

Frederik Pohl - A HOME FOR THE OLD ONES (an excerpt from "From Gateway to the Core")

WHEN the guy came in, bold as brass, we were busy aversion training a leopard cub, and it was taking all our attention. The cub was a healthy little male, no more than a week old. That's a little bit young to begin the aversion training, but we'd been tracking the mother since she gave birth. When we spotted the mother this day, she had dropped off to sleep in a convenient place—at the edge of a patch of brush that wasn't large enough to conceal any other leopards. So we jumped the gun a little, doped the mother with an air gun and borrowed her cub.

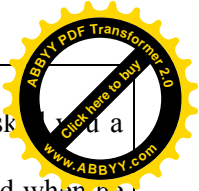
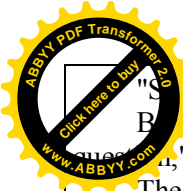
It's a job that takes all three of us. Shelly was the one who picked up the baby, completely covered, and sweating, in a gasproof isolation suit so it wouldn't get any ideas about a friendly human smell. Brudy kept an eye on the mother so we wouldn't have any unpleasant surprises. The mother had had her own aversion training, but if she had woken and seen us messing with her cub she might have broken through it. I was the head ranger, which meant that I was the boss. (Did I mention that my name is Grace Nkroma? Well, it is.) And, as boss, I was the one who manipulated the images—3-D simulations of an Old One, a human, a Heechee, one after another—with a cocktail of smells of each released as we displayed the images, and a sharp little electric shock each time that made the kit yowl and struggle feebly in Shelly's arms.

It isn't a hard job. We do it four or five times for each cub, just to make sure, but long before we're through with the training they'll do their best to run away as fast as they can from any one of the images or smells, whether they're simulations or the real thing. I don't mind handling leopard cubs. They're pretty clean, because the mother licks them all day long. So are cheetahs. The ones that really stink are the baby hyenas; that's when whoever holds the animal is glad that the gas-proof suit works in both directions. As far as other predators are concerned, lions and wild dogs are long extinct in this part of the Rift Valley, so the leopards, hyenas, and cheetahs are the only ones the Old Ones have to worry about on their reservation. Well, and snakes. But the Old Ones are smart enough to stay away from snakes, which aren't likely to chase them anyway since the Old Ones are too big for them to eat. Oh, and I should mention the crocs, too. But we can't train crocodiles very reliably, not so you could count on their running the other way if an Old One wandered near. So what we do is train the Old Ones themselves to stay away. What helps us there is that the Old Ones are sort of genetically scared of open water, never having experienced any until they were brought here. The only reason they would ever go near any would be that they were tormented by thirst and just had to get a drink. We never let it come to that, though. We've taken care of that problem by digging wells and setting up little solar-powered drinking fountains all over their reservation. They don't produce a huge gush of water, but there's a steady flow from each fountain, a deciliter a second year in and year out, and anyway the Old Ones don't need much water. They're not very interested in bathing, for instance. You catch a really gamy Old One, which we sometimes have to do when one of them is seriously sick or injured, and you might wish you could trade it for a hyena cub.

The first indication we got that we had a visitor was when we'd given the baby leopard four or five aversion shocks, and he suddenly began to struggle frantically in Shelly's arms, nipping at her gas-proof clothing, even when he wasn't being shocked. That wasn't normal. "Let him go," I ordered. When a cub gets really antsy, we don't have any choice but to call it off for the day. It isn't that they'll hurt whoever's holding them, because the gasproof coveralls are pretty nearly bite-proof, too. But it's bad for the cubs themselves. Wild animals can have heart attacks, too.

We backed away, keeping an eye on the morn as her baby, whining, scooted over to her, crept under her belly, and began to nurse. What I didn't know was what had set the cub off. Then I heard it: motor and fan noises from afar, and a moment later a hovercar appeared around a copse of acacias. Leopard cubs had better hearing than people, was all. The vehicle charged right up to us and skidded to a halt, the driver digging its braking skids into the ground for a quick stop and never mind how much damage it did to the roadway or how much dust it raised. The man who got out when the bubble top popped open was slim, short, rather dark-complected and quite young looking—for what that's worth, since pretty much everybody is. But he was quite peculiar looking, too, because he was wearing full city clothing, long pants, long sleeves, with little ruffs of some kind of fur at the cuffs and collar. (A fur collar! In equatorial Africa!) He gave Brudy a quick, dismissive glance, looked Shelly and me over more thoroughly, and ordered, "Take me to the Old Ones."

