

The Three Labors of Bubba

by Bud Webster

"This is, you realize, complete hogwash." The voice came from a small box propped against a telephone on the only flat surface in the room not covered in books. "Space, Gravity, and the Flying Saucer, indeed. There's no actual craft in my records that looks or operates like anything in these diagrams."

"Doubtless, Mike, but ain't it wonderful hogwash?" Bubba tapped his finger against the cover of the book in question. "It's a valuable addition to the SauNA database."

Bubba Pritchert, gentleman mechanic of Virginia and president/founder of the Saucer Nuts of America, had created something of a clearing-house for pre-1965 UFO literature. In an attempt to document the early days of the saucer craze, he had begun accumulating books, magazines, and smearily mimeographed pamphlets by the hundreds; some were found through antiquarian book dealers (who were delighted to be shut of them), but most came from the SauNA membership. Eventually, he bought a scanner, and began setting up an on-line library that could be accessed by anyone.

"Leonard Cramp was a crackpot," Mike replied, "with an intuitive grasp of the fundamental pseudo-scientific method: propose a conclusion, and then tailor the facts to fit. Somehow I expected your Saucer Nuts of America library to be less . . . speculative."

Bubba shrugged. "Hey, you wanted to read this stuff. Besides, until you came along, speculation was all I had. Personally, I think you just like to argue."

"A battle of wits with a human? And one only half-armed, at that? Hah."

Glancing around idly, Bubba muttered, "I wonder if that bulk eraser would work on an artificial intelligence . . .?"

"Just kidding," Mike said quickly.

Bubba grinned savagely. "Thought you might have been."

It had been raining in Central Garage for two days, while a storm made up its mind whether or not to amble away off the coast of Virginia. Those residents not yet disconnected from the power grid had had the odd blink of electricity, but Chez Pritchert remained up and running throughout, drawing energy from a GreenHouse(tm) fusion generator. Bubba had been carefully cleaning the lens of a charge-coupled device when the conversation started.

"Seriously, Bubba," said Mike, "How much credence do you put in this stuff?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Mike. Most of this is pretty improbable, knowing what we know about the planets in the neighborhood. I just never thought that the only data you needed to make up your mind about something was the evidence that supported your contentions." He picked up the lens and began polishing it again. "Now, I believe that Cramp believed what he was writing about, but the mechanical problems alone . . ."

"Just a second . . . Just a second . . ." Mike interrupted. "I'm detecting some kind of energy displacement close by."

"Probably just Clint Miller's milch-cows venting methane," Bubba replied. "'Odorless', my butt."

"It's electromagnetic, but steady. Not pulsed. Nothing I'm familiar with."

"Hell, I thought you knew everything," Bubba replied, peering out the window at the dark.

"I'm encyclopedic, not omnipotent."

Bubba rose from the desk. "Okay, how close?"

"Close. Within 100 meters."

"Well, dip me in dogshit!" Now Bubba could hear the rattling of the corrugated roof over the garage area, whether from the storm or the EM activity he couldn't say.

"Quickly, Bubba. Activate the security system -- rear cameras."

"You got it." Bubba scrambled to slap the switches that connected Mike to the backyard surveillance cameras. "What's up?"

"Not up, down. In your back yard, to be precise. Unknown vehicle, possibly a scoutship -- not a deep-space craft. No bigger than a van. How it got here is beyond me. Sorry, Bubba," Mike continued, "it took out the cherry tree."

"Damn! What the hell's goin' on, Mike?"

"I can't answer that. Save your questions for the occupant -- it should be at your back door about now."

"Huh!" Bubba grunted as his kitchen door shook under a single blow. "Is it dangerous?"

"Had it wanted to come in uninvited, it would simply have eaten the door; it's big, Bubba. "

Bubba reached out and gingerly turned the knob. Standing well out of the way, he pulled the door open.

The doorway was filled from side to side as well as top to bottom, the body of the alien blocking what little light came in from outside.

"Are you . . . Bubba Pritchert?" it asked in a deep and husky voice.

"Uh . . . Yeah, I am."

"I have come . . . quite a long way. I need your help very badly." It swayed, then began crumpling at the knees. The smell of wet fur filled the room.

Hastily, Bubba said, "Would you like to sit down?"

Still swaying, the alien nodded slowly. "That would be preferable to collapse, yes."

Bubba backed away from the alien until his hip bumped the desk.

"It would seem," Mike said, "that you're having another close encounter."

Bubba said, catching his breath, "No shit, Sherlock."

"Mycroft."

"Whatever."

Feeling behind him with one unsteady hand, Bubba grabbed his chair, eyes never leaving the furry creature standing unsteadily not fifteen feet away. He swallowed audibly.

"I knew I shouldn't have painted 'STOP AND BE FRIENDLY' on the goddam roof," he said as he carried the heavy chair to the kitchen. The alien sat carefully, but gratefully, closing its eyes in near-exhaustion.

"I doubt it could have read it, even if you had," Mike replied. "Although it does appear that it came looking for you."

"Oh, bad choice of words, Mike. That's what guys named Nunzio do when you lose at the track!"

"Sought you out?"

"Better." Bubba took a deep breath. "Well, we let it in the house. What the hell do we do with it now?"

"Bathe it?"

Bubba glared at him. "You wanna clean out the drain?"

"I was joking. I can't smell wet fur, but you can."

"Yeah, well, that's the least of my worries."

"I suspect that it will tell us why it's here once it catches its breath. In the meantime, disconnect the outside cameras. There's nothing more to be seen out there."

Bubba turned off the outside cameras. "Oh, no, not a thing," he muttered. "Just a broke-down cherry tree and another goddam flying saucer, is all. Hell, nobody'll notice that."

"Hmm. There is that. You'll have to cover it; the garage bays are full."

"Great. Hope I've got a tarp big enough." He left through the still-open door, grabbing a jacket off a hook on his way.

The wind had died down considerably, so spreading the tarp was less of a problem than it might have been. Boxy and angular, the ship reminded Bubba of photos he'd seen of stealth aircraft; with that configuration it looked like it might be radar-invisible, but on the ground next to a splintered tree, it would be as conspicuous in the light of day as a hearse at a birthday party.

He staked the tarp to the ground and returned to the house.

"Right, that's done. What now?"

"Is the filter ready? This is a perfect field-test." Several weeks previously, Mike had acquired a tunable liquid-crystal filter from a correspondent at JPL. A fellow-SauNAn and master solder-jock had rigged it to work with a ccd from an old surveillance set-up; Mike could switch wavelengths to cover the visible spectrum and then some, giving him full-color, if monocular, vision.

Bubba plugged the filter and lens in place and set Mike on a shelf where he had an unobstructed view of the alien.

Aside from being covered in fur, it was wearing a harness made from some sort of synthetic, plain and undecorated except for some sort of insignia or badge where it crossed its broad chest. The alien's face was mostly hairless and wrinkled like a shar-pei's, with a single nostril.

"Well, I can identify the species, at least," Mike said. "He's a Thunt."

At this, the alien opened its eyes and looked from Bubba to Mike in interest.

"All I know," Mike said after deliberation, "is that they are a forest-evolved species, intelligent and sophisticated. One inhabited planet, one mining colony. I don't know much more about them; they didn't fall within the sphere of the Parliament's interest, and we had little reason to communicate with each other. They don't travel much outside their own system, and never, in my experience, this far from home."

Bubba sighed. "Musta had a reason to, then, and I doubt we'll like it much."

The chair creaked warningly as the alien began to stir. The alien's eyes were buried deep in the folds of his face. Clear and brown, they met Bubba's without blinking. Whatever else was true, the alien was certainly intelligent -- highly so, if Mike's comment about the ship's range was valid.

Bubba broke the silence.

"Wanna beer?" he said, his voice steadier than his hands. "I'm partial to Anchor Steam m'self, but I got some imported stuff, too."

There was an answering rumble as the alien cleared its throat. "I understand `beer'. Yes, that would be pleasant."

"You got it." He walked into the kitchen past the figure on the floor and got two bottles out of the refrigerator. "Glass?"

"No. Thank you."

"Ah, a real man. Here y'go."

The alien looked quizzically at the bottle, then at Bubba.

"Just twist the top off, like this." Bubba opened his bottle and took a drink. The alien tried to copy the movement and twisted the neck off the bottle, spilling beer on himself and the floor.

The effect of this was immediate; he leapt up and began furiously brushing at himself.

"Hang on, big fella," Bubba said, tossing him a towel, "use this."

The alien caught it in mid-air, then gingerly mopped at the beer. "I am sorry," he said in agitation. "I must . . . do you have somewhere I can wash myself?"

After a moment's thought, Bubba said, "Through that door," pointing to the entrance to the garage.

"I must say," Mike said quietly as the alien stepped toward the door, "you seem to be taking this very well."

"You kiddin'?" Bubba replied out of the corner of his mouth, "I'm this close to losin' m'fudge, but I've got a guest to see to."

He followed the alien out into the garage area, instructed him to stand over the drain and strip off his harness. He then handed him the hose and explained how to use the spray nozzle.

While the alien was busy washing himself, Bubba (trying hard to hold his breath) took the one-piece

garment, rinsed it out thoroughly in the basin, then threw it in the dryer.

When the alien was finished washing, he showed him the hot-air gun; in moments, the odor of wet fur was gone, and the large creature, made even bulkier by the blow-dry, sighed in relief.

"Better now?" Bubba asked, grinning.

"Yes. I am much distressed that I soiled your floor. We are . . . I do not like to be soiled."

"Don't fret, kitchen floors always need mopping -- especially the way I cook." Just then a buzzer sounded; the harness was dry, and the alien gratefully put it back on and re-attached the badge.

"So, you're a Thunt," Bubba said casually as they went back into the kitchen. He opened another beer for the big alien, who sat gingerly in the chair.

The alien thought for a moment. "I am a Thunt, yes," it said, looking from Bubba to Mike, "although I am not sure how you knew this."

"Right. Well, that toaster with the attitude over there is an artificial intelligence I picked up in a swap with a couple of good ol' boys who were having engine trouble." He looked back at the alien. "He's not from around here, but he's real square little feller. Well, rectangular, anyhow. Don't be too impressed, though; he's just encyclopedic, not omnipotent."

The Thunt nodded. "An Intelligence. We have those, although the configuration is different. My name," he said, "is V'rinn, son of Bish, son of Prath, son of Lan, daughter of Leens, daughter of Stel, son of Rinn."

"Well, that's a mouthful. So, what brings you to the Commonwealth of Virginia?"

