

# Conquest

## Anthony Boucher

### Star Science Fiction Stories #2

**The cat was** the first one out of the airlock—the first creature from Earth to touch the soil of a planet outside our system.

Laus was all against it, of course. He wanted out himself—not to get his name in the books for the Big Moment in History, but because it was his cat, and he'd sooner take a chance with his own body.

But Mavra made sense. "Eccentricity, yes," she said. "Stupidity, no. Bast's go-ing." And Bast went.

She liked it, too. We could see that from the port. Hydroponic-cycle air is OK, and Bast has seemed as used to it as the rest of us; but lots of loose fresh oxygen hit her like a dose of catnip. Something too small for us to make out flew by just above her. She leaped and missed; but the leap was so pleasingly high ("Slightly less than Earth-gravity," Laus observed) that she kept repeating it, bouncing among the flowers of the meadow and into the dusty path.

Then abruptly she sat down and inspected herself. The ship was so automatically clean that she'd been spotless for weeks. I guess she was glad of this chance to resume a normal life. No sound came through to us, of course, but just looking at her you could hear the thunderous purr as she settled down to give herself a tail-tip-to-whiskers bath.

We were damned near purring ourselves. This was a livable world—at least as far as gravity and oxygen went. Which is doing all right for an emergency crash-landing.

It was our third trip into space, and the first time we'd found a star with planets—seven of them, no less, of which this one (with two moons) was the second. We found the system and overdrove back to Communications, that Earth-built satellite of Alpha Centauri, the poor sun that never spawned any planets of its own. Don't ask me why you can install overdrive in a scoutship, but not Faster than Light communication. All I know is it takes something the size of the Communications satellite to house FL transmitters and receivers, and we have to go there to clear with the fed-tape boys back home.

So we got the clearance: No other scouts had reported our system, so go ahead and good luck. Find a habitable planet and you take the jackpot that's been accumulating compound interest for almost two centuries ever since the UN set it up just after the first moon flight.

So we overdrove back to our system...and crash-landed.

For a minute I thought we were through as a team. Laus kept looking back and forth between me and his smashed instruments, flexing his fingers and rubbing that damned bare chin of his. Any second he was going to go off with a Bikini burst. Even Mavra wasn't trining; she was withdrawn, off someplace of her own where she didn't have to look at a thing like me.

Then Bast decided that I was the best prospect to hit. She rubbed her order against my leg, looking up with a woebegone face whose big eyes plainly stated that nobody ever fed cats on this godforsaken spaceship—but if I acted fast I might be able to prevent a serious case of starvation.

Among our blessings, the reutilizer had sprung a leak. I didn't turn the spigot; I just put the dehydrated fish in a pan and held it under the leak. I mixed it, set it down, gave Bast a couple of little strokes behind the ears, and got out some plastiflux to stopper the leak. Bast looked at the pan dubiously, and I said, "Go on: Nice fish for fine cats." She hesitantly tried a mouthful, agreed, and made a brief remark of minimum gratitude.

"Well," I said, "somebody's speaking to me."

Mavra came back from wherever she'd been, and laughed. "Bast's right," she said. "You're still human. You're still useful. We're still alive. What more do we want?"

Laus still looked at the ruined instruments, as though it would take him a good hour to begin answering that question. But he looked at Bast too, and finally at me. "All right, Kip," he said. "Astrogation's a new science—"

"Science, hell!" I grinned at him. "It's an art. I don't know any more about the science of overdrive than the first airplane ace knew about the science of heavier-than-air flight. I fly with my synapses, if that's the word I want, and sometimes I guess they don't apse."

He was staring at my useless control dials. "I can see your problem. You're working in such incalculable distances that a relatively minute error is absolutely enormous. A miscalculation of 20,000 miles could be fatal in causing a crash-pull into a planet's gravity—and it would show up on that dial as .000,000,001 parsec." He seemed to feel better, as if stating our problem in decimal fractions he'd worked out in his head made it all a little more endurable.