That was pure arrogance. When I sneaked a look at my indicator, it did not show a pass for his vehicle, so he had no right to be on the reservation in the first place, whoever he was. Brudy moved toward him warningly, and the newcomer stepped back a pace. The expression on Brudy's face wasn't particularly threatening, but he is a big man. We're all pretty tall, being mostly Maasai; Brudy is special. He boxes for fun whenever he can get anybody to go six rounds with him, and he shows it. "How did you get in?" Brudy demanded, his voice the gravely baritone of a leopard's growl. What made me think of that was that just about then the mother leopard herself did give a ragged, unfocused little growl.



"Shelly's waking up," Shelly warned.

Brudy has a lot of confidence in our aversion training. He didn't even look around at the animals. "I ask you a question," he said.

The man from the hover craned his neck to see where the leopard was. He sounded a lot less self-assured when he said, "How I got in is none of your business. I want to be taken to the Old Ones as soon as possible." Then he squinted at the leopard, now trying, but failing, to get to her feet. "Is that animal dangerous?"

"You bet she is. She could tear you to shreds in a minute," I told him—not lying, either, because she certainly theoretically could if it wasn't for her own aversion training. "You'd better get out of here, mister."

"Especially since you don't have a pass in the first place," Shelly added.

That made him look confused. "What's a 'pass'?" he asked.

"It's a radio tag for your hover. You get them at the headquarters in Nairobi, and if you don't have one, you're not allowed on the reservation."

"'Allowed,' " he sneered. "Who are you to 'allow' me anything?"

Brudy cleared his throat. "We're the rangers for this reservation, and what we say goes. You want to give me any argument?"

Brudy can be really convincing when he wants to be. The stranger decided to be law-abiding. "Very well," he said, turning back to his hover; he'd left the air-conditioning going and I could hear it whine as it valiantly tried to cool off the whole veldt. "It is annoying to be subjected to this petty bureaucracy, but very well. I shall return to Nairobi and obtain a pass."

"Maybe you will, and maybe you won't," Shelly said. "We don't disturb the Old Ones any more than we can help, so you'll need to give them a pretty good reason."

He was already climbing into the vehicle, but he paused long enough to give her a contemptuous look. "Reason? To visit the Old Ones? What reason do I need, since I own them?"

2

The next morning we all had to pitch in because the food truck had arrived. Brudy and Carlo were unloading little packets of rations from the Food Factory in the Mombasa delta while the rest of us kept the Old Ones in order.

Personally, I couldn't see why the Old Ones needed to be kept orderly. For most people that standard Food Factory stuff is the meal of last resort—that is, it is unless it's been doctored up, when you can hardly tell it from the real thing. The Old Ones chomp the untreated stuff right down, though. Naturally enough. It's what they grew up on, back when they were living on that first Food Factory itself, out in the Oort Cloud. They had come from all over the reservation when they heard the food bell. Now they were all pressing close to the truck, all fifty-four of them, chattering, "Gimme, gimme!" at the top of their voices as they competed for the choicest bits.

When I came to work at the reservation, I had only seen the Old Ones in pictures. I knew they all had beards, males and females alike. I hadn't known that even the babies did, or did as soon as they were old enough to grow any hair at all, and I hadn't known the way they smelled.

"The ancient female we called "Spot" was pretty nearly the smelliest of the lot, but she was also about the smartest, and the one who was as close as they had to a leader. And, well, she was kind of a friend. When she saw me, she gave me an imploring look. I knew what she wanted. I helped her scoop up half a dozen of the pink-and-white packets she liked best, then escorted her out of the crowd. I waited until she had scarfed down the first couple of packets, then tapped her on the shoulder and said, "I want you to come with me, please."

