

FIVE THOUSAND LIGHT YEARS FROM BIRDLAND

by Robert R. Chase

Robert R. Chase tells us that he is now the actual (as opposed to “acting”) chief counsel at an Army laboratory. He lives with his family and a dog named after Malcolm Reynolds, hero of Joss Whedon’s late, lamented *Firefly* series. The author will be entertaining no retirement plans until his youngest graduates from Rensselaer. Robert would like to think that the spirit of Poul Anderson hovers over the story that takes us...

The *Star Spear*

There was no sense of the stars rushing past us, or of being crushed into a singularity or being turned inside out in eleven dimensions. Instead, there was a momentary inattention, the sort of lapse that might occur driving late at night in the desert when the blink of your eyes extends a second too long and you snap your head back from the steering wheel. One instant, I was gazing through the nose of Screet’s starship, courtesy of the viewing visor connected to its sensing system, at the constellation of Sagittarius. The next, I blinked (or turned aside, or daydreamed for a moment) and when I refocused, the stars had shifted color and position.

“That was it?” I asked. My voice shook just the least bit. “That was our fifty light-year jump?”

Screet regarded me closely. Gold-flecked eyes with 20:5 vision flanked a cruel beak. Blood-red feathers made a bull’s-eye around both eyes before shading into the cobalt blue of the rest of the body.

“Affirmative probability,” said the translation device hooked into my ear. “Relocation has been effected. Precision of move at 70 percent and increasing. Further sightings being taken.” That was mostly comprehensible. With luck, it was also what Screet meant to convey. Translation had been a problem ever since Screet’s resuscitation. Most of the E-Team fretted over terms that seemed impossible to translate. I was more worried about translations that we thought were right but weren’t quite.

Screet was not his—its—his name. His actual name was Scree’ata’ata’ert’eu’ert (those last three sounded while inhaling) woo’eta-tatatik’ka’eet and so on for half a typed page. About a third of it was pitched above the range of human hearing. Informed speculation was that, in addition to what we would call a name, this included social descriptors and an extended genealogy, but no one knew for sure. I called him Screet and let the translator pronounce the complete name in all its glory. Screet,

of course, could sneeze it out in less than two seconds.

“Relocation” was even less understood. It was, however, the way in which Sreet’s people could travel between the stars without being constrained by the speed of light, and thus the focus of much anxious investigation. The version given to me went something like this. In quantum mechanics, not only light but everything else has an associated waveform. Generally, the envelope of the waveform closely corresponds to the shape of the item. However, the tails of the waveforms extend to infinity. Sreet’s race had learned how to relax the waveform of a starship and everyone inside to an arbitrary degree, moving the envelope to any point along the tails and then allowing it to collapse to its new state.

“You are disturbed,” Sreet said. “Think visors arbitrary? Perhaps outside view believed more convincing.”

It took me a moment to understand the offer. “I trust the visors.” Mainly because Sreet had no reason to lie to me about this. Either we got back to his home system or we didn’t. And since we did not pack a pressure suit for me, an outside view was not indicated.

“Trust is good. Knowledge/certainty—” The translator indecisively provided both words. “—is better.”

* * * *

Earth

It was first identified as a previously uncharted asteroid and given a one in three thousand chance of hitting the Earth. Then radio telescopes picked up signals that repeated themselves every eighty-five seconds. Its path would take it inside the orbit of Mercury. On its way out to interstellar space, it would cross Earth’s orbit at a distance only three times greater than the distance to the Moon.

We had fifteen months. The *Ares Reach* had been built by the CIJUS (China, India, Japan, United States) nations for a Mars mission. Its crew was cut from twenty to three, its fusion engines rebuilt to provide bursts of 1.5 gee acceleration.

The newly-christened *Stellar Bounty* launched on the last possible day to make a rendezvous. It drew even with the artifact as it raced back from the Sun. The crew attached rockets to its blackened hull and nudged the starship into high Earth orbit. When they entered the airlock, they were

astonished to find the electrical system still operational. But that was nothing compared to their reaction when they discovered Sreet in his hibernation chamber and realized that resuscitation procedures had begun.

