

“To Tell the Troof” by BRAD FERGUSON
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FATHER MORTIMER MCALEER was dozing in his favorite chair, the plush one in his study nominally reserved for visitors. It was another lazy (and officially proclaimed) Sabbath afternoon on Henderson. It was a world that didn't care at all about priests or Sabbaths, so no one would bother a tired, middle-aged man in his underwear who wanted to zee a few zees, his collar off and hanging on a hook ... except that on this particular so-called Sunday, McAleer's telephone buzzed, and kept on buzzing.

The annoying sound killed McAleer's nap. *Where's Zweebl gone to?*, the priest asked himself as he roused himself to answer it. He was also more than a bit puzzled; no one ever called the mission.

McAleer activated the audio pickup; he noticed a light coating of dust, and frowned. "Hello, St. Polycarp's. This is Father McAleer."

"Hello," came a thin, piping Troof voice. "This is Klatho, controller at field. Thought I should tell you. Ship coming in, red-hot emergency. One-seater, Terran registry; compatriot of yours, maybe. Maybe perhaps compatriot in matters of Earthie spirituality, also. You might want to come? Twenty minutes and counting to possible big mess."

"I'll be there right away."

"Good. Everybody coming to watch. We not handle much space traffic, particularly space traffic that bounces all over sky and maybe ground, too. You hurry, now, and beat crowd. Goodbye." The Troof cut the circuit.

McAleer powered down his own unit. He knew Klatho slightly, as much as he'd been allowed to come to know any of the Troof. As for the Troof's miserable excuse for a landing field, the Teamstars had designated the local field as Class D7 — no place to set down a starship, even a small one and even under the

best of circumstances. *The pilot must be in very serious trouble*, the priest told himself.

"Zweebl!" McAleer called. "Where are you?"

There was the sound of splashing. "Upstairs," came another reedy voice. "Taking bath. What up, Father Mort?"

"Emergency," McAleer called back. "Hurry up. We're leaving."

"Right there." The splashing grew frantic; then McAleer heard the hurried patter of small feet.

The priest went to his bedroom and grabbed a pair of dark slacks and a light jacket from his closet. He skipped socks; he didn't have any clean ones, anyway. Dressing quickly, he rummaged in a night table next to his bed and drew out a stole, a prayer book, a vial of oil, and his pyx. The ship's pilot could be Orthodox Catholic, and McAleer might have to administer last rites. McAleer also grabbed his small standard-issue medikit and strapped it around his pot belly; the priest had a working knowledge of what to do with most of the stuff in the 'kit.

"Come on, Zweebl!" McAleer called.

"Coming, Father," Zweebl said from upstairs, and the priest heard his Troof assistant bounding down the stairs — if a four-foot being who looked like an overripe plum with stubby legs and a fat, snouted blueberry for a head can be said to bound. "Here am. Let's go."

"We'll have to take the car," McAleer said. Zweebl grimaced. McAleer smiled faintly. "Is the fuel tank filled?"

"Last time I look."

"Very well. Church first. Come on." They left the mission residence through the connecting door to the small chapel.

Once inside the darkened church, McAleer went to the altar, genuflected, and opened the

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door to the small tabernacle; Zweebl waited in the rear of the church. McAleer secured several consecrated wafers and placed them carefully in his pyx. *Forgive the rush, Lord*, he murmured as he hastily closed the tabernacle door.

“All done, Zweebl,” he said. “Let’s hurry.” The two left the church by the front door.

McAleer’s only transportation was an old, rusting gevster left behind by the trade group that used to be on Henderson; it had taken McAleer a great deal of tinkering to get it to run. The priest kept the heap parked by the side of the residence, covered with an old tarp; he pulled it off, getting himself rather dusty in the process, and Zweebl punched the codes to unlock the doors. The two got in, and McAleer quickly hit the ignition codes; the dual turbines started with a loud roar.

“Ye gads,” said Zweebl. “Wish had ears to cover.”

McAleer glanced at the fuel indicator; it showed only a quarter of a tank. McAleer could not indulge in casual conversation — he was carrying the Host — but he wished he could ask Zweebl just when he’d last looked at that indicator. It wasn’t important right now — a quarter of a tank was more than enough to get them to the field and back — but it annoyed McAleer; it added an item to the list of things Zweebl had fudged.

The priest fed more power to the turbines; the gevster lifted unevenly for a foot and then came level. Dust and trash flying around them, McAleer pushed the stick forward gently and, with a start, the gevster drunkenly weaved its way ahead, trying to find its air legs.

“Here goes nothing,” Zweebl said. “Every time we do this, neighbors complain like hell.”

McAleer gestured Zweebl to be silent, and tapped the jacket pocket in which he was carrying the pyx. “Oh,” said Zweebl, suddenly

understanding. “Didn’t realize. Forgive.” McAleer nodded.

The gevster finally found its internal rhythm and noisily whooshed ahead on a reasonably straight course.

Fifteen minutes later, the gevster roared to a halt in front of the landing field’s small administration building. McAleer popped the gevster’s doors, and he and Zweebl hurried out amid the settling dust and leaves.

The control room was just off the small lobby, and boasted an excellent view of the landing field, thanks to a big window typical of Troof construction. The Troof liked light and air. Entering, McAleer could see Klatho, the field superintendent, gesturing excitedly and squeaking orders to the two other Troof in the room. Klatho noticed the arrival of McAleer and Zweebl at about the same moment.

“Hello, Father, Zweebl,” Klatho called. “Ship made it through atmospheric skip maneuver, don’t ask me how. Approaching field. One hot damn pilot, that boy.”

“Where on the field will the ship set down?” McAleer asked. “I should be there.”

Klatho shrugged. “Anywhere it wants. Lucky if it doesn’t hit town. Better you stay near building.”

“Very well. May we go outside to look?”

“If you like. Don’t go far. You can ride out to crash site with emergency crew, these guys, when ship set down. This okay?”