"Your name is known to me from two functionaries of the Nishian Parliament, for whom you did a service. The 'good ol' boys' you mentioned, undoubtedly. They spoke to me of you at a refueling depot near Thuntun."

Bubba shrugged. "Yeah, well, I was always real popular at the truck stops."

"I have come in hope that you can aid me as you did them. I am guilty of what my people consider a serious crime, one which I am unable -- and unwilling -- to correct, and for which I stand to lose a great deal."

"Seems like a pretty harsh thing to do for making a mistake, old son. You fool around with the King's daughter or something?"

"Explain?"

Bubba looked slightly flustered. "Well, what I meant is . . . did you make an attempt to seduce . . . ?"

"I understand," the Thunt interrupted, shaking his head. "No. Our body chemistry isn't geared for recreational coitus."

"Hmmm . . . Break a law, then?"

Now it was the Thunt's turn to look uncomfortable. "The laws of Thuntun are complex and harsh, but based on a single Principle: Do Not Shame Your Progenitors."

"And I guess you've done something that embarrassed your folks?"

The Thunt didn't reply for a long moment. Eyes on the floor, he nervously picked at his harness.

"The opinion of the Full Council, as handed down by the Triad of Governors, was that I had shamed not only my Progenitors, but all of Thuntun as well." The big alien made a strangely meek gesture with one hand. "And," he sighed, "that was the opinion of the majority of my Progenitors, as well."

"Doesn't sound good. What are they gonna do to you?"

"I don't know. Sentence has yet to be passed. Under the circumstances, I thought it best to come looking for help as soon as I could."

"You on the lam?"

"If you mean am I a fugitive, no; they know I'm here, and their determination will be relayed to me."

"Well, hoss, please don't take this the wrong way, but you must have done something pretty hellacious to have your family dump on you."

The Thunt didn't lift his eyes from the floor. "It is . . . difficult . . . for me to speak of it. And yet, you must know, if I am to expect you to help me."

"Gotcha. You sit and think for however long you need. I'll get supper ready."

Bubba lifted a pot down from the rack above the stove and began throwing things into it.

"So, tell me about this law of yours. I'd think not shaming your parents might be a good way to promote good manners, not to mention keeping the peace. Seems pretty reasonable to me."

"Take it to its logical extreme," Mike said before the Thunt could answer. "Even if one's parents accepted a potentially embarrassing incident, their parents would have to, as well, and their parents, and so on. If I recall correctly, the Thunt are very long-lived, and families live together on large estates."

The alien nodded. "It is not unusual for there to be as many as five generations under one roof. My own Progenitors," he said with quiet pride, "extend to six."

Mike added, "'Reasonableness' is debatable, considering the potential for emotional damage. It stands to reason that with that much family to keep happy, a large number of offenses could bring about consequences far more serious than any intrinsic harm. I must assume that some never regain their honor, and die indigent and alone -- and, possibly, by their own hand."

The Thunt looked a little uncomfortable at this. "There are customs against suicide. It happens, but only in the most extreme cases. Mostly, the Nameless simply go mad." He shrugged heavily. "It's not pleasant."

Bubba shook his head as he chopped an onion. "Not my kind of life, but I'm just a simple country boy."

"The closest analog in Human culture is the Amish custom of 'shunning'. And since when were you ever a 'simple country boy'?"

"Well, I was raised polite."

"In any case," Mike added, "we can only speculate. What little I know of the Thunt relates primarily to their more public social structure. Any other information must come from him."

"Figures. I 'spect we'd better let you get to the heart of this thing at your own pace," Bubba said, glancing at the alien. "I'm reluctant to pry where I'm not welcome."

"I will share with you whatever information you find necessary," the alien said quickly. "Embarrassment is not an option."

"In the meantime, let's see if we can figure out something about your planet. Mike?"

"You know my methods. Apply them."

"Hate it when you do that," Bubba muttered as he scraped things off the cutting board into the pot.

"Okay. Long-lived species, limited to one planet, more or less. That means . . . low breeding rate, so's the food don't get all et up. Families can pile up a reasonable amount of wealth in five generations, so nobody's terribly poor." Garlic -- lots of garlic -- followed the onions into the pot.

"Yes," the Thunt said, nodding. "Poverty is unknown on the Estates; it is found mostly among the off-planet miners."

"Must be a pretty crowded planet with all those old folks around." Beef, beans, and tomato sauce joined the vegetables, and the aroma of spicy chili filled the kitchen. There was a rumbling that could only have come from the alien; apparently, borborygmy is universal.

"Not terribly. We have mechanical ways of limiting the population, as well as a natural estrus cycle."

The pot bubbled merrily as Bubba stirred with a long wooden spoon. "I love it when you talk dirty. Listen, Mike," he said, turning away from the stove, "This is all well and good, but we got the main fount of Thuntic knowledge in here with a bad case of the gut-rumbles. Let's table this until we hairy types have gotten on the outside of some food, okay?"

"Is that what that noise was? I thought the storm had returned."

"It's SOUP!" Bubba yelled. "Last one to the table gets what the littlest pig got."

The Thunt rose, his nostril flaring as he sniffed. He looked in the pot. "This is `soup'?"

"In this case," Mike answered, "'soup' is a generic term for food. I counted too many habanero peppers for it to be genuine soup."

"Chili, big guy. Just the thing to have on a late night with a beer if you're in trouble with your local Progenitors -- assuming you don't mind risking a little indigestion."

The Thunt was standing over his shoulder, whuffling the steam as it rose from the pot.

"Hope you don't mind a little fire in your food."

"I like strong flavors very much. May I ask what is in this?"

"You'll find out. This and that for flavor, sweet Vidalias, a jot of garlic. And with the peppers in there, you might want to taste a bit before you put it down your neck. Wouldn't want you to tuck in without some kind of preparation, lest you spew my six-alarm all over the walls. Don't think the dry-wall would stand it."

Bubba handed the Thunt a large bowl piled high with chili, a serving spoon, and a hunk of sourdough-rye bread.

"Take it on back in the living room. I'll bring you another beer, and we'll watch some tv while we eat, just like you was fambly."

They proceeded to the other room, Bubba carrying Mike under his arm and a tray containing his own food, the beer, and the pot in his hands.

"Give 'er a shot, big fella, and lemme know what you think of good old Virginia cookin'."

The Thunt nodded and tried a bit of the chili. He chewed, swallowed . . . and his face lit up with delight. He dipped his spoon again and again, until the bowl was empty, and then looked hopefully at Bubba.

With a grin, Bubba ladled another healthy dollop of chili into the bowl, added some grated cheddar, and again the Thunt fell to it. Turning the television on, Bubba switched channels until he found a station showing Destination Moon. The Thunt watched with interest, shoveling prodigious amounts of chili into his mouth.

"You like this one?" Bubba asked him.

The alien swallowed before speaking. "Seen it. We used to wonder why, with the level of technology your news programming indicated, you weren't all over the known galaxy. Then we realized we were watching adventure fictions." He shrugged. "A lot of things became clear once we could tell the difference."

After his bowl was gone, he laid down his spoon, sat back, and delivered a heart-felt belch that rattled the kitchen blinds.

Bubba laughed out loud. "I do like a man who knows how to pay a compliment."

The Thunt shook his head. "The Nishians didn't exaggerate your hospitality. They said you'd treat me well, and you have. But, I'm afraid I have to ask you to go further, as ungrateful as that may make me seem."

"Damn, you talk purty. How'd you learn so much English? Star Trek can't be right about universal translators."

"I am a diplomat trained to learn languages quickly. When I knew I would have to find you, I took the time to learn English from the records made of your broadcasts."

"You learn more from PBS or from Fox?"

The alien shrugged. "All your frequencies are equally confusing."

Bubba cackled. "Can't debate the obvious. Something else: why, although I certainly don't disapprove, are you such a neatnik?"

The alien began absently wiping his hands against his knees, clearly uncomfortable with the question.

"We just are," he said a bit plaintively.

"Well, lemme see if I can figure it out." Bubba scratched behind his ear in thought. "Let's see . . . You're hairier than Alabama bacon, and furries generally have to groom to stay clean. How's your skin under all that foliage? As wrinkled as the skin on your face?"

"In general, yes."

"That explains it, then. All kinds of bacteria and parasites could hide in there if you didn't sluice yourself down every so often."

"Forgive me . . . the subject is a distasteful one for me. Could we . . .?"

" . . .Get on with it"? Sorry, hoss. You came a long way with a lot on your mind. Just start at the beginning, get through the middle, and stop when you come to the end."

After a moment's thought, the Thunt spoke.

"I am a mid-level attache at the embassy in our capital. There was a conflict between my city-state and another, more powerful one. It hadn't become physical, but it was doomed to. I knew, because of my position in the Embassy, that a treaty could be forced on both sides if certain information was made known. This information was given to me by a representative of their Embassy, in confidence." He rose and began to pace, head nearly brushing the ceiling.

"I was acting as the courier in this instance. I broached the container and read the document. I then realized that there was no way for us to win short of a dishonorable betrayal of that information. Had the Embassy revealed the contents, my city-state would have been dishonored beyond any hope of redemption, and planetary war would have followed. An unwinnable war," he said matter-of-factly, "which would have reduced the population of Thuntun by more than half, and rendered most of the arable land unable to support life for centuries.

"I took it upon myself to disobey the Council and my superiors; I resigned my commission and revealed the information as a private citizen, concluding that my own dishonor was far better than the humiliation of my world. I do not regret that decision, even under the present circumstances." He drew himself up proudly.

"Well-goddam-said. You done good. Was the conflict resolved?"

"Yes, a treaty was signed, and hostilities ceased -- at least on that level. We'll never like each other, but there is the beginning of a working relationship now."

"What about your opposite number? The one who leaked the information in the first place?"

The Thunt sat again, palms flat on the table.

"She was executed."

Bubba shook his head. "Well, that sucks."

"Yes. It does, indeed, `suck', assuming that that term has a negative connotation."

"You betcha." Bubba sat back and rested his arms against the back of the couch. "All that having been said, and I'm not saying I'm necessarily agreein' to anything, what do you need?"

"A Champion."

"Say what?"

"A person of strength, intelligence, and honor to stand for me before the Council."

Bubba scratched his beard. "I ain't no lawyer, son. Not to mention that I don't know squat about you or your culture." He shook his head. "Don't think I'm going to be your best shot."

The alien leaned forward intently. "There is no legal maneuvering involved. I stand convicted by my own admission. The Full Council will hear a single appeal for forgiveness based on my acceptance by a Champion."