* * * *

The *Star Spear*

The settings for the living areas were adjusted for equitable sharing of discomfort. At sixty degrees Fahrenheit, it was ten degrees cooler than I liked it and ten degrees warmer than optimal for Sreet. Atmospheric pressure was 1.1 times Earth sea level average, not a big deal, but the oxygen level was 35 percent rather than the 21 percent I was used to. Hundred percent oxygen at standard pressure causes pulmonary edema, chest pains, collapsed lung alveoli, blindness and, oh yes, eventually death. No one really knew what the long term effect would be on me. The only advice I had been given by the Army doctors was not to breathe too deeply.

The ship could recycle its water supply. I had been stocked with a three year supply of vitamin and mineral supplements. Our biochemistry was considered similar enough that I could survive on Sreet's supplies for protein and roughage. I had also been provided with a rack of spices, since cooking seems to be a uniquely human art.

During the first week, I found shipboard life thrilling, uncomfortable, and boring in equal parts. Being humanity's ambassador to the stars (as one news organization put it) was both exciting and even daunting. Being confined within the starship, with only the occasional change in star patterns to suggest that we were progressing toward Sreet's home world, quickly lessened the thrill and replaced it with something like claustrophobia. This despite the fact that the starship was, compared to human spaceships, incredibly spacious. The livable area consisted of six oval rooms, called nodules by our tech staff, connected by tubular corridors. The corridors formed two circles intersecting at right angles. Each nodule was ninety degrees away from all the others. Why this should be, aside from a vaguely pleasing symmetry, was something our scientists had never figured out and Sreet had never been asked to explain. The control room was the one furthest forward. The nodule on the starboard side had been set aside for me, though like all the others it lacked doors. Privacy might be an alien concept to Sreet's people. On the other hand, the craft had apparently been designed for a single occupant, so perhaps privacy was never an issue.

I spent most of the time in my quarters trying to make sense of Sreet and his civilization. It took considerable mental discipline to keep reminding myself that most obvious analogies were probably deceptive. Start with the physical ones. The news organizations referred to Sreet as a birdman, committing two errors with one word. The resemblance to birds was only a surface similarity. Sreet had six limbs. Underneath the gorgeous and fully functional wings were two arms, not as strong as human arms but evidently strong enough to forge a technologically advanced civilization. The “feathers,” although light and warm and aerodynamically tapered, were considered by our zoologists to be only feather analogs. Part of the difference was that they linked together to form a lightweight but surprisingly tough mesh. On the biochemical level, Sreet seemed to require three nonstandard amino acids in his food, which was one of the main reasons he had said he needed to return to his home as soon as his ship was repaired.

In the course of his three months on Earth, Sreet put as much effort into trying to understand human culture as we had in trying to understand his. Even now, he would quiz me whenever seemingly random questions popped into his brain. When the questions concerned history or science, I could supplement my own opinions with information from the data disks that had been packed for me. I could not understand why some subjects interested him, much less the connections he made between them. For example, he was intrigued by descriptions of both jazz and improv comedy, where I could discern at least the ghost of a relationship. On the other hand, I had no idea why he characterized poker as “anti-jazz.” He wanted to know what I thought about cost-benefit analysis, and did Eisenhower use it while planning the Normandy invasion?

I wanted to know if my role was that of ambassador, or of an American Indian brought to the court of the Sun King as an exotic amusement. And either way, why had I been chosen to fill the role? It was a question Sreet steadfastly refused to answer.

* * * *

Earth

Rudimentary understandings were achieved even before the astronauts returned to Earth. Numbers: Sreet’s people used base six. Terms for affirmation or negation. Personal names. Terms for shipboard items like airlock and pressure suit. Captain Anderson radioed home that communication was being established with “miraculous ease.”

In retrospect it was clear that, whatever the humans thought, it was Sreet who was controlling the translation sessions. It was also obvious why. We might have time for leisurely study. He had to repair his craft and get home before he ran out of food, since it was possible (and turned out to be the case) that the terrestrial ecology would provide insufficient nourishment.

Naturally, most of the language sessions, whether with the astronauts or on Earth, concentrated on technical matters. Sreet needed certain components of his drive engines replaced. The CIJUS nations and their allies wanted to do everything possible to help, and not from purely altruistic motives. Sreet's ship had two different drive systems: a reactionless drive for sublight speeds and a quantum drive for jumping between stars. Both utilized zero point energy. The technology was beyond price.