“Very okay. Thank you, Klatho.”

“No mention.” Klatho turned back to his work; the loud Troof squeaking and bleating started again at a higher level.

McAleer turned to Zweebl. “Let’s go outside.”

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The sky was a brilliant, clear seawater green; visibility was unlimited. McAleer looked in vain for a vapor trail or some other indication of the ship’s imminent arrival.

Zweebl was shrilly fuming. “Can’t stand that Klatho, pompous ass of *yerega* son of bitch. Self-righteous bastard. Oops, sorry twice.”

McAleer ignored the outburst. “Do you see anything yet?”

“Hmmm.” The Troof squinted. “Can make out little pop of electromagnetic interference, ‘way up.” He pointed. “Follow finger. You should see ship soon, that direction.”

“Is it headed for the field?”

“Directly. Good pilot, that boy.”

McAleer sent a few prayers the pilot’s way. Soon, there was a glint in the sky, in a direction almost opposite to the one Zweebl had indicated.

“I think you made a mistake. I see her,” McAleer said, pointing. “Just barely.”

“Can’t see her by light yet,” Zweebl complained. “Damn all Earthie predator eyes. Oops, sorry again. Um, any sign of big trouble?”

“I don’t see smoke or little bits of the ship tearing off, if that’s what you mean. Her flight line looks smooth enough, too.”

“Oh, I see her now. Yes, you right. May make it, after all. Here’s luck, Father Mort.”

They watched as the ship grew bigger and bigger. The siren on the admin building’s roof began to wail a final alarm.

“Still wishing for ears to cover,” Zweebl complained. “Final approach now.”

McAleer could see the ship’s belly jets suddenly spew exhaust in an all-or-nothing braking maneuver. At fifty feet of altitude, the ship rolled over once, then stabilized. It continued to drop slowly.

“Whew!” said Zweebl. “Can’t believe *that* one!” McAleer could only nod, his mouth dry.

Mere feet above the field now, its forward speed now negligible, the ship extended its landing skids. Slowly, with another roar of her belly jets, she grounded with a deep, grinding groan about five hundred feet from the admin building. The pilot killed the engines, and McAleer heard the crackle of cooling metal.

The pilot’s emergency door popped open and a chute rolled out. A figure in an old-fashioned, bulky spacesuit — obviously the pilot — slipped down the chute as easily as if the thing had been greased. The pilot ran madly away from the ship.

“Get *down*, Zweebl!” yelled McAleer, hitting the dirt and covering his head with his hands. Zweebl followed suit.

The small ship gave up the ghost and, with a thundering report, blew itself to shards. The pilot, still too close, was caught by the blast and tossed head over heels.

McAleer and Zweebl felt a hot gust of air and bits of dirt and debris rush over them; behind them, several windows in the admin building shattered. McAleer could hear high-pitched native cursing amid the sharp cracking and tinkling sounds of breaking glass. *There goes that big window, among other things*, the priest told himself. *Hope no one’s hurt*.

Carefully, McAleer raised his head, to see Zweebl already up and heading at his best speed for where the pilot lay sprawled on the tarmac. McAleer was quick to follow.

Puffing, McAleer reached Zweebl, already bent over the limp form of the pilot. Even at some distance, McAleer could feel the intense heat from the blazing ruin of the pilot’s spacecraft. Opening his medikit, he took the probe and passed it closely over the pilot’s still form, scanning for evidence of gross injury —

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about the limit of his ability with the thing. McAleer found nothing major — bumps and bruises, maybe a sprung shoulder, but no broken bones and no internal bleeding.

McAleer decided it would be better if he and Zweebl, rather than the Troof he could hear pattering toward them, moved the pilot away from the flaming wreck; Lord knew how the Troof might decide to do it. Drag the pilot behind a cart, maybe; not only were they largely ignorant of human physiology, but they were also pretty mad. At least McAleer would be careful of the pilot’s neck; the Troof, having none, might not be.

Carefully, McAleer straightened out the pilot’s body. *Out cold*, he thought. *How deeply, I don’t know. I can’t see inside the helmet, and there’s no readout panel on the suit.* “Zweebl, we’d better try to get him out of this thing,” he said. “We’re going to have to move him. Don’t let his head drop as I remove the helmet.”

“Right, Father.” Zweebl looked very serious.

McAleer undid the hasps that held the helmet to the suit, and gently eased it away.

“I’ll be,” the priest breathed. “It’s a woman.”

“A what?”

“A woman. A female human.”

“Oh. Like Virgin Mary? Eve of Adam story, stolen rib?”

“Um, yes, sort of. A woman.”

“You sure?” Zweebl asked. He peered.

“Never saw one before. Her head just as round as yours. Can’t tell difference.”

“Well, I can. And she’s alive. Just unconscious.”

“Can tell *that*.”

“Better get me some water. No, wait. Ask one of them.” McAleer pointed. A gaggle of Troof was running toward them; the priest thought he recognized Klatho in the lead,

looking as angry as any Troof could. It was hard for McAleer to tell, even after some practice.

Zweebl chattered and squeaked at Klatho and the others in their native tongue. Klatho made a surprisingly puzzled, almost skeptical, response. Zweebl responded insistently. Finally, two of Klatho’s co-workers headed back to the admin building.

“Taken care of,” Zweebl told McAleer.

“Water be here soon.”

“Was there a problem?”

“Not one damn bit. Oops, sorry again. To continue. Also asked for human-size pallet — um, *stretcher* — to move woman pilot. Never mind taking off suit now. Presume you want to get away from big fiery mess?”

“You presume correctly,” McAleer said. “In fact, why don’t we try to move her without the stretcher? She’s not very big, although the suit weighs. I’d like to get her behind the building, just in case that ship has another surprise in store for us.”

“Better pray it doesn’t,” Zweebl said. “I take feet, you take head?”