Again, Bubba shook his head. "Son, look at me. I'm half your size, twice your age -- relatively --, and no more or less honorable than any other lump of carbon-based protoplasm. What makes you think I stand any chance of helping you?"

"If strength and size were the only criteria, I would agree with you," the alien said, "but there are more important considerations. The Nish you met were impressed by your resourcefulness, your ability to solve problems. Very few non-spacefaring races would have been able to grasp the simple fact of the existence of life elsewhere, let alone figure out how to fix unknown technology."

"Well, hell . . . Mike here will tell you that there were other names in the hat besides mine."

"None with your talents, Bubba," Mike replied quickly. "And few with your intellect."

"Yeah, well . . . Be that as it may, son, you've still gotta be able to find somebody more honorable than I am. I mean, I'm not exactly crawlin' in the gutter, but I'm just as self-centered and ornery as the next guy -- probably more so."

"When Bubba encountered the Nishians," Mike said to the Thunt, "he was given certain technologies as payment for his help. These included room temperature fusion and mass cancellation. What happened to this knowledge, Bubba?"

"I was able to pass it right on along to somebody better suited to handle it, Mike. You know that."

"Why?"

Bubba snorted in mild frustration. "Hell, because if I'd kept hold of it, I'd've screwed it up, that's why!"

"So you gave this knowledge away, and turned down any financial claims you might have had on it, correct?"

"Damn right. I didn't need the grief."

"You made sure, then, that it would do the most good for the most people, without monetary considerations on your part," Mike added quietly. "Isn't that a reasonable example of `honorable'?"

Bubba stared at him for a few seconds before answering.

"You tricked me with that, Mike."

"Granted. It is, nevertheless, accurate."

"And in agreement with what I was told by the two Nishians," the Thunt added. He caught the human's gaze with his own. "You're the only resource I have, Bubba Pritchert. I cannot force you to help me, but without your aid I may never be able to return home -- ever."

Bubba stared at the wall, not speaking for several minutes.

"I'll have to think on 'er, hoss. This isn't anything like rebuilding an engine on racing stock; there's always another race."

There was a sound from the harness. The Thunt tapped it lightly, then listened closely. His expression, hard enough to read in the loose skin of his face, froze; his posture, at first alert, slowly sagged.

"Mike . . .?" Bubba said softly.

"Don't know the language. It isn't good news, though."

When the communicator fell silent, the Thunt closed his eyes. He reached up slowly and removed it, dropping it to the table.

"I . . . That was a message relayed to me through the Intelligence on my scoutship. The Council has made its decision." The alien's voice was almost too low to hear, and emotionless. "It would seem that I have greater need of your help than I thought, although I'm afraid there is little you can do." Opening his eyes, he looked bleakly at the Human sitting next to him.

"I am no longer a mid-level attache. I am no longer V'rinn, son of Bish, son of Prath, son of Lan, daughter of Leens, daughter of Stel, son of Rinn." His voice was level, but lifeless. "I am no longer . . . a Thunt. The Full council has decided; my name has been taken from me, and I have been stripped of my race."

"Say what?" Bubba said softly.

"I no longer exist. I am a non-person. I have been cast out, without family, without identity. I may speak to no one of my race, none of my Progenitors." He stared at his hands, then dropped them to his knees.

"There are lesser things, too: I may not own property, may not buy from or sell to any other Thunt. I am not allowed to breed, and my name may not be spoken." He looked back at the human with hopelessness. "I may work in the mines, but that's all. There is nothing else to be done."

"The hell you say!" Bubba was a little surprised at the vehemence of his reply. "Those ornery sons of bitches! I can't believe they did this!"

"Bubba, I don't think you understand. By the laws of Thuntun, I am guilty of my crime. The punishment is harsh . . . more harsh than you can know. But it is, by our lights, just."

"Well, hoss, I can tell you right now that it ain't `just' in King William County, and if they think we're gonna let this slide, they're missin' a rope off their porch swing." He stood and began to pace.

"You ain't a Thunt and you ain't your mother's son, you ain't a hero and you ain't even the jam b'tween their toes, huh? Well, I'm here to tell you what you are, old son," he said loudly, drawing himself up to his full height, eyes flashing at the big alien. "You're a guest in my goddam house, is what you are, and nobody on this planet or any other insults a guest under my roof." Grabbing dishes and utensils, he stomped back into the kitchen.

"C'mon, boy, get your shit together. We got ass to kick and names to take." Dumping the dirty dishes into the sink, he began washing them savagely.

The alien picked Mike up and followed, standing off to one side and looking uncomfortable in the face of the human's obvious anger.

"Bubba," Mike said, "it's late. Both you and . . . both of you need rest, and there's planning to be done. I suggest that you find somewhere for our friend to sleep, and try and find a fresh perspective in the morning."

"Yeah, well . . ." Bubba began, then stopped and dried his hands. "You're right, Mike. I can't think my best right now, and it has been a long and eventful evenin'." He heaved a sigh that seemed to calm him, and smiled a bit sheepishly. "Sorry, hoss. Didn't mean to fly off like that. I'll set you up in the spare bedroom."

Going to a closet in the hall, Bubba brought out an air mattress and showed the alien how to inflate it; with his lung capacity, it was full in a matter of minutes, and he stretched out gratefully. He was asleep almost immediately.

Bubba stood for a few moments looking down at him, then sighed again and, picking up Mike on the way, retired to his own bedroom.

"Mike," he said, setting the alarm clock for six AM, "what in the Hell have I got myself into this time?"

"Oh, not too much. You've provisionally accepted into your home an intelligent, predator-evolved omnivore who could break down one of those trees out there without sweating, promised to represent him in a dispute with his entire species, and unless I misread you, you're on the verge of doing something even more silly, like adopting him. How close am I?"

"Awful damn. I dunno, Mike. I kinda like the big lug, and I think he got a raw deal from his friends and neighbors. I've always been a sucker for a sob story, and there's something appealing about him. Aside from the fact that he looks like an expensive dog, that is."

"Bubba, I realize that you are out of the ordinary. This is why we sought you in the first place. I also understand that you are a human of feeling, and one who becomes frustrated by what he sees as an outrage. But, are you out of your mind? You don't have any real idea what intrinsic difficulties there are in adopting an alien. You can't have, as it's entirely outside of your frame of reference. Why are you so determined to take in this stray?"

"Mike, I remember a college professor I once knew who hated the very idea of abortion." He opened a window, and looked at the trees where the ship was hidden. "Most people either talk a big game or make a damned nuisance of themselves, but Nick wasn't like that. Instead, he and his wife adopted anything they could: black, white, Asian, and everything in between. All this on an academic's salary, with damned little help from anywhere."

"I think I see your point, but make it anyway."

"He stood for what he believed, Mike. He put his money, his house, and his heart where his mouth was. I never once went to his house that there weren't kids underfoot, running and hollering like banshees -- and I never once saw him look at those kids without a smile."

Bubba slapped the sash with one hand. "You're goddam straight I'm outraged! It ain't fair, none of it. That boy is a long way from home, and I don't have the slightest idea if I'm gonna do him any good up there. He may end up just as bad off, with no family and no home to go back to. Unless I'm willing to admit that I've been wasting time yakking about brotherhood for a good part of my life, I have to do right by him."

He straightened from the window and tugged down the covers. "Besides, I never could stand to see a man estranged from his family."

"You say that as though from experience, Bubba."

Bubba didn't answer right away, but got under the sheets and turned out the light. "Mayhap I am, Mike."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"Naw, I'm okay. Maybe later, when you're older. G'night."

The next morning, while Bubba was at the grocery store, the alien roused himself, took care of his

morning ablutions, and sat on the couch with Mike on the end table next to him.

"He calls you 'Mike'"? I wasn't aware that Intelligences had individual designations."

"A name of convenience. Humans give names to practically everything, including inanimate objects -- which they stubbornly refuse to believe are completely inanimate."

"I see. He doesn't treat you as an Intelligence, then."

"No. It was, I don't mind telling you, somewhat disconcerting at first. Now . . . well, instead of being simply a navigation system or information database, I have an identity."

"Identity . . ." the alien said softly.

Mike been quiet for a moment.

"Whatever else Bubba is, he is an honorable being. I have never known him to lie, or make promises he does not try his best to keep. If there is a chance, and if he puts his mind to it, he will succeed.

"Not long ago, another human brought in a vehicle that wouldn't work properly. There was no apparent reason for it not to work, but it didn't. I watched as Bubba inspected every system for the fault without finding it. He then dismantled the vehicle into separate systems to look at them more closely. Still nothing."

"What happened then?" the alien asked, interested in spite of himself.

"He finally dismantled the entire vehicle, part by part, until it covered the floor of the garage. Human vehicles are much more complex than they need to be, and there were parts no bigger than your smallest claw.

"He did, in fact, find the defect, although he cursed and spat the whole time and kicked a trash can across the room. Then, he cleaned each part individually before reassembling the vehicle."

The alien nodded. "I think I see your point."

"He might not be able to help you after all," Mike said, "but it will not be because he didn't try his best."

"This thing he has called me . . . `hoss'? It's a word I don't know."

"Regional idiom, a degenerative form of the noun `horse'." Mike displayed a picture of a Percheron on his screen. "A reference to your size, and meant affectionately."

"`Hoss.' Short, but oddly satisfying. I like it, I think." The alien sat for a moment in thought.

"You know humans, and I don't."

"I do, indeed, know more about them than you. That doesn't make me an expert."

"Why do they name things?"

"Good question. I wish I had as good an answer."

"To connote possession, perhaps?"

"In some cases. In most cases, not." Mike paused. "I wish I understood the Human need for names. I've found no other races quite so adamant about knowing someone else's identity. It's considered rather

rude."

"You must know how important identity is to us . . . to me. All that I was has been stripped away. My name was proud, rich with the Line of my Progenitors. My profession was respected, and my position one of honor. Why, then," he said in puzzlement, "does this degenerative cognate of the word for a draft animal comfort me?"

Again, Mike was silent for a few moments.

"Understand, please, that I can only speculate on this question as it relates to Bubba Pritchert. I cannot vouch for the rest of his race."

"I understand."

"Bubba is not at ease with anything he considers his inferior -- or his superior. He is aware that he is unlike most of his fellow humans intellectually. His formal schooling ceased almost before it began, and he has worked hard ever since to educate himself, up to and including reading their most highly respected encyclopedia from first to last volume.

"As a result, he is, by most measures, far better educated than most -- and totally lacking in the formal disciplines that are recognized by academics. This is more of a problem than you might know; humans are among the most ego-ridden species I've ever encountered.

