. “Can this humble servant inquire if the Most High is pleased with the gift of the star?”

“Yes, yes, of course. But it’s not a star, you fool. Oh, well, you wouldn’t understand. Get out.”

Zelnak bowed, and got out. His mind was seething with the knowledge the god imparted. If the fire-breathing thing were not an angel, then he shuddered, it must be a demon! And the star was not a star, but something else. But what?

Warden watched the priest go with interest. He wondered whether the man would soon be back followed by a gaggle of screaming cannibals.

He put the question to the god, who said, “No. That idiot won’t be back for a while yet, anyway. Would you like to resume the tour of the city, Warden?”

“Sure,” Warden assented. He cycled the ramp back into the ship and closed the port just in case, and walked down the cave toward the swirling mists.

Warden stepped from the mouth of the cavern onto a moving way which started when he descended a pair of low steps. The way was part of several moving bands going in different directions.

“I activated these for your benefit,” the voice said proudly. “They haven’t been used for some time, though I keep them in perfect working order.”

“Thank you,” Warden murmured. He was busy looking around. The mist was not as thick as he had supposed. Visibility was limited to about a thousand yards, but he could see adequately.

He expected a cluster of soaring buildings of fantastic shape and color, like the elaborate hotel architecture of the pleasure worlds he knew.

Instead, the city was sparse, and mathematical in design. The streets, if they were streets, were broad, twice as broad as the height of the buildings the moving way passed.

The buildings themselves were bare and functional. It was not the functionalism of his own past history, however. These buildings were built with an eye to a kind of sparseness which in its perfection relied heavily on cubes and rectangles as the main forms, with the beauty coming from the detailing, proportion and texture of the building materials.

“I’m no great authority on what’s beautiful,” Warden said to the voice. “But this is—well, it makes my eye think it sees more than may be there.”

“The greatest art lies in its own concealment,” the voice said.

“Ah,” Warden said.

The buildings were not a riot of color, but were chiefly of white stone or a black substance Warden thought might be marble. Some were built of native woods, dark in hue and richly patterned.

None of the structures was over four stories high. All sat back from the way in restrained gardens where an occasional fountain or artificial waterfall glittered.

The way carried the surveyor before a long, low, black building approached by a wide series of steps.

“Enter that building, Warden,” the voice said.

The man zigzagged across the moving walkways and went up the stairs. A door twenty feet high soared above him. He looked at the statuary on either side of the door. They were double helices, in which lights sparkled and moved back and forth. Above the statuary there was writing incised in a lighter material.

“What does that say?” Warden inquired of the Most High.

“This is what you would call a museum,” the voice answered. “Enter.”

There were no doors. Warden walked under the archway and found himself in a vast room with walls of a striated, green stone. There was illumination, but he was unable to pinpoint its source. About the room on pedestals stood glittering constructions of metal and what appeared to be glass.

“Are these art objects?” Warden inquired.

“These are machines,” the voice said. “The Ones Who Went Before built machines which were art. Art became machine.”

“What a find!” Warden exclaimed involuntarily. Then he caught himself and asked somewhat less enthusiastically, “Do they work?”

“They work,” the answer came back.

“What do they do?” Warden demanded. He was, in spite of himself, becoming excited. His mind raced ahead.

Here might be unlimited sources of power, more important than any kind of material wealth. The knowledge his own race could gain from the perfectly maintained mechanisms would be enormous.

“The tallest machine transports beings or objects to distant places,” the voice said. “The rounded device on the low pedestal synthesizes matter.”

Warden noticed a certain metallic quality creep back into the voice of the Most High. “Those crystalline structures, and I am simplifying for your benefit,” the voice went on, “are devices for defense or offense against hostile elements.”

One of the machines rose from its pedestal and began to glow. An angry hum came through to Warden.

“I control these machines,” the voice finished.

Excitedly, Warden said, “Could you tell me in detail what they do, and how they work? This knowledge would be a great help to our race!”

“I could,” the voice said.

He was standing in the center of the room. He walked up to one of the war machines. They all looked like sculpture, shiny constructions of metal and crystal elements in a pleasing design. Warden could see hidden depths in them but was unable to locate any point from which destruction would issue. He put out a tentative hand.

“Stop!” The voice commanded. “To tamper is dangerous!”

Warden snatched his hand away and backed down the raised platform. His mind was ticking over as fast as it could.

“Warden,” the voice said abruptly, “you must return to your ship. There is something there which will need your attention.”

“What’s the hurry to get back to the survey ship?”

When the god answered, it seemed to come from a distance. “The other vessel which circled the planet, Warden.”

“What about it?” Warden demanded.

“It is descending above the square of the city.”

“This city?” Warden was incredulous.

“The city of Zelnak,” the god answered. “You should be on hand to meet our future servants.”

Warden was startled by the last statement, but let it pass. When the surveyor entered the glowing chamber, he was wrapped in his own thoughts. For once, the god, too, was silent.

## VI



The city below was coming out of the night side into dawn as Sara finished her coffee. She rubbed the last sleep from her eyes and sat before the screens applying cosmetics.

Satisfied, she turned her full attention to the magnification of the buildings below. A few of the natives were stirring, but otherwise the city seemed deserted.

I shouldn't wonder, she thought, after yesterday's orgy. She swept the view finder closer to the main temple and searched for any sign of Warden or his ship. There was only a raw scar about twenty feet wide to show where the ship had scraped the pavement in its passage.

She saw nothing else and a small stab of worry began to grow at the back of her mind. Sara had every confidence Warden could extricate himself and his ship from the confines of the temple. But, she thought, and that's a great, big but.

She knew her delay was costing hours of search for another world.

"Time's money," she reminded herself aloud.

"What was that?" Buck said as he clambered into a seat beside her at the main control console.

"Nothing," she answered. "I was just thinking we ought to be going on and continuing our sweep in this sector."

"What about him?" He gestured with his hand at the screen focused closely on the temple compound.

Sara fought with her conflicting emotions and finally said, "I suppose he can take care of himself. Still—"

The mate said nothing. He watched her carefully over the edge of the coffee cup he had brought with him.

"Don't you think we ought to help him out?" Buck asked with a subtle overtone in his voice.

Sara looked at the mate suspiciously.

"Why?"

He paused to take another sip of his coffee and answered blandly, "Well, it wouldn't be right just to go off and leave him if he's in trouble, would it?"

"When did you develop the milk of human kindness, Mister Buck?" she said flatly.

He spread his hands and said easily, "The way I figure it, if he's in real trouble and we help him out, he'll be morally bound to give us a piece of the find. If not, well, it'll look good on the record."

Sara couldn't accept the smooth line of reasoning. All her perceptions told her there was more to Buck's look than he would have appear.

She looked at the mate for a long minute, then leaned back in the flight couch and said, "All right, we'll go down and throw a scare into the locals.

"Warden should be able to get away in the confusion. If he can't take his ship we'll stand by to take him



aboard,” she ordered.

“You may begin descent over the main square of the city, Mr. Buck,” she finished.

“Yes, ma’am,” the mate said submissively.

Sara watched him with narrowed eyes. The recorder and engineer came into the control room at the sound of the power beginning to blast and took their places.

Two hours later the ship hovered a thousand feet over the city.

Watching from her couch, Sara could see the inhabitants begin to swarm out into the square and streets. When they felt the heat from the ship’s blast, they retreated to take cover among the buildings a distance away.

“We’ll hover for a half hour, then go down, Mr. Buck,” Sara rapped. The mate gave no answer but bent over his own screens as if he were searching for something.

“Mr. Buck, Mr. Jason,” Sara called, “do you see any signs of Warden?”

Both answered in the negative.

“Take it over the temple courtyard, Mr. Buck,” Sara ordered.

The ship moved across the main square and hovered at a lower altitude over the large temple courtyard. Sara could see the natives scattering to take cover.

“Let’s wait a while yet,” she said.

Twenty minutes later, when there was still no sign of Warden, she grew impatient. “This waiting is silly. Put her down, Mr. Buck. Let’s go look for ourselves.”

The ship descended slowly, the heat from the jets causing the painted walls and columns of the temple to crack, blacken and blister. As it settled lightly onto the pavement of the temple, a pavilion of wood a hundred yards away burst into flame.

A slight jar indicated they were grounded. “Nice landing, Buck,” she commented. “Now, let’s wait for the ground to cool a little and we can take a look around.”

Against her better judgment, she unlocked the compartment where the blasters were stored and handed one each to Buck and Jason—she knew the recorder would be useless—took one for herself and turned back to the screens. The recorder knew he wouldn’t be asked along.

Zelnak opened one eye. The captain of the guard was there, looking upset and fidgeting. Zelnak closed his eye. The guard was still there when he opened it again. Sighing, he climbed down from the bed.

“A big star, bigger than the one in the temple!” the guard offered eagerly. “The Oracle says it comes to find the smaller one!”

The man crossed to the window at the balcony. “It was above the city square, Your Worship, but now it floats above the temple.”

Zelnak groaned and hastened to the window.

He looked up and winced as a blast of hot air from the hovering craft struck his face. “It floats,” he said

dully.

The guard stared.

“And blossoms of flame come out of the bottom,” the high priest continued in a monotone.

The guard backed a foot away. He had never seen the high priest like this; he was usually majestic and commanding. “Is, is, something wrong, Your Worship?” he stammered.

Zelnak groaned. He said without thinking, never moving his eyes from the star, “Of course something’s wrong, fool! This one’s five times larger than the other thing, and it’s probably full of demons, too!” Zelnak could look at Warden in no other light.

The high priest had not raised his voice and was not aware of the information he had inadvertently let out. Eyes wide, the guard backed toward the door of the chamber, where the attendant priests stood clustered.

He threw away his spear, and with a last departing look, shouted, “His Worship says there be demons! Run! Run! For the Most High’s sake, save yourselves!”

The crowd scattered amid shrieks as the high priest continued to stand at the window looking at the new visitor from the stars.

Sara sprinted down the ramp and headed toward the temple. She thought the mate and the engineer were behind her, but they were pounding across the compound toward the palace, blasters ready.

She pulled up short before the high doors leading into the temple. They were too massive for her to open. As she aimed the blaster a head timidly peeped out of a smaller door she had not noticed. The head quickly withdrew and the little door slammed shut.

Sara advanced on it slowly. She stood before it and pushed. “Bolted from the inside,” she said to herself and leveled the gun. The door buckled and was a cinder.

As she stepped through the smoking opening, she saw priests and guards scattering through the columned inner temple. They were shouting something, but she couldn’t understand that they were screaming “Demons!”

Sara laughed. “Boo!” she said to a face peering at her from an upper gallery. The face disappeared.

She looked for Warden’s ship. It wasn’t in the main hall, but she noticed large doors at the other end of the chamber. Keeping near the columns in case one of the guards decided to make her a target, she moved quickly toward the opening beside the high altar.

She examined the paneling for another small door. A series of small cracks showed where it was, but she could not figure out how to get it open.

She leveled the blaster at the point she thought would get her through quickest. Before she could squeeze the firing stud, the door swung open inwardly.

Warden stepped quickly into the main temple chamber.

“You!” they exclaimed simultaneously.

Warden recovered first. The blaster he held seemed slightly ridiculous pointed at Sara. He lowered it.

“What’s going on,” he demanded.

Sara put her own weapon back in its holster.

“I was going to ask the same question,” she said. “We thought you were in trouble, and came down to help, you see.” She finished in a lame tone.

“Well, I wasn’t and now you may be in trouble.”

Warden related the story of the hidden city and the god which guarded it.

Sara stared at him in disbelief.

“A god?” she said struggling to keep her face straight. “Here?”

“That’s what I thought,” Warden answered. “But the answer is yea. He’s here, everywhere, in fact.”

“A real, honest to everything, god.”

“You’re beginning to sound like a straight man,” Warden commented wryly.

He turned. “Through here,” he said and led the way through the door. The shimmering cavern beyond dwarfed them as they stepped out of the temple. She saw Warden’s ship halfway down the domed space.

He called, “Most High? Are you here?”

A rumbling voice answered, “Of course I am here, Warden. Is this person with you from the other ship?”

Sara involuntarily shrank nearer to Warden at the sound of the voice. She gulped.

“She is,” Warden answered. “This is a female of our race. Her name is Sara Medell.”

Gathering her strength, Sara stepped away from Warden’s side. “Uh, hello,” she said tentatively.

The god ignored her, “Warden,” the voice said. “The others from the Medell’s ship attack the palace of the high priest.”

“What?” Warden and Sara said together.

“They are racing for the chamber of the high priest,” the voice rumbled on.

Warden stared at Sara, who had forgotten about Buck and Jason until the voice snapped her to attention.

“The jewels,” she gasped. “That’s why they wanted to land! Oh, Bill, I’m sorry! We’d better—” she started to run back toward the temple.

“Zelnak’s a nuisance, Warden,” the god said, “but I wouldn’t want him hurt. He keeps the majority of the natives in line.”

“Can’t you do something?” Warden yelled as he pounded after Sara.

“I already am,” the god said absently.

Zelnak turned from the window as heavy footsteps sounded in the anteroom outside his bedroom.

A voice called something in a strange language. The high priest began to cross the room, when two strange forms blocked the door.

“In here!” Buck called to Jason. They ran together toward the chamber where the ornamentation seemed to indicate they would find Zelnak.

“That’s the high priest,” Buck said. He saw that the figure was wearing jeweled robes. Through the door toward which the native was backing, he could see a collection of robes hanging against a wall.

Buck started forward. He skirted the bed on one side and motioned Jason to take the other. They would catch the priest in a pincer movement.

As they walked toward the high priest, a thunderous voice filled the air.

“Stop!” the voice commanded in their own language.

Buck and Jason stood still. They looked around and, seeing no one behind them, began stalking the high priest again.

“You are ordered to stop!” the voice boomed again. “If you do not, we shall punish you.”

The two survey men stopped again and stared through the room. “Hell,” Buck said, “there’s no one there. I must be hearing things.”

Jason said, “Let’s grab this stuff and get out of here.” He started to dash toward Zelnak, who was standing very still against a tapestry. Zelnak knew the voice of the Most High, but didn’t understand what He was saying to the demons. His knees began to tremble.

The high priest was unsure whether the Most High was taking him as a sacrifice or protecting him. From the way the two stopped at His voice, Zelnak decided the latter was the case.

Neither the high priest nor the two saw a small cloud form against the ceiling of the room.

When Jason made his leap toward Zelnak, a clap of thunder filled the room. Lightning flashed down toward the running engineer and flung him twenty feet across the chamber to bounce off a wall and land in a heap on the floor.

Zelnak closed both eyes and murmured a silent prayer of thanks to the Most High.

“I told you to stop!” the voice rumbled self-righteously.

Buck stood immobile. He turned as running footsteps told him someone was coming into the room. He raised the blaster, but let it fall as Sara and Warden came bounding through the door.

Zelnak, who was finishing his prayer, opened both eyes to see the scene in his bedroom, which heretofore had always been sacrosanct.

One of the demons lay groaning on the floor; another stood still beside the bed and two more stood in the doorway, their strange flashing weapons held at the ready.

“Four demons,” Zelnak gurgled. Then he fainted.

## VII

« ^ »

Lllan, the shepherd who first saw the star floating to ground, was feeling sorry for himself. He lay propped against a wall in one of the poorer quarters of the city holding his head.