“Right. Try not to jiggle her around too much. Uh, just let me unhook the backpack first.” The straps of the heavy pack unbuckled easily; it dropped away.

The weight of the woman and the suit was just within the ability of McAleer and Zweebl to cope. The priest noted with some anger that none of the admin building personnel had made a move to assist them. McAleer fumed silently but said nothing; it was now as it ever had been, ever since the priest had arrived on Henderson. It was a few hundred difficult feet back to the rear of the admin building, and Zweebl moved even more slowly than the old priest, but they made it.

The handle controlling the roof of the gevster was starboard amidships, just within

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reach of McAleer’s foot. He tromped on the handle and the roof rose, squealing on its hinges. McAleer and Zweebl carefully placed the still-unconscious pilot in the rear seat; Zweebl strapped her in.

“Hey!” came a high-pitched cry. “Zweebl! You wanted water? Got some. Can’t find stretcher. Probably got swiped by *ilantha* con artist.”

Zweebl grew even more purple with anger. McAleer saw Klatho coming toward them from the admin building, a standard-issue canteen in hand. Zweebl looked at McAleer inquiringly; the priest nodded.

“Bring, already, fool,” called Zweebl. “Time wasting.”

Klatho shrugged, uncaring. “Sorry. Had to send others to fight big fire caused by priest’s compatriot. Remember?” he had the air of one pointing out the obvious to a simpleton. “Don’t suppose you two want to assist in fierce battle, maybe?”

Zweebl flared. “As much as *you* assist *us* in heroic feat of dragging woman off field, incompetent!”

“Woman? What that?”

“Hah! Uneducated ass!”

McAleer held up a hand. “Thank you for the water, Klatho,” he said mildly, taking the canteen. “Zweebl, is there a cloth of some sort in the car?”

Zweebl gave a quick look. “Nope. Tissues in box, though, under seat.” He fetched them.

“Thank you.” McAleer took several and wet them, then began wiping the pilot’s face. She stirred after a moment; her eyes fluttered, then opened.

“Made it?” she softly asked. “Made it?”

McAleer nodded. “Yes, yes,” he said kindly and slowly, so she would understand. “You

made it. You’re safe on Henderson. We’ll help you.”

The woman sighed something — whether acknowledgement or relief or both, McAleer couldn’t tell. Her eyes closed again; her body relaxed as she drifted off.

“You’re driving, Zweebl,” McAleer said as he settled himself in the back. He wet some more of the tissues with what was left in the canteen and began wiping the woman’s face again; she didn’t stir at the touch of the cool water, nor did the sound of Zweebl starting the turbines seem to disturb her.

“Hey!” Klatho squealed above the roar. “When I going to get canteen back, huh?”

“Soon,” McAleer answered calmly.

“Hell with that,” Klatho retorted. “Want it back *now*.”

“Drive, Zweebl,” McAleer said firmly, and they were off, with Klatho squeaking odd, unheard curses behind them.

It was Sabbath night now. McAleer was spending it comfortably enough in the visitors’ chair in his study; the pilot — DANEY, EDITH MANUS, according to her necktags — was sleeping in his room. She had roused several times, but only briefly, since McAleer and Zweebl had gotten her back to the residence. A more careful scan by McAleer upon their return had shown that Edith had suffered no concussion or other head injury; he judged that she was simply exhausted.

McAleer and Zweebl had spent most of an evil hour getting the rest of her spacesuit off, an hour during which Edith roused only once. McAleer had taken on the job of taking out Edith’s urinary catheter and dumping the honey bag; he noticed some evidence of irritation and applied the appropriate medication. With Zweebl’s assistance, McAleer also gave Edith a

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washrag bath, which she sorely needed; the priest estimated she'd been in the suit for a week, perhaps longer. He'd also had to treat an outbreak of severe dermatitis on Edith's back, buttocks and limbs. Edith's suit, which stank abominably of sweat and waste, was airing out in the mission courtyard.

McAleer was awakened by a sound from his bedroom door. The handle rattled as it was opened. “Hello?” came a voice.

McAleer rose. “Hello there, Miss Daney. Please come in.” He waved the study lights on.

Edith Daney entered the room, clad in a pair of McAleer's pajamas. They fit poorly; Edith stood a foot shorter than McAleer and was compactly built. Her face was still swollen with sleep; her close-cropped black hair was sticking up in spikes randomly.

Nevertheless, when she smiled at McAleer, she glowed. “I really don't know where I am,” she said. “On Henderson, I hope.”

McAleer smiled back. “Yes, you are. I'm Mort McAleer. You're at St. Polycarp's mission. We're on the outskirts of the town closest to the field.”

“You picked me up?” Edith asked. “How's my ship?”

“I'm afraid it's a dead loss.”

Edith sighed, frowning. “Poor old girl. I hope she didn't hurt much. Um, I'm afraid I don't remember anything about the landing.”

“It was good enough. You're here, after all.”

Edith smiled slightly. “I guess it was. Thanks for taking care of me, Mr. McAleer.”

“No thanks necessary. Glad to help. How are you feeling?”

Edith considered it. “Some achy, kind of tired, but nothing too bad. Better than I have a right to. How long was I asleep?”

McAleer looked at the clock. “A bit more than twelve hours. Want some coffee? There's some ready.”

“Coffee. What a wonderful idea. Yes, please.”

“I hear voices,” came a high-pitched voice from upstairs. Edith's eyebrows raised.

McAleer smiled. “That's Zweebl. He's my assistant.” Walking to the doorway of the study, he said loudly, “Come on down if you want to, Zweebl. Our patient's awake and feeling fine.”

“Be down in flash, Father.”

“‘Father’?” Edith said. “Oops. But of course — you said this was a mission. Called you ‘mister’ before, didn't I? Sorry. I'm still a little slow, I guess — ”

McAleer laughed. “Miss Daney — ”

“Edith.”

“Edith, don't worry about it. It's not important. Okay?”