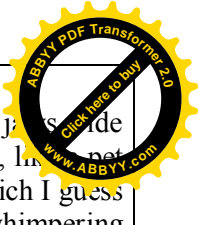
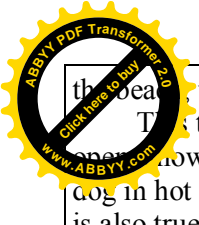
Well, I didn't say it like that, of course. All of the Old Ones have picked up a few words of English, but even Spot was a little shaky on things like grammar. What I actually said was, "You," pointing at her, "come," beckoning her toward me, "me," tapping my own chest.

She went on chewing, crumbs of greasy-looking pale stuff spilling out of the corners of her mouth, looking suspicious. Then she said, "What for?"

I said, "Because today's the day for your crocodile-aversion refresher." I said it just like that, too. I knew that she wasn't going to understand every word, but headquarters wanted us to talk to them in complete sentences as much as we could, so they'd learn. To reinforce the process, I took her by one skinny wrist and tugged her away.

She had definitely understood the word "crocodile," because she whimpered and tried to get free. That wasn't going to do her any good. I had twenty kilos and fifteen centimeters on her. I let her dally long enough to pick up a couple of extra food packets. Then I put her in our Old Ones van, the one that never stops smelling of the Old Ones, so we never use it for anything else. I picked another five of them pretty much at random and waved them in. They got in, all right. That is, they followed Spot, because she was the leader. They didn't like it, though, and all of them were cackling at once in their own language as I drove the van to the river.

It was a pretty day. Hot, of course, but without a cloud in the sky. When I turned off the motor, it was dead silent, too, not a sound except the occasional *craaack* of a pod coming in from orbit to be caught in the Nairobi Lofstrom Loop. The place where the hippos hang out is what we call the Big Bend. The stream makes pretty nearly a right-angle turn there, with a beach on the far side that gets scoured out every rainy season. There are almost always fifteen or twenty hippos doing whatever it is that they like to do in the slack water at the bend—just swimming around, sometimes underwater, sometimes surfacing to breathe, is what it looks like. And there's almost always a croc squatting patiently on



waiting for one of the babies to stray far enough away from the big ones to become lunch. This time there were three crocs, motionless in the hot African sun. They lay there with those long, toothy jaws showing the yellowish inside of their mouths—I guess that's how they try to keep from being overheated, like a dog in hot weather. What it looks like is that they're just waiting for something edible to come within range, which I guess is also true, and I can't help getting sort of shivery inside whenever I see one. So did the Old Ones. They were whimpering inside the van, and I nearly had to kick them out of it. Then they all huddled together, as far from the riverbank as I would let them get, shaking and muttering fearfully to each other.

Fortunately they didn't have long to wait, because Geoffrey was right behind us in the truck with the goat projector. That was Geoffrey's own invention, and before I came he used to use live goats. I put a stop to that. We raise the goats for food and I'm not sentimental about slaughtering them, but I made sure the ones we used for aversion training were dead already.

While he was setting up, I gave myself a minute to enjoy the hippos. They're always fun, big ones the size of our van and little ones no bigger than a pig. The thing is, they look to me like they're enjoying themselves, and how often do you see a really happy extended family? I'm sure the big ones were aware of our presence, and undoubtedly even more aware of the crocs on the bank, but they seemed carefree.

"Okay, Grace," Geoffrey called, hand already on the trigger of the launcher.

"You may fire when ready," I said to him, and to the Old Ones: "Watch!" They did, scared but fascinated, as the goat carcass soared out of the launcher and into the water, well downstream from the hippo families so there wouldn't be any accidents.

You wouldn't think a crocodile could run very fast, with those sprawly little legs and huge tail. You'd be wrong. Before the goat hit the water all three of the crocs were doing their high-speed waddle down to the river's edge. When they hit the water, they disappeared; a moment later, all around the floating goat, there were half a dozen little whirlpools of water, with an occasional lashing tail to show what was going on under the surface. The show didn't last long. In a minute that goat was history.