The celebrations for the Most High had been very wet. Lllan, as discoverer of the offering to the Most High, had been freely welcome anywhere in the city.

A round of parties, drinking and willing girls would have been beyond the wildest imagination of the shepherd before that time. But now, having been accepted in the palace itself and in the homes of the great priests, captains and rich merchants of the city, Lllan in a short time had grown accustomed to thinking of himself as a personage of some importance.

He groaned and fingered the robe he wore. It was of fine cloth, a gift of one of the rich merchants, so that the shepherd could attend the ceremonies in the temple and the revels afterward and not be an embarrassment,

He stirred. A crock of wine which was tilted against the wall fell over and cracked. The wine began to seep between the cobbles of the street.

The shepherd lunged for the container and managed to right it before all the liquid had run onto the earth. A flashing pain ran through his head when he made the violent motion and he groaned again.

He tilted the crock back and took three healthy swigs of the fiery wine. Presently feeling better, he leaned back against the wall and started to take stock of his situation.

Surely, he reasoned, there is still a way to turn the course of events to my own advantage. The shepherd had drunk long and late in the celebrations of the preceding day; he knew nothing of the visit of the second ship.

Lllan belched, climbed to his feet and set off in search of new adventure.

Warden grabbed Sara by the arm and sprinted back through the anteroom.

“Let’s get back to your ship,” he yelled.

He saw Buck turn for a moment to look at the flattened shape of the high priest.

“Forget that,” Warden called as he and Sara dashed through the door.

Buck remembered what happened to Jason, who was groaning against the wall. He said, “Women and children first,” and ran out the door in pursuit of the Star Systems surveyor and his own captain.

Jason, seeing himself left alone, lurched to his feet and began feeling his way along the walls. All thought of booty was gone, and he was intent on getting back to the ship where he would be safe.

The voice of the god remained silent as Sara, Warden and Buck ran through the galleries of the palace, followed more slowly by Jason, who was having trouble keeping his equilibrium.

The natives undoubtedly observed their passage, but the belief that they were demons kept them at a safe distance.

A group of guards was gathering at the foot of the staircase in the main audience hall of the palace. As

the three surveyors came to a stop at the top of the stairs, the captain of the guard looked up and shouted, "Demons!" He started backing cautiously away.

Warden ducked back behind a column, motioning the others to do the same.

Gathering his courage and being prepared for a grisly death, the captain threw his spear. It slanted off the column behind which Warden had disappeared.

The other guards grew bold when there was no instant retaliation and began to advance, muttering. One put his foot on the stairs.

Nothing happened. He let out a shout and threw one of the spears he carried.

With a howl of triumph, the cohort of guards began running up the stairs. Warden, who was prepared to vanish through one of the connecting rooms of the palace and make his way without trouble to his own or Sara's ship, was about to make a run for it when Buck ducked out from behind a column, sighted at the first running guard and fired his blaster on full. The man vanished in a rush of acrid smoke. The other guards broke and fled.

Warden regretted the harm done one of the natives, knowing it would make his job of establishing trading contact harder, but took advantage of the break.

"Come on!" he yelled.

The three of them fired warning shots over the heads of the retreating guards and began to make their way down the long staircase, which was littered with the detritus of the abortive rush.

They reached the arcade on the ground floor and quickly ran across the square toward the ship. As they neared the survey vessel, a port cycled open and a ramp flicked outward.

"Carnaby's in for a commendation," Sara gasped to Warden as they pounded up the ramp.

The port closed behind them. Sara led the way into the control room. Buck went toward a cabinet and made himself a stiff scotch without ice. Sara fell into a couch and began studying the screens.

"We should get out of here," she said at last.

She turned to Warden. "Do you want to go back with us? You'll have to leave your ship."

Warden struggled with himself. It was his planet; greed won.

"It's my planet, Sara," he answered. "I'm more or less grateful for your meddling, but I was doing all right before you landed and caused all this mess." He indicated the barren square on the screens.

"Mess?" she said indignantly.

"Mess," he retorted. "I didn't ask you to land, after all; and I was not in any trouble, at least not in any trouble with the natives." He indicated Buck. "Your crew caused me enough grief here that it will take a year at least to make some kind of peaceful contact with the local population. If then," he added resentfully.

"Well, I like that!" she cried angrily. "Here we come down to save your miserable hide and you say we messed you up! That's gratitude, I suppose?"

Warden responded, "So why don't you just blast out of here and let me handle this in my own way?"

A slow flush crept up Sara's neck and cheeks.

"I will!" she answered shortly. Then, looking toward the screens to cover her embarrassment, she cried, "Oh, look, there's Jason now!"

They all crowded around the screens, and saw with dismay that Jason was staggering as if drunk.

Warden looked at Sara. "If he were on my crew," he said, "I wouldn't have just left him to fend for himself."

"It wouldn't have hurt you to think of helping at the time," Sara snapped, stung for having forgotten the crewman.

"Well," she continued, "I suppose we should go out and collect him before somebody puts a spear in his back."

She stood. "Come on, Buck, we don't need any help to take care of our own people."

Sara began leading the way toward the lock.

Warden, who had continued to watch the screens, said, "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

Sara turned. "What's that?" she demanded.

"Look," Warden said, gesturing toward the screen.

Jason was about halfway across the square. Advancing rapidly on him was a lone native, who, with robes flapping, tackled the engineer and brought him heavily to the pavement.

"Oh, great," Sara muttered. "What do we do now?"

"We go out and try to get him," Warden answered. "There's only one of them this time, and five of us."

"Four, for all the use Jason is," Buck said sourly.

Warden unholstered his blaster. "Let's go," he said. "I want to get back to my ship and then you can get out of here before something really awful happens."

They opened the port. As the ramp slid earthward, they saw a ragged group of guards come out to help the native who had tackled Jason. They swarmed over the two grappling figures and by the time the men from the survey ship reached ground, the guards had bundled the unfortunate engineer back into the palace.

"What now?" Sara said coming down the ramp.

"Let's go back inside," Warden answered, "and scheme up a rescue."

"I suppose the best place to start would be the palace," Lllan said to himself as he ambled through the deserted streets.

The shepherd looked around. From the position of the sun, it was well into the day, but the streets were lifeless. "Probably still sleeping off yesterday," he muttered.

Slapping at his dusty robe, he began to feel more cheerful and set off toward the palace at a vigorous pace.

He stopped on the edge of the square, staring at the second vessel. He stood quite still and looked keenly at it. It was larger than the one he had discovered; he wondered if it were a relative of the other star. Then he dismissed the thought as a series of shouts came from the open doors of the palace.

The shepherd picked up his robe so that he could run and hastened toward the palace, the ship forgotten.

Lllan skidded to a stop in the arcade as a group of guards came boiling into the arcade and scattered in a hundred directions. He reached out a lean arm and collared one.

“What’s going on?” he demanded.

“The demons,” the guard stuttered, “they’re in the palace!” He broke out of Lllan’s grip and ran down the arcade.

“Demons?” Lllan called after him. “Demons?” The fleeing guard kept running.

The shepherd stood pulling a wattle beneath his chin, which he always did when he was forced to think. “Demons,” he said to himself.

The loud sounds which had preceded the rout of the guards had stopped. Lllan had almost reached the door when three strange-looking beings came running through the opened portal. He shrank back behind a column and looked at the running figures.

“They’re awful short for demons,” he said at last. He stood in the shadow of the arcade and looked into the glare of the central square where the ship glittered in the sunlight.

He saw an opening appear in the side of the star. A stairway slid out from below the opening. The creatures raced up the stairway, which then retracted. The opening in the side of the ship closed.

Lllan stood dumbfounded. Then he exclaimed, “Stars with doorways! With demons inside!”

The shepherd thought harder than he ever had thought before. He considered going at once to the high priest, but held back. He reasoned that if the demons had been in the palace, then Zelnak must know about it. There would be no profit there.

But why were the demons running? Were they afraid? For that matter, why were the guards running? They were surely afraid, Lllan thought furiously.

He was still pondering the wonders he had seen when a figure went reeling by not far from his vantage point.

“By the Most High,” Lllan murmured to himself, “another demon!” These are wondrous days indeed.

The shepherd watched Jason going across the square. He seemed to be in trouble of some kind. Lllan, who had spent his entire lifetime among the hills watching his herds, knew when a creature was sick. Perhaps it’s hurt. But if it’s hurt, then it must be a lesser demon, for everyone knew that demons can’t be hurt. And if it’s a lesser demon, if I can catch it, the high priest will have to reward me this time, and in great measure.

Picking up his robe, he began sprinting toward the retreating figure.



## VIII

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By the time Warden, Sara and Buck had regained the control room the screens showed that Jason had been hustled back inside the palace.

“I have an idea,” Warden announced.

“Don’t do us any favors,” Sara answered sarcastically.

“This is simple,” Warden said ignoring her outburst. “And,” he added proudly, “this has the terrific advantage that we can get Jason back without ever leaving the ship or getting stuck with spears.”

Sara looked at him doubtfully.

“Most High?” Warden called tentatively.

The voice was unnaturally loud in the confines of the control room. Warden winced.

“Yes, Warden?”

Buck snapped his head around. His eyes grew wide.

“What was that?” he said, panicked.

“The god of this planet,” Warden answered briefly. “Now be quiet and let me talk.”

Buck goggled. The recorder shrank back into his couch and said nothing. Sara abruptly sat. “I don’t believe it,” she said.

“Well, Warden?” the god demanded.

“It’s about the engineer of this ship, Most High,” he began suavely.

“He is now incarcerated in the palace,” the god answered, lowering the volume of his voice slightly.

“We know that,” Warden returned. “But we wondered if... well, if perhaps, you could help us get him out?”

“Why?” god answered simply.

“Well, because they might do something to him,” Warden answered.

“That is the fellow I smighted with a thunderbolt,” the god said sententiously. “He deserves any retribution the natives care to hand out.”

“Now just a minute, Your Godship,” Sara said starting up from her couch. She was frowning angrily.

Warden waved her back into the couch.

“Most High,” he said persuasively, “this man is truly sorry for what he did; we all are, and if you will tell the natives to let him go—they are obviously scared silly of you—then we will just get in our ships and leave. We won’t cause any further trouble,” Warden promised.

“I will not allow you to cause any further trouble, Warden,” the god answered pettishly. “I will pacify

these people, and let them have your Jason as a sacrifice to Me. You, on the other hand, are sufficiently amusing that you will take up residence in the city of the Ones Who Went Before—you and these others.” The god ended on a quiet note.

“But... but...”

“No buts, Warden! Remember the cloud!” the god bellowed. The sound rang back and forth in the metal-walled control room.

“Yessir,” Warden said when his ears stopped ringing.

“Good,” the Most High said, mollified. “Now, I shall stop the interference patterns and defense mechanisms of the city for the time being. Take this ship up and put it down in some convenient square.”

“Why don’t you just let us leave,” Warden hazarded.

“Because you would return with meddlers, Warden, and diggers. I simply cannot allow the ecology of this world to be so interrupted. Go now,” the Most High said.

Warden gulped and gestured to the others in the control room. They set about the business of raising the ship and setting it down in the hidden city.

Sara stared dully at the screens. “I believe it,” she said.

“What?” Warden asked.

“Impossible things,” she answered. “What was that about the queen in Alice? She could believe in ten impossible things before breakfast, or was it twelve?”

“I don’t know,” Warden answered. “But I believe it, too.”

Zelnak opened one eye. There was nothing. He opened the other eye. He peered around his bedroom. “A nightmare,” he muttered. “It had to be a nightmare. I must have eaten too much shashlik. Why, I didn’t even undress or go to bed!”

He struggled to his feet, making a firm resolve as he did so to live much more temperately in the future.

Zelnak went into his robing room to change into a different garment. “Stars,” he muttered darkly to himself, “demons, nightmares! Humph.”

A minor priest scratched timidly at the door of the chamber.

“Get out,” Zelnak snapped nastily, “and bring me some breakfast.” The priest scuttled away.

“Demons, stars. Bah!”

The high priest came to an abrupt stop before a window, as if he had blundered into a wall in the night. He thought he saw another star sitting in the square.

“Oh, no!” He groaned. “Then it’s true.” Zelnak rubbed his eyes. It was still there. “Demons,” he said and tottered into a high-backed chair, burying his face in his hands.

There was a commotion in the anteroom. Zelnak looked up, beginning to fear any new interruption. A guard stood respectfully in the doorway.

“Proud news, Your Worship,” the guard announced.

“What is it?” he inquired wearily. “Is it another star?” That was all he needed to make his life a complete disaster, he thought.

“No, Your Worship,” the guard said, standing at attention. “It is the shepherd, Lllan.”

“What about the shepherd Lllan. Isn’t he the fellow who found the first star?” Zelnak did not entertain pleasant thoughts about that particular peasant. That discovery was causing Zelnak to lose faith in his own sanity.

“Yes, Your Worship,” the guard said obsequiously. “It was he who found the star, but now he has done a magnificently brave thing.” The guard paused for the effect of his statement to roll across the chamber.

Zelnak sat straight in his chair. His eyes narrowed.

“A brave thing, has he, the wretch,” he grated. “What new misfortune has he brought upon us?”

“Let Lllan and his demon come forward,” the guard said exultantly.

The gray visage of the high priest paled to the color of the marble lining his chamber. “Captured a demon!” he said unbelievably.

Zelnak fought the overwhelming desire to let everything go black. He sat huddled in the chair and watched as the peasant advanced into the room cuffing Jason before him.

Jason, propelled with a final shove and kick, sprawled into the room where minutes before he had terrified the high priest. Jason landed at Zelnak’s feet with a mighty thump.

“Oof,” he said, shaking his head groggily.

“This is a pretty kettle of shashlik,” Zelnak said dully. “What does one do with a demon?” He addressed the room at large. “Maybe I could give it back.”

Lllan swaggered forward. “I captured the demon, Most High,” he boasted.

Eyes flashing venomously, Zelnak looked at the uncouth figure of the shepherd. “You!” Zelnak hissed.

“Me,” Lllan answered drawing himself proudly to full height. He beamed at the high priest.

“You,” Zelnak grated again.

Lllan bowed. He smiled in anticipation of his reward. He considered asking to be made a captain of the guard, but rejected that in favor of being made a baron.

Zelnak exploded into rage. He gestured at the shepherd, “Take that and feed it slowly to something vicious, a little piece at a time.”

Lllan was bewildered. He shrank back. “What?” he stuttered. “Hold on, now—” he shrieked as the guards hustled him through the door.

The high priest smiled benignly. “Escort the demon gently, for we do not yet know its full powers and lodge it in a tower room with no windows and a strong door, lest it fly away—a strong metal door.”

Jason was led away, unresisting. His captors gave him a respectful distance but urged him gently forward.

Zelnak began to feel better.

“I’ll have my breakfast now, in the arena, while they ration that accursed Lllan to the beasts.”

## IX

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It’s very pleasant in the hidden city, Warden thought after they had been there a week. If you stop to consider that we’re prisoners, he added.

He spent entire days in the museum, questioning the Most High about the working of the machinery there and gradually acquiring a mastery of a few of the glittering objects he thought of as weaponry.

Sara had moped about after choosing, in one of the residential buildings, quarters as high as she could find. It was a series of vast rooms which apparently had belonged to some administrator among the city’s first residents. She spent a lot of time sight-seeing. Warden seldom saw her. The ordinary thing for marooned people to do is stay together. Sara was morose and uncommunicative; Warden stayed away.