Edith smiled. “Thanks. Now, where's the coffee?”

“Kitchen. I'll get it.”

“I'll help.”

After two quick cups of McAleer's coffee, both the pilot and the priest felt a great deal more human. Zweebl, content with a cup of *suffra* milk cut with water, sat quietly and listened to their conversation.

For his part, McAleer was fascinated. He'd already found out that Edith Manus Daney had been born Presbyterian but hadn't been a churchgoer since her early teens, and that she'd also been born Manus; she'd ditched Daney in an uncontested divorce action three years before.

McAleer also found out Edith was a small-time smuggler. Edith told that to McAleer only after she decided she could trust him. It hadn't taken long, though.

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“Smuggling?” McAleer asked, surprised.
“Really?”

“Sure,” Edith shrugged. “I had to make a living. I went partners with the guy I took up with about a year after the divorce. Jimmy, his name was; he had the ship when I met him. Drugs, weapons, furs, gems, liquor, electronics, luxury foods — you name it, we brought it in.” Edith paused. “Jimmy got killed on some piece of shit called Matter of Fact a year and a half ago. Some bastard took him down in a bar for no damn reason at all. I went solo after that.”

McAleer nodded.

“The stuff I had aboard was bound for Conrad; somewhere along the way, my exchanger fused and the backups failed. She was an old ship; Jimmy was forever trying to hold her together, and I wasn’t as good at maintenance as Jimmy was. Anyway, after she went bad on me, I came out of warp and spent eight days solid trying to get here, environmental controls gone and the ship in near-vacuum all the way. Didn’t get more than ten or fifteen minutes of sleep at a time. Best damned flying I ever did, you’ll pardon me. Um, I hope you don’t consider smuggling a sin or something.”

McAleer thought about it, running a hand through what was left of his hair. “Render unto Caesar, you know. But I’m no judge.”

“Going to turn me in?” Edith asked calmly.

“No. No one’s been hurt. No crime was committed in my presence. I’m not a cop, either. Look, Edith, I’ve got enough problems without turning informer. I don’t care what you had aboard. Tell you the truth, I’m relieved I don’t have to deal with the situation.”

“Thanks. That’s honest.” Edith paused again, more comfortable now. “Well,” she finally said, “enough about me. What about you?” She sipped at her coffee.

McAleer gave her a small, sad smile. “It’s a pretty short story. I don’t know how much you know about Henderson — ”

“Zero. It was here when I needed it, that’s all.”

“Okay. Actually, there’s not much to tell,” McAleer began. “Henderson was first charted fifteen years ago. The exploration team stayed for a while, but didn’t do much except introduce the Troof to the Fed; that’s when Standard was introduced here.

“Anyway, the team left after a few months. There was really nothing here for it to chart, and its report was buried under a mass of explorers’ reports from likelier star systems. Henderson doesn’t have much in the way of natural resources, and it’s not in a good location for easy exploitation. Its best and pretty much only value is as a way station on an unpopular trade route. In fact, no one came back here until the Feds opened a trading post in town about three years ago. That’s when the field you landed on was built, by the way.”

Edith nodded. “So what happened to the traders?”

McAleer shrugged. “It turned out that the Troof had no interest in trade with the Fed, so the post was closed down a year or so back. All the Troof got out of the deal was the field and, six months ago, me. The traders’ final report managed not to get itself buried in the bureaucracy, and my bishop transferred me here right after a summary hit his desk.”

“Just like that?”

“Sure. That’s the way it works, Edith. Someone comes up with a planet full of sentients, and off we go, if we’re able. My bishop’s rather determined on the subject, so we’re most often able. Representatives of other Terran sects will almost certainly come fairly soon but, as of now, I’m the only human — the

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only *other* human — on Henderson. And I’ve done damned little with my, uh, monopoly.”

“I once work for explorers and trade team,” Zweebl put in. “Was go-between with my people for Feds back then. That how I know Terrans so good. Father Mort show up with no idea of what to do here. He hire me right away. Found this building for him, hired labor for reconstruct, et cetera. Showed him the ropes according to Hoyle.”

“Zweebl taught me a lot about the Troof,” McAleer said. He sighed. “Apparently not enough, though. I’m afraid my efforts here have been rather fruitless.”

Edith looked puzzled.

“I mean the mission is far from successful,” McAleer continued. “I have no Troof congregants, none at all. I don’t have anyone taking instruction in the faith, either. I realized that the Troof might not take to Orthodox Catholicism, but I haven’t even had so much as an inquiry about it. No one’s seemed in the least interested, not even Zweebl. He just works for me, that’s all.”

“Perhaps the native religion is too strong?” Edith hazarded.

“Is none,” Zweebl stated flatly. “Didn’t have one before Father Mort come. Still don’t. New thing for us. Planets, stars in sky, fish in sea, mystery of creation. Jesus dies, redeems Terra. Who cares? Phooey. Eat, drink, be merry, for tomorrow we do it all over again, that what I say.”

Edith looked at Zweebl. “The Troof aren’t religious? Isn’t that supposed to be unusual for a sentient race?”

“How I know?” Zweebl asked, eyes wide. “Only know two such, and from what I see, it fifty-fifty.”

“That’s my assistant talking,” McAleer said agreeably, “and, yes, the lack of any native

religion here is highly unusual — unprecedented, I’d say. Not only are the Troof uninterested in my religion, but they don’t have any use for *anything* I have to offer — my medical skills, agricultural knowledge, or anything else. I’m stalled, and have been since I arrived here.”

“But isn’t there anything else you can do?”

McAleer sighed. He rubbed his eyes tiredly. “If there is, I can’t see it. Look, Edith, I’ve been a missionary all my adult life. Henderson is my third post. I founded missions on two other planets, got them going, and passed them on to ordained native assistants after a few years. All still exist, all are still successful. But on Henderson, I’m a total flop. No one here is interested in anything I might have to say. Even Zweebl is only here for the pay.”