I glanced at the hippos. They hadn't seemed to pay any attention, but I noticed that now all the big ones were on the downstream side of the herd and the babies were on the other side, away from the crocs.

"Show's over," I told the Old Ones. "Back in the van!" I said, pointing to make sure they understood. They didn't delay. They were all shivering as they lined up to climb back in, one by one. I was just about to follow them in when I heard Geoffrey calling my name. I turned around, half in the van, and called, "What's the problem?"

He pointed to his communicator. "Shelly just called. You know that guy who claims he owns the Old Ones? He's back!"

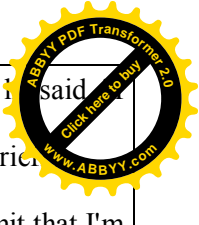
All the way back I had one hand on the wheel and my other hand on my own communicator, checking with Shelly—yes, the son of a bitch did have a pass this time—and then with Nairobi to see why they'd allowed it. The headquarters guy who answered the call was Bertie ap Dora. He's my boss, and he usually makes sure I remember that. This time he sounded really embarrassed. "Sure, Grace," he said, "we issued a pass for him. We didn't have any choice, did we? He's Wan."

It took me a moment. Then, "Oh, my God," I said. "Really? Wan?" And when Bertrand confirmed that Wan was who the mysterious stranger was, identity checked and correct, it all fell into place. If it was Wan, he had been telling the truth. He really was the owner of the Old Ones, more or less, because legally he was the man who had discovered them. Well, that didn't actually make much sense in my book. If you stopped to think about it, Wan himself had been discovered as much as the Old Ones had. However, it didn't have to make sense. That was the way Gateway

Corp. had ruled—had given him property rights in the place where the Old Ones had been discovered and ownership of everything on the site—and nobody argued with the findings of Gateway Corp.

The thing about the Old Ones was that they had been found on a far-out, orbiting Heechee artifact, and it was the Heechee themselves who had put them there, all those hundreds of thousands of years ago when the Heechees had come to check out Earth's solar system. They were looking for intelligent races at the time. What they discovered were the ancestors of the Old Ones, the dumb, hairy little hominids called australopithecines. They weren't much, but they were the closest the Earth had to the intelligent race the Heechee were looking for at the time, so the Heechee had taken away some breeding stock to study. And when the Heechee got so scared that they ran off and hid in the Core, all the hundreds of millions of them, they left the australopithecines behind. They weren't exactly abandoned. The Heechee had provided them with the Food Factory they inhabited, so they never went hungry. And so they stayed there, generation after generation, for hundreds of thousands of years, until human beings got to Gateway. And, the story went, one of those human beings, and the only one who survived long enough to be rescued, was the kid named Wan.

As soon as I got to the compound, I saw him. He wasn't a kid anymore, but he wasn't hard to recognize either. His size picked him out; he wasn't all that much taller than some of the Old Ones, a dozen or so of whom had gathered around to regard him with tepid interest. He was better dressed than the Old Ones, though. In fact, he was better dressed than we were. He'd forgotten about the fur collars—sensibly enough—and the outfit he was wearing now was one of those safari-jacket things with all the pockets that tourists are so crazy about. His, however, was made of pure natural silk. And he was carrying a riding crop, although there wasn't a horse within five hundred kilometers of us. (Zebras don't count.)



As soon as he saw me, he bustled over, hand outstretched and a big, phoney smile on his face. "I'm Wan," he said. "I don't blame you for the misunderstanding yesterday."

Well, there hadn't been any misunderstanding and I didn't feel any blame, but I let it go. I shook his hand briefly. "Gracie Nkroma," I said. "Head ranger. What do you want here?"

The smile got bigger and phonier. "I guess you'd call it nostalgia. Is that the word? Anyway, I have to admit that I'm kind of sentimental about my Old Ones, since they sort of took care of me while I was growing up. I've been meaning to visit them ever since they were relocated here, but I've been so busy—" He gave a winsome little shrug, to show how busy he'd been.