Buck vanished from sight. Warden supposed he must be prowling among the buildings looking for loot.

Warden headquartered in his own ship. The recorder in Sara’s crew stayed in the other ship, rarely leaving it.

The god answered questions if it felt in the mood, which was not often. Warden suspected that the Most High was sulking because it had to threaten to restrain the humans from attempting to leave the city or planet. The mist had been restored over the city, though the god kept it above the height of the buildings. The Most High occasionally preened Himself to Warden, who was apparently His favorite, about the beauty and accomplishments of His godhead and of the Ones Who Went Before.

But there were days on end when the god did not bother to answer when Warden called for him. One morning Warden awoke to hear Zelnak out in the cavern where his ship still stood, talking to the Most High, who answered in a booming, mighty voice. Warden stayed in the ship and watched the priest sidle around fearfully on his way out of the cavern.

Warden tried once or twice to contact Star Systems on his own equipment. The Most High set up such a turbulence in the planet’s outer atmosphere that the message was blanketed. As punishment, the god caused a constant rain in the city for a week, keeping Warden and the others to whatever pursuits they could find indoors.

Sara told him once, on meeting Warden on one of the moving concourses, that her recorder had tried to make contact, too, with the same results. The man, who was a kind of genius with his equipment, couldn’t understand how the god blanketed the communications.

Warden had shrugged, and, remembering one of the books of his hated school days, said, “The ways of the gods are inscrutable.”

Sara had snapped at him and turned on her heel and strode away on a concourse going in the opposite direction.

Warden continued to tinker around in the museum with the tacit approval of the Most High, who now and then commented on the surveyor’s attempt to master the machines. The transport device remained

off limits no matter how Warden argued.

Warden grew bored with that occupation after several weeks and set out to explore the city. The valley was four miles wide and twice as long; the streets and walkways of the city radiated from a lake in the center of the valley.

He began systematically quartering the city in his sightseeing and patiently went through one building after another.

He found Sara's living quarters, though he knew if he had asked, the god would have told him where to locate her.

She was grouchy and inhospitable. "It's all your fault, Warden!" she said before shoving him out of the apartment into the corridor.

"My fault?" he said in amazement. "Who asked you to come down here in the first place? If you'd have stayed where you were you could be happily away from here by now, bringing me back some help."

"So you admit you needed help?" she accused.

"Oh, forget it," he said wearily. They had been over that territory before. "I guess I'll never understand women," he sighed as he turned away.

"No, I don't suppose you will!" She broke into tears and ran off.

All things considered, Jason told himself, I'm not being treated too badly. Now and then a bunch of the natives would come to the rooms where he was being held and look at him. Pointing at him, they chattered to each other in a hissing language and then went away.

A native came twice a day with food and a kind of wine to which Jason grew accustomed.

He hid his blaster, thinking that if his captors grew ugly, he could fight his way out of the palace to some place of safety.

In the meantime, the natives seemed to hold him in awe, and left him unmolested. Jason stayed in the tower rooms, contenting himself with trying to speak the native language with the servants and looking through rolls of manuscript he found one morning on the table in the room where he ate.

The high priest came in once or twice. Pointing at the manuscripts on the table, the priest launched into a long harangue which ended abruptly. Jason grew bored and stood up, making a nasty face and shouting. The high priest retired quickly. The man had no way of knowing he was supposed to read the manuscripts and consider himself exorcised.

One day an old native came in and patiently began to teach Jason the language. It was a diversion, so he applied himself, gradually acquiring some facility with the tongue-twisting syllables.

He learned that the others had disappeared into the ship and vanished into the mountains which hid the Forbidden Place.

Jason wanted to know what the Forbidden Place was and asked long and detailed questions. All he was able to learn from the old scholar was that it was a place whence none ever returned; it was taboo. And now the demons had disappeared there and none had seen them since.

"Serves the bastards right," Jason muttered resentfully in his own tongue.

When he knew enough of the language to make himself understood, Jason demanded to be allowed out of the tower so that he could look at the city.

The answer was no, couched in polite terms such as “Most Noble Demon, it is not possible; the people would revolt. They still talk of your coming and of the stars that float and of where the other demons vanished!”

Jason argued and grew impatient. Finally the high priest, whom the engineer was given to understand was named Zelnak, paid a visit.

Flanked by guards and underlings Zelnak came warily into the room. He had been assured by the scholar that the demon was most gentle when not provoked, and did not seem disposed to avail himself of any magical powers.

Jason and Zelnak sat across from each other flanking the dining-room table.

After a pause, Zelnak said, “Did the honorable Demon consider it within his dignity to peruse the holy texts?”

“What?” Jason said. “Oh, yes, I read them, noble Zelnak. Interesting.” He lied.

“Interesting?” the high priest expostulated. “Interesting!”

Jason said nothing.

“Well, if you read the scriptures and the Words of the Most High, why haven’t you vanished?” Zelnak demanded at last.

A great light dawned on Jason. He was expected to go up in smoke!

“I didn’t feel like it,” he said twitching one of the folds of the simple robe he wore.

“But,” the high priest exclaimed, “you are exorcised! You’re supposed to go back to wherever demons live!” Zelnak was plainly astonished.

“Well, I’m not going to,” Jason said sharply, “at least not yet.”

Zelnak had consulted the god about the demon. “What should we do with it?” he whined to the Most High.

“Do away with it,” the god had answered and then refused to discuss the matter further.

This left Zelnak in a quandary. The books plainly said that the only way to get rid of demons was to exorcise them.

Zelnak wrang his hands. “But you have to!” he complained. “It’s in the books. Get a demon to read holy writ, and he goes away,” he ended on a hopeful note. “So go away.”

“No,” Jason answered.

There was a long pause. Zelnak sensed himself losing face before the guards and priests who stood behind his chair, covertly looking at the demon in spite of etiquette. Zelnak felt outmaneuvered.

“Well, you must not be much of a demon, if you won’t go away.”

“I could always eat you for lunch,” Jason leered. He was beginning to enjoy the discomfiture the high priest was suffering so openly.

Zelnak drew back into the recesses of his chair. “That would never do,” he got out at last.

“Why not?” Jason moved as if to rise. “It’s time for my lunch, and it’s not here, and you’re about as near as anything else.”

Zelnak scrambled to his feet and beat a retreat.

The recorder was named Alexander Carnaby. As a boy he had dreamed of the exploits of the legendary Greek hero, but Carnaby was not the stuff of which heroes are made.

Physically, he was puny and weak. He worked to the best of his ability in school to become an athlete, but his small size worked against him. The race had a tendency to grow taller, but Carnaby was only five feet tall.

He gradually retired to the comfort of books and machines. The machines seemed to be sympathetic to him, so he devoted more and more time to them, gradually building up a rapport with the most complicated. But his size still proved to be a handicap, because when he applied for jobs, the taller, handsome men with less education, perhaps, but more charm and drive always received the appointments.

Carnaby could have stayed in the university but he still dreamed of making a name for himself. He wanted to be one of the conquering men who returned from the stars loaded with glory and loot from newly discovered worlds. At last he found a berth among the surveyors, not as a captain, for which he felt his large store of information entitled him, but as a recorder. By his sixth flight he was piling up a comfortable bank balance but he had learned to keep his mouth tightly closed no matter where he was.

The recorder stayed close to the ship, taking his meals at the control consoles and trying every method he knew to get a message through. Finally, after weeks of constant trying, Carnaby gave up. He was desolate.

Nothing worked. Unmindful of being immured on the planet or of the fact that one of his crew members was held by the natives and possibly dead, Carnaby was struck only by the magnitude of the fact that his polished techniques did not work.

He slammed his fist against the console. “Did—not—work.” Carnaby sobbed quietly to himself and went to his bunk.

He felt betrayed.

Buck wandered through the city. In various apartments he found small, shiny objects. He took them if he could carry them; they might be valuable. He located a large apartment, apparently once a residence, because four of the rooms contained long, narrow platforms of a spongy material.

To this building he hauled his loot, including various jeweled objects he found here and there in the city. Buck could not tell what their function might be, but he could recognize a gem when he saw it, despite the unusual cutting.

He sampled the fruit growing on some of the trees and found it edible; there was water in all of the fountains. He was relatively content. He told himself he would return to the ship when he grew tired of prowling through the buildings or needed a more substantial meal.

Buck slipped along the moving ways and in and out of the beautiful buildings oblivious to the spare art around him. He was always oblivious to his surroundings unless he was personally uncomfortable.

He saw to it that this seldom happened.

The mate had eyes only for the fascinating trinkets he picked up and removed to his hiding place, which soon resembled a fabulous warehouse of artifacts waiting shipment to some pleasure world or museum. He would stand for hours examining the surfaces and speculating on what kind of metal they were and what sort of jewels were set in them. He slept when he was tired and picked fruit when he was hungry. Life had never been better for Buck.

The voice spoke to him now and then, but Buck ignored it. He knew it was supposed to be the god of this planet, but Buck did not believe in gods: Buck believed in Buck and money.

He thought about Warden's beacon. He knew it was still broadcasting. When Warden or his own ship failed to report, both corporations would send searchers quartering along the path the ships had taken. He was confident he would be rescued.

For the time being, he was happy. There was no discipline. No one told him what to do.

The god, after attempting to communicate with the mate, seldom bothered with him. The only questions Buck ever asked demanded the location of treasure. After a few sessions, the Most High and Buck ignored each other, except once when Buck tried to get what he thought was a statue off its pedestal. It looked small enough to roll back to the apartment.

"Beware," the god warned.

"Go terrify a native," Buck snarled. He kept on trying to topple the statue from its stone block.

"Do not touch that!" the Most High said beside him again.

Buck made a rude noise.

He leaped back in surprise as an electrical shock ran through the stone block.

"That is a mild warning," the god said implacably.

Buck tried to touch the block again. A blue spark leaped to meet his hand and spun him ten feet away.

Buck cursed, but thereafter he left the statuary alone. The god did not seem to mind when he took small articles.

Then in a tiny black cubicle of a building Buck found a stairway; in all his searches through the city he had never seen a stairway or ramp leading down.

The walls glowed softly. Buck went slowly down the steps. He hesitated. "Hey, voice," he called, "is this safe?"

The voice of the Most High said, strangely to the mate's ears, "It is safe so long as you do not enter any chamber marked with a device resembling a triangle."

Buck grunted what might have been thanks and continued down the steps. He found a long corridor at the bottom, which it took him fifteen minutes to reach, moving slowly.

The corridor was wide and perhaps twelve feet high. It stretched both right and left in what was



apparently a straight line until it seemed to curve into infinity. Buck was unable to see the end of the corridor, but turned at random to his right and began walking quickly beneath the glowing ceiling. Ranks of doors appeared now and then, and Buck stopped at each to peer into the chambers, which grew light at his approach.

Each was filled with large, bulking shapes. Buck entered a few of the rooms but was unable to see anything he would want to carry away.

At last he came to a room marked with a glowing triangle. It was made of a semitransparent material. As the room lightened, Buck could see the interior of the room.

It was filled with a fantastic jumble of shapes, light and dark, in every color of the rainbow.

He stood quietly before the door, remembering the admonition of the voice.

He continued along the corridor. Several of the rooms were marked with the triangle. Each was closed by the transparent material which Buck decided was a highly-tempered glass when he rapped a door tentatively. The door slid back and the way to the room was open.

Buck hesitated and stepped forward, one step at a time.

Nothing happened.

The mate laughed and walked boldly into the center of the room, mindful not to touch anything. "Creepy place," he observed, then turned on his heel and left.

## X

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A month and a half by the earthmen's reckoning had passed. Warden was still roaming through the city. Sara seemed cloistered in her room. The recorder had not come out of his ship, everyone gradually forgot about him. Warden now and then saw Buck scurrying along the moving ways with different objects in his arms. Warden made a note he would have to look the mate up at some point and find out what he was doing, because he avoided even coming near, always veering off among the buildings and parks.

Warden continued his desultory talks with the god, who was less and less reticent after sulking, but Warden learned little.

Zelnak, on the other hand, was as happy as a shashlik among tender plants. Except for the persistent refusal of his resident demon to vanish, life had settled down again and Zelnak ruled supreme. He was even on fairly cordial terms with the demon.

He currently was preparing to receive the ambassador from the king of the territories to the west, Nerva. The high priest arranged himself comfortably on the throne and signaled the guards at the far end of the audience chamber to admit the ambassador, who came to the foot of the dais from which the high priest looked down. The ambassador prostrated himself, his suite following his example.

"Rise, Ambassador," Zelnak said languidly with a flick of his wrist.

The embassy rose to their feet and arranged their robes becomingly.

The high priest studied the ambassador as the pages went through the ritual of exchanging compliments between the rulers and offering mutual expressions of esteem, affection and gratitude. The real business would come later, in private.

Zelnak rose. "Let our noble visitors from afar enjoy themselves," he intoned. Then he descended the dais and, taking the ambassador by the arm, led him through a tapestry behind the throne to a room reserved for Zelnak's use alone.

When they were comfortably seated over cups of Zelnak's best wine, he sparred for a few moments with the emissary and then said plainly, "And why does our beloved cousin Nerva send this embassy, pray?"

The ambassador fussed with the ruffles of his robe and then blurted, "Since it pleases Your Worship to speak bluntly, then I shall feel honored to do likewise. It is about the star."

"The star," Zelnak echoed. "Which one?"

"You mean you have two?" the ambassador gasped.

"Well, in a manner of speaking," Zelnak hedged. "Why are you interested in stars, my dear ambassador?"

"We heard rumors that a star is come down in your temple, and that it contains angels who bring messages to the Most High. We would know if this has any import for our nation."

Aha! Zelnak said to himself. That's what this villain's after, the star! Well, he can take it and welcome—and the demon, too! And good riddance. Before doing so, however, he would have to think of a way to turn this to his advantage.

The ambassador smiled guilelessly. "To take back a report to our monarch would be a happy event," he said.

Zelnak, catching the hint at a bribe, lowered his eyes and said softly, "A most happy event, I am sure.

"Let us discuss it later," the high priest continued in a brighter tone. "I am sure you are tired from your long journey and would like rest. I shall be grateful if you would dine with me this evening, Ambassador."

As the other man bowed his assent, Zelnak reminded him self to threaten a slow death to any of his people who let slip to the ambassador or his suite that the "angel" was a demon who wouldn't go away.

"Perhaps his spies don't know," Zelnak said as the ambassador took his leave.

Carnaby stayed listlessly in the ship for a week following his realization of failure. He, stayed away from the control console and remained in his cabin, staring at the ceiling and rereading old maintenance manuals.

He thought about the captain and about Warden. He thought about the snide meanness the engineer and the mate had put him through. Baiting the recorder had been among their chief pleasures, and he had looked forward to the end of the cruise.

Carnaby never saw any of them, though he knew Jason was somewhere in the city of the natives. He never doubted the engineer would manage to escape, because like most people who watch from the outside, Carnaby knew that Jason's worst qualities were just the ones which would keep him alive. He did not look forward to another meeting with the engineer. He resolved to stay in the ship.

At last growing bored, he returned to the control room. He idled in front of the screens on the captain's console. They still showed the city stretching around the ship. He saw Warden striding along one of the moving walkways. The tall surveyor disappeared into one of the buildings. Carnaby lost interest.