“You got it,” Zweebl chirped.

McAleer shrugged. “Anyway, I’m not sure I can take this state of affairs for much longer. I might just give up.”

“Hmmm,” Edith said. “I’m not sure — no, nothing.”

“What is it?”

“Well ... I’m not sure I’m in favor of the mission thing, Father. I mean, why not leave the natives alone? I don’t want to seem ungrateful, but — ”

“No, it’s a good question,” McAleer said. He sighed. “The basic reason, which you can accept or not, is that every being has a soul to save.”

“And it’s up to Terrans to save them?”

“Basically speaking, yes. Orthodox Catholic Terrans and their ordained converts, that is.”

Edith was unconvinced. “Oh. Well, that’s a little too dogmatic for me.”

McAleer waved a hand. “Look, Edith, we don’t threaten anyone with hell; we don’t even preach much. We lead by example. We’re

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trained to heal, to teach, to *care*. It does some good in the universe, or should. But I haven't contributed a damned thing to anyone's physical or spiritual well-being here on Henderson, and I'm very tired of that.”

“More coffee?” asked Zweebl politely.

Two weeks later, a stronger and more rested Edith had already taken to long walks along the narrow streets of Trooftown, something McAleer did only occasionally. A ship might or might not call at the field within the year. Until then, Edith Manus Daney — broke, jobless and with no prospects in sight other than the pallid ones afforded by St. Polycarp's — was determined to do what she could to survive in as much style as she could manage on a backwater planet such as Henderson.

It also bothered Edith that she owed McAleer rather a large debt, and she could see no way to pay it off. He hadn't quite saved her life, but he *had* done much to heal her and make her feel at home. What could she do? She'd have slept with him willingly — she'd gone to bed with worse and for less — but McAleer was a professed celibate and seemed to take his vows seriously. Edith respected McAleer for that and didn't press the issue, but it made her problem that much tougher to solve.

Edith did not have it in her to sponge off McAleer indefinitely. Edith hated owing anyone. Cash and carry, that was Edith.

Worry about it later, she told herself. Right now, it was a beautiful morning, and Market Day — held every four days, or twice a week, as the Troof reckoned time — was already well under way. Edith had quickly found that she loved the smaller bazaar held on the other days of the Troof week, and the way the Troof dickered with each other over even the most minor transactions. The action on Market Days

was even better. Watching two blue, bulbous and excited Troof gesturing frantically and shrieking at each other in the spirit of hard bargaining was one of those sights in life Edith was glad she hadn't missed.

To her great surprise, Edith had found on her first day out that the Troof seemed to be incredibly interested in her. She would have thought that, given McAleer's experience, she would have evoked no more than a yawn from the jaundiced natives — but, instead, they approached her in friendship and made constant inquiries about her health. Edith thought it impolitic to mention any of this to McAleer — at least until she found out the reason behind it.

Today was no different. Edith had been approached and greeted warmly by several Troof on her way to the square. *Is it because I'm a woman?* she wondered. *Maybe. They've never seen one before, after all; the exploration team years ago, and then the traders — they were all males, according to Father Mort. How boring! Damn all sexists, anyway. Or is it because of the way I arrived here — the crash? No, that doesn't make any sense.*

Edith strolled through the town square. Market Day was, indeed, in full swing. Scores of merchants lined the perimeter of the square, their wares neatly placed on large, multicolored rugs laid on the stone plaza. A few merchants had crude but neat wooden booths set up in an open rectangle around the center of the square. Hundreds of Troof milled about, and here and there squeaky cries of outrage could be heard as buyers and sellers attempted to strike deals.

Edith headed for her “favorite” booth, Haraska's. Haraska sold agricultural products grown on a farm he owned at some distance from town, and seemed to do well at it. The smell of the booth reminded Edith of a vegetable stand in the neighborhood where she

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grew up, so she liked hanging around it. Haraska was also popular with the other merchants; there were usually a few standing around talking to Haraska between sales.

“Hey, Edith!” came Haraska’s voice. “Over here today. Visit?” Edith looked around and spotted Haraska, waving; there were two other Troof with him at his booth. She smiled at Haraska and headed over.

“How you feeling?” Haraska asked. “Better?”

“Yes. Almost well. And you?”

“Fine. Business good. Sun shine. Big crowd. Excellent day.”

“Glad to hear it.” Edith looked at the two Troof merchants standing around Haraska’s booth. “Hi, everyone.”

“Hello!” one of them squeaked. “I Redefe, this Eudobo. How your health?”

“I feel much better, thank you. Glad to meet you all.”

“Same here,” piped Redefe and Eudobo.

“So what new?” Haraska asked Edith. “Enjoying beautiful weather?”

“Yes, very much,” Edith replied. “Actually, I am looking for something today — ”

“Oh?” said all three Troof, their eyes a bit wider.

“Well,” Edith continued, “it’s more in the nature of advice. I’m going to need a place to stay, now that I’m up and around again. I can’t stay at the mission. Do you have any ideas?”

The three Troof grew very excited. “Hah! *Yerega!* Knew it! She no *ilantha*, not nearly!”

“Had feeling all along,” said Redefe. “Definitely *yerega*.”

Edith was puzzled.

“This good news,” Eudobo said. “First Terran *yerega* we ever meet. Good stuff. Yes, can find you place easily, even one conforming to needs of larger Terran dimensions. I talk to

friend about it. No problem. There will be rent, but you can owe.”

“Well, that sounds fine,” Edith said. “Thank you.”

Eudobo shrugged. “Pleasure. I find friend now. You want place today?”

They certainly move fast around here, Edith thought. “Tomorrow or the next day will be all right, thanks. I have some things to gather.”

“Copacetic,” agreed Eudobo. “Bye now.” He wobbled off.

“I go with,” Redefe said. “Bye.”