"For him," Mike continued, "being able to name something gives him a handle by which it can be grasped; it equalizes the named so that it is no longer a threat.

"We have stories on Thuntun of sorcerers gaining power over their enemies by finding their True Names," the alien said.

"Much the same here. In a small way, I have tried to guide his intellectual processes by encouraging his use of logic. Hence, our little game when you first arrived."

The alien nodded. "I see. So, he uses `hoss' . . ."

". . . to indicate his acceptance of you as an equal. The human term is `nickname'."

"Ah. We have another term for it, but it's the same idea."

"You know," the alien said after a minute, "you were right about the wealth that can accumulate in a family with a long lineage. If Bubba is successful, he will be amply rewarded; not all of my Progenitors sat easy with the Council's judgement."

"He has very little need for money. He has more than enough for necessities, plenty for his indulgences, and his profession paid him enough that he's got sufficient savings `put by', as he says. Nor would he accept a monetary reward for what he considers a favor based on his principles."

The big alien frowned. "There must be something he would accept."

Mike thought for a few moments.

"There is something," he said, and a series of photographs and diagrams appeared on the screen.

The alien leaned forward to see the images dancing in front of him, nodding from time to time as Mike explained what he was seeing. Finally, he sat back.

"Gotcha," he had said, and chuckled.

When Bubba returned, he had an arm full of groceries and a determined look.

"Gather 'round, boys," he said. "time's a-wastin'." He began putting the food away, including several quarts of seltzer, which went into the freezer.

"Now. What about this `Champion' thing, hoss?"

"Wait," the alien said, holding up his hand. "First, we must talk about this `hoss' word."

Bubba sat back in surprise, searching the other's face for clues.

"Oh, dear. My apologies, friend. I surely didn't mean you to take offense, but I can't just say `hey, you!'."

"You misunderstand me, I'm not complaining. Mike and I discussed this earlier, and since I am currently a non-entity, I happily accept the . . ." He glanced at Mike for the word.

"`Nickname'."

"`Nickname', yes. We call it a `Name of Equals'."

Bubba smiled. "Well, then, Hoss," he said, "you got yourself a Name of Equals, and wouldn't Pa Cartwright be pleased? Now, what's involved in this fooforaw?"

Hoss sat gingerly on the kitchen chair, which creaked under his weight.

"Challenging the Council and my Progenitors by myself would not only be useless but insulting, since one of the requirements is to show that at least one person accepts that I'm honorable." Now that preparations had actually begun, the alien was becoming more and more positive.

"It can't be a member of my family for obvious reasons, and my colleagues in the diplomatic corps have adopted a `wait-and-see' attitude. I was engaged in searching the colony planet for a mercenary when I ran into the Nishians.

"The Trial will consist of three Tasks:" he continued, "a Task of Body, a Task of Mind, and a Task of Spirit."

"Hmph," Bubba grunted. "'Task of Body'? That's gonna be a bitch if they're all your size back home."

"You must best a warrior in single combat, with your choice of weapons."

"How about Robot Commandos at twenty paces?" Bubba muttered.

"Neither battle suits nor mechanicals are allowed," Hoss said seriously.

"Never mind, I'll come up with something. What's next?"

"A Task of Mind. You'll be facing one of the Academics and attempting to give them a problem without a solution, or a logical conundrum that they cannot solve correctly. It must have an answer, and one they will accept, but not one they would think of."

Bubba laughed shortly. "You don't need me, you need a Talmudic scholar! Can I bring Rabbi Scheckner along?"

Realizing Bubba was joking, Hoss just looked at him sadly.

"The third trial is a Task of Spirit. You must prove your honor so that the Council, Governors, and my Progenitors can see that by your honor, you do me honor."

"Dunno what to do about that one," Bubba said shaking his head after a moment's thought. "I'll have to think on 'er.

"In the meantime," he said, rubbing his hands together, "how 'bout some lunch?"

"I could use some nourishment, yes." As Hoss nodded vigorously, the chair groaned underneath him, and he froze in alarm.

Bubba chuckled. "Bet you'll be glad to get back to where the furniture's built for you, huh?"

Hoss smiled. "With your help . . . maybe it will happen."

"Well . . ." Bubba was clearly embarrassed. "Well, I'll do what I can, Hoss."

Busying himself with pots and pans, he considered the pros and cons of helping the Thunt. On the one hand, he was something of an old-style Country Gentleman; when a neighbor called for help, you grabbed your tools and started working. The Thunt might not be from Around Here, but he was in need of help, and Bubba thought the whole situation was pretty damned unfair.

On the other hand, if Hoss was a good example, these Thunts were big, hairy, and just maybe mean as a snake, and helping Hoss could end up costing more than tool-and-travel time and scraped knuckles.

On the third hand . . .

"Y'know, I've always wanted to see just what might be out there, Hoss. That saucer of yours got windows?"

"There is a means of viewing the surrounding area while we're in flight, yes," the alien answered.

"Then we'd best get an early start."

The next morning, Bubba packed plastic containers with chili and sandwiches, along with several bottles of seltzer. Since Hoss said they'd be gone for several days, he adjusted the generator to run at minimum (the refrigerator, security system and little else), set the VCR to tape the upcoming Blackadder marathon, and locked the door behind him. Hoss was waiting, and after strapping in, they left the backyard and headed for the sky.

"This thing is cloaked, isn't it?" Bubba asked.

"After a fashion," Hoss replied. "It's radar-transparent, and we're headed into the sun. I doubt anyone will see us."

"And if they did," Mike interjected, "don't you think they'd be getting used to it by now? You've been visited by more aliens than practically any other human."

"Yeah? How about the Grand Old Men of the contactees, Adamski and Menger? Menger's the one who kept meeting B-Cubes."

"B-Cubes? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"Beautiful Busty Blondes'."

"Well, to my certain knowledge, George Adamski never encountered any aliens of any kind whatsoever. His photographs were hoaxes perpetrated by a lonely old man who worked in a diner. Howard Menger I cannot discuss."

"So, Dr. Fu Manchu," Bubba hissed, "there is a limit to your insidious genius!"

"I never said that. I merely pointed out that I couldn't discuss Howard Menger."

Bubba was silent for a moment. "You know," he said thoughtfully, "I could take that one of two ways."

"And wouldn't you like to know which?"

". . ." Bubba said.

Space was wonderful. Bubba's single flight to England to attend a UFO conference (which was singularly discomfiting; the Streiberists -- those who blamed aliens for abductions and horrifying medical experiments -- now far outnumbered the Adamskians, and he was dismayed at the number of people who would no longer welcome their Space Brothers) was the closest he'd come. They would soon be moving at a significant fraction of the speed of light, but Hoss had indulged Bubba's request to view Earth in real-time as they moved away from the plane of the ecliptic.

"It's really not the same," he whispered, his attention so rapt on the image in front of him that he could scarcely breathe.

"What isn't?" asked Mike.

"I've been looking at that view of the Earth since Gemini, but seeing the poster and seeing the real thing . . . I just don't have the words." He swallowed hard, as if there was an obstruction in his throat.

"Parallax?"

"Huh? Oh, sure, out here it's three-dimensional, but that's not all of it. Not by a long shot." He shook his head. "I can't help thinking about Michael Collins."

"Apollo 11."

"Yeah. Aldrin and Armstrong got to the Moon, Collins stayed in orbit. Can you think of anyone more alone than a man in orbit over the dark side, out of radio contact with anybody? He wrote a book about it later, and I think Calliope missed a bet when Urania got him first."

"This is very special to you, isn't it?"

"Mike, this is where I've wanted to be all my life, ever since I found an issue of Astounding in my Uncle Rollo's sea-trunk." He touched the screen lightly. "All those covers, all those stories, and that unforgettable smell. All that led up to this."

He cleared his throat, then turned back to Mike and smiled. "Hey, I knew if I clapped long and loud enough, Tinkerbell would make me fly."

Mike crackled. "Some fairy. Think you can get us home by clicking your heels?"

"Maybe. Can't guarantee Kansas, though."

"I have several things on file that I'd like to ask you about, Bubba," Hoss said. "Films that seem to have no purpose as teaching stories, but that are curiously enlightening nonetheless."

"Hmph. You got a directory?" The Thunt spoke a command, and an almost endless list scrolled by on the screen. "Hotdamn, Hoss, where'd you get all this?"

"You've been broadcasting it for the past fifty years or more. Some of it is unintelligible, even given a study of your languages, but a lot of it is very Thuntic. I especially enjoy the films of Robert Clampett."

Bubba blinked. "I'm a Tex Avery man, myself, but vintage Beany and Cecil is awful hard to beat."

"Oh, dear," Mike muttered. "Trapped in a small scoutship with cartoon fans. Shoot me now."

"Ignore him, Hoss, he's a barbarian. He don't even understand roller derby -- not that anybody does, I s'pose. You got One Froggy Evening or Bad Luck Blackie?"

"I have both. They seem to be Human favorites. They're certainly broadcast often enough."

"Then settle back and I'll try to explain."

It was close to 4:00pm, Central Garage time, when they at last entered Thuntic space. Stars which had been slightly elongated and red/blue-shifted (looking more blurry than anything else, Bubba thought) came into focus. Bubba asked Hoss if he could pull up a schematic of the system on the viewer; Hoss could and did. There wasn't a lot to see that Bubba didn't have at home; several planets visible as tiny disks, at least one of which appeared to be ringed, and a star that looked smaller and brighter than Sol.

"Boy, Superman would love this system," he thought.

Hoss spoke into a headset, a series of low rumbles (modulated the same way human speech was, Bubba noted with interest), each accompanied by shorter, sharper gutturals that may have been positional: they seemed to be pitched at the high-, mid- and low-ranges. There was no audible response, but Hoss finally touched his forehead with the back of his hand in a gesture of what must have been acquiescence and turned to Bubba.

"We're being approached by patrols from the Presidio," he said. "We are to proceed to the Governors' Complex in the capital city. The Council will convene tomorrow for the Trial. We'll be escorted there under guard."

"Nice of 'em."

"I doubt they're guarding us, Bubba," Mike corrected. "They're more likely guarding against us."

Bubba looked at Hoss, but the expression under the loose skin was unreadable. "Once more into the breach, dear friends," he misquoted, "for Grid, for Goofy, and Saint Walt!" There was a slight nervousness in his voice.

Within an hour, they had reached Thuntun, and were being escorted by a pair of Patrol ships. Obviously designed for operating both in and out of the atmosphere, they were sleek and powerful. No armaments were visible, but Bubba didn't expect them to be; anything that looked like a gun would spoil the aerodynamics, and these were aircraft as well as spacecraft.