But there were other things we wanted to know. Things like the sort of society that had produced Sreet: what were its mores, its values? What did it think about technologically inferior races? According to Sreet, he had been exploring an area near the Trifid Nebula in the Sagittarius arm of the Milky Way. Coming out of jump, his ship had found itself in the outer edges of a supernova explosion. Safety systems cut in automatically, throwing Sreet into protective cold sleep and initiating a random jump of the *Star Spear*. Sreet said that his people had never explored this part of the galaxy and had no idea of humanity's existence. Some members of the evaluation committee were beginning to whisper that it would be well for things to stay that way. "Mere contact with a superior civilization did in the Tahitians. There is only one way to make certain it doesn't happen to us."

Sreet appeared to have nothing to hide. He allowed us complete access to everything in his ship's databanks. This contained a library's worth of histories and fictions, surely enough to give us an idea of how the People of the Air (the name for Sreet's race as a whole) viewed themselves. The problem was that a month after Sreet landed on Earth, we had a vocabulary of about five percent of Sreet's language. We had only just realized that about 40 percent of what he said was too high for human hearing. We were also coming to suspect that we only partially understood the concepts and contexts of the 5 percent we did have.

My job was to try to reduce our ocean of ignorance. Sreet seemed intrigued by my history: growing up tough in the *barrios*, being given by a judge the choice between jail and the Army, landing in language school, becoming an interrogator and eventually a professor of linguistics.

"Your peoples churn," Sreet said. "That is good."

“We do and it is,” I agreed. If that were not the case, I would still be stuck in a slum, if not dead. “I see from your histories that the fortunes of People of the Air churn as well. I was hoping you could clarify some terms for me. I keep coming across the phrase *eutik si euban*. It seems to be very important. The context implies that is a pairing of opposites. In my language, we talk of war or peace, good or evil, hot or cold, and so forth. The ‘eu’ prefix, however, seems to imply that both of these are good in some way. Can you clarify the meaning of the term?”

“This is ... difficult,” Sreet said. My notebook screen informed me that the word for difficult had two meanings. The first meant requiring extra effort. The second, tentative, meaning suggested embarrassment, loss of status.

“Let it go,” Knox commanded in my earphone. He monitored all the interview sessions for compliance with CIJUS guidelines. Meeting him, you might think him an idiot until he opened his mouth. Then you knew for sure. “The phrase you are asking about has been identified as a hot button one. Since he’s clearly reluctant, go on to the next topic.”

Bullshit! I thought. *That’s why it takes us forever to learn anything.* “Only the difficult is worth doing,” I said, quoting a line from a People of the Air proverb. “And only the exalted,” a word which seemed to mean in equal parts hero, noble, and saint, “can achieve it. This is a matter worth exploration.”

“His pulse rate and respiration just shot up,” Knox said. “You are upsetting him. If he shuts up, CIJUS will have my ass. This is too important to risk offending him. Back off.”

Sreet was completely motionless, fixing me with the sort of intense stare I imagined a mouse might see in a barn owl.

“As near as I can tell,” I said, “*ibani* can mean components or fuel. *Atikka* has to do with personal relationships between individuals of equal status. The *eu* form suggests that both of them are good, so obviously I am missing something major. Please help my understanding.”

Sreet leaned forward and opened his beak. All I heard was a rapid series of high-pitched shrieks. Both translator and notebook had gone dead.

“Out of the room. Now,” Knox said. “You’re fired.”

* * * *

While packing the next morning, I learned that I had not been fired. I was, however, off the interrogation team. My new schedule had me reviewing the reports from the interrogators and the tech team translators, and brainstorming with the other linguists. This still left me with free time. I spent most of it in the cafeteria, osmotically soaking up what the other teams were doing.

The biologists were arguing over pronouns. “You keep referring to Sreet as ‘he,’” one said. “I don’t think you can justify that.”

“Really, Tom,” his companion said, “political correctness is so twentieth century.”

“You’re missing my point,” Tom insisted. “I agree that we have established that Sreet’s people reproduce sexually. Sreet may even become male eventually. But right now, Sreet is prepubescent. None of the machinery has been activated. Those quick readings I was able to get—”

His companion, suddenly alert, made shushing motions. Tom flushed and bit his lip. Apparently, they had subjected Sreet to some sort of covert (x-rays? Sound waves?) examination that was close hold even in this cleared for classified cafeteria.

The biologists were not the only group with internal disagreements. “It’s bogus!” one of the engineers shouted, the second day after my “firing.” “They are all Maelzel circuits.” His companions laughed and began to clear their trays. I went over and sat down across from the speaker, whose security badge announced him to be Henri Maillardet.

“Maelzel circuits?” I asked.