As the two Troof headed away from the square, Edith turned to Haraska. “Mind answering a couple of questions, my friend?”

“Course not. Gimme.”

“Just what does *yerega* mean? And that other word — *ilantha*?”

Haraska looked surprised; his small mouth made an “o.” “You not know?”

“No, I don’t. I’m new here.”

Haraska considered that. “Yes, is true. You would not ask if you didn’t know. You are, perhaps, *yerega* by birth! Oh, the marvels of Terra!” He seemed quite excited by the thought.

“So what is *yerega*?” Edith asked again.

“Most important things, friend Edith,” the Troof replied. “Difference between *yerega*, *ilantha* vital. You *yerega*, which is better, as I am and Eudobo, Redefe are.”

“You mean that there are two kinds of Troof? One *yerega*, one *ilantha*?”

Haraska shook his head. “No. One only kind of Troof. Two kinds of — how you say, attitude? Belief?”

Edith was puzzled. “You mean religion?”

“Ah, that it. Religion. Worship, living life by code. You see?”

“I do see, but Father McAleer said you *have* no religion — ”

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Haraska gestured impatiently. “No, no. Of course he say that. He *ilantha*.”

“He is?”

“Certainly,” Haraska said emphatically. “Self-evident. All Terrans *ilantha* before you come.”

Edith thought about that. “So why am I different?”

Haraska told her — explaining it as if Edith were a child, which on Troof she was — and, gradually, Edith got it.

Edith hurried back to St. Polycarp’s. She found McAleer in his study, behind his desk. He smiled at her as she entered.

“Hi,” he said. “Enjoy yourself at the market?”

“Yes. Look, I’ve been talking to some of the Troof — ”

“You have? You mean, besides Zweebl?”

“Of *course* I mean besides Zweebl!”

McAleer looked surprised. “Well, that’s fine. I’m even a bit jealous — ”

“Can I go on, please?” Edith broke in. “This is important.”

“Please do.”

Edith seated herself. “Ever hear the words *yerega* and *ilantha*?”

“Here and there. The Troof seem to use them to cuss and fume at each other.”

“Well, they’re not curses. They’re the names of sects. Religious sects.”

McAleer’s eyes widened. “They can’t be,” he said. “There’s no native religion here.”

“There sure as hell is,” Edith returned. “In fact, in this area, there are two. One’s pretty big, and one’s fairly small — but both are active and vital, and everyone’s a true believer in one or the other. No agnostics or atheists here.”

“But Zweebl says — ”

“Zweebl is *ilantha*,” Edith said flatly.

McAleer blinked. “All right. So what’s *ilantha*?”

Edith paused. “An *ilantha* lies.”

“He tells lies? That’s it?”

Edith nodded. “It’s important. He lies *constantly*. He lies any time he can possibly get away with it. That’s all the time, nearly enough. All *ilantha* do it. Oh, if you ask one what color the sky is, he’ll tell you it’s green because you can check on that too easily. But if he can lie with any possibility of getting away with it, he will. Without fail.”

McAleer shook his head. “But *why*? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Yes, it does. You don’t know enough yet. There’s also this: The other group, the *yerega*, is just the opposite. They always tell the truth. All the merchants in the town square are *yerega*; the Troof wouldn’t have it any other way. *Ilantha* are, generally speaking, farmers, ranchers and hunters. It doesn’t matter if you lie a lot if you can produce crops and game.”

“I don’t get it, I’m afraid,” McAleer said. “How did all this come about?”

“It’s the religion, Father,” Edith answered. “It makes a certain kind of sense, actually. The *yerega* believe that telling the truth shames the devil — it’s not the devil, really, but the idea is close enough — while the *ilantha* believe that telling lies misleads him. Both sects take it all *very* seriously.”

“So Zweebl is *ilantha*,” McAleer said. “All right. But I still don’t see why that’s important, or what that has to do with me.”

“You’re *ilantha* by association, Father,” Edith said. “*You hired Zweebl!* You were neutral as a newborn Troof babe when you arrived here, but hiring Zweebl — as your assistant, no less — put you over the line.”

McAleer’s jaw dropped. “Oh! That means the Troof think I’m a total liar?”

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“Right. And here you are, trying to tell them about Orthodox Catholicism — and no one’s having any of it. Why *should* they? You’re *ilantha!* Anything you say is a lie. To the Troof — *yerega* and *ilantha* both — everything you are represents a falsehood. Of *course* they haven’t been paying any attention to you — from their point of view, you’re trying to make them into stooges, *yerega* and *ilantha* both!”

“So I’m guilty by association,” McAleer breathed. “I’ll be damned. But, wait — you’re living here. How come you haven’t been tarred with the same brush? Why aren’t you considered, er, *ilantha*?”

Edith smiled. “I just got here and I’ve been sick, remember? To the Troof, that’s okay. I hadn’t yet chosen a path — but I did today, without knowing it.”

“How?”

“I told a Troof friend of mine — a *yerega*, as I soon found out — that I was looking for a place to live.”

“And that was it?”

Edith grinned. “It was more than enough. Every day I’ve been out, each Troof I’ve met has asked me how my health was. I thought they were being polite, but it wasn’t that. They were waiting for me to choose which path I’d walk — something I wouldn’t be expected to do until I felt completely well. In fact, I managed to impress my pals in the square by choosing anyway, before I had to.”

“Just by saying you intended to move out of the mission?”

“Sure. You see, while I was ill, I had no choice in where I was living, any more than a child does. I incurred no, er, penalty for living under the same roof as a couple of *ilantha*. There’s plenty of precedent for that. However, once I could choose, I chose to get out — and that automatically made me *yerega*. An honest

woman.” Edith smiled at that. “They’re finding me a place now.”

McAleer nodded. “I think I see. I take it the explorers and traders who used to be here were also considered *ilantha*?”