Then he gazed benevolently around at the Old Ones. "Yes," he said, nodding. "I recognize several of them, I think. Do you see how happy they are to see me? And I've brought them some wonderful gifts." He jerked a thumb at his vehicle. "You people had better unload them," he told me. "They've been in the car for some time, and you should get them into the ground as soon as possible." And then he linked arms with a couple of the Old Ones, and strolled off, leaving us to do his bidding.

3

There were about forty of the "gifts" that Wan had brought for his former adopted family, and what they turned out to be were little green seedlings in pressed-soil pots. Carlo looked at them, and then at me. "What the hell are we supposed to do with those things?" he wanted to know.

"I'll ask," I said, and got on the line with Bernard ap Dora again.

"They're berry bushes," he told me, sounding defensive. "They're some kind of fruit the Old Ones had growing wild when they were on the Food Factory, and they're supposed to love the berries. Actually, it's quite a wonderful gift, wouldn't you say?"

I wouldn't. I didn't. I said. "It would be a lot more thoughtful if he planted the damn things himself."

Bernard didn't respond to that. "One thing I should tell you about," he said. "The bushes are supposed to need quite a lot of water, so make sure you plant them near the runoff from the drinking fountains, all right? And, listen, see if you can keep the giraffes from eating the seedlings before they grow out."

"How are we supposed to do that?" I asked, but Bernard had already cut the connection. Naturally. He's a boss. You know the story about the second lieutenant and the sergeant and the flagpole? There's this eight-meter flagpole and the lieutenant only has six meters of rope. Big problem. How does the lieutenant get the flagpole up?

Simple. The lieutenant says, "Sergeant, put that flagpole up," and goes off to have a beer at the officers' club.

As far as Bernard is concerned, I'm his sergeant. I don't have to be, though. Bernard keeps asking me to come in and take a job as a sector chief at the Nairobi office. There'd be more money, too, but then I'd have to live in the big city. Besides, that would mean I wouldn't be in direct contact with the Old Ones any more.

Everything considered, you might think that didn't sound so bad, but—oh, hell, I admit it—I knew I'd miss every smelly, dumb-ass one of them. They weren't very bright and they weren't very clean, and most of the time I wasn't a bit sure that they liked me back. But they needed me.

By the time Wan had been with us for three days, we had got kind of used to having him around. We didn't actually see a lot of him. Most of the daylight time he was off in his hover, with a couple of the Old Ones for company, feeding them ice cream pops and lemon out of his freezer—things that really weren't good for them but, I had to admit, wouldn't do them much harm once or twice in a lifetime. When it got dark, he was always back in the compound, but he didn't mingle with us even then. He stayed in his vehicle, watching soaps and comedies, again with a couple of Old Ones for company, and he slept in it, too.

When I finally asked Wan just how long he intended to be with us he just gave me that grin again and said, "Can't say, Gracie. I'm having fun."

"Don't call me Gracie," I said. But he had already turned his back on me to collect another handful of Old Ones for a joyride.

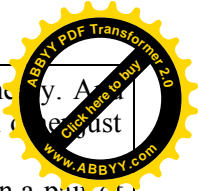
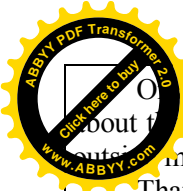
Having fun seemed to be what Wan's life was all about. He'd already been all over the galaxy before he came back to see us, flying around in his own private ship. Get that, his own private ship! But he could afford it. His royalties on the Heechee stuff that came out of the Food Factory made him, he said, the eighth richest person in the galaxy, and what Wan could afford was pretty nearly anything he could think up. He made sure he let us all know it, too, which didn't endear him to most of the staff, especially Carlo. "He gets on my nerves with his goddamn brag-gjng all the time," Carlo complained to me. "Can't we run the son of a bitch off?"

"As long as he doesn't make trouble," I said, "no. How are you coming with the planting?"