"Well," said Mavra, "we're on a planet. The next test for the UN jackpot is the little word *habitable*. I don't suppose the atom-analyzer still...?"

It didn't, and that's where the argument started about who was to be first guinea pig through the airlock.

Now we three watched Bast finish her bath, and knew that at least we could breathe here. There were little items like food and water still to worry about, but it was safe to leave the ship. I was just starting to open the lock when Mavra's cry called me back to the port. That was how we saw the first of the Giants.

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**It looked like** an Earth meadow out there. The sun, we knew from our scouting tests, was a little colder than Sol, but the planet was closer in than Earth. The sun-light was about the same, and it was bright noon now. The grass was, so far as we could see, just plain grass, and if the flowers in the meadow and the trees beyond it looked unfamiliar, they didn't seem improbable—no more strange than Florida would look to a New Englander, or maybe not so much.

But the Giants...There were two of them, and they were of different sexes, if holding hands and looking (I guess the technical word is *gazing*) into each other's eyes, and not noticing where the hell you're going, have universal meaning. From which you'll gather they were humanoid—hands and eyes and all the other stan-dard attributes so far as we could see, for they wore clothes—free-flowing gar-ments which looked like woven cloth, implying some degree of civilization.

But there were three nonhumanoid things about them. A: they were both ab-solutely flat-chested, which sort of spoiled the picture. B.: they were both abso-lutely bald, which didn't help it any either. And C: they were both, as best we could judge using Bast as a measuring comparison, well over twelve feet tall and built (by humanoid standards) in proportion.

"It isn't possible...!" Mavra gasped. "This planet's Earth-size, Earth-gravity. They'd be bound to be..."

"Why?" Laus asked bluntly. "I've always doubted that point. Wrote a paper on it once. Earth has creatures every size from the ant to the elephant. Make it from the bacterium to the brontosaur. It's pure chance, aided by an opposable thumb, that of all living beings the medium-sized primates developed intelligence. Why should we expect the size-ratio aliens over us equals their planet over ours?"

"Shh!" said Mavra irrationally, as if the Giants might hear us.

We watched Bast's jump of astonishment as the four Giant feet pounded the soil near her. She looked at them curiously but without bristling, much as she had, from time to time, regarded the things that lived in the spaceship without our knowledge. As they sauntered along, lost in each other, Bast made up her mind. She stood up, leaned back on her hind feet, dug her foreclaws into the ground well in front

of her, gave her vertebrae a thorough stretching, then recompacted herself and walked casually toward the Giants, her tail carried like a tall exclamation point over the round dot beneath.

She picked the larger and presumably male Giant for her rubbing post. When, for the first time since we'd seen him, he took his eyes from his companion, Bast rolled over in her extra-voluptuous pose, the one that suggests that there's a mirror in the ceiling.

They both stopped and bent over her. You could guess the dialogue from the humanoid gestures and expressions: *What on Earth's that? Never saw one before. Well, it seems friendly anyhow. And it's cute too. Look, it wants to be rubbed. See, it likes it. Especially right there...*

"She's a lucky Giantess," said Mavra. "Nothing like tactile intuition in a man."

"I hope you've noticed," I said, "that Bast likes me."

"*Shh!*" she said, having started the conversation.

The male fumbled in a sort of sporan and tossed something to Bast, who fielded it nicely. The lovers grinned and looked at each other and stopped grinning and went on looking. Their hands met again and they started to stroll away, in no condition to notice a trifle like a scoutship crashed in the bushes at the edge of the meadow.

Bast spent a minute using the Giant's gift as a toy, batting it along the grass and chasing it. Then her interest became more practical. She sniffed at it, turned it over once and crouched eyeing it, tail atwilt. When she finally ate it, it made three mouthfuls.

Laus and I each held one of Mavra's hands, but it was no such hand-holding as we'd been witnessing. It was just trine unification in the intensity of our suspense—suspense squared as Bast decided that now, in all this lovely sun, was just the time for a nap. But she had hardly curled up when one of the tiny flying things passed over her. She bounded up with another of those leaps, chased it vainly for a full minute, then abruptly stopped and trotted sedately back to the ship as though that was all she'd intended all along.