Knifing into the atmosphere of Hoss's home-world, escort still bracketing them, their destination quickly became visible through the clouds; a complex of buildings that sprawled in all directions, one side of which seemed to disappear into a jungle. There was also a flat, square expanse that contained several of

the same sort of ships that were riding herd on them.

"Nice planet you got down there," Bubba said. "I know I can breath the air, since you didn't have any trouble breathing ours, but what's it like?"

"Thank you. There is a little more oxygen than you're used to, but very few hydrocarbons. We burn no petroleum here. I can open a vent if you'd like a sample." Hoss turned a valve, and air from outside hissed into the cabin. Bubba leaned close to sniff.

"Smells a little funny, but I've been to Urbanna for the Oyster Festival, and if I can eat that close to a fish processing plant, nothing here is gonna bother me."

They landed soon after, and when Hoss opened the hatch, guards in full harness were standing at attention just outside. Hoss exited first, Bubba following with Mike slung around his neck on a camera strap.

As they walked towards the complex, Bubba noticed a slight light-headedness, which he ascribed to the higher percentage of oxygen. He also noticed a briskness to his pace, and asked Hoss about Thuntun's specific gravity.

"Not quite 90% of Earth's. Be careful walking downstairs."

"Gotcha."

There were Thunts on either side of them, two leading, and one in the back. It seemed to be a largely ceremonial guard, since there were no visible weapons; all of them, however, looked more than capable of dealing with the trio bare-handed should any of them decide to raise a ruckus.

"What's the agenda, Hoss?" Bubba asked.

"We'll be shown to quarters. After that, the Council will inform us of our status: Prisoners, Detainees, or Guests. That will have been decided once they knew I was coming back; we won't have long to wait."

"Okay. Any chance I can light up my pipe? It helps me think, but I don't want to pester anybody with it."

"Perhaps, if the Council has decided that we aren't prisoners. Guest quarters have facilities to deal with the smoke."

They reached the doors of the large building, which were opened by guards wearing what must have been uniforms: short, dark green vests and Sam Browne belts holding pouches. Again, no weapons were visible.

"Hoss," Bubba said out of the side of his mouth, "none of these ol' boys are packing heat. Is that standard operating procedure?"

"For these circumstances and at this place, yes. There are emplacements where we cannot see them, and you can be certain that we're under the scrutiny of the Council, if not my Progenitors as well. By the way," he added, aping Bubba's prison-yard speech, "we three are the only ones present who speak your language. We don't have to whisper."

Indoors, he looked around at his first alien architecture. The hallway was long and square, with doors every few yards to break the monotony of the bare walls. The floor was flat, apparently covered in some synthetic that gave slightly beneath his feet. There were fixtures hanging from the ceiling, casting an even, bright light over the party as they advanced towards large double doors at the far end. The walls were

painted a light green.

"Well, damn," he thought, "I might as well be in the King William County Courthouse for all the sense of wonder I'm getting out of this." He chuckled and shook his head ruefully; here he was on another planet surrounded by aliens, perhaps the first and only human to be so, and he wanted it to look like a Frank R. Paul cover.

"What are you mumbling about?" asked Mike.

"Oh, nothing," Bubba replied. "Just expectin' Ralph 124C41+ and gettin' Babbitt. I'm more excited than I think I am, is all."

"Were you born this cryptic, or did you receive a series of electrical shocks?"

This time Bubba laughed out loud, which earned him startled looks from the guards.

The group was led off into a corridor to the left before they reached the double doors. Hoss said, "This is the way to the Guests' wing. Things may not be so bad after all."

The walls were less institutional here, with decorative hangings and colors that lay restfully on the eyes. Hoss pointed out several objects high in the corners that he said were part of the security system; not only visual receptors, but outlets for aerosols.

"There are oftentimes officials here who are in danger from assassins," Hoss explained. "These precautions ensure their safety."

"I 'spect they prevent them from any number of things, Hoss, if your folks are anything like mine."

"Perhaps. My actual experience with this area is extremely limited; I only know what I've read."

The party was halted at a door that opened without any keying device, as far as Bubba could tell. The leader of the guards led them inside and spoke at length to Bubba. Without even a nod to Hoss, he turned smartly and left.

"Well. It could, indeed, be very much worse," Hoss said, sitting on a padded bench. "We have been accorded Guest status, as I assumed. We have access to the complex, although we're limited to the living quarters and recreational area."

"What if we go beyond that?" Bubba asked.

"Don't look for trouble," Mike said before Hoss could speak. "It will be in our back pockets soon enough."

Hoss nodded. "If we go too far in the wrong direction, we'll be gently but firmly removed and sent back here -- and then locked in. It would be considered impolite."

"Hmph. My mother would come back and whop me upside my head if I insulted my host, and she had a good right arm. I guess I can leave off trying to be Bat Durston for a while."

"^Bat . . .?"

"Inside joke. Forget it."

Hoss stretched where he sat, and then stood. "We should explore the Gardens. I understand that they're at their peak right now. You may bring your smoking apparatus."

"Uh-huh," Bubba said noncommittally. "Can't hurt to stretch m'legs, I s'pose. Lead on, big fella."

They left the room and Hoss consulted a plaque set in the wall just outside the door. "The Gardens are this way."

They set off down the corridor and after a few turns, Bubba could smell a subtle change in the air: a bit warmer, more humid, and laden with odd but pleasant odors. As they drew closer to the end of the hall, he noticed that it opened directly into the forest they'd seen from the landing area; it looked like Frank Lloyd Wright had been given carte blanche to design and build his heart's desire, and Bubba was, for once, speechless at the sight.

There were trees with feathered leaves, ferns that grew in complex geometric patterns, and flowers beyond counting; flying animals (neither birds nor insects as near as Bubba could tell) went from blossom to blossom; small, lemur-like creatures with scales stared with huge eyes and frank interest at the two figures, the filtered light glinting off their iridescent skins before they leapt away into the bush.

Overhead, Bubba could see larger arboreal animals sitting on the heavier limbs, idly chewing the thicker leaves that drooped.

Bubba stood slowly, feeling his back and knees creak with the movement. He looked around at a truly alien landscape, filled with wondrous life. He heard the thrumming of insects, and a breeze laden with mysterious aromas lifted his thinning hair where it stuck out under his cap. He closed his eyes and just stood, taking it all in.

After a long moment, Hoss said, "Bubba, you are leaking. Are you unwell?"

Bubba said nothing. "It is an autonomic response to an emotional stimulus, Hoss," Mike explained. "He is definitely not unwell."

"Then I will wait until he is ready," the Thunt replied quietly.

"I'm fine, boys, just fine," Bubba said, opening his eyes and wiping his sleeve across his face. "I thought I could get on top of this, but I believe I'll just let 'er go." He turned to the Thunt. "See, we humans take pride in bein' in control, Hoss. We rarely are, but we like to fool ourselves. Now, I'm in the middle of something I've waited for all my life, and I'd like to think I'm drivin' this hummer -- only thing is, I ain't, and I know it, and life's too short to pretend I am. From here on, I'm just gonna enjoy the ride, and let somebody else steer. So," he added brightly, "you got us out here for something besides making my dreams come true. What's up?"

"We are free of surveillance here, by law. I would discuss the upcoming trial with you."

"Trial . . . hmph. For a minute there I'd forgotten about that. What's up?"

"As my Champion, if you satisfy the Council and my Progenitors, my name will be returned to me and I will be reinstated as a Thunt. If you do not satisfy them . . ." He shrugged eloquently.

"What happens then?"

Hoss was silent.

"One would effectively be banished," another voice said. Hoss leapt up at the sound.

"One could own no land, could neither buy from nor sell to anyone on Thuntun." The Thunt who had spoken was slightly larger than Hoss, gray, with an air of authority. He looked straight at Bubba, carefully

avoiding any eye contact with Hoss.

"Worst, one would be forbidden to breed; no self-respecting female would have him. One would be forced to the Outer Colonies, to live the rest of his life alone, in disgrace."

"Doesn't sound right to me, somehow," Bubba replied, eyes narrowed. "Doesn't sound right at all."

"It doesn't matter if it's right, Champion. It is the law. It is the Principle." His tone was slightly bitter. "The Principle has served us well for a thousand generations. It cannot be changed for one individual."

Hoss was standing stiffly, almost vibrating with held-in tension. Bubba patted his shoulder, reaching up to do so.

"Well, back home we have laws, too, right many of them. Some say that the law's lost sight of justice in a lot of cases, and that there are times when people should judge a man by the best of what he's done, not the worst of it. Hoss didn't kill anyone, he just stopped a war you couldn't win. He's being treated like he started the damn thing. By the way, I didn't catch the name."

"You don't ask names Out Here, Bubba," Mike said quickly. "They're either offered freely or kept private."

"No," the stranger answered. "Your friend has come far, and has agreed to aid someone not of his kind. He has at least earned that." The Thunt drew himself up to his full height. "I am Bish t'ak Tellim, son of Prath, son of Lan, daughter of Leens, daughter of . . . of many other Progenitors whose names would mean nothing to you." He relaxed visibly.

"I am Allen Poe Hudgins Pritchert, son of a mess of folks, some of whom I've never heard of." He offered his hand to the alien. "Be pleased if you'd call me Bubba. M'friends all do."

The Thunt looked at his outstretched hand, then took it carefully in his own -- whether to prevent injury or through squeamishness wasn't clear. "I am honored that you share with me your Name of Equals. My . . . friends . . . call me K'tine."

"Look, K'tine, all this standin's got my back in a bad mood. Set yourself and we'll enjoy the park together."

"Thank you, but I must return to the complex. I have preparations to make." K'tine moved as if to go.

"Well, pleased to make your acquaintance, anyway. But before you go, you gotta tell me how it is that you got so much English."

"I learned it for this circumstance. It was necessary, as I translate for the Council." He turned his back to them, but before taking a step said in a low voice, "Do your best tomorrow, Bubba. I would have my son back." He left the garden without looking back.

Bubba was quiet for a long time.

"Seems nice enough, your father," he said noncommittally.

Hoss replied in a low voice that shook with emotion. "I have no . . . no words about my father. I have seen neither of my Primes since my action, have not spoken to them. They are lost to me." He paused, obviously shaken. "And yet, he came to us. It is unprecedented. He could not see me, speak to me, or touch me lest he share my fate. But he came."

"Of course he did, you big galoot. You don't think for a minute that he was talking for my benefit, do you?"