Actually that was going pretty well. All the guys had to do was scoop out a little hole in the ground, a couple of meters away from a fountain, and set one of the pressed-earth pots in it. That was the whole drill. Since there were a couple of patrols going out all over the reservation every day anyway, checking for signs of elephant incursions or unauthorized human trespassers, it only took them a couple of extra minutes at each stop.

Then, without warning, Wan left us.

I thought I heard the sound of his hover's fans, just as I was going to sleep. I considered getting up to see what was going on, but—damn it!—the pillow seemed more interesting than Wan just then, and I rolled over and forgot it.



I almost forgot it. I guess it was my subconscious, smarter than the rest of me, that made my sleep unsteady. About the fourth or fifth time I half woke, I heard the voices of Old Ones softly, worriedly, murmuring at each other outside my window.

That woke me all the way up. Old Ones don't like the dark, never having had any back home. I pulled on a pair of shorts and stumbled outside. Spot was sitting there on her haunches, along with Brute and Blackeye, all three of them turning to stare at me. "What's the matter?" I demanded.

She was munching on a chunk of food. "Grace," she said politely, acknowledging my existence. "Wan. Gone." She made sweeping-away gestures with her hands to make sure I understood her.

"Well, hell," I said. "Gone where?"

She made the same gesture again. "Away."

"Yes, I know *away*," I snarled. "Did he say when he was coming back?"

She swallowed and spat out of a piece of wrapper. "No back," she said.

I guess I was still pretty sleepy, because I didn't take it in right away. "What do you mean, 'no back'?"

"He gone," she told me placidly. "Also Beautiful. Pony and Gadget gone, too."

4

Just to make sure, I woke Shelly and Carlo and sent them up in the ultralight to check out the whole reservation, but I didn't wait for their report. I was already calling headquarters even before they were airborne. Bernard wasn't in his office, of course—it was the middle of the night, and the headquarters people kept city hours—but I got him out of bed at home. He didn't sound like he believed me. "Why the hell would anyone kidnap a couple of Old Ones?" he wanted to know.

"Ask the bastard yourself," I snarled at him. "Only find him first. That's three of the Old Ones that he's kidnapped—Beauty and her two-year-old, Gadget. And Pony. Pony is the kid's father, probably."

He made a sound of irritation. "All right. First thing, I'll need descriptions—no, sorry," he said, catching himself; how would you describe three Old Ones? And why would you need to? "Forget that part. I'll take it from here. I guarantee he won't get off the planet. I'll have cops at the Loop in ten minutes, and a general alarm everywhere. I'll—"

But I cut him off there. "No, Bernard. Not so much *you* will. More like *we* will. I'll meet you at the Loop and, I don't care how rich the son of a bitch is, when we catch him, I'm going to punch him out. And then he's going to see what the inside of a jail looks like."

But, of course, that wasn't the way the hand played out.

I took our two-man hover, which is almost as fast as the ultralight. The way I was goosing it along, maybe a little faster. By the time I got within sight of the Lofstrom Loop, with Nairobi's glowing bubble a few kilometers to the north, I was already aware of police planes crisscrossing across the sky—once or twice dropping down to get a good look at me before they were satisfied and zoomed away.

At night the Loop is picked out with lights, so that it looks like a kind of roller coaster ride, kilometers long. I could hear the whine of its rotating magnetic cables long before I got to the terminal. There weren't many pods either coming or going—maybe because it was nighttime—so, I figured, there wouldn't be so many passengers that Wan and his captives might not be noticed. (As though anybody wouldn't notice three Old Ones.)

Actually there were hardly any passengers in the terminal. Bernard was there already, with half a dozen Nairobi city cops, but they didn't have much to do. Neither did I, except to fret and swear to myself for letting him get away.

Then the cop manning the communicator listened to something, snarled something back and came toward us, looking shamefaced. "He won't be coming here," he told Bernard. "He didn't use the Loop coming down—used his own lander, and it looks like he used it to get off, too, because it's gone."

And so he had.

By the time Bernard, fuming, got in touch with any of the authorities in orbit, Wan had had plenty of time to dock with his spaceship and be on his way, wherever it was he was going, at FTL speeds. And I never saw him, or any of the three missing Old Ones, again.