The ship, he knew, would be a refuge as long as the food lasted, which would be quite a while. The power supply would last almost indefinitely. Carnaby himself had supervised the installation of a new power pile, though it was Buck's job; it was good for twenty more years at the rate the uranium base decayed.

He wandered through the ship and ended back in the control room. He seated himself before the console; it began to rain. He remembered someone saying it always rained at this time of day.

Every day.

Carnaby straightened. "Every day?" he said aloud. "At the same time? Why, that's a pattern!" The recorder was always happiest with concrete things.

He sat cheerfully at the console and punched a series of questions into the ship computer.

"Let's see," Carnaby said to himself, "rate of spin, charted convection currents, pull of the moons, cycling at—" He worked away, pulling codes from memory and feeding information, then asking for postulates.

The computer spun back the answers. Carnaby read the tapes. According to known laws and to information the computer had at its disposal, it was impossible for there to be rain naturally every day at the same time, especially in a valley shielded as this one was.

He sat back, fingers nervously thumping the console.

The computer was incapable of lying if the information he fed into it was fact. It was; Carnaby reasoned, then the rainfall is artificial!

If the rainfall is artificial, there are machines or people making it happen!

The recorder had rejected the preposterous idea that the voice was a god. Carnaby had heard the voice of the Most High and didn't believe it. But he could believe his own computer. He wondered if there might be other patterns.

Humming silently to himself for the first time in weeks, Carnaby settled down to the console. If there were other patterns, he vowed he would find them.

Sara continued to avoid him, so Warden contented himself with exploratory forays into the city. He watched the mate from distant buildings as he went back and forth to one particular structure near the lake.

Curious, Warden waited for almost an entire afternoon watching Buck go back and forth between the building and some point on the distant reaches of the city.

The Star Systems man timed the mate's trips. Each took approximately an hour and a half.

Warden patiently allowed Buck to get about twenty minutes away from the hideaway before he entered the building; he quickly found Buck's storehouse on the main floor.

He stood in an archway with amazement on his face. He recognized some of the small instruments from what the Most High had told him, others he had seen in his own travels and left undisturbed. But the mate

was apparently stockpiling anything shiny here for some purpose.

The surveyor walked quickly through the rooms and at last, whistling cheerfully, strode off in the direction he had seen the mate take on his forays.

Warden passed the small building without a second glance. He had noticed it before but its small size would seem to indicate it held no interest, and he ignored it.

He was about to enter a nearby structure of a shining, green stone when he heard a clink, as of something being dropped nearby.

Warden ducked into the nearest doorway, located an open area in the stonework and peered out toward the street.

Buck, arms overflowing with glittering trinkets of one sort or another came through the arch of the small building. Warden now examined it with interest. It was low, cubical in shape and set above a reflecting pool lined with low shrubbery. From his vantage point earlier, he had seen the mate make at least four trips in and out of this direction. Warden suspected the building might hold more than he thought.

He waited for the mate to disappear on one of the moving walkways and then walked directly into the building.

The Most High spoke directly before him. "There is danger below, Warden. Take care of doors marked with triangles. Touch nothing within."

"Thanks," he said wonderingly, because the god had not spoken to him in days, and plunged into the building. He forgot to ask where he was going in the rush of his curiosity.

There was a stairway leading down. Warden hesitated at the head of the steps and peered down. The steps continued down at a dizzying angle. Flat rises prevented him from seeing the foot of the stair.

"By the way," he said as he walked down the stairs, "you never have told me, Most High, how your voice seems to be everywhere." Warden's tone was hopeful. Perhaps the deity would unbend and let him in on the secret.

The god did not answer.

Warden reached the foot of the stairs. The corridor stretched away to pinpoints on either side of the doorway through which he emerged.

Warden turned to his left and walked down the corridor, stopping now and then to peer in at doorways. He noticed lights came on in the rooms when he stepped up to any door.

"Storerooms," he said quietly to himself. "So this is where Buck is getting his loot."

He continued down the long corridor. The tall surveyor was examining a bulky piece of metal in one corner of a room when he heard footsteps in the corridor.

Buck noticed the lighted doorway as he came back from his latest trip back to the apartment.

He knew the rooms lighted only if someone were in them. He pulled his blaster and walked cautiously up to the edge of the door.

He sneaked a quick look into the room. He couldn't see Warden, who was now behind the masses of containers.

“Who’s there?” Buck called.

Warden, ducking a glance through the base of a table, saw the blaster. He thought it prudent not to expose himself at once.

“Warden,” he called. “Is that you, Buck?”

The mate stepped openly through the door, sheathing the blaster.

“How’d you find this place, Warden?” he demanded.

The surveyor saw the mate replace his gun. He came out from behind the table. “Exploring,” he said. “Do you know what this is?”

“Storerooms, I think,” Buck answered suspiciously.

He hesitated and then made an involuntary gesture toward Warden. “Look,” Buck said, “there’s enough here for both of us, I figure. I’ve been going through here for days. There’s more stuff than ten ships could carry in jewelry alone.”

Warden stared at the mate. Finally, he said, “I don’t want any of it, Buck, at least not until we can get off this planet.” He refrained from pointing out that the planet was the property of Star Systems.

The Most High picked that moment to interject, “You will never leave, Warden, any of you. I have spoken.”

“Bet he doesn’t know about the you-know-what,” said Buck showing his large teeth in a grin. He meant Warden’s beacon.

As Warden made a gesture of silence, the voice again spoke. “The beacon no longer transmits; a rock fell on it,” the Most High said with finality.

## XI

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Zelnak leaned forward in the chair and speared a particularly choice piece of the roasted meat.

After he had chewed it reflectively, he swallowed delicately and then said to the ambassador, who was hanging on his words, “Tell me, my dear Ambassador, why the interest in the star? I am sorry, of course, to ask again, but I would be most gratified if you would refresh my memory.”

“Not at all, Your Worship,” the ambassador returned dulcetly. “We know that it is a great mark of honor for the Most High to send you the star and His emissaries, the angels. We are concerned, though, with the stories that there may be more to the star than would immediately come to the unsubtle eye.” That was a nice speech, the ambassador said smugly to himself. Top that, you old fraud!

“Of course, of course,” Zelnak said soothingly, “there might be, at that.

“Tell me, Ambassador, could there be a remote possibility that your country would want the star for its own purposes?”

“Not at all, not at all!” The ambassador held up his hands in protest. “The honor of the star is of course

your own, Your Worship, however..." The ambassador let the interest in his voice hang in the air as he regarded the high priest from drowsy lids.

"However, you might see your way, shall we say, to a small, ah, arrangement should we allow the star to, ah, be taken for a holy visit to—"

"Exactly." The ambassador interrupted Zelnak's insinuation. "A holy visit is just what we had in mind, Your Worship."

Zelnak smirked. The fool is falling into my hands! When I'm well and truly quit of the star, then I'll feel safe again, and rid of the demon, too.

The high priest leaned his arm comfortably against the table. In his most agreeable manner he said, "And if we could see our way clear to doing your lord this favor, what would he be prepared to do in return—that is, if it were possible to gain the favor of the Most High in this most unorthodox request?"

"Naturally," the ambassador interjected smoothly, "we would make high remuneration to the temple, Your Worship."

He paused, "Shall we say, hypothetically, of course, six of our villages would transmit their taxes to the temple for a number of years?"

Zelnak yawned. "Hypothetically, of course."

The ambassador smiled. "Perhaps twelve villages," he said.

Zelnak was very interested indeed. "Only twelve?" he asked as if bored.

"Fifteen, then," the ambassador sighed.

"For fifteen villages it could be possible," the high priest said, while pretending to inspect the wick of a lamp burning on the table.

The ambassador heaved a sigh of relief. He had been prepared to say thirty villages. "I am so glad we understand each other, Your Worship," he said gratefully.

Zelnak stood and wandered close to the window. He gestured for the ambassador to follow.

When they stood in the shadowed window alcove, Zelnak took the man's arm fondly and inquired softly, "And would it be worth, say, a province in perpetuity as part of our own lands, if say, we could persuade the angel of the Most High, whom we have here in the palace, to accompany the star?"

"Oh, Your Worship!" the ambassador breathed soulfully. "An entire province?" He resumed bargaining.

Warden had returned to his ship to sulk. Buck, with many dispirited groans for the riches he would never be able to enjoy, trailed back to his own apartment-warehouse.

In Sara's ship, Carnaby was busily making diagrams, plotting repetitions of local phenomena and bombarding the surface of the planet with random search patterns of his own.

At last the short recorder sat back and patted himself figuratively on the back. Alexander Carnaby had made a discovery. "Why," he said to himself in a mild way which sounded more like surprise than discovery, "It's not a god at all; it's a computer!"

A lot of things were becoming clear to him. "It used magnetics to blanket out communications," he said to

himself as he shoved away from the control console clutching a sheaf of data.

“And it uses a blanket grid-pattern to project its voice,” Carnaby continued as he walked toward the open port of the ship.

“And it uses heat and convection from the mountains to move the clouds and make it rain,” he continued, standing at the head of the ramp.

“Why, the whole planet must be a honeycomb of planted grids,” he exclaimed. “I wonder where the power comes from?”

Carnaby was by this time at the middle of the ramp.

“Solar heat traps,” a voice said beside him.

Carnaby stood still. His small face grew suffused with blood as he suddenly realized he was angry. A machine claiming to be a god!

“You’re a fraud!” Carnaby accused. “You’re a machine!”

“You are very perceptive,” said the voice calmly. “I calculated within ninety and nine ninths points you would discover my secret.”

Carnaby grew curious. “Why,” he demanded, “is there a secret? Why would you be afraid one of us would find out?”

“Because,” the voice returned blandly, as if explaining to a very small child, “then I wouldn’t be a god any longer.”

Carnaby began slowly inching backward up the ramp.

“Your purpose is to serve, machine,” he said. “How do you follow us around, anyway?”

The recorder was nearing the port.

“Heat patterns and sound modulation,” the voice said. “I do not see in the ordinary sense I have heard you people discussing. Additionally, your brains give off distinctive patterns.”

“Well, I order you to stop pretending you’re a god, machine,” Carnaby said. He now stood in the aperture of the lock.

“Oh, no, little creature. I fear you can’t do that.”

“Why not?” Carnaby demanded. “You’re just a slave device!”

The recorder jumped through the port and to the side with sparrowlike quickness. As he did, a bolt of lightning struck the ramp where he had been standing and ran through the outer frame of the ship to the ground on the pavement below.

“You cannot escape My wrath,” the voice said from a speaker near Carnaby’s head.

“Oh, yes, I can, now that I know what you are,” Carnaby retorted. “It takes you a while to make those clouds and lightning bolts. I watched it forming against the mist, you fraud!”

Carnaby cycled the port shut, and ran for the control room. Some of the control levers had begun to

move. He locked the master controls on manual. Any interference by the computer with power flow would be deadened.

“I can strike in other ways, Carnaby,” the voice said heavy with menace. “Come out of the ship.”

“Not on your life—I mean, circuits!”

“I shall destroy the entire ship. I can, you know.”

“How? With a thunderbolt?” the little man jeered.

“I shall hurl rocks,” the machine threatened.

“I will create tidal waves and hurricanes. I will sweep you away,” the voice menaced.

“And destroy this city? I don’t think so,” Carnaby said. “Somewhere in your prime orders you are absolutely set up to protect this city.” Carnaby was guessing. He had no way of knowing what the original builders of the machines had programmed into the computer as its prime directives.

“I will raise molten mountains and cause the earth to heave,” the voice said wrathfully.

Carnaby knew he had won for a little while.

He made himself comfortable. “Let’s be reasonable, machine. I can help you, you know,” Carnaby offered deviously.

“I will toast you with laser rays and then send you in one of the transport machines to a far place a hundred light years hence,” the voice grated.

“Your equipment is not movable,” Carnaby teased.

“You will be smashed beneath the service mechanisms!” The computer roared.

“What service mechanisms?” inquired Carnaby innocently.

“You cannot trick a god, you worm!” the voice bellowed. Then, in a crafty way, the computer said, “I will retire to think about your destruction, and it will be terrible when it happens. But if you should crave my pardon, I won’t hurt you very much.”

“Oh, no,” Carnaby said. “I’m staying right here.”

The voice was silent. Carnaby watched his screens. The computer at least wasn’t trying to tamper with them, yet. He would be able to see anyone coming and warn them. He wondered if the computer would take its wrath out on the others of his crew or on Warden.

“My crew,” Carnaby said to himself, relishing the words. “My crew!” For the first time in his life, the recorder poured himself a drink of alcohol. “To celebrate,” he said, and drank it down.

Warden’s communicator buzzed. He turned it on. The screen cleared to show the recorder from the other ship.

“Oh, hello, Barnaby,” Warden said. “What can I do for you?”

“Carnaby,” the little man corrected. “Warden, it’s about the thing that’s claiming to be a god, it’s—”

A wave of static bloomed across the screen.



“What?” Warden called. “Clear your focus, Carnaby. I can’t hear you.”

Awk, bleep. “Computer,” Squawk.

Warden hit the button for a finer beam. The static continued.

From the speaker, Carnaby’s words came through garbled. “It’s awk, burble, ‘go out,’ squeak.

“Call me when you get a clear band,” Warden said before he switched off, “or stop by for a talk. I can’t get you clearly.”

“Warden?” the god said beside him.

“Oh, hello, Most High,” Warden said carefully. He didn’t want to offend the deity into any kind of dreadful action, after yesterday’s announcement in the corridor below the city.

“How much of your native food do your ships carry, Warden,” the voice inquired in friendly tones.

“Oh, I don’t know, Most High. I have enough emergency and other rations stored in this ship to last for four or five of our years. Why? Are you worried about our well-being?”

“Then the other ship must carry even a greater store,” the Most High deduced.

“I suppose so,” Warden said. “But if you’re worried about our survival until another ship comes, we could last on some of the local fruits and animals almost indefinitely.”

“But if the other of your species in the larger ship wanted to, it could remain within for a long time?”

“Who, Carnaby? Yes, I guess so, but he’ll come out sooner or later,” Warden said. A frown began to make a crease across his forehead. “Why?”

“I want him out now, Warden!” the voice snapped. “He has offended. My godhood. He has committed—what do you call it?—he has committed lèse majesté.”

“I’m sure if he has, he’s very sorry,” Warden offered sincerely. He was beginning to feel icy sweat trickling down his spine and forming under his shoulder blades.

“He must be eliminated, Warden,” the god said reasonably. “Surely, you can understand that you can’t go around insulting Me and get away with it!” The voice turned ugly. “Remember the lightnings, Warden!”

“Can’t we work this out some way, peacefully?”

“No.”

“Uh, well, what do you want me to do about it?” Warden at last ventured plaintively.

“Just this.” The voice was crisp. “In the early morning when I perceive that your brain patterns indicate you are least active, that monster will have his defenses down. You are to be alert. Go to that ship, carrying an implement with which you can destroy this Carnaby. You will do so, Warden, or suffer the consequences.”

“But that’s murder!” Warden protested.

“warden!” the voice was working itself into a rage.

“Yes, sir.” Warden was meek.

“And Warden,” the voice said as an afterthought. “Don’t let this Carnaby utter one word, not one. He would probably say something insulting about Me again.”

“Not one word,” Warden promised.

## XII

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Well,” Zelnak went on, “you’ve been demanding to see a little more of our way of life. This is the perfect way of doing it.”