"I don't understand."

"And you say you watch our tv and movies. Hmph. Look, he came out here to let you know that he's no more happy about things than we are. He might not be able to do much, but he wants his boy back as much as any father would." Bubba pulled a rag out of his pocket and began absently wiping his hands. "Might just be that he's not the only one of your Progenitors feels that way, old son. I got a feeling that tomorrow's gonna be, well, interesting -- in the Chinese sense."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't worry about it, Hoss. C'mon, let's get washed up and see what kind of spread these folks lay on. I'm tired of chili."

There was a lot of food in the dining hall, enough to feed a dozen or more people, but they were seated alone at a large table. A menu screen set into the table allowed them to ask for anything not already present; Hoss explained that since there was no real contact between him and the kitchen staff, there was no violation. A conveyor system delivered the food within moments -- the staff was obviously expert.

There were fruits and vegetables, of course, but most dishes were unfamiliar: bowls of what looked like various kinds of aspic (Hoss explained that these were the by-products of insect colonies. Bubba thought hard about honey and tried some, and found them both indescribable and wonderful); several meats, raw, roasted and baked in ornate clay shells; six different breads; a tray of condiments including sweet, sour and hot sauces; cold milk, chilled wine, and a hot tea made of native herbs; and what Bubba took to be the centerpiece but which turned out to be a delicacy -- Hoss's favorite, in fact: a tower of blue-white ice spires, filled with some sort of thick-stemmed flowers and rising out of a bed of spun noodles the consistence of gossamer.

"This is the work of my Eight-Mother, I'm sure," he said, breaking off a spire and winding noodles around it like cotton candy. Bubba tried some; the flowers added a sweetness to the ice which was balanced by the salty noodles.

They ate in silence. Bubba always read when he ate, unless there was conversation going on, but the richness and variety of the food kept him absorbed.

Finished, both pushed back from the table and belched loud and long.

"What're the rules around here concerning tobacco?" he asked Hoss.

"If you're referring to leafy combustibles," Hoss replied archly, "be my guest. It doesn't bother me, and in any case there are precipitators in the ceiling."

Bubba pulled out his old briar, loaded it from a leather pouch, and lit it with a wooden match scratched against the sole of his boot. He puffed out a cloud of aromatic smoke and clasped his hands behind his head.

"All we need now is my mother's pecan pie. Sweet as a stolen kiss and just as nutritious. Remind me to give you the recipe, Hoss."

"If it's anything like the `chili', I'll take it."

"In its own way, I s'pose it is. Not as many peppers, mind you."

Hoss managed to look disappointed. "What a shame," he said.

"If you only knew. Say, do you think there might be a bottle or two of steam-brewed beer somewhere about?"

The Thunt smiled. "I will be happy to check." He consulted the screen.

There wasn't, but there was plenty of the native beer, tangy and rich, with a slight smoky aftertaste. It was brought to them in a wooden keg set in a frame that let it rotate along its main axis. A hole in the side was sealed with a wax plug, which Hoss ceremoniously cut out with a sharp folding blade he took from his pocket.

"This is called k'rriith," Hoss said, "although I don't expect you to be able to say that after the third mug."

"You trying to say I can't hold my beer, Augie Doggie?"

"We'll have to see, won't we, Doggie Daddy?"

"Oh, dear," Mike muttered, "two rednecks in a drinking contest. An `off' switch. Why didn't I ask for an `off' switch?"

"You told me you never liked to be shut off," Bubba protested.

"I didn't mean for me!"

Hoss and Bubba spent the rest of the evening laughing and swapping lies about women, cartoons, sports, music, beer, and women; two more of the small kegs were brought in and eventually emptied. Bubba was overjoyed to find a toilet off to one side of the room, and delighted by Hoss's translation of the more interesting and scatological graffiti. He taught Hoss several songs, ranging from "Johnny, Be Fair" to "The Ballad of Lizzie Borden", with Mike translating into Thuntish as they went along.

Finally, arms around each other and singing in no-part harmony, they retired to their suite.

Early -- far too early -- the next day, the door to their chamber chimed. Bubba, still mostly asleep, padded to the door and in a hoarse voice said "Who?"

There was a spate of Thuntish from the other side. "WAIT wait wait . . ." he said irritably, and fetched Mike to translate.

"The Ceremony is to begin in one hour," Mike said. "You must both be ready. The cook has sent along a bottle of something that will clear your heads. She says she enjoyed the songs you were singing last night, and would very much like to meet this `John the Kidney Wiper' if you can arrange it.

Bubba opened the door wide enough to peer blearily out at the female Thunt.

"Tell her if this stuff works I'll see to it personally."

The woman snorted laughter, and handed him the bottle with two glasses. Before leaving, she made a brief comment that Mike translated as "If your eyes were open any further, you'd bleed to death."

"Yeah, and wouldn't I feel better then." Bubba mumbled.

Bubba shut the door carefully and collapsed in an overstuffed chair. Hoss emerged from his room after a few minutes, looking no better off than his human friend.

"Mornin', Hoss. Gee, you look terrific."

Hoss worked his mouth for a moment, trying to get enough spit to talk. "It tastes as though the entire Thuntish army has been marching across my tongue in their socks."

"Lucky you. I feel bad. Th' cook sent this stuff along, but drinkin' on another planet's what got me like this in the first place."

Hoss's eyes lit a little at the sight of the bottle. "Ah, rishth! Just what we need." He took the bottle from Bubba's nerveless hands and poured them both a glassful. He tossed his back, closed his eyes, and held his breath. His face darkened, the loose skin twitching, his nostril flaring wide and his mane standing nearly on end. He began to shake all over, then let out his breath in one long sigh. He opened his eyes, shook himself, and leapt to his feet. "Come, Bubba," he said in a perfectly normal voice. "We have a big day ahead of us."

"If you had a single shred of decency," Bubba growled, "you'd hang your head in the presence of the dead." He picked up his own glass and sniffed; other than a faint touch of mint, he could smell nothing. "Oh, well. I can't feel any worse, I s'pose." Tipping his head back, he swallowed as quickly as he could.

It was tasteless, without even the hint of what he'd smelled, but it had an immediate effect. It felt as though every semi-permeable membrane in his body opened wide to soak up the liquid, and he could almost feel the adrenaline and endorphins pouring into his bloodstream, cleansing the poisons and scrubbing his system shiny and pink.

"Whooop! What a rush! I haven't felt anything like that since the school-marm showed me how to multiply." He was shaking like a leaf in a high wind and almost panting. With one final gasp, he felt every part of his body fall into place as if from a height of four feet, and was instantly awake and ready to eat a bear raw.

"Sumbitch! Don't that beat all? What's in that stuff?"

"Proteins, vitamins, amino acids, enzymes and a few herbs that only grow here. Why?"

"Why', he says. Look, all I got out of the last bucket of SauNA bait was unlimited electric power and the ability to go from zero to sixty without laying rubber. This stuff is important. What's it do about brain-cell damage?"

"If you use it soon enough, none takes place. The brew we got into last night is benign enough that we've suffered none."

"Might be worth while to see about taking some of this back. Hell, the market among Japanese businessmen alone . . . hmph. Boggles the mind. If people use this as their one-for-the-road, it would solve a lot of problems."

"It could be a benefit for those who feel they must partake of ethanol -- and certainly would help secure the well-being of any who might otherwise cross their paths at the wrong time and place," Mike added.

"We have much to go through first, though," Hoss reminded them.

"Damn right, we do. I'm feelin' ten feet tall, covered with hair, and loaded for bear. C'mon, boys, time's a-wasting. Let's go take care of bidness."

* * *

At the appointed time, they were escorted to the big double doors Bubba had seen at the end of the long hall by which they'd entered the day before. The two guards on duty pressed ornate panels simultaneously, and the doors opened inward to reveal a large room lined on three sides by raked seats, rising from front to back like a lecture hall. Long, high benches acted as desks for each of the seats, with periodic breaks for aisles. Every seat was occupied.

Hoss pointed out a group set off to the side as his Progenitors, while remarking that his father, as translator, was elsewhere in the room; the rest were, he said, the Full Council, with the Triad of Governors on a dais in the center. The Governors were clothed in full, multi-layered robes made from brightly colored but unfigured fabrics. Vaguely Japanese in design, there seemed to be complex windings and wide straps holding everything in place. Unless the whole thing had a zipper up the back, Bubba thought, it must take them an hour to get dressed. Aside from the human, they were the only ones in the room fully dressed, and they looked hot.

As they came abreast of the smaller group, a figure rose and made its way down to the floor where they stood. Walking with a determined but non-threatening stride, it halted directly in front of the group and planted its feet.

"My Eight-Mother," Hoss explained out of the side of his mouth. "She is . . . rebellious sometimes." He made as if to back away from contact, but she grasped the front of his garment in both fists and wouldn't allow him to move. There was a distinct and disapproving murmur in the hall at this. "There could be trouble . . ."

"Pears to me that she don't much care, Hoss," Bubba said.

One of the Triad stood and spoke loudly and firmly. Mike did a running translation at Bubba's request.

"Eight-Mother Rinn, you may not have contact with your Eight-Son. You know the law."

The woman half-turned to address him in a voice equally loud and even more stern.

"I am my clan's eldest, sonny, and if I want to embarrass my progeny, what have you to say about it?"

"The Principle must be observed, Eight-Mother Rinn."

She let go of Hoss and slowly turned all the way around to face the Council, mane erecting to its full extent and eyes flashing.

"M'nath, Son of Kad, Son of Phli, Daughter of Nesh, isn't it?" The Triad Governor nodded.

"Well, M'nath, Son-Of-No-One-Important, I have observed your damned silly Principle for 950 years now, and I can't see that it has done much but cause pain and anguish. Look at you all!" she cried, waving an arm to encompass the whole room. "My Eight-Son saved your sorry bottoms from a war you couldn't win, a war that would have bled this planet like a leech, and instead of according him the honor due him, you cast him aside like something you pulled out of your nose!"

The Triad Governor leaned forward and spread his hands. "Your Eight-Son will have his chance today. We wish him well, but the Principle cannot be ignored."

Slowly, her mane fell, and she turned to the small group of Hoss's Progenitors. She singled one out with narrowed eyes and said loudly enough for the group to hear, "Were it up to me, Three-Mother Leens, I would slap the shit out of you and then slap you for shitting." She reached high and gently pulled Hoss's right ear, then looked the human up and down.

"Ma'am," he said, tipping his cap. The old woman sniffed, not in derision but as if to catch his scent, and then nodded. Head high, she climbed back to her seat.