“You have read Poe?” he countered.

“Long ago,” I said. “People being buried alive, or murdered and stuffed up chimneys.”

Maillardet shook his head impatiently. “He wrote an essay about an automaton called Maelzel’s chess player, explaining that the gears within it were misdirection, and that it was a concealed human who manipulated the

automaton. We are in a similar situation. We are astounded by the complexity of the components of Sreet's starship. We say that they are beyond human understanding. Bah! That is because there is nothing to understand."

"They say that any sufficiently advanced technology would be indistinguishable from magic," I said.

Maillardet snorted in disgust. "Clarke's third law. Sir Arthur should have been shot making a statement that excuses so much shoddy thinking. If he had realized how it would be used, he probably would have shot himself."

"That ship did not come from anywhere in our solar system," I reminded him. "It is a real starship. Estimates I've seen say that what we have learned from Sreet has already pushed our materials and nano technologies fifty to a hundred years ahead of where they were."

Maillardet's smile was contemptuous. "Junk jewelry," he said. "A fistful of pretty baubles for your island."

I studied him carefully, wondering how much of this was paranoia and how much might be the result of insight. "Let's say you're right," I said slowly. "Half or more of the components of the starship are dummies just meant to look impressive, but they do nothing. I can't believe that is normal engineering practice for any species. Why would his people do that?"

"That is what I cannot figure out." For the first time, I saw the fear beneath his bluster. "He says all he wants is help to get home. That is a lie, but I have no clue what the truth may be."

* * * *

Knox's displeasure made most of the linguistics teams reluctant to pick me up. I was given a mass of material estimated to be three times the size of *War and Peace*. It appeared to be a racial epic of some kind. Ancient and probably fictional, it had nothing to do with People of the Air technology. It was just the sort of thing you might give to occupy a loose cannon and keep him from making trouble.

It had half a dozen different titles. One of them was *Eutik Si Euban*.

I skipped through it, trying to get a sense of what I was dealing with. Most of it was narrative. In the ten sections I sampled, there were more

than fifty individuals mentioned. There were complicated charts which turned out to be clan lineages. Descent appeared to be both matrilineal *and* patrilineal. There were maps. One showed a mountain range, another an island chain. It took me a while to realize that they showed identical portions of Screet's home planet.

The People of the Air had clawed their way up to civilization on a planet which suffered periodic catastrophes. Human myths recount one great flood. *Eutik Si Euban* referenced a dozen, as well as three ice ages and numerous cataclysms that read like asteroid strikes.

That was as much as I could get with a 5 percent vocabulary. I made notes of possible meanings of nearby words from context, but it was slow going. This was an old document. I suspected that half the words were archaic or obsolete. Still, two themes showed up repeatedly. The first was of a race struggling to create a civilization despite a planet which often seemed bent on their extermination.

The second concerned a shadowy enemy called the Doubles who launched repeated attacks over intervals of centuries. At first, I could not be certain they actually existed. The accounts used terms meaning "treachery" and "corruption." I thought the Doubles might be a metaphor, a way of saying that opponents were not even members of the same race. The more I read, though, the more that explanation seemed unsatisfactory. Time and again their threat recurred. There were tragedies when trusted friends or clan members were found to be Doubles, and also when true members of Screet's race were killed in the mistaken belief they were Doubles.

I would have given a lot to have had Screet clarify matters. But the repairs to his ship were nearly complete. He would be gone in a week. In the meantime, I was not allowed to talk to him.

* * * *

Four nights later, Knox asked to see me. We had not spoken to each other since he pulled me off the interrogation team. I knocked on the door to his motel room and entered. When I opened the door, the first thing I noticed was the half empty bottle of Scotch on the table. I could smell it from the hallway.

"Come in, Mr. Gonzales. I wanted to talk to you. You know that our friend is going back to his home in the stars in a few days."

“That’s what I hear.” Knox did not invite me to sit. I felt more comfortable standing anyway.

“All the way home. Five thousand light years to birdland. Must be a long, lonesome trip. Screet must think so, at least. He’s asked for company, a human to accompany him. Something exotic for the folks back to Cloudhome.” He paused, waiting for me to say something. I let him wait.

“He has asked for you,” he said finally.

“Really?”

“Oh yes indeedy. Caused quite a stir. You’re not considered prime ambassador material by some. So after a lot of argument, they came and asked me. What do you suppose I told them?” He smiled as if inviting me to share in a joke.