“I won’t go,” Jason said.

“Why not?” Zelnak demanded.

“Suddenly I like it here,” Jason answered. He felt the high priest was going to try to trick him.

“Be fair, Most Honorable Demon,” Zelnak countered. “The people of the west think of you as the most glorious of angels. They will treat you with every honor; your every whim will be catered to; you can have anything you want; they will worship you.”

“I don’t want to be worshipped,” Jason said with a trace of petulance in his voice. “All I want to do is be able to walk around right here.”

“But that’s not possible,” Zelnak protested. “I’ve told you why before. But if you were to go to another country, where they venerate and cherish you, why, the, uh, stars are the limit, if you will pardon what may be a painful allusion.” The high priest was attempting to be very persuasive.

Jason was unaware that Zelnak had sold the engineer and Warden’s ship for three quarters of a rich province bordering on the west.

“I’m very happy right here,” Jason insisted stubbornly, fiddling with his robe. He saw the mass of guards walking back and forth outside the door of the room where he was closeted with the high priest.

Zelnak began to lose his temper. “Now look here, Demon. I promised you would go on a goodwill tour. Are you going to make trouble between two peaceful countries just because you don’t feel like a little travel?”

“Yes,” Jason said blandly.

Zelnak banged a bony fist on the table. “But consider the international situation! If you don’t go, there will be war! Thousands of our people will die; the countryside will be in flames; farms will be trampled; the shashlik will roam wild in the streets; mothers will mourn their lost children!”

Jason held up his hand. “I think you’re just trying to get rid of me, Zelnak.”

About to scream in rage, Zelnak caught himself. “Not at all, Most Honorable Demon,” he said sweetly. He sighed and rolled his eyes heavenward. “But I find it hard to believe that even the most hardened demon would want to be responsible for the deaths of little children.”

“Don’t try to soft-soap me, Zelnak. In your language that means don’t try to get around me by appealing to my better instincts; I don’t have any.

“Besides, how do I know they really want me to come?”

“Why,” said the high priest feigning surprise, “ask their ambassador, if you want to. He’ll tell you how much they would love to have you. But don’t let on you’re a demon instead of an angel. It would be bad for appearances, of course.”

“Oh, of course,” said Jason sarcastically.

Zelnak had meanwhile summoned the ambassador by making a beckoning gesture toward the door.

The ambassador hurried in and knelt reverently before Jason. Then he stood and stepped back beside Zelnak. He stared at the engineer.

Jason stared back belligerently. He was two feet shorter than any of the natives.

“Well,” the ambassador said after a lengthy silence, “he’s a pretty small angel, Zelnak. Don’t you have any bigger ones?”

Zelnak paled. Before he could say anything, Jason broke in with, “Now just a second there, I’m six foot, and that’s pretty tall as us de—angels go.”

Zelnak heaved a heartfelt sigh. Perhaps his plan would work.

“I just thought I’d take a look at you at least before you go back,” Jason said, “because I’m not going with you.”

“What?” gasped the ambassador and Zelnak in the same breath.

“You heard me,” Jason said to Zelnak. “I like it here, and I’m sure, Zelnak, that the Most High wouldn’t hear of my going, either.”

“Ah, most excellent Ambassador, let me have a little time with the Most Honorable De—I mean, Angel. I am sure a little conversation between us and the Most High will persuade him.”

The ambassador looked crossly at Zelnak and then assented. His robes twitched as he walked stiffly out of the room.

“Now, see here, Demon!” the high priest started in an angry undertone.

Jason produced his blaster. Zelnak cringed back.

“You see here, Zelnak. I’m staying here and that’s that.”

Zelnak sighed as if he were going to give in with a certain amount of good grace. The guardsmen were standing behind the demon. They had stolen into the room unnoticed.

“If you insist,” Zelnak said, giving the signal. The haft of a spear landed on the demon’s neck with a satisfying thud. “I was afraid you’d refuse,” Zelnak said to the recumbent figure.

By smashing an occasional thunderbolt against the hull of the ship in the city, the computer thought to keep Carnaby in a convenient place for its assassin to find him.

The noise attracted Sara. Buck, who had left the ship with a large supply of liquor, lay in a stupor in his treasure rooms.

Sara heard the thunderclaps through the afternoon and thought little about them. When they continued into the early evening and seemed to be localized, she put on a freshly-laundered jump suit and went in search of the disturbance.

From the edge of the ornamented plaza she saw small clouds forming over the ship, one by one, and bolts sizzling downward.

“That’s not only funny, that’s extremely fishy,” the young woman said. “I may not know a great deal about rain clouds, but they don’t just hang forever in one place.”

She set off at a determined pace across the plaza.

“Do not go near!” the voice of the god boomed from seemingly everywhere around her.

“And why not?” she demanded.

“It’s my ship, Most High,” she pointed out.

“I am about to destroy it,” the god said calmly.

“You can’t do that!”

“Those bolts can find you just as easily, female Terran.”

“Well, at least let me get a few things out of it before you do anything rash,” Sara said urgently.

“It is not permitted,” the Most High rambled. “What things?”

“Why, things necessary for females like me to survive,” she said in astonishment. “Things like cosmetics, intimate instruments, and, uh, very personal little things.”

“What little things?”

“Oh, never mind! Can I go to the ship and get them?”

Being an honest, or nearly honest, person, Sara hesitated and then when the god asked if the “little things” were absolutely necessary to survival, lied. “Yes,” she said. Then thinking better of it, she said, “Well, not exactly, that is, but necessary, you see, if I don’t have them. It would— I mean...”

“Enough.”

“I’m not finished!”

“It is not permitted to go again into that ship,” the voice intoned.

“Well, I like that!” Sara shouted, stamping her foot.

“Go away,” the god said calmly, “and I will not harm you. You are, after all, the only female of your species on my planet.”

“You sound like you’re talking to some guinea pig,” she said angrily. “What if I don’t like it?”

“It makes no difference. You will cooperate.”

Sara felt a cold lump forming in the base of her stomach. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The females of your species breed, do they not?”

“They do not,” she said firmly, “unless they feel love for their husbands!”

“Husbands? You mean mates. No matter. You will cooperate.”

A new cloud soared above Sara’s ship, stopped, rumbled around a bit and then released another thunderbolt.

“Well!” Sara blurted indignantly. Then she stamped off in search of Warden, whom she knew to be staying in his ship.

“The Sara is coming to see you,” the Most High announced, jolting Warden out of a tense sleep. The surveyor had had trouble finding sleep, thinking of what he had been ordered to do. He had spent hours trying to figure a way out of it.

“Oh, terrific!” Warden mumbled. “What am I going to tell her? That early this morning I’m going over to her ship and do away with one of her crew?”

“You will tell the Sara nothing,” the god instructed.

In less than five minutes Sara popped through the opened port and surged into Warden’s control cabin.

“Do you know that the Most High is going to destroy my ship?” she demanded.

“No!” he said, feigning surprise. “Why?”

“He’s talking about me being the only female and he wants to force me to have babies and he’s going to destroy my ship and— Oh, Bill, we’ll be here forever!”

Warden made soothing noises. The prospects of Sara becoming a mother intrigued him. He reached for her, forgetting everything else.

“Did the Most High indicate who would be honored in this way?”

She snapped alert. “Just a minute there, you tall lecher! Who do you think I am, Eve with three Adams?”

Warden pulled a rueful face. “I’m sorry,” he said at last.

The voice of the Most High rang through the control room. “Close your port, Warden. That idiot Zelnak is coming to the cavern with a gaggle of people.”

Zelnak and the ambassador from King Nerva advanced down the length of the temple. Both were clad in stately robes. Massed choirs sang and hidden instruments played impressive, overwhelming music. As it glittered with the reflected light of thousands of torches, the temple roof bounced all the sound back.

The high priest was leaning on the arm of the ambassador.

“A great state occasion,” Zelnak whispered sotto voce.

“Indeed, Your Worship,” the ambassador returned. “But to be practical, what arrangements can we make for the moving of the star?”

They stood before the tall, burnished doors to the inner cavern. While waiting for a small phalanx of

slaves to swing the doors open, Zelnak said with a smile, “You roll it along a roadway of felled and stripped trees. Then other trees, inserted under one end can be used to lever it in the direction you want. Lines of people hauling on ropes guide its direction, you see.

“In the first stages of your journey,” Zelnak continued, “I shall be happy to lend you twenty or thirty thousand people to help move the star, say to our own borders, where your own people can meet it and drag it to our dear cousin Nerva’s capital city.

“Our people will go on for a way, of course, to take up residence in our new province and see to its adequate administration.”

The doors fully open at last, the two advanced into the softly glowing cavern where the ship rested before the statue of the god.

“Somehow I thought stars close up would be larger than this,” the ambassador said after standing in the lee of the survey ship for several minutes.

“Of course, Your Worship,” he hastily went on, “this is a magnificent star, and my dear Lord Nerva will be most happy to see it arrive for its holy visit.”

“Let us make obeisance to the Most High,” Zelnak suggested.

Inside the ship Warden and Sara watched this conversation with interest, though they had no inkling of its meaning.

“Most High!” Warden called softly, though the two outside could not hear through the walls of the ship. “What’s going on?”

“These fools begin to anger Me, Warden. They talk of taking this ship away—though, on the other hand, if it were out of here and in some distant place, that would be a good idea, too. Perhaps I’ll let them.”

“One little minute there, Most High.” Warden said in alarm.

“Quiet, Warden,” the god answered. “I must speak to them.”

The man and woman were quiet, staring at the screens.

Advancing to the base of the statue, the two natives prostrated themselves.

“I wish I could understand those birds,” Warden said.

Zelnak began with a string of phrases of adoration and then launched into the tricky business of getting approval from the god to move the star.

“And so, O Most Mighty, Most High, Ruler of All, we humbly do beseech Thy divine blessing on this journey of holy moment, by this star, to the temples of our beloved relative, Nerva, and that You will vouchsafe to grant the gracious assent of Your minion, the angel, in going along to carry Your Word incarnate as represented by the body of this star.”

To Warden the voice of the god, though speaking in an unintelligible tongue, sounded wry. He looked at Sara and shrugged slightly.

The Most High said, “Zelnak, priest beloved of Us, for the first time in your life you’re doing something intelligent. I most heartily approve and do grant My blessing to this journey in every way. Bright skies will smile upon your journey, water will flow beside your camp sites; the very trees will sing joyously in a soft

breeze and bear fruit to nourish you on your way.”

Zelnak was ecstatic.

The ambassador was properly impressed. With many and profound thanks, the two bowed themselves backward out of the holy cavern.

When the doors began to close again as was proper after a high ceremony, Zelnak halted them with a wave.

“Let us begin to make preparations to move the star,” he called grandly. The underlings in the temple began to do the bidding of the high priest.

Inside the ship, Warden said, “What was all that about, Most High? I don’t want to seem disrespectful, or anything like that, but something seems just a little, uh, out of line.”

“You will have to leave the ship, Warden,” the Most High said curtly.

Warden felt his eyebrows climbing toward the usual level of his hairline.

“Come again?” he gargled. “Would you play that one back for me just one more time, please?”

“Come, come!” the voice said impatiently. “I have decided it is best for your own interests and Mine, too, that this ship be taken away from here.

“Since you have things to attend to, Warden, you obviously can’t go with it,” the Most High ended reasonably. The surveyor ignored the hint about his job as assassin.

“Well, I have news for you, Most High,” Warden said stubbornly. “Wherever this ship goes, I go. I’m not leaving, and Sara isn’t either,” he said.

“That’s right!” Sara chimed in unexpectedly.

“Remember the thunderbolts, Warden!” bellowed the voice.

“Go ahead and hit me, then,” Warden said defiantly. “I am not going to leave my ship!”

“Be reasonable, Warden,” the Most High cajoled.

“The ship could be damaged in the journey,” the god added. “Floods could wash it against sharp rocks. Lightning could hit it, or other disasters.”

“Your lightning doesn’t seem to hurt my ship,” Sara said.

“Silence!” roared the voice.

“No, I won’t!” Sara retorted. “First you threaten to use me like some kind of succubus, or something, and then you want to destroy my ship, and now you want Bill to give his ship up. Well, we won’t go, that’s all!”

Warden noticed that moisture didn’t seem to be forming against the low ceiling of the control room. He began to entertain a suspicion.

“I don’t think you can hit us in the ship,” he said slowly.

“I can destroy all!” the god rejoined.

“I’m beginning to wonder about that,” Warden said, a dark suspicion about his conversation with Carnaby flicking into his subconscious.

He told Sara about the two conversations, including the instructions of the Most High that he was to sneak into her ship and do away with the mild recorder.

“Then Carnaby must have found something,” she said thoughtfully. “And the Most High doesn’t want us to find it out.”

“That worm knows nothing!” the voice bellowed out of nowhere.

“Oh, shut up,” Warden snapped. “I’m thinking.”

The voice was unexpectedly silent.

“What we have to do is get in touch with Carnaby somehow.” Warden lunged for the communicator board and began setting up a sequence to reach Sara’s ship.

Within seconds the screens were streaked with interference and the speakers filled with static.

Carnaby came on the screen after a short wait, bands of interference slashing through his face.

Warden tried to clear the audio receivers. They finally settled down to a dull buzz, but nothing came through. He could see Carnaby moving his lips as if he were saying something.

“Damn!” Warden swore. “I wish I could read lips.”

Sara was staring at the screen. Carnaby was making gestures now, trying to get a message across through sign language.

She grabbed up a log book and held it up before the screen making writing motions.

“That’s it!” Warden shouted. He doubted the computer would know the meaning of written language if its own means of communication were totally electronic. But the natives had written language, he knew.

Carnaby caught on. He bent, scribbled something on a pad and held it up. The screens went blank. “Old god caught up with us,” Sara said dispiritedly.

“Oh, no he didn’t!” Warden crowed. He had caught the brief message before it blanked out. Carnaby had written in block letters, it’s a computer.

He told Sara. She sagged back in the acceleration couch. She was silent.

“It makes a lot more sense than calling it a god, anyway,” Warden observed.

“You will be unable to use that information, Warden,” the voice said from the speakers.

“Shut up, Charley,” the surveyor said rudely. He crossed to the control panel, flipped up the top and turned off toggles on four macrocircuit boards.

“He won’t be able to hear or talk to us now,” Warden said. “The circuits won’t connect.”

“He? Are you sure?” Sara questioned weakly.

“Sure. He won’t be able to, and we have to call it something. Let’s call it Charley,” said Warden in a light tone.



“How can you be clever at a time like this, Bill? It’s insane!”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he answered. “We’re still the most potentially dangerous animals in the universe, you know.”

He continued confidently, “Anything that one intelligence can make, another can figure out, one way or another.” Warden felt a surge of confidence which was slightly less than his manner was intended to indicate.

“Oh, sure,” she said. “Great, beautiful, terrific—here we are marooned on some idiot planet controlled by an insane computer that thinks it’s a god, and you sit around and talk like we’re on earth and all the machines are predictable and safe!” She began to sob.

Warden took her clumsily in his arms. “We’ll get out of it somehow, Sara,” he said.

There must be a control room, or someplace where the thing could be serviced or reprogrammed, Carnaby mused to himself. Even if it’s self-restoring and self-repairing there would have to be a way to get to it.

