

Jeever's Lost World

ALGIS BUDRYS

Illustration by Kandis Elliot

One day was very much like the next. Then the spaceships came.

Jeever lay in splendor on the moss, naked and happy, inhaling the perfume from a blossom that grew in the entangled mosses and vines that wreathed his building. In a little while, he would harvest some of the fruit that grew upon the skeletal structure, and split the skins to have his breakfast drink and his breakfast, but for now he was simply living, in quiet joy, and inhaling the sweet odor as a prelude to a day that was, exactly, like the day before. A peaceful crap over the side of the building, a little run around vacant rooms of the building, a trip outdoors, provided the spirit moved him, and quiet.

Not literal quiet, of course. There was usually a wind, thrumming through the hanging gardens for which the building was a trellis, and sometimes there was rain, but rarely enough to cause Jeever to shift to a bower farther away from the edge of the floor. No, not literal quiet. But the quiet of accustomed sounds; of a peaceful, essentially invariable background to the various thoughts chasing themselves around Jeever's brain.

Which were not much, as he well knew. No large and ponderous thoughts; there was nothing to be large or ponderous about. There was eating, there was defecating, and there was thinking thoughts like 'Should I trim my nails today?' as he would do every nine or ten days, chewing them short. Or there was thinking about what thoughts to think. Jeever was the last of his kind; the last in all the world, and in the rest of the Universe, as well. They had simply run down, his people, after a long and sometimes exciting history, and now they were reduced to one individual, who had realized very early that history--and almost all the other things his people had once prized and argued over--was irrelevant.

Except today was different. His extended senses were suddenly picking up a mother ship in the space adjacent to his planet, and voices in conversation, and the dispatch of a number of scout vessels. Jeever put down the blossom. "Aw, chuck!" he said and stood up in annoyance.

They had not found him yet, in several days of overflying the city. He waited, warily. Perhaps they would not. They tracked endlessly over the city, photographing the vine-covered buildings, the remains of a complex metropolitan culture, the ships sunk in the bay. But perhaps they would tire of it. Jeever did not know enough to hazard a guess; they were new people, from a young culture, and they might do anything. They were very excited about their find; their conversations now were loaded with discovery and wonder. But they might, he comforted himself, tire of it. The city was not really different from any abandoned city; there was little left in it to reward search, really. Perhaps they would realize that.

But they did not. Several more days passed, and the flights continued. And in the middle of this particular day, they concentrated on his building. The conversations suddenly said they had detected a spot of heat. Jeever. They could not see him, yet, but they were closing in on him, and in a little while they would send a landing party down. "Fut!" Jeever said in disgust.

"Aw, feef!" He went to the central core of the building, scraped aside the lichens, opened a small door, and pulled down the red handle inside.

The conversations became thunderstruck as the building converted the vines into window glass, the mosses into carpet, the lichens into paint, the fruit into power and light; before their eyes, the building flourished into full bloom, standing tall and suddenly clean in the sunshine. The new people were thrown into confusion; many conversations flew back and forth between the scouts and the mother ship. The upshot was that one scout would land on the plaza in front of the building, while the others covered it from the air. "Chuck!" Jeever repeated.

The scout touched down. And as Jeever had known would happen, the city's defenses fully came on. With a crackle and a rushing, a rumble and a great singing noise, the red handles came down automatically in every building in the city, and the city changed into what it had been, very, very quickly. And robots poured out of the building entrances, scuffing the sidewalks with the soles of their feet, raising their hand weapons. The scout ship fired, in a panic, and vanished. The rest of the scout ships vanished. The mother ship had time for a single syllable of protest, and it, too, vanished.

The city lay under the sun, brave and new, and the robots put up their weapons and went back inside. Jeever stared out at the landscape with no joy. Now he would have to eat in a kitchen, with prepared food. Now he would have to use a bathroom. And now he would have to inhale synthetic odors, which would no doubt be identical to the real flowers. He would have to do this for centuries until the blessed desuetude crept over the city once more, except that he strongly suspected he would die first. He thought of the ship and growled.

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