“I have no idea,” I said.

“Course you don’t, ‘cause I haven’t made up my mind yet. But what should I tell them? What do you think?”

And there it was. I had defied his authority from a burning desire to learn more about the People of the Air. Now I would be able to learn more than all the rest of humanity ... if I was willing to beg.

“I think,” I said carefully, “that I remember somebody saying that it would be dangerous to risk offending Screet. A man who did that would have to be really sure of himself. He would have to pit his opinion against that of the entire CIJUS team. He would have to be willing to risk having Screet return home with no human ambassador and with a bad opinion of the human race generally.

“The man who could do that ... Well, no one could say that man got his start by sleeping with the boss’ daughter. No one could say he rose to prominence by brown-nosing his superiors and stealing the work of his subordinates. Absolutely no one could say that he was promoted beyond his level of competence ten years ago, and got his current position through political pressure.

“I would really have to respect that man. I’d like to shake his hand.”

The smile had vanished some time ago. “Get the hell out of my room.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “Right away, sir.”

The next morning, I learned officially that Sreet had requested that I return with him to his home world.

* * * *

The *Star Spear*

Technologically superior though they might be, Sreet’s people had not been able to create artificial gravity. As a result, my diet was filled with calcium supplements. My nodule had its own exercise machine complete with six different resistance stations and a stationary bike. I had to put in at least two solid hours every twenty-four hour period to stave off muscle atrophy and osteoporosis.

Sreet had a similar problem but a very different way of dealing with it. He would take a food cube, which looked like some combination of grain and hamburger, and seal it inside an extremely resilient plastic ball which he called the lure. The lure had two unevenly-sized “wings.” Sreet would fling it at a wall while turning on a system that forced powerful air currents through small holes scattered through the nodules and corridors. The lure would take a strong bounce, be seized by an air current and sent spinning in a random direction. Sreet would throw himself after it, endeavoring to anticipate the trajectory of its next bounce while fighting the artificial winds that were trying to smash him into the walls. If he caught the lure in the minute before the winds shut off, he got to eat the food cube.

“Hunting,” he informed me, “stimulates the appetite.”

Usually there was a few seconds, warning for me to grab my sleep netting and press myself against the bulkhead. When we were one thousand light years out from Cloudhome, there was an unannounced feeding hunt. Air screamed out of a nozzle at my back, pushing me to the center of the nodule. I heard a bounce in another part of the ship and then the lure hurtled past. An instant later, Sreet slammed me into the wall and pinned me there.

The sharp points of his beak pressed against either side of my throat. Hot breath felt like it would burn my skin. “Why should I not have my meal now?” The voice of the translator was remarkably calm.

I thought of and discarded half a dozen answers. “It would be a waste

of all the resources you have used to get me this far,” I said carefully.

“Sometimes one must cut losses. Know when to hold and when to fold.”

“You can’t kill me before I break both your arms,” I said, reasonably sure it was true. I was stronger, and Screet’s bones were hollow.

“*Star Spear* responds to my voice. I need no arms.” The beak twitched. Small globules of blood drifted across my line of sight.

“True,” I said. “But then you would have *euban* rather than *eutik*.”

“Yes.” Screet said. He leaned back and let his beak snap shut. His expression conveyed something that might have been approval. “Perhaps you will not get us both killed.”

I released his arms. One powerful beat of his wings and he was gone. With shaking hands, I rooted through my first aid kit until I found a bandage to apply to the punctures. Why had Screet threatened me? How had I convinced him to let me go?

* * * *

Eutik Si Euban is divided into sections called generations. In generation fifty-three, there is the story of the Two Rahnee’ahs. Rahnee’ah was a clan leader of the Ice Knives Escarpment. One day he left on a solitary hunt. A storm came up suddenly and he was presumed lost. Thirty days later he returned to the clan aerie. His story was that he had been blown into a Doubles encampment and taken prisoner. He had managed to escape after weeks of torture.

Six days later, a celebration was held in the Great Hall to mark his return. But in the midst of the feasting, the singers fell silent. A flyer had landed on the balcony overlooking the Frozen Sea. He staggered into the room, his feathers torn and burnt in some places, his broken arms hanging limply from his sides. In an unrecognizable voice, he proclaimed himself Rahnee’ah, escaped from a tribe of Doubles who imprisoned him, hoping to learn enough to send one of their own to take his place and lead the clan into destruction.