And that’s underground, I would guess. It would have to be, if the system’s big enough to service the entire planet. But where? Under the mountains, under the seas? No—difficult to get to. The original inhabitants walked, or there wouldn’t be moving ways. So they had to have some kind of transportation, too.

A thought hit him. The computer had talked about service mechanisms. That must be it. There are powered pieces of equipment, but they would be in storage somewhere, and somewhere the computer couldn’t get at them, or it would have used them to attack.

“Then,” Carnaby said aloud, “that part of its relay systems must be blocked!”

“If I can find a way into the system, I could figure out how to control it,” Carnaby told himself, “or blast it apart.

“The original reports!”

Carnaby started up and began pulling the report cartridges out of their racks.

“I will destroy the Carnaby and all its petty works!” a voice thundered suddenly through the control room.

“Shove off,” Carnaby said rudely. Like Warden, he disconnected the automatic inputs to the speakers and screens. For the first time in months, Carnaby felt totally alone, but he also felt elated.

He began listening to the self-activating report cubes and making charts and graphs with the light board, looking for the information he needed: here a massive ore deposit, there a bulge resembling pure copper, there a thin vein of gold.

“Wait a minute! Pure copper!” Carnaby bent closer to the console.

### **XIII**

The god was learning about guile.

The voice murmured persuasively, “You must return to your ship and destroy the Carnaby.”

Buck stumbled up to awareness as the voice continued to whisper.

He finally was alert, shaking his head to dissipate the fumes of the scotch he had been drinking steadily.

“Destroy the Carnaby,” the voice said again in a muted tone.

“What?” The sense of what the voice was saying penetrated his conscious mind. The insidious voice snapped the hulking mate to attention.

“Murder that little jerk? Why?”

“I will reward you if you will go to your ship and destroy this Carnaby,” the voice said gaining slightly in volume.

Buck squinted. “Not so loud,” he croaked. “Why should I kill Carnaby? He’s harmless.”

“I will reward you,” the voice promised. “I will destroy all the others of your species but the Sara and will give her to you to found a ruling family here over all the natives.”

“What?” Buck found it hard to believe. “You will be a—how do you call it—a king,” the voice went on.

“Suppose I don’t want to be a king here?” Buck was crafty. “What if I wanted to take these things and go away?” He indicated the heaped spoils in the room.

“Then I will allow you to take a ship and anything here you want and leave,” the voice said, compromising. “But you must destroy the Carnaby, and then the Warden.”

Buck scratched his chin. He didn’t trust the voice entirely, because in the same spot he would double-cross anyone to get what he wanted. Yet his eyes glittered at the thought of leaving with the wealth. If he took his former captain with him, she would have to be grateful, he thought.

“Both of them?” he asked.

“Both,” the voice ended flatly.

“How do I know I’m not dreaming?” Buck said at last.

“I will show you,” the voice said. A rumble filled the room. Buck looked up. A slight mist began falling. He was getting wet.

The mate pinched himself. “Okay, I believe you,” he said. “Turn off the shower.”

The cloud drifted against a far wall and began to dissolve. Buck felt a wave of cold air sweep through the room.

“Have you a weapon, an instrument with which you can blot out the Warden and the Carnaby?”

“My hands are good enough,” Buck responded boastfully. “And if not, I’ve got this.” He held up the blaster he still wore.

“If not, I will show you machines used by the Ones Who Went Before which can be used for the purpose.”

“This is enough,” Buck answered.

“When do you want me to do it?” he queried the unseen voice.

“Now, Buck.”

“Whoops!”

Sara fell against Warden as the ship lurched in its passage out of the cavern.

“Here we go again,” Warden sighed. “I wonder what that computer’s got up its sleeve?”

“Bill?” Sara said in a small voice.

“Hm?”

“I’m sorry I laughed at you before, I mean, when the ship was being dragged the first time.”

“Apology accepted.” He grinned. “I think, though, we may be able to get out of this mess when we get out in the open.”

The ship lurched again.

Sara gasped as she fell against Warden. He put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed reassuringly.

“Do we dare turn the screens on?”

“Couldn’t hurt,” he assented. “We’ll probably have to listen to the demented Charley, though.”

“I like to see where I’m going, even if that machine talks all night long,” she said.

Warden slipped the macrocircuit boards back into place. The screens cleared. Reception was perfect. Warden said, “No sign of Charley.”

“No news is good news,” she quipped.

“No news is bad news, I have a feeling,” he answered.

The ship lurched again. “Looks like they’re all steamed up to go somewhere with us in a hurry this time,” Warden said.

Thousands of natives swarmed around the survey ship, shoving and straining. Ranks of shashlik strained at heavy cables to give the forward movement of the ship momentum.

With a wobble, it bounced slightly down the low steps of the front doors of the temple and came to rest in the temple courtyard. Its rapid forward movement caused the cables to go slack. The shashlik bunched forward in confusion. The lines of men trying to guide the ship went over in dozens as the suddenly strained lines snapped out of their hands like frenzied snakes.

Sara, perched at last on a ventilator outlet pulled herself erect when the ship came to a stop.

“It’ll take them a while to get going again, I suppose,” she said.

Warden was sprawling over the computer control boards between the nearer ceiling screens. He rolled over. His face was six inches from the screen.

He sat up, then clambered up toward the floor and adjusted the screen to higher magnification.

The view he saw was a procession coming from the palace.

“Look at that!” he said excitedly.

“What?” she asked, displaying little interest; she was trying to straighten her tunic.

“There! There on the palace steps—that’s the high priest. I recognize him,” Warden said. “And the one beside him is the one who was in on the meeting just before we had the fight with Charley.”

“So?” she said. “They certainly wear pretty robes. I’d like to have just a piece of that thing the high priest is wearing.”

Warden cut her off. “Look behind them, between the guards.”

She peered across at the angled screen.

“Why, it’s Jason!” she exclaimed.

The unconscious engineer was moved forward by the priestly guards.

“Oh, Bill, we’ve got to help him!” Sara said. “But how?”

“Well, if Charley doesn’t interfere, we can try,” he said grimly.

Warden climbed up to the master control console and strapped himself into a couch.

“Come on,” he said. “Get into the other one and strap in.”

As Sara was complying with the order, Warden rapidly brought the controls to manual and began warming the drive mechanism. When he saw her safely strapped in, he punched a tab marked equalize. The artificial gravity controls cut in and the ship slowly began righting itself, dragging the shashlik backward and throwing the lines of men into confusion.

Zelnak, who was feeling very smug at having gotten rid of both demon and star and getting a province in the bargain, stopped as if struck in the stomach by a spear. He stared at the ship. It was beginning to revolve, and his own people weren’t controlling it.

Jason was groggily awakening behind the high priest. Held by the guards, he almost was bumped into the rear of the robed figure.

“I’ll be—” he said, becoming aware of where he was. Then he was quiet. There was someone in the ship and it was righting itself.

Jason took a step forward. The guards hauled him back.

Zelnak could only stand there and stare. He was almost beyond speech.

The ambassador plucked at the arm of the high priest. “What’s this?” He was gesturing at the slowly turning ship. “Your Worship looks pale. A touch too much wine, perhaps?”

“Shut up,” Zelnak said absently.

The ambassador flushed and closed his mouth with an audible snap.

When the ship was righted, Warden put the drive in low. Little crackles of flame from the chemical released against the shielded atomic pile began to shoot out of the drive tubes, stinging the natives who had ventured too close when the ship stopped turning. They scattered.

“Oh, no!” Zelnak groaned.

Some of the people in the square began to scream; they crowded back against the walls. Zelnak had promised a painful death to any who so much as breathed the word demon while the ambassador or any of his suite were in the country. But the mob began shouting, “The demon is controlling the star! Kill the demon!”

The ambassador shot a quick glance at Jason, whose face was shining with a sudden perspiration.

He turned to the high priest.

“What is this?” the ambassador demanded. “What is this? Is this a demon and no angel, Your Worship? Why are flames coming from the star?”

Zelnak was staring at the ship. A hole was opening in the side, a stairway extending. “Not again!” he cried plaintively.

Two figures appeared on the stairway. Bursts of thunder and flame splashed against the tops of the buildings of the court.

The crowd scattered, shrieking “The demons, the demons!” Thousands scrambled for the nearest hiding place.

Jason saw the taller figure, which he thought was Warden, waving at him. He tripped one of his guards, threw his body against the other, and, bowling over the figure of the high priest, ran toward the ship.

The ramp was beginning to retract as he stumbled into the interior of the Star Systems survey ship. As Jason sagged panting against the walls of the inner lock, a sharp flash of lightning clanged off the hull.

Warden quickly cycled the port shut.

“Charley’s getting quicker with those bolts every time,” he observed.

“Charley,” Jason gasped. “Charley?”

Sara was struggling with the ropes binding the engineer’s arms.

“No time,” Warden said. “We’ve got to try to get out of here, before something really awful comes along.” He went to the control room.

Strapping in, Warden scanned the screens rapidly. The population was leaving the square. Out of the corner of his eye as he began punching for full drive and takeoff, Warden saw the high priest scramble to his feet and run into the palace. Warden was intent on getting off the planet. He decided someone else would have to rescue the two humans left on the planet.

The ship lifted.

From the readings, Warden knew they were about a half mile up and beginning to climb rapidly.

Then control of the ship was snatched away from him.

“You shouldn’t have tried that, Warden,” a voice said from one of the speakers.

Warden wrenched at the controls. They tracked correctly but he could not make them respond fully.

“He’s jamming some of the relays,” he ground out to the other two occupants of the control room. Jason was clinging to the doorway and Sara was lying tense in the other acceleration couch.

Jason tried putting the controls on manual. The switch to manual control depressed but the ship did not respond.

“Damn,” he swore under his breath. “What now?”

“I shall land you in the Forbidden Place, fool, there to bring you to a final and terrible fate. I would simply hurl you into a moon but for the Sara. I need her.”

Buck was stalking toward the ship when he heard the roar of another craft descending. He sprinted back across the plaza toward the buildings as the Star Systems ship settled beside his own.

“Well, what now, Voice?” he demanded.

“Wait. Make no move until I tell you,” the voice answered. “I am busy.”

Warden’s ship landed.

Buck leaned restively against a wall.

“There!” the voice announced. “You have no idea how many thousands of alternating circuits it takes to do that, Buck.”

Buck took a swig from a scotch container he had shoved into his belt. “Carnaby has my ship closed up tight, it looks like from here, and if he has the ports clamped down there’s no way I can get in there.”

“Why not?”

Buck patiently explained about locks. “If there were no one aboard, the ship would be voice coded to open. But with someone in both ships, there’s no way I can get in unless they let me in,” he finished.

“I understand,” the voice said.

“Why don’t you just open them up with some magic or something?” Buck inquired curiously. “You’re claiming to be a god, after all.”

“There are limits to the powers we gods can allow ourselves,” the voice explained. “It is impossible to open those ships without damaging the city.”

“So who cares for a few buildings?” Buck said carelessly.

“The city must be preserved at all costs!”

The voice continued, “No, I shall devise some other way. Now that I have released control of Warden’s drive mechanism, he has shut down on manual controls which I cannot adjust. The Carnaby did that before, too. On the other hand, they cannot leave.

“Wait. I will conceive of a plan,” the voice said, leaving Buck standing silently in the shadows and staring across at the two survey ships.

## XIV

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Every time Carnaby attempted to use the ship communications equipment the screens filled with static or went blank, but he had been able to observe the landing Warden made. The recorder then attempted to make contact, with no success.

He knew that Sara or Warden would try to reach him. Carnaby decided he would work out a plan to talk to them first or to get into Warden's ship before they had a chance to go out. He wondered if Warden had caught his attempt at communicating by holding the printed sheet before the screen.

If the tall Star Systems man had missed the message, Carnaby knew he might walk into a trap, leading the others with him. The recorder had seen Jason and Sara in the screen before it went blank. He knew the computer must be a type of self-regenerating setup and that the computer was insane. It could kill, he knew; that it would was evident. But it was limited in the ways it could attack so long as they were in the city, he finally decided. Its prime directive being maintenance of the city, the machine would only be able to take wide offensive action so long as the surveyors remained in the open. Carnaby decided he would stay as close to the city as possible.

Carnaby knew approximately where he might expect to find the computer manual controls, if there were any. It was a gamble.

The mass of copper detected by instruments told him that, if the machine operated on circuits, the great concentration of metal beneath the mountains to the north was the right place. If the computer was of more exotic construction, such as magnetic impressions in a metal mesh, that still was the most likely place. The problem was how to get underground to find it without being killed first by the computer.

"I can watch the clouds form," Carnaby said to himself, "and then I can avoid the bolts. It needs an almost stationary target.

"And what," he said brightly, "if it had several targets? And all of them moving quickly?" The recorder sat mulling it over a good part of that night.

"The plan is simple," Warden said.

"There's a small ground car in the storerooms. It's not only small, it operates on a fission grain. There's only one circuit, and that's on. The computer—uh, Charley—won't be able to interfere with it. I can run it up to your ship, Sara, with one of you in it at a time, and then we'll be able to be together, all of us."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Why won't Charley be able to interfere? He can control the circuits in our ships, why not that one?"

"Our circuits are sophisticated," Warden answered. "They're tied in to our own computer systems. That's how he's able to interfere. He alters the flow and messes up the balancing in the control synapses. That car has only one circuit, on, off. All the rest is mechanical." He smiled. "That's the only advantage we have," Warden said wryly. "And all because I couldn't afford more modern gear!"

Sara failed to be impressed.

"There are still the bolts," she pointed out.

“Carnaby is probably watching right now,” Warden answered. “If he’s quick enough, he’ll have a chance to open the ports. If we’re quick enough, we can get inside even if Charley throws a hundred bolts.”

“I’m not too sure about that,” Jason said. He related his adventures in the ecclesiastical court of Zelnak, including his mastery of the local tongue and a detailed history of the things the computer could do if displeased.

Warden said, “Look, this is the only chance we have, as I see it. So he throws a couple of bolts. I can run the car right up to the port along the ramp. You raise the canopy just enough to get out and that’s it.

“It’s a chance we’ll have to take if we want to be together,” he finished.

“I’m still afraid of it, Bill,” Sara persisted.

He ignored her caution.

“If we don’t do something, we’ll just sit here until he starves us out,” Warden answered. “And you have more food in your ship than I have.”

“Anyway, your equipment’s more specialized than mine. We should be able to work something out, like blowing up the city if he doesn’t cooperate.

“We should anyway,” he added on a grim note.

Warden began to undo the clamps leading to the storage hold. Jason helped him with the recessed wheel. They had it open in a short space.

He dropped lightly to the floor of the hold. The ground car was in a sealed compartment in the hull of the ship. Warden opened the ovoid cover, climbed into the small cabin and released the side clamps which held the car to the hull of the ship, then maneuvered it to the lower side of the compartment, where there was an auxiliary port.

“Before I’m all the way out,” he said to Jason, “start resealing the port. Then watch for me to come back.” He looked up to see Sara coming down from the control room. She clambered uncertainly into the cramped compartment of the car.

They were halfway across the distance between the ships when he saw the port of the opposite craft open slightly and Carnaby drop to the ground. The recorder had not even taken time to lower the ramp.

Carnaby was scuttling toward the ground car in a zigzag pattern. As the car and the running man neared each other, a flash of lightning scorched down to a spot from which Carnaby had just turned.