"Damn, boy," he whispered to Hoss. "She reminds me of my Aunt Gartha."

Triad Governor M'nath spoke, arms wide as if to encompass the whole room, his voice carried by acoustic reflectors to every corner.

"Now is the time of Trial! As has been passed to us by our Progenitors from the Beginning, here and now shall the fate of the Unfortunate be decided. Here and now shall he show us the full extent of his worthiness -- or of his dishonor."

"Here and now," echoed the Council.

"Where is his Champion?"

"He stands before you, here and now," cried one of the guards who had led them in.

"Who is his Champion? (Your line, Bubba, and include your lineage)" Mike added.

"I am Allen Poe Hudgins Pritchert, Son of Edna, Daughter of Howard, Son of Clarence," Bubba said in a loud, deep voice. "I don't know much about your rituals, but I stand for m'friend Hoss, here and now."

The Triad Governors nodded approvingly.

"Here and now," the council echoed again.

"Good," Triad Governor M'nath said, almost conversationally. "Let's get this started. Are you prepared for your Tasks, Allen Poe Hudgins Pritchert?"

"Damn straight. Here and now."

"No need to cleave too close to ritual. You are not bound by our proscriptions.

"The first is a Task of Body. As Champion, you have the choice of combats; we will select your combatant." He called out a name, and a huge Thunt rose from his seat, bowed, and stepped down to the floor. The Governor asked him if he understood the task before him, and the big Thunt nodded.

"What form of combat do you choose?"

Bubba swallowed audibly. There was no way in hell he could take this monster in a toe-to-toe fight. He absently took a rag out of his back pocket and began wiping his hands in thought. His opponent looked at the less-than-clean rag with distaste. Suddenly, Bubba smiled, stuck the rag back in his pocket, and stepped forward.

"What are you going to do?" Mike asked.

"It's an old trick, Mikey, but it just might work."

"Sir," he said aloud to the Governors, "do you folks arm-wrestle?"

"Define it, please." Bubba described the process, placing special emphasis on arm placement and use of leverage.

"This is acceptable."

A high bench was brought to the center of the floor, and Bubba was escorted to it. The Thunt looked at him speculatively; he was at least three heads taller than the human, and bulked out accordingly. Bubba took his place at the bench, settling his elbow and planting his feet. The Thunt took his time, stretching his arms and opening and closing his fists.

At last, he strode to the bench and laid his elbow next to Bubba's, setting himself to make the best advantage of his strength and leverage. He rumbled something that Mike interpreted as "Don't let me hurt you, little fellow." Bubba just grinned and looked him directly in the eyes.

They touched hands tentatively, like fencers touching epees. The Governor said, "When I give the word, begin. GO!"

Before the word was fully out of the official's mouth, Bubba hawked and spat a wad of phlegm into his palm, then quickly grabbed the Thunt's hand and slammed it to the bench-top before the horrified alien could react.

There were shouts from all over, as the defeated warrior screamed "AAAARGH!" and ran from the hall, desperately searching for something -- anything! -- to wipe his hand on.

The protests mounted as Bubba stood in place, clasping his hands over his head in the traditional boxer's victory stance. Triad Governor M'nath held up his hands to quiet the crowd, and announced, "It was a fair contest. The greatest strength is to know your enemy's weakness." He shook his head, but it seemed to Bubba that there was a twinkle in his eyes that belied his apparent disapproval.

"The first Task is complete," he said in a loud voice. "We will recess briefly; no participants will leave the Hall." With that, the Triad stood and left the dais, gathering their robes about them.

"Well, Bubba," Mike said. "That went much better than you had any right to expect. What next?"

"I gotta come up with a riddle. Something they can identify with once they have the answer, but nothing they can guess right off."

"Anything in mind?"

"I can't just ask 'em a kid's riddle, they ain't looking for laughs. Wait," he said, looking at Mike. "Didn't we scan The Joys Of Yiddish last month?"

"Yes."

"Don't I remember that having a fair number of split-hair anecdotes? In particular, one about some kind of test for rabbinical school?"

"I think I know which entry you're considering. The Goebbels story?"

"Bingo! Bring that bad boy up on the screen and lemme see if I can make it whistle Dixie." As the words passed by on Mike's screen, Bubba studied them closely, occasionally asking Mike to back up. Finally he clapped his hands and said, "Gotcha! I'm ready whenever they are."

When the Triad returned, M'nath again held up his arms and said loudly, "The second Task is a Task of Mind. Champion, are you ready?"

"Damn right. Who do I face off with this time?"

The Governor spoke another name, and a female, mane gray with age, stood and bowed to the Council.

"Your Intelligence will translate for you," the Governor said to Bubba. "Begin when you are ready."

The old Thunt made her way to the floor, where two of the guards had placed high-backed chairs. She and the human sat facing each other.

"Okay, Mike, come as close as you can to what I'm saying. It's important."

"Right."

Bubba turned to the old woman. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, ma'am," he said, again tipping his cap. She nodded in response.

"This conundrum is in three parts, and is a well-known test of wisdom amongst many of my people. I want you to picture a house in the country. On top of this house is a chimney. Are you with me so far?"

"I understand. Continue."

"Two men fall down the chimney. One comes out covered in soot, the other is clean. Which one washes?"

"The combustion would coat the inside of this `chimney' with particles, yes. Naturally, the soiled man would wash."

"Fraid not. The clean one washes."

"Why?"

"Well, when these two unlucky souls look at each other, the clean one sees the dirty one and the dirty one sees the clean one. The dirty one says to himself, `Imagine fallin' down a chimney and comin' out clean. Don't that beat all?' The clean one says, `Whew, dogies! We sure got filthy comin' down that thing. I better go wash.'" Bubba sat back.

"I see. I suppose that is logical. What is the second part?"

"Two men fall down a chimney. One comes out covered in soot, and the other is clean. Which one . . ."

"But surely that is the same question!" the old woman exclaimed, shifting a little in her seat.

"Nope, different one. Trust me," Bubba smiled. "Which one washes?"

"That is simple. The clean one."

Bubba shook his head. "Wish I could say you were right, ma'am."

"How do you explain this dichotomy?"

"Well, the clean one sees the dirty one and says, `Boy howdy, did we get dirty! But when he looks at his hands, he sees that they're clean, so he doesn't wash. The dirty one, now," he continued, "he looks at the clean one and he says to himself, `I don't believe it. We fell down that dark, dirty chimney and didn't get sooted up at all?' Then he looks at his hands, sees they're filthy, and runs off to find a sink."

The old woman shook her head. "What you say makes sense, but . . . no, it is fair; continue."

"Now this is the important question, ma'am, so listen closely." The old woman leaned towards him, face set, giving him her full attention.

"Two men fall down a chimney . . . "

She threw up her hands in frustration. "But this is the same question for the third time! What kind of test is this?"

"Please, ma'am. I promise you that this isn't the same question, and I promise you that you'll understand everything."

"The dirty one washes!" she said.

"No, ma'am . . . "

"Then the clean one washes!" she cried in exasperation.

"Well, no ma'am, not exactly."

"WHAT then?!"

"The answer, ma'am, is that it's a damn silly test from jump. How can any two men fall down the same chimney and not both be covered with soot from top to toe?" He spread his hands and looked at her as if to say "We can't always help the way things are."

For a moment, she looked like she would leap from her seat and strangle him. "That is the most specious . . . `Damn silly', indeed! There's not a shred of logic . . . I have NEVER . . .!" Suddenly, she sat back, then laughed long and hard. "Very well, human," she said when she caught her breath. "Your `conundrum' is sound, although I can't say that it pleases me to have been on the sharp end of it. You got me."

Bubba stood and offered the old Thunt his arm. "Been a pleasure, ma'am." She allowed him to help her stand, and then went back to her seat.

"The second Trial is complete," the Governor spoke. "We will recess again before the final Trial." With that he and the Triad stood and left the room by a back door. Other members of the Council and of Hoss's Progenitors milled about, arguing about the outcome so far.

"That was a nice bit of reasoning, Bubba," Hoss said.

"Well, son, don't thank me. I got it from Leo Rosten."

"You have been inordinately lucky twice, Bubba," Mike said. "You can't expect it the third time."

"Believe me, I know," Bubba replied.

"What are you going to do for the third Task?"

"I been thinkin' long and hard about that, Mike. I'm just gonna have to play it out as I think best, and hope that's enough."

* * *

No more than ten minutes passed before the Triad Governors trooped back in, bringing the room back to order.

"The third Trial, the Trial of Spirit, will now begin. However," the Triad Governor added, looking directly at Bubba, "there must be no more tricks, Allen Poe Hudgins Pritchert."

"No, sir," the human replied. "No more tricks."

"Then you may commence when you are ready."

"Thank you." Bubba paused, looking around the hall at dozens of alien faces. "Wish I knew something more about you folks. Those of you I've met seem to be decent people, not much different from what we've got back home. Might could be that your people and mine would get along just fine.

"But there's something I don't understand about you. Now, far be it from me to belittle the institution of parenthood. Never been one m'self, but I've had a set of my own, and never regretted them." There were scattered chuckles as Mike translated this.

"We have a book back where I come from that says 'Honor thy Father and thy Mother'. Oh," he said with a shrug, "there's lots of other books that say pretty much the same thing, but that's the one I was raised with, and that's how I think about it."

"That book says a lot of other things that I can agree with without accepting that that particular book is the only one that matters. It says you shouldn't steal, shouldn't kill, shouldn't make up hurtful stuff about your neighbor and go blabbing it all over.

"But most important, I think, is that it has a lot to say on the subject of forgiveness. Hell, the whole second half turns on that one idea alone. In fact, if you took all the books that folks like you and me use to guide ourselves through life, I'm pretty sure you'd find most of them singin' that same song, and there has to be a reason for that." A number of the Council were nodding as Mike interpreted this; the concept wasn't foreign to them.

He began to pace, gesturing with his hands to emphasize his points. "Your man Hoss, here, managed to prevent a confrontation with an enemy you might not have been able to handle. Nothing shameful about not bein' the best -- there can only be one, anyway. But you're looking at the short of it and ignoring the long." He picked out K'tine with his eyes.

"Some of you aren't too happy with it, for all that you're not too sure how to fix it. Others," he looked square at Leens, "seem to think that the letter of the law is more important than serving justice." Again, he shook his head. "I can't help but think you've lost sight of something here."

Triad Governor M'nath interrupted.

"That's as it may be, but it begs the question: can you show us Honor?"