The Clan Sergeants immediately imprisoned both claimants and conferred among themselves. Both Rahnee’ahs wished to lead the Clan against the Doubles. The one which was a Double would surely lead them

into an ambush. Thus both honor and self-preservation necessitated unmasking the Double.

Both knew Clan history, though the second Rahnee'ah seemed confused at times. A Double would be expected to have learned such things, and momentary confusion could easily be the result of rough treatment. The first looked exactly like Rahnee'ah, but a Double would naturally be able to mimic one of the People of the Air, especially after having weeks to study one as a captive. The injuries of the second were consistent with the way Doubles treated the People of the Air, especially the broken arms. Even more than for humans, hands were the symbols of civilization, of abilities the People of the Air had which Doubles did not. That was the reason Doubles delighted in smashing hands and breaking arms.

(It was also the buried memory of that which was the reason I had responded the way I did to Sreet.)

After days of being unable to determine the true Rahnee'ah, OverSergeant Kl'awt'tik brought the young heir, only three seasons old and unfledged, into the Council chambers. The young were known to have a more sensitive sense of smell than their elders. Surely the heir would be able to discern true from false.

It was brought into the room and told to go to its father. In one corner, it saw a battered creature with broken arms, burned feathers, and a voice that was barely a squawk. In the other, the image of its father, the second face it had seen after birth. It was to this Rahnee'ah that it ran.

The OverSergeant grabbed a spear and hurled it at the child. The battered Rahnee'ah threw himself in the path of the spear, taking the full impact of the blow. The OverSergeant turned to the other claimant which had stood motionless, declared it to be the Double, and ordered its immediate execution. He then turned his attention to the battered claimant. The OverSergeant had flipped the spear as he grabbed it, throwing it butt end first. It had only bruised the true Rahnee'ah, who had instinctively dived in front of it to protect his heir.

The first time I read this story, I thought the point was Rahnee'ah's love for his offspring. I also thought of Rahnee'ah as the hero of the story, especially since he appears in several other adventures. Rereading it now, I began to think that I had missed the most important point. To the People of the Air, the OverSergeant was the hero, not simply because he unmasked the Double, but because of the way he did it. He had not thought to throw the spear when he sent for the heir. That was a moment's

improvisation, a test for which the Double could not draw on memorized answers.

One final note. The OverSergeant raised the true Rahnee'ah to his feet and declared him Eutik. In ordering the execution of the Double, he calls him Euban and says "Let him and all his kind be devoured." At this point in the text, one of my colleagues had added a footnote. "Devoured in this sense is clearly a metaphor for being overwhelmingly defeated."

Only, maybe not. Maybe it meant what it meant. *Eutik Si Euban*. Friend or food.

Before leaving Earth, I had spent three twelve-hour days with scientists and diplomats who had tried to give me instructions on how to respond to every possible situation. None had contemplated that Sreet might decide to kill me because my mental processes too closely resembled those of an ancient racial enemy.

It was time to throw the book away and play jazz.

* * * *

I kicked myself into the control room as Sreet was plotting the last jump. The Lagoon and Omega nebulas glowed brilliantly ahead of us. Sreet's system was roughly halfway between them. I drifted over until I was just out of reach. His beak looked terribly sharp.

He stopped what he was doing as soon as he became aware of my presence.

"I have an important question," I said. "Just how stupid do you think we are?"

"That is a difficult question." Difficult as in requiring much effort. Difficult as being potentially embarrassing. This was Sreet's idea of humor.

"Your story has been that your ship made an emergency jump from a supernova and just happened to emerge in our solar system. There are six hundred million stars within five thousand light years and you just happened to find ours."

"*Star Spear* had to emerge somewhere," he replied. "Any destination would be equally unlikely."

“You fell into our system along a path which crossed Earth’s orbit not far from Earth itself. Only that wouldn’t happen until we had enough time to modify a space craft built for another purpose. I multiply the odds of all of these things happening by each other and I get a number so big I don’t have a word for it.

“As it was, *Stellar Bounty* nearly missed its launch date. What would you have done if it had?”

“*Star Spear*’s engines would have begun to fire sporadically,” Sreet said. “Just enough to allow it to be captured by Earth’s gravity.”

I nodded. “So the whole story of being caught near a supernova was a ... fabrication.” I hoped that would translate as something better than “lie.”

“Of course,” Sreet said. “You have just realized this?”