“Yes. Zweebl worked for them, too, pretty much doing what he does for you. Since the exploration team and traders were *ilantha* because they had ‘adopted’ Zweebl, no one would trade with them; the Troof of either sect were sure they’d be cheated. The *yerega* Troof wouldn’t even speak to the Terrans unless it was an emergency. For their part, the *ilantha* Troof didn’t think talking to a bunch of Terrans stupid enough to employ one of their own was worth their time.”

Edith scratched her head. “Every survey report on Troof sociology that’s ever been made is going to have to be rewritten. I’m the only Terran the Troof have ever met who wasn’t *ilantha* ... and that means I’m the only Terran who’s ever been able to talk to the *yerega* Troof and find out what’s really been going on here.”

McAleer nodded, then sighed. “Well, I guess congratulations are in order. If my church allowed women to become priests, I’d let you run the mission. I’ve really made a mess of things, haven’t I?”

Edith frowned. “You didn’t know anything about this,” she said. “How can you blame yourself? You’re not being fair. Even blaming Zweebl is out of line — from his point of view, he’s being devout.”

“I suppose he is,” McAleer agreed. “Look, I’m glad that you found out what’s wrong here. I really do wish you’d gotten here a year ago; maybe I could have fixed things then. Now, though, the situation seems irredeemable.”

Edith smiled a secret smile. “Now, really, Father — you run a mission, don’t you?”

McAleer shrugged. “Of course.”

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“Well, then — does the word ‘conversion’ ring a bell?”

McAleer blinked. After a moment, he smiled.

The site of McAleer’s conversion was a large hall near the square in the middle of Trooftown. McAleer had never been inside before; Zweebl had told him it was a warehouse, and McAleer had had no reason to doubt him. Actually, the hall was the nearest thing to a church the *yerega* Troof had — more like a Quaker meeting house in spirit, something like a theater in fact.

The priest’s imminent conversion from one sect to another had aroused great interest among the Troof. Conversions were rare enough and provided a reason for splendid spectacle and feasting for both sects. The *yerega* Troof were genuinely happy about McAleer’s conversion; the *ilantha* Troof only pretended to be.

McAleer just hoped he could get through the ceremony without incident. His sponsor was the merchant Haraska, who was serving in that role as a favor to Edith. (Edith wondered how she would pay *that* one back, too.) There had already been an hour’s worth of Troof hymn-singing, and McAleer had anointed the stubby blue feet of the *yerega* leader, Sethaber, with *fasgat* oil to prove his humility and sincerity.

But there would be a test, too. Haraska had warned him that there would be one near the close of the ceremony, but would not say what it was, other than to say it would not be physical. McAleer wasn’t worried; he was determined to tell the absolute truth about anything, no matter what. That, he thought, would see him through.

It was really too bad that the test had nothing to do with McAleer telling the truth.

When the time for the test finally came, Sethaber stabbed a stubby finger at random

toward three Troof sitting in different parts of the hall. They rose and waddled toward the front, stopping in front of McAleer. Edith, nearby, watched with great interest.

“I have chosen these three at random,” Sethaber said. “I know none of them personally. The test, Father McAleer of Terra, is for you to tell me which is *yerega*, if any, and which is *ilantha*, if any. A true *yerega* has no guile and will be able to tell. A true answer will validate your conversion. You are allowed to question each one of these three only once. You may not question me or anyone else at all. Let the test proceed.”

McAleer’s mind was boggled. He knew what he had to do, but had no idea how to do it — and he couldn’t afford to waste a question. He scratched his head and thought more furiously than he had ever thought in his entire life. *So much hangs on this*, he prayed. *Please, God. Just a little clue. Perhaps these people can sense each other’s ethics, but I certainly can’t!*

McAleer looked at each one of the three Troof closely. No, there was no way to tell a *yerega* from an *ilantha* by physical differences. Neither sect wore identifiable clothing or markings; there was no analogue to religious medals among the Troof. McAleer also knew that he could not ask a question to which the answer was obvious; any *ilantha* among the three Troof would give a correct answer because it could be checked easily. If the answer could *not* be checked easily, it would do McAleer no good.

Could McAleer ask a question and rely on audience reaction to gauge the truthfulness of the answer? He decided he could not; the approach struck him as unreliable.

McAleer looked to where Edith was standing. She seemed worried, and there was no help there anywhere.

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What if he simply *asked* — wait, wait! That was it!

Perhaps a minute had gone by. Sethaber didn't look at all impatient; good. So far, McAleer remained within the apparent bounds of propriety. He hoped his approach to the problem kept him there.

“You, there, Number One,” McAleer said, pointing. “Are you *yerega* or are you *ilantha*?”

The Troof opened his mouth to speak. “No!” shouted McAleer. “Don't tell me. Whisper the answer to Number Two.”

Sethaber stirred. “The question is valid, but whispering the answer to another does not change the rules of the test. You have used up your question to Number One.”

“I understand that, Sethaber,” McAleer said. “May I continue?”

Sethaber motioned McAleer to proceed.

“Number Two,” McAleer called out. “Tell me what Number One said, and whether you think he was telling you the truth.”

Number Two squeaked loudly in outrage. “He tell me he *yerega*, but he not! He lie! He *ilantha*! I am *yerega*! I tell you truth!”

Number Three, unbidden, broke in. “Nah! They both *ilantha*. They both lie to foul up test! I the only *yerega* here! Believe that! I not lie!”

McAleer turned to Sethaber. “I have your answer, Sethaber. Number One is *ilantha*. Number Two is *yerega*. Number Three is *ilantha*.”

“You are correct,” Sethaber said. “Welcome, *yerega*.”

The sincere happy squeaking of the *yerega* Troof and the insincere and not-so-happy squeals of the *ilantha* Troof merged into a high-pitched roar of mass approval.

McAleer went over to Edith and hugged her. “I almost feel bar-mitzvahed,” he said.

“Congratulations, *yerega*,” Edith said, returning the hug.