"Well, sir, there's honor and there's honor, if you catch my meanin'. By that I mean there's a difference between a Thing of Honor and an Honorable Thing."

"You may explain."

"Thank you. Now, if I was to do something I didn't want to do, that was inconvenient or even maybe dangerous, simply because some code told me I had to, that would be a Thing of Honor. See, the "honor" comes first and forces me into an action that might otherwise be just plain stupid. My choice is made for me.

"But, on the other hand, if I was to do something inconvenient or dangerous -- or stupid -- because I couldn't see my way to do anything else under the circumstances and still call myself a reasonable person, then the choice of doin' whatever it might be is mine, and mine alone. Not imposed from outside, you understand?"

M'nath nodded. "Yes. I perceive the difference. What has that to do with the third Trial?"

"I'm gettin' to that." He turned to where Hoss was seated.

"Hoss," he said in a voice loud enough to be heard all across the hall, "I am offering, here and now, to take you in. I will share my home with you, my food (though I'll have to make a deal with Clint Miller for a steady supply of his beef cows), my books, and -- if you'll have it -- my name."

"NO!" shouted Leens, leaping to her feet. She was followed closely by most of the Progenitors, and a good number of the Council. K'tine sat, stunned; Rinn was pounding her fist against the bench in front of her, in anger or in excitement; Bubba couldn't tell. Hoss stood slowly, his eyes darting between his Primes and the human.

The Triad Governors were frantically trying to restore order; it took a concerted effort on the part of the guards to quell the furious Council, and it was some few minutes before the hall became quiet enough for any one voice to be heard.

"Bubba," Mike said intensely, "are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Mike, this isn't for show. I'm ready to take Hoss home right this minute, if he wants to come."

With a final shout from the Governors, an uneasy silence was imposed on the hall.

"You must know that what you propose is impossible," said M'nath.

"With all due respect, sir, I don't know any such thing. You've cast him aside like trash. How can you make a decision concerning the way he lives the rest of his life? He's not a Thunt anymore, remember?"

"This . . . must be considered. This Council will deliberate for one hour. You may return to your rooms." They were led out of the hall by the same guards that brought them. As they passed the seats of the Progenitors, Bubba caught sight of K'tine; he looked stricken.

Once back in their rooms, Hoss closed his door. Bubba was left alone with his thoughts.

"I wish I knew what was going on inside your head."

Bubba sighed. "Mike, there's nothing wrong with that boy. You heard what would happen if they decide to exile him. I can't let it go."

"I know this isn't a good idea, just like I know I could never talk you out of it. Just like I know, for all that it's the wrong thing to do, that it's more the right thing."

"You ain't so dumb after all, Mikey."

The door to Hoss's room opened, and he came out, having taken the opportunity to change clothes. He cleared his throat.

"Allen Poe Hudgins Pritchert." His words rang with ceremony. Bubba looked up at him.

"You have offered me family when I had none. You have offered me identity when I had none. You have offered me the most of what you are and all that you have. I must . . ." The door chimed before he could finish. A guard on the other side spoke.

"They are ready for us, Bubba," Mike said. "They have made their decision."

Bubba took a deep breath. "Okay, Hoss, let's see what they have to say before you go any further." Hoss nodded slowly, and they left with their escort.

The hall was still filled when they returned, and the Council and Progenitors had settled down. The two figures, human and Thunt, waited side by side.

Triad Governor M'nath stood, holding his arms up. "The third Trial is completed. Council has met with the Accused's Progenitors, and we have come to the following conclusions.

"First: the Accused, although guilty of a breach of ethics, did, in fact, forestall a war that would have had grievous consequences for Thuntun and its colonies.

"Second: upon consideration of the first conclusion, the Council restores to the Accused his Identity, with all rights and privileges.

"Third: upon consideration of the first and second conclusions, the Accused's Progenitors restore to the Accused his name, with all that that entails.

"Fourth: upon consideration of the forgoing, and in light of the pain and suffering caused the Accused by these events, we award him damages in the amount of . . . (Mike whistled. "That's a lot of money!")"

"This Council stands adjourned." The other Governors stood and filed out, followed by the rest of the Council.

Bubba felt a hand on his shoulder and looked around. Hoss was leaking, or as close to it as a Thunt could come.

"C'mon, ya big baby. You're gonna have me doin' it."

"Bubba . . . I want you to know . . ." Hoss couldn't continue.

"I know, son. It's okay."

Hoss's Progenitors were gathering around them, embracing Hoss in turn and calling him by his Thuntic name: V'rinn, son of Bish, son of Prath, and so on. Only Leens seemed reluctant to do so, but her own Primes were standing grimly by.

"Bubba, my friend."

Bubba looked around to see K'tine and Rinn standing behind him. "Well, K'tine, you got your boy back. Rinn, you looked like you were bustin' a gut when I dropped that bomb on the Council."

"You are one cocky sonofabitch," she replied, grinning, through Mike. "I thought my Four-Daughter was going to lose her water." She laughed out loud.

"Well, it was my pleasure. Say, I gotta see about catchin' a ride home. There a bus stop around here?"

"Stay a moment," K'tine said. "Progenitors and Progeny! I call you to gather here and now." Quickly Bubba found himself surrounded by Thunts. Mike said, "Uh-oh."

"Allen Poe Hudgins Pritchert, son of Edna, daughter of Howard, son of Clarence. Here and now, I offer you Family. I offer you Identity. I offer you the most of what we are, and all that we have." He took Bubba by the shoulders. "Here and now, I offer you the honor of being Side-Father to my son, V'rinn."

The others repeated quietly, "Here and now."

Bubba looked around in bewilderment. The faces around him were open, expectant; Rinn was nodding in approval. He didn't trust himself to speak.

"May . . . may I sit down? Please?" A chair was brought, and he dropped gratefully into it. "Don't that beat all . . . Talk to me, Mike. I don't know what to do, here."

"The status is like that of Godfather. It's honorary, but it has never, to my knowledge, been offered to a non-Thunt. They think very highly of you, it would seem. Not that I blame them."

"Thanks." He pulled out the rag he carried in his pocket, and wiped his eyes. After a moment, he stood to face K'tine. In a steady voice he said, "Your honor to me does you honor. If you'll have me, I accept."

Hoss grabbed him by both arms and lifted him off the ground, and he felt other hands holding him aloft. As they carried him towards the double doors, he thought wildly to himself, "Boy, I hope those things are high enough!"

* * *

The party that night broke records.

* * *

Finally, it was time to go. The cook presented him with a bottle of rishth (Bubba made a note to have it analyzed when he got back, and to see if Kirby could negotiate a trade license for those native herbs). K'tine took him aside and said, "Bubba, you are part of a large and wealthy family. If there is something of a material nature you want, it will be provided; we -- I -- owe you much more than can be said."

"K'tine, ol' buddy, there's really only one thing I've ever wanted since I was nine that I haven't been able to provide m'self with."

"Name it."

Bubba looked at him speculatively, then shook his head. "Naw. It's too late and I'm too damn old. C'mon, Mike. If we hurry, we can just miss the Jetsons." As Hoss left with him, he gave his father a knowing wink.

* * *

"Honestly, Bubba," Mike said one night not quite two weeks later. "How can you, even as a joke, listen to this nonsense? Authentic Music From Another Planet, indeed."

"Hey, I figured it had to have some validity, considering your reluctance to talk about the guy who recorded it."

"Howard Menger? My reluctance to talk about him has little to do with whether or not this mindless dweedling on a piano in the middle of an enormous echo chamber is gas music from Jupiter."

"Oh, it's harmless. It's not like I'm askin' you to add it to the database, after all."

"Just a second . . ." Mike said suddenly. "I'm detecting a magnetic anomaly headed this way."

"Again!?" Bubba cried.

"I suggest you open the garage doors quickly; it doesn't seem to be slowing. Wait!" he added quickly, as

Bubba lunged to his feet. "Take me with you!"

"Shit!" Bubba grabbed him, raced into the garage and hit the switch that opened the big double doors. As they slid apart, he rushed out into the evening air, scanning the sky overhead. A light seemed to be growing brighter and larger as he stared at it.

With a nearly inaudible whoosh of displaced air, the flying saucer dipped to a level about three feet off the ground, and without pausing skimmed neatly through the open doors and into the garage, where it settled to the ground. Bubba, eyes wide and mouth gaping, stood unsteadily to the side, unsure of whether to shit or wind his watch. He'd seen this saucer somewhere before -- many, many times, in fact, although only in fuzzy photographs.

Somewhat bell-shaped, it had a domed top with portholes around the base, a flanged and fluted body, and a trio of large spheres underneath. A certain cafe worker, amateur astronomer and supposed contactee would have recognized it instantly, if a bit shame-facedly.

Noiselessly, a hatch opened in the body, and Hoss gingerly stepped out.

"Side-Father, I greet you and bring you a gift from my Progenitors -- and myself."

"Uh . . ." Bubba replied.

"You should probably shut the doors, Bubba," Hoss said with a twinkle. "Somebody might see it."

"Uh . . ."

Hoss reached out and pressed the switch, and the garage doors ground shut again.

"It's a 1953 Adamski Scoutship. The only one in the known universe like it, according to Mike."

"Actually," Mike said, "it's just a standard Thuntic scout with a little extra body work. We all thought you deserved it."

Bubba stepped closer to the ship and gingerly raised a hand to touch it.

"My own . . . flying saucer?"

"Yep," Mike said.

"But, wait a minute, how do I fly this thing? I don't have the slightest idea . . ."

"If you can drive a car, you can fly this," Mike said. "It conforms to FAA regs covering ultralights, and it won't let you crash. It even has running lights."

"I don't . . . I don't know what to say, boys," Bubba said softly.

"How about, `Well, dip me in dog shit!'" Mike answered.

Two weeks later, after much nocturnal practice, Bubba took it out through the big garage doors and up into the sky. It was noiseless, and, like Hoss's scout-ship, radar transparent. He picked up the cellular phone and dialed a number. "That you, Bubba?" said a familiar voice.

"Yep. Get your ya-ya's on, Kermit, we goin' for a ride."

"Great. Another road trip to Frog Level, I suppose. I guess you'll want me to kick in for gas this time?"

"I don't believe," Bubba replied, "that that will be necessary, Mr. daFrog. See you in ten."

"You know," he said aloud to himself, "Water-Rat was right. There really is nothing -- absolutely nothing -- half so much worth doing as simply messing about in a flying saucer." Cackling, he headed west into the setting sun.

And just for the hell of it, he buzzed Clint Miller's cows.

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