“No. The thought occurred to a number of CIJUS officials even before you were brought to Earth. The more we examined your ship and questioned you, the more official opinion shifted in that direction.”

“Nothing was spoken,” Sreet said.

“They could not be sure,” I said. “No one wanted to offend you needlessly.”

“Except you.”

I shrugged. “It seemed important.”

“Is important.”

“Why?”

“*Eutik Si Euban*. Many Doubles stories you have read. Over centuries, we do not understand them. First, we think them magical, otherworldly. Then a competing tribe. Later a divergent race, broken away from our own in the past before awakening. Difficult to be certain since all are killed long past. We think.

“We learn wave function drive. In the stars we find ... ruins.”

Images flashed across my visor: a world of blue vegetation and green

seas. The point of view descended and hovered over an island that had been turned into a city of mounds. Light and air entered through a series of thin, rectangular slits. Any passageways, if they existed, were enclosed tunnels. There was no movement. As the point of view flew across the island, I saw sections which had collapsed, creating pits five or six stories deep.

An abrupt shift. Now Sreet's people were on the ground examining what appeared to be catacombs of some sort. Within were mummified corpses of creatures the same apparent size as Sreet but with a body plan more closely resembling crabs. An oval headless torso supported by four hooped legs. Two antennae between one set of legs, presumably defining the front of the creature. Two strong, shovel-shaped arms.

"Mound builders," Sreet said. "Like your technology of nineteenth century. All extinct. Records say extended warfare. First thought, engineered disease. Genetic exam shows two distinct races. The originals and their Doubles. Originals killed first. Then natural die-off for Doubles.

"Dating is not easy. Approximation: their Doubles appear within one thousand Earth years of our Doubles. We kill ours. Success kills theirs."

I stared at him, trying to work through the implications of what he was saying. He saved me the work.

"Hypothesis: approximately three hundred thousand years ago unknown Destroyers swept through our sector of the galaxy. Identified potentially technological species. Developed Doubles to take the place of the originals. Succeeded with Mound Builders. Struggle made my people stronger, faster, smarter."

"You are looking for the Destroyers," I said. "You want to find them before they come back to see the results of their handiwork."

An untranslatable squawk pierced my ears. "Most certainly do not want to find them yet. More than a quarter million years ahead of us. We look for allies!"

"Then why not tell us?" Not that I could imagine CIJUS volunteering to jump into the middle of an interstellar war, but at least we would have been able to consider our options more intelligently.

"Two known races, both with Doubles. Then you. Humans had Doubles or not. If yes, three choices: Doubles destroyed; battling still;

humans destroyed. Must learn which.”

I thought of the old legends of doppelgangers and shape shifters. A different part of my mind remembered that there once might have been a similar contest between human and almost human. The Neanderthals lost. Maybe genocide could be a good thing.

“How would you be able to tell?” I asked.

“Intelligence creates, improvises. Doubles mimic, memorize rules. Nothing new, no innovation.”

Sreet had been especially interested in improv comedy, jazz and poker. Now it all made sense. To be sure, there were rules to all three, and you needed at least an intuitive understanding of those rules. But even a perfect understanding was not sufficient. You had to know which rules could be broken and when to break them.

“You broke rules to ask important questions. I thought: this is true human. Humans might fight Destroyers. I chose you to come back to the Council of Aeries, convince my people that human could be allies. I would achieve puberty.”

“Leaving Earth, you become quiet. Questions are small and few. I fear a mistake. Error dangerous to the People. Solution: test you to breaking. Ask a question for which there was no old answer. Prove yourself or die.”

I shook my head, trying not to start shaking again. *And if I had been having a bad day? I wondered. Suppose I was too frightened to talk? Or just surrendered to my combat training reflexes? Would both of us have died?*

“So I have passed your test,” I said. “Do I now negotiate a treaty with your Council of Aeries?”

Sreet said something the translator did not pick up. The *Star Spear* responded. I blinked, having lost my train of thought. The scene on my visor shifted abruptly. Beneath us, white clouds swept across a blue world which, even from this height, was clearly not Earth. Two vessels, bristling with projections which certainly looked like gun tubes, fell into position on our flanks. They herded us towards a space station. Only when a vessel looking like the *Star Spear* passed in front of it did I get a clear sense of its

enormous size.

Sreet concluded a conversation with our escorts and turned his attention to me. "No. You passed my test. Now you must pass the test of the Council.

"With fortune's favor," he said brightly, "we both survive."