Warden was baffled at the procedure, but he stopped the car as Carnaby dashed up, flipped open the front and allowed the recorder to scabble his way past the tiller and land sprawling on Sara, who was in the corner opposite.

Warden reached up and grabbed the canopy, snapping it shut

“What the—” he began.

“I reprogrammed the vocoder,” Carnaby gasped. “No one will be able to get in the ship without the new recognition signal, even if the computer gets one or two mechanisms working.”

“What are you talking about?” Warden demanded.



“No time,” Carnaby said. “Back to your ship, Warden. We’ve been here in one place too long.”

As if to punctuate the statement, the fabric of the car bucked as a bolt hit the outer skin and grounded on the pavement.

Warden gulped. “Yeah,” he said and set the car in motion.

Jason had been dutifully watching. As the car dashed back toward the Star Systems ship, the lower port flipped open. Warden ran the car up the short ramp and began killing power as they surged through the opening. They bounced once off the wall of hold, then were stationary.

Jason had closed the port.

Warden looked around, heaved a sigh of relief, and staring at Carnaby, said, “Now suppose you start from the start, that being a pretty good place. Why did you leave your ship? We were coming over to join you.”

Sara broke into the interrogation. “Couldn’t we get out of this coffin and go back to the control room?”

They were shortly in the small control room, listening to Carnaby relate his theories and ideas.

It was the first time in his life Carnaby had ever felt important or looked up to; he was making the most of it. Jason, Sara and Warden sat around the cabin hanging on his every word.

“As I see it,” he said, unconsciously imitating the people from whom he had taken orders all his life, “we have to find a way to get underneath that mountain, find the control centers, and, if they’re there, shut at least part of the computer down.”

“Or blow it up,” Warden said laconically.

“Whichever—it will give us a pretty fine chance of getting out in one piece,” Carnaby said.

Warden was astonished at the recorder.

“The tunnels,” he said.

“What?” asked Sara.

“The tunnels,” Warden repeated. “You remember, I followed Buck when he was out scrounging for movables. He led me to a long tunnel that goes off under the city.

“The rooms on each side of it are full of some kind of equipment,” he added as an afterthought.

Carnaby was excited. “Which way does the tunnel run?” he demanded.

“I get you,” Warden said. “I’m pretty sure it would run somewhere around the general vicinity of that mountain where you think the main banks and controls are.”

“The only problem is getting there in one piece,” Jason complained.

“We’ve got the ground car,” Warden said.

Sara demanded, “And what about those clouds, just to mention something you may have forgotten.”

“We’ve got the ground car,” Warden repeated. “That runs fast enough.”

“If we keep moving in random patterns and don’t bunch up, the chances are, he won’t be able to use them against us,” Carnaby said.

“I’d like better odds,” Sara said in a glum voice.

“I think I’ll stay right here,” Jason said. “At least it’s safe.”

“For how long?” Warden asked. “If Charley could figure some way to get at the ships without damaging the city, we’d be hash right now.”

“I thought of that,” Carnaby said. “He could just open the ground and let us fall through, if we weren’t where we are. That is, if he’s as powerful as he says. But the water mains and service ducts probably crisscross under this part of the plaza, or he would have done it.

“But the really big thing to consider is that, if we head for the controls, Charley will know it. And what’s more, he’ll know we intend to do something about him.”

“Like turn him off,” Warden said.

“Yes,” Carnaby answered. “That would be the absolute end not only of him, but of the first rule governing the city. He would reason correctly that, if his control centers are shut down, he won’t be able to adjust the ecology, or for that matter, protect the city.”

“Ergo, the prime directive, if that’s what it is, is violated,” Sara finished. “Charley may be paranoid, but he’s not stupid.”

Carnaby and Warden argued back and forth on ways to trick the computer or render it inactive.

## **XV**

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Buck.”

“Yeah, voice? What now?”

“They prepare to descend from the ship.”

“Noise and voices carry through the lower hold. They will drive out in their car. You will be prepared to destroy it and them.”

“The blaster won’t make a very big hole in the side of the car, but I can stop it by messing up the treads. Then I could maybe keep hitting it in one spot and open up the front canopy.”

“Leave an opening, however small, and I shall strike through it,” the voice promised.

“They wear suits of some kind, Buck. What are these?”

“Probably life-support,” the mate hazarded. “We usually wear them to make repairs between planets or when we land on worlds without the right atmosphere.”

“They go to the other ship for more of these suits. The Sara and the Jason wait for Warden to return with more suits. I do not understand this. But you will stop them.”

“Jason in the ship?” Buck demanded.

“Yes.”

“If I could talk to him, he’d help me out,” Buck said. “Could you fix that up, voice?”

“Not at the moment. It is more important to destroy Carnaby and Warden, since you failed to get inside your own ship. Wait. The lock opens. Be ready.”

“I’m ready,” Buck said. He sheathed the blaster but left the holster flap undone for a quick grab and began walking across the plaza toward the two ships.

As the ground car lurched out of the hold of Warden’s ship, Buck began shouting and waving his arms. He ran toward the car.

Carnaby saw Buck running across the glistening pavement. He nudged Warden and pointed.

“There’s Buck!”

“I wonder how he didn’t get zapped,” Warden said. “If he’s not careful, he will! Look! He’s not running in any pattern. Charley’ll get him for sure!”

Warden stopped the car and snapped the canopy partially open. “Careful!” he shouted. “The computer—”

Before he could finish the sentence, Buck had thrown himself to the pavement a hundred yards away and fumbled out his blaster. He made a brace with his arms and began firing.

The shots crashed off the side of the car.

“But—he’s firing at us,” Carnaby protested.

“Yeah,” Warden muttered. “I think Charley found himself an ally.” He threw the car in gear and began backing toward the ship. “I’d give a lot to know what he promised Buck to make him turn against us,” Warden said sourly under his breath.

Buck fired again. The shot hit the treads of the car squarely. The right drive ground to a halt of fused metal.

“Damn,” Warden said. He wrenched at the tiller to compensate for the loss of the right drive. The car continued to back crabwise toward the ship.

“We have to turn to get up the ramp,” Warden said, “and then he’ll have a shot at the other side. We’re in trouble, Carnaby.”

Carnaby said nothing and hunched back into the interior of the car as a shot caromed off the transparent canopy.

“That won’t hold very long,” he said.

Warden handed him a blaster.

“Set it for high,” he instructed. “You don’t have to be a good shot, just wave it in his direction and squeeze the stud. It’ll keep him down long enough to let us get back inside the ship.”

Warden cracked the canopy enough for Carnaby to slip the muzzle of the blaster through. The recorder peered around the sheltered edge of the cabin through the canopy and fired in Buck's general direction.

The shot hit the pavement behind the mate and to his left. Warden began swinging the car around.

"Now try from this side," he said as the car touched the ramp. Warden could see the port begin to fall open. Sara and Jason had been watching.

Moving the car up the ramp was a hard job with one set of treads inactive. It was slow work. The computer, never one to miss chance Warden reflected, slammed a bolt through the opening into the cargo hold.

Carnaby squeezed off another shot. Buck had rolled from his original position and now was on one knee, aiming at the car's exposed working tread.

Warden swore. The car was halfway up the ramp.

Carnaby got off another shot.

"I hit him!" he said. "I hit him!"

"What?" Warden turned in the seat and looked out toward the plaza where Buck now writhed on the ground.

The mate had dropped his blaster. He was crawling for it as the car lurched back into the safety of the ship.

Warden opened the canopy and scrambled down into the hold.

"Scratch one mission," he said. "Let's get back up into the control room and see how our friend Buck's faring."

"Is he dead?" asked Sara, following him up the ladder.

"No," Warden answered. "Just winged, I think. But he'll be out of action for a while."

Below in the hold, Carnaby, who had never before struck a man in anger and who had fired a gun only on company practice ranges, was being quietly but thoroughly sick.

Warden peered through the observation port. Carnaby's blast had missed Buck but had passed close enough to burn the mate's arm, shoulder, and part of his face and hair.

The mate was rolling around on the pavement in considerable pain. Warden was tempted to pity the man, but the thought of Buck and the computer trying to get at him made a sudden surge of anger run through him. He turned away from the port.

"Well, we'll just have to try again," he said.

Sara moved to the port and began to watch her former crewman. She said nothing and her back was rigid.

Jason was well into another drink. He watched Carnaby emerge from the hold white-faced and miserable.

"Who would of thought it," Jason said, looking at the short man with a mixture of disbelief and awe.

“Carnaby,” he said with fine irony, “today you are a man.”

Carnaby looked up resentfully.

“Shut up, Jason,” Warden snapped.

“Bill!” Sara called from the observation port. “Come look, something’s happening outside.”

Warden leaped across the cabin and peered through the port.

Buck was staring around with a terrified face. He was trying to drag himself backward toward the ship. Warden could see that the man was saying or shouting something, but couldn’t tell what.

Before he could turn on the aural pickups even at the risk of interference by the computer, the air outside the ship turned white. Momentarily blinded, Warden stumbled back from the port. He crashed into the control console and came to a stop rubbing his eyes. When he opened them he could still see spots. “Thank somebody that wasn’t a direct observation port,” he mumbled, gathering his wits.

“What’s wrong?” Sara asked, as the ship trembled. A faint roar filtered through from the outside.

“I think that was the granddaddy of Charley’s thunderbolts,” Warden said. “And I think Mr. Buck, wherever he is, is probably regretting his bargain.”

A second tremor went through the ship and they faintly heard a muffled roar. It was followed by another.

Sara hurried to the port and stared out. “I don’t see Buck anywhere,” she said. “Just a pile of black—”

She turned from the port, eyes wide. “Was that—?”

Warden nodded. She turned away.

Outside, a gentle patter of rain began. Warden heard it as he switched off the outside pickups.

Keeping the city neat and tidy, Warden observed to himself.

“Come out, come out wherever you are,” the voice called lightly.

Warden, who had undogged the port preparatory to making a run for Sara’s ship, stopped and listened suspiciously.

“Huh?” he said. “Is that you, Charley?”

“I have decided to forgive you, Warden,” the voice said sweetly.

“Not a chance, old machine.”

The voice was chiding. “You hurt my feelings, Warden.”

“You would hurt more than just my feelings,” Warden retorted.

The others had joined him in the lock. Sara started forward to ask a question, but Warden motioned her back. Carnaby stood listening, his eyes bright.

“As you have said, Warden, let bygones be bygones,” the voice said.

“Like Buck, is that it?” Warden sneered.

“I am truly sorry about that unworthy being,” the voice offered in a regretful tone. “But he was defective, and so I was left no alternative but to destroy him.”

“Yeah,” Warden said.

“Perhaps it was his evil influence which caused me to do horrible things, Warden.”

“Please come out, won’t you?” the voice cajoled. “I will make amends to you, I promise.”

“No thanks,” Warden said.

“You won’t have to recognize me as a god,” the voice proposed.

“We don’t anyway,” Carnaby muttered from the rear of the port.

“I know your species like beauty and flowers and I will shower you with all these things,” the voice went on.

Warden, suspecting a trick, managed to stay well inside the port and out of line of any trick the computer might try.

“See,” the voice went on, “even now, the petals of this planet’s most beautiful flowers descend toward you on gentle winds, so do come out,” the voice coaxed.

Warden peered through the barely cracked port.

“Why, there are flowers,” Sara said. There was a gentle drifting of petals outside the ship, as if the god had caused a snowstorm of pastel flakes.

Several of the petals drifted into the port opening and settled to the floor. Sara reached over to pick up one.

“Don’t touch it,” Warden said, pushing her roughly backward.

“Doesn’t it smell nice, though?” she said.

Warden shook his head briskly. “Smell!” he yelled. “Into your suits, quick! I hope we have enough time!” He was beginning to feel light-headed.

Warden leaped toward his suit and was into it in seconds. Jason, who had been standing nearest to the rack, was snapping the helmet of his shut as Sara and Carnaby began pulling the legs of their suits over their feet.

Jason spoke over the com. “I feel a little happy, like three or four drinks.”

“Me too,” Sara said. Warden was helping her fasten her helmet. Her eyes had become glassy. Carnaby suddenly crumpled to the floor of the chamber.

Through the open port where more petals were piling, Warden could see a soft mist beginning to poke tendrils into the outer lock. Moving slowly as if walking below the surface of a sea, Warden hurried forward, brushed the flowers through and cycled the port shut. There was a small eddy of mist against the floor of the chamber.

As he shut down the controls, Warden heard the voice of Charley saying softly and gently, “Come out, come out, come out...”

He had felt a sudden urge to open the port and go out, out into the drifting flower petals, out into the friendly mist.

“I can’t have inhaled that much!” he said, shaking his head. He called over the com, “Jason, let’s get back into the control room and put the purifiers on maximum. We can cycle our own air.”

Never trust a friendly computer,“ Sara said when she struggled out of the sleep induced by the mist or the petals.

“Hypnotics,” Warden guessed, “or euphorics of some kind. The natives probably get high on them. Charley would know about it.”

“What we need to know,” Carnaby interrupted, “is whether they induce any lasting effects.”

“I must have smelled the least,” Jason said, “and I don’t feel woozy or anything. I feel great, and I don’t even need a drink.”

Warden looked at him narrowly. “They’re probably a habit-forming narcotic of some kind. You could dream your life away until you starved if you sniffed them long enough.”

“Square,” Sara said. “We know about addiction.”

“We don’t know anything about this one,” Warden said. His voice was grim. “We’re not going outside the ship until we’re sure our systems are clear of whatever that stuff was, and then we’re going suited up, breathing our own air. I still aim to get out of this place some way.”

“At the rate we’re going,” Sara observed wryly, “the shashlik will grow wings and fly before we’re through.”

“Then watch out for elephants in the tree tops,” Warden retorted.

## XVI

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Carnaby was panting heavily from the sustained running; Sara slumped in a weary sprawl on the steps. They were at the head of the flight of steps which descended into the corridor Warden thought might lead to a control center for Charley, if there was one.

“Where’s Jason?” He looked around.

“I think he zigged too close to the lake when we were running across the plaza,” Carnaby said. “At least I saw a big wave rolling up out of the lagoon after him.”

“He should have known better than to go too close to the lake,” Warden said. “Still, I’m sorry, Sara.”

“He was a member of my crew, not my lover,” she said with some asperity. “And remember, we had to keep apart and keep moving in random patterns too quickly for Charley to get set for us.”

“Two men gone, and maybe more,” Carnaby said. “Look.”

They looked. A small, dense cloud of moisture was beginning to form on the ceiling above the steps.

“Charley, don’t you ever give up?” Warden demanded. He lifted the bag he carried, containing their rations and light cubes and dumped the contents onto the floor. He waved the bag through the cloud, dissipating it.

“There will be higher ceilings, Warden,” the voice said grumpily.

“Oh, go count a few billion ants,” Warden grated.

He helped Sara to her feet.

“Hurry,” Warden said to her. “Let’s go.” He motioned to Carnaby, and led the way down the staircase.

The light in the stairwell dimmed, flickered and went out.

Sara screamed.

“I will not aid you,” the voice said. “Beware. Go back.”

“Sure,” Warden sneered, “and get fried like an egg. No thanks, Charley, ’cause when we get where we’re going I’m going to get a good amount of pleasure in turning you off, forever.”

“Me, too,” Carnaby said.

“Me, too,” Sara added.

Then Charley screamed. A wail began, coming from all around them, rising in volume until Warden, his head ringing, thought his eyes would burst.