Later that night, after the feasting was over, McAleer and Edith shared another pot of coffee. McAleer had made it himself, because Zweebl was gone now; the little Troof refused to stay in the employ of a *yerega*, nor could McAleer continue to keep an *ilantha* at the mission. That didn't stop McAleer from missing Zweebl already.

“I admire your restraint,” McAleer said to Edith after their first cup.

“In what way?” Edith said. “There *are* a couple of restraints on me, you know.”

“I only meant that it's been hours and hours, and you haven't yet asked me how I did it.”

“I thought you made a lucky guess, and that you asked the questions to stall for time.”

“Nope,” McAleer said, grinning. “I almost did something like that, but then I realized that, within the rules, there *was* a way to figure out who was who. So I used it.”

“With those questions?” Edith looked puzzled. “But how could you know who was telling the truth and who wasn't? You didn't even hear the answer that Number One gave — unless you read his lips or something?”

“I didn't have to.” McAleer sipped at his second cup of coffee. “Figure it out for yourself. If Number One were *yerega*, what would he have said in answer to my first question?”

“That he was *yerega*, of course. He would have had to tell the truth.”

“And if he were *ilantha*?”

“He would have — he would have lied!” Edith grinned in surprise. “He would have *had* to say *yerega*! So you knew what Number One's answer was, all along!”

“That's right,” McAleer said. “Then I asked Number Two the second question. Since

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Number Two told the truth about what Number One had whispered to him, I knew he was *yerega* right off, and anything else he'd say would be the truth, too. Number Two told me that Number One was *ilantha*, and I could believe it. Then Number Three burst out in mock indignation and said both of the others were liars, which I knew wasn't true. That made Number Three *ilantha*. Actually, I think I scored some extra points by having to ask only two questions, but it's just a feeling."

"Hmmm," Edith mused. "Well, congratulations. I must admit that your solution to the problem was pretty goddamn elegant, if you'll pardon me."

"Forgiven." McAleer smiled broadly. "And here's a little bonus to end the day. Now that I'm *yerega*, anything I say is the truth. Think of what that means to a missionary on a planet full of skeptics!"

Edith stirred her coffee. "I'm glad you're pleased. I'm not sure I am, though. Does that mean the Troof are all going to become Orthodox Catholics?"

McAleer shrugged, still smiling. "No, it doesn't. It just means I'm going to get a chance to make my pitch, that's all. Just because I only tell the truth doesn't mean I tell the only truth there is."

"I think I followed that," Edith said.

Several months later another ship arrived, a landing boat from a much larger craft orbiting Henderson. McAleer gave himself an hour off and left his busy, bustling mission to meet it. The *gevster* did its usual noisy job of transporting him to the field; his new assistant, a *yerega* named Ghrosset, accompanied McAleer and cursed at the machine as much as Zweebl ever had.

There was quite a crowd of Troof at the field. McAleer thought it was too bad that Edith wasn't in town for the landing, but she was a few thousand miles away on a survey job; the Fed had hired her to correct previous reports and come up with new data of her own. She led a skilled team of *yerega* Troof and was much too happy at her work to leave Henderson. McAleer was glad about that; he would miss her terribly if she left.

"Hey, Father!" came a cry. "Welcome to field!"

McAleer spotted Klatho, the field superintendent, coming toward him. The priest greeted him warmly. "Good to see you again," he said. "Any word on who's aboard?"

"No VIPs," Klatho answered. "Charter flight, though. No passenger list broadcast. My boys handle landing okay. I come to watch. This first craft to land here since Edith crash, you know. Very big deal."

"I know," McAleer said. "I wonder who's aboard?"

The boat settled softly onto the field; its engines died. Several Troof quickly rolled a gangway up to the forward port airlock.

A tall, thin, unsmiling man in clerical garb emerged.

"Hey, that guy dressed like you," Klatho said. "Another priest?"

"Seems to be," McAleer said. "In fact, he's got 'missionary' written all over him."

"Yeah? Where?"

"Just an expression. I'd better meet him, Klatho."

McAleer walked to the foot of the gangway, extending his hand. "Welcome to Henderson. I'm Mort McAleer."

The cleric frowned. "Oh. The competition." He shook hands limply. "I'm Harold Smith. Lutheran, in case you were curious."

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“Well, to tell you the truth, I was. I’m Orthodox Catholic myself.”

“I know,” Smith said unpleasantly. “I read our report, thank you. You’ve been dealing with these Troof for awhile, haven’t you?”

“Just about a year now. I think you’ll find them pleasant people.”

The two began walking toward the admin building. Suddenly, McAleer spotted Zweebl emerging from the crowd.

“Here comes someone I know,” McAleer said. “His name is Zweebl — ”

“‘Zweebl’? What kind of name is that? Haven’t you managed to persuade any of these aliens to adopt good, Christian names?”

“I suppose not.” McAleer fell silent.

“Well, that’ll change,” Smith said firmly as Zweebl reached them. The crowd of Troof watched.

“Greetings,” the little native said to the newcomer. “I am Zweebl, experienced in serving all sorts of Terran needs. Have worked for Fed exploration party, Fed trade group. Can I be of service?”

“Depends,” said Smith. “You know anything about mission work?”

“Could learn. I quick study.”

Smith considered it. To McAleer, he said, “You know this Troof?”

“I haven’t seen him in some months,” McAleer said carefully, “but his fellows speak well of him. They say he’s a hard worker.”

“Hmmm.” Smith scratched his chin. “At least it speaks decent Standard. Okay.” Smith stooped to address Zweebl. “You’re hired, on a temporary basis. I won’t pay you much; the main rewards of the job will be spiritual. You understand?”

Zweebl nodded. “Deal. Shake hands, Terran fashion?”

“Why not?” Smith returned. They shook.

The crowd saw the handshake and melted away.

McAleer hid a shameful smile and headed for the boat. There might be some mail aboard for him. •