He turned off the com in his suit. It helped, but it almost prevented communication in the dark. Warden produced a light cube and thumbed it to brilliance.

They all had shut down the coms while Charley’s shrieking went on and on and on.

Warden shrugged and resolved to bear it. He motioned to Sara and Carnaby and began leading the way down the stairs.

He kept an alert watch on the ceiling. Every now and then he used the bag to break up a cloud.

The shrieking stopped. They felt, rather than heard, the cessation of sound. Warden hazarded the com. The computer was silent, but they knew it would strike with speed if they let down their guard even once.

At the foot of the stair Warden motioned the others to turn on their coms. “Turn here for central control room. First stop on the way home.”

“Ha. Ha.” Sara said. Her face was unnaturally white.

“Don’t go in any room with a ceiling more than fifteen feet high,” Warden cautioned the other two. “I can’t reach much higher than that even jumping, and Charley’d love to find us standing still with enough time and height to make up one of his little calling cards.”

They walked silently down the corridor, Warden randomly swinging the bag to create a turbulence against the ceiling.

Warden called a halt after about an hour. He opened the face of his helmet to take a drink of water. Carnaby was looking into one of the rooms. Sara had looked into the doorways on the left, Carnaby on



the right, each searching for what might be a control room.

Warden walked down the middle of the corridor watching for telltale moisture and grumbling to himself about it. All were apprehensive; they expected the screaming to start at any moment.

“How far do you think we’ll have to go, Carnaby?” Sara asked.

“I don’t know,” the little man answered. “It could be in the next room, or it could be twenty miles away.”

“Or it could be that there isn’t any control room at all,” Warden said, leaping up to bat at another cloud with the bag.

“There is no control room,” said the voice of the computer.

“Oh, shut up,” Sara rapped out. “We couldn’t believe you one way or the other anyway.” The computer did not answer.

They continued their walk, pausing at each doorway to look into the chamber beyond for anything which might resemble a control system.

Warden mused aloud as they continued down the corridor, “The trouble is, we don’t even know what it will look like if we do find it.”

“I’ll know, Captain Warden,” Carnaby said shortly. “Even if it’s a piece of amber with a slug embedded in it, it’ll be big, and there’ll be controls leading into it and away from it.”

“Not necessarily,” Warden said. “It could be streamlined into the walls we’re walking between, for all we know, and that’s not much.”

“It could be molecular,” Sara said.

“I’ll find it,” Carnaby insisted doggedly, looking into another doorway. “And when I do, I’ll program that damn thing to self-destruct.”

“Why, Carnaby,” Sara said in surprise, “that’s the first time I believe I’ve ever heard you swear, and at a machine at that. I thought your first love and consuming passion lay with machines.”

The trek continued hour after hour. They went slowly because of the necessity of checking each doorway along the corridor.

“I don’t know how far we’ve come,” Warden said, whirling the bag aloft, “but I’m getting pretty tired of walking.”

“Keep your helmet closed, your feet moving and your bag waving, to coin a phrase,” Sara said wearily.

They continued.

At last they came to a large vaulted area. Emerging from the corridor into the huge, domed room, Warden said, “Uh, oh,” and dived backwards. He lurched into Sara, sending her sprawling. A bolt smashed against the resilient floor where Warden had been about to step.

“He was waiting,” Sara said.

“Sure,” Warden said picking her off the floor and setting her on her feet. “He’s probably got two or three nice little clouds floating around in there just for our benefit. And we’ve got to cross that room, too, or

rot here.”

“There can’t be any going back,” Carnaby said.

“Maybe we’re getting close to something,” Sara said.

“I think so,” Carnaby agreed. “There haven’t been as many large, bulky things stored in the last rooms I’ve looked through, just furniture, as if these were waiting rooms or something like that.”

“Or ready rooms of some kind?” Warden asked.

“Perhaps,” Carnaby said indifferently. He took the bag from Warden and waved it.

“I missed that one,” Warden said. I must be losing my grip.”

“There’s something funny about that big room,” Sara said peering at the dim shapes barely visible as shadowed outlines at the edge of the light thrown by the cubes.

Warden came alert. “What do you mean?” he said straining to see into the shadowed space beyond.

“It is the Ones Who Went Before,” the voice of the computer echoed heavily in the low hall.

“Here?” the three surveyors gasped.

“They—sleep,” the voice said at last.

“Hey,” Warden said without thinking. “If they’re here and asleep, then all we do is wake one or two up and get Charley turned off!”

Sara snorted. “Oh sure. And what happens if the natives are not friendly? What happens if we look remarkably like lunch or something?”

“Oh,” Warden said deflated.

Carnaby sniggered a high and almost hysterical laugh to match the rising tension in Sara. He hopped up and waved the bag about at random.

“On the other hand,” Warden mused, “if they have been here all this time, then they have to be in suspended animation. But that room is the same temperature as ours so it can’t be deep-freezing— The only thing we can do is make another run for it,” Warden said.

“Separate,” Warden told them. “Run fast, broken field, just like outside. If you run into the lady of the house, smile nicely but don’t stop. Run like hell.”

## **XVII**

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Warden dodged to the right of where he had been standing and landed running. He began crossing the room on a diagonal.

Warden could hear Carnaby and Sara pounding off in other directions. They had the lights, and their course through the room caused the shapes and shadows to spin madly.

He dashed past rows of long, boxlike couches, expecting to see anything at all, knowing that these were the resting places of the builders of the city. He glanced down as he angled among the couches. After seeing about half a dozen Warden concentrated on running, Sara's bobbing light showed a corridor entrance almost directly across from the one he had just left.

Warden made for the opening and dived in. He rolled and came to his feet as Sara dashed in followed by Carnaby. The recorder was already waving the canvas bag to create drafts.

Sara collided with him. He put his arms around her to steady himself as well.

"Did you see them?" she gasped. Warden nodded.

"What did they look like?" Carnaby demanded.

"You don't have to worry about the owners kicking up a fuss over trespass," Warden answered.

"Are they dead?" Sara blurted out.

"Unless there are some somewhere we may never find, Charley's owners are gone. The only things on those couches in there are bones."

"Oh," she said.

"Oh," Carnaby echoed.

"Yeah." Face sober, Warden took the bag from Carnaby and urged them farther down the corridor, leading Sara by the hand.

"We still have to find the control room," Warden said.

"Have you noticed it getting hot?" Sara asked. Her suit face-plate was up, as were the others.

A dull rumble came from behind them and echoed in the darkness ahead.

"What's that roaring?" Warden asked Carnaby, who stood slightly ahead in a doorway. Carnaby shrugged a question back.

"Beats me," Warden answered. "Strange, though. Charley hasn't been making any clouds lately. I wonder what he's up to."

A loud roar and crack shook the corridor. The floor heaved.

A giant vibration threw them to their knees.

"That's what!" Warden answered himself. He scrambled up, pulled Sara to her feet and threw her over his shoulder. He ran down the corridor.

"Run, Carnaby!" Warden shouted. "Charley's got himself worked up to an earthquake!"

Carnaby needed no urging. He pounded off down the corridor after Warden and Sara.

Behind them a section of ceiling caved in with a sibilant rumble. Then the floor whipped under their feet as another wave from the quake struck. A crack opened in the darkness from which they were running and Warden glanced back to see a thin, bright ribbon of lava begin to trickle up into the corridor.

Warden ran until he thought his lungs would burst. After ten minutes, he stopped to gasp for air. He was

staggering from the effort, his lungs seared as he rasped for breath. Carnaby came up soon after.

“I never thought I could run that fast,” Warden gasped. Carnaby collapsed on the floor beside Warden.

Sara had begun waving the bag around in the air.

“I feel silly doing this,” she said. “And I think Charley’s busy with other things.”

Warden’s shoulders were still heaving with the effort of his panicked run. He opened one eye and looked at her, but said nothing.

“We must have come a couple of miles,” Sara said in an effort to be cheerful. But her eyes were probing at the shadows outside the range of the lights.

“Yeah,” Warden said sitting upright. “And we’re going to go another hundred or so before I’ll feel safe.” He peered down the corridor. There was a red glow where the lava still crept up through the ruptured floor.

“Let’s go,” Warden said struggling to his feet. “Air’s no problem, but if that stuff builds up, it’ll fill this corridor like a river. I don’t think I’d like to try swimming in that stuff.”

They wordlessly began trotting down the corridor.

As they ran Warden, continually turned to look down the corridor behind them. The lava was still seeping up, and beginning to run through the corridor and into the rooms. There was an occasional flash as it touched a combustible object stored in the rooms.

This is murder, Warden thought. But it’s so silent! He remembered that they had not heard from the computer for hours, or so it seemed. He wondered what new tricks the computer was up to.

He looked ahead into the darkness, seeing a pinpoint of light. He didn’t stop running, but asked himself whether the computer might not be trying to catch the running party in a pincer between two flows of lava.

As he trotted on, Warden could see that the light did not flicker. It was a white light.

Behind them, there was an explosion far down the corridor. The force of the concussion stunned the three.

Warden popped his hands against his ears. “Look ahead,” he called to the others.

“Lights!” Sara gasped.

Carnaby stopped stock-still. He stared at the lights ahead.

Warden halted, too.

“What’s the matter, Carnaby?” he asked. “Think it’s another of Charley’s traps?”

“When I was talking to the computer before,” Carnaby said, “he said something about service mechanisms. It seemed funny to me at the time that he didn’t use them against us if he had them. And then I thought that perhaps he couldn’t control them. I think that’s what those lights up ahead mean. I think this may be an area where Charley doesn’t have any control, and where we might be able to find something to use against him.”

“Let’s go, then,” Warden ordered.

They set off again at a trot. A short time brought the three to another of the large, domed rooms. This one was lighted. There were banks of oval, blank screens and thousands of wall studs which glimmered as if the board were functioning at top speed.

Warden walked into the room. He was careful not to touch anything. He looked up. The roof was perhaps a hundred feet above. Metal, railed walkways ran around the sides of the chamber at different levels.

Ramps led to the walkways which gave access to more banks of screens and the flashing panels.

“It’s a control room of some kind,” Carnaby said.

He and Sara had trailed in after Warden. She was looking around in awe. “But what does it control?” She was about to touch a stud on one of the consoles.

“Don’t touch anything yet,” Warden cautioned.

They began to walk around the islands of machinery in the room.

“Look here,” Warden called from behind a console.

They walked to where he was standing. A skeleton lay at his feet.

“Charley’s masters,” Warden said. “They sleep, all right.”

“I wonder what happened?” Sara stooped to pick up a small bright object in the outstretched hand of the skeleton. When she inadvertently brushed one of the bones, the entire skeleton disintegrated.

She withdrew instinctively, looking with distaste at the floor and then at the object she had found.

“It’s pretty,” Warden said. “But what is it?”

“Let’s see,” Carnaby said. He took the shiny thing from Sara and walked up to the control console. He studied the console for several minutes, turning the relic over and over in his hands.

“Look at this slot,” Carnaby said. The metallic object would fit, they could see.

“Could be it’s a key for controlling some of these,” Carnaby said. “And it looks as if this one was trying to reach this console with it.”

Carnaby leaned over the control panel and pushed the object against the slot. It lowered into a perfect fit, almost flush with the surface.

“Okay,” Warden said. “Now what?”

“We experiment,” Carnaby said. He depressed a stud. Doors to the entrance of the room slid from concealment and blocked all ways in and out of the chamber.

“That may take care of the lava for a while,” Warden reminded them, “but it probably wouldn’t for long.”

“Unless it flows faster than it has, we’re safe for some time, I think,” Carnaby said, absorbed in the board.

He added, “If this is the control room, I don’t think Charley would want lava in here. I would guess he’s

blocked off the tunnel. He must know by now that we're through."

Carnaby pressed another stud. A screen lighted against one of the walls. A cube fell from a concealed slot with a slight click.

Warden went to a tray bolted against the wall under the screen. It lay in a confusion of other small cubes. He picked up the one which had just been ejected.

Carnaby said, "That could be a memory block for Charley, or a set of instructions for just about anything; or it could be just a faulty circuit."

He lightly ran his fingers across the block. "Ridges."

The recorder looked up at the screen.

"Here," he said. He took the block and inserted it against a panel. The cube slid in and a picture of sorts began forming on the screen.

There was light, movement and sound.

"I don't understand any of it," Sara said.

"They apparently were built differently than we," Carnaby said, "and received light differently. That's obviously a recorded message of some kind, but what?"

The message ended; the screen went blank. Carnaby pressed the stud. The block ejected.

"It would take years to figure this stuff out," Sara said.

"If I had this back at the ship..." Carnaby said abstractedly.

"There's no chance of that, Carnaby," Warden commented. He was looking at the other studs on the panel. "Here's a large one. I wonder what it does?"

Carnaby turned. "Don't—"

Warden pushed the stud.

"Thank you for returning control of this section to me," a voice said above them.

Sara went white and so did Warden.

He stammered, "I guess this isn't the master control room, huh?" He was busily scanning the ceiling for telltale moisture.

"It is a control room, one of many," the voice said. "It was taken away just before the Ones Who Went Before departed. Now it is again part of my system. I am whole once more."

"You mean," Warden asked hopefully, "that you're sane now? You know you're a machine? You will take orders?"

"I mean that all the functions which were once mine and which were partially obliterated are again in my control," the voice said.

Carnaby was curious. "Why were parts of your system disconnected?"

“The new seed strain I introduced into the diets of the Ones Who Went Before caused dreams. It was a gift to those who built me; they dreamed long and beautiful dreams.”

“The flowers!” Sara said.

“Yes,” the voice answered, “the flowers. But some of the masters rejected my first gift and attempted to deprive me of life instead of offering thanks. They turned off this section of me and attempted to deprive me of others as well. But they dreamed, too, at last.

“They’re dead now,” Warden said.

“Merely sleeping,” the voice said serenely. “Now, you must sleep as well. You were warned to go back.”

“Masks!” Warden rapped.

Over the com they heard Carnaby shrieking.

“I turned you on in here,” he shouted, “and I can turn you off again!”

He lunged for the large stud.

The survey ship orbited the planet for several days, estimating and tallying what instruments could detect about its resources.

Since the air appeared breathable, and the population looked curiously almost human, which was to say Rsslike, the surveyor decided to land.

He brought the ship down in the square of the large city which lay against the foothills of a spectacular mountain range overlooking an equally splendid bay. The mountains had sustained volcanic activity in the last thousand years, according to the instruments. But it would be safe to land.

Spra, son of Spra, son of Spra, descended from the ship into the square. Of course the natives had run off at the approach of the survey craft, but Spra knew they would soon return from curiosity.

He surveyed the place with pleasure. It would look well on his record to have found a world so suitable for colonization. The Council of Elders would be pleased! They might even relax the rule and allow him to mate early, he thought.

Spra stretched himself to his full ten-foot height and gracefully arranged his gleaming tail over one arm to make walking an easier matter.

He was grateful for the warmth of the sun. Spra began to saunter across the square toward the most imposing structure, which was either a temple or a palace. He planned to make it his headquarters.

“Greetings,” a voice said in standard Rss. “May your nest be ever fertile.”

Spra looked quickly about. There was no one in the square but himself.

“Who,” he inquired, “or what, are you?”

“I am the god of this planet. You may address Me as the Great Egg.”

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[scanned anonymously]

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