We all let out our breaths at once. Laus dropped Mavra's hand; I didn't. "So there's also food here," he said, "that's at least not immediately poisonous. If one food's edible, doubtless most are; it implies a reasonably similar metabolism. It's a habitable planet."

"Jackpot!" I said, and then felt like seventy-eight kinds of damned fool.

Mavra smiled at me. "The Giants seem not uncivilized. They might even be able to repair the ship. But whether the UN ever learns the fact or not, we can live here."

"If," said Laus, "we can communicate with the Giants."

He was flexing his fingers again and rubbing his bare chin, but this time I knew his concern was focused on himself. This was his job; would he do it better than I'd done mine?

We were a team of specialists:

Kip Newby, astrogator. I was deciding to invent a new slogan for the Service: "You can't call yourself an astrogator until you've had your first crash-landing." By which standard I would be the only astrogator in the Galaxy.

Dr. Wenceslaus Hornung, xenologist—even more untried in his job than I was in mine. For the Giants were the first Xenoids (aliens to you) that an Earth man had ever found. For more than two centuries we'd been developing what some of them called Contact-Theory. It had never proved necessary in the solar system, but the theoretical work went on. Of all the boys who'd ever taken the works in BLAM (Biology, Linguistics, Anthropology, Mathematics) Laus was reckoned the absolute tops in xenology—so damned good that he could even get away with eccentricities like taking a pet on a space trip or scraping the hair off his face like an ancient Roman or a Dawn-Atomic man.

Mavra Dario, coordinator. We haven't developed a good word yet for her specialty. I've known lads that called her a "neuro-sturgeon," which I'm told derives from an early investigator who discovered

some of the principles of trine symbiosis. Her specialty is being unspecialized, being herself and thereby making each of us be more himself and at the same time more a part of the team. If you've never been on a team I couldn't make it clear to you; if you have I don't need to.

That was the team, plus—thank God for Laus's eccentricities—Bast. Laus has told me, more than once, all about the Egyptian goddess, but I still think of that name as an affectionate but not wholly inaccurate shortened form.

She was at the airlock now. I opened it. She seemed to think this was fine. It had been weeks since she'd had a door to decide whether or not to go through.

While she was making up her mind, Mavra spoke. "Don't rush it, Laus. There's no hurry for First Contact. If we're lucky, we can take a few days to size them up beforehand. And the first thing is to get busy with this shrubbery and try a rea-sonable job of camouflaging the ship. The next Giants may not be in love."

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**We were lucky.** Our meadow was a mountain meadow; as we guessed then and later learned, it was used for pasturing and it wasn't quite the right time of the year yet to move the flocks up there. Nearby, the mountain ran up higher to a peak. With slightly lower gravity and slightly higher oxygen percentage, it was a plea-sure to go in for a little mountain-climbing. And there in the valley on the other side was a city.

Our telefocals were among the very few surviving instruments. They were strong enough to give us a damned good idea of life in the city. We spent days of observation up there. Once Bast came along but it bored her. After that she would squat in the ship and peer after us through almost-shut eyes, regarding us some-what as an idol might look upon a crowd of worshippers, who are necessary for existence, but whose departure leaves him in more peaceful possession of the temple.

One thing was for sure: The Giants were civilized, even highly so. Their archi-tecture was (Mavra said) of exquisite if alien proportion. Their public statuary was good enough, by Earth standards, to hide away in a museum and not leave out, like the Hon. Rufus Fogstump in bronze, for the pigeons and the people. Their public life seemed peaceful and orderly, and largely centered around an enormous natural amphitheater, featuring what we interpreted to be plays and concerts and games. The games—Olympic-type contests of individuals rather than massed groups—gave us a chance to see the Giants practically naked in all their absolute hairlessness, and learn why a perfectly flat-chested girl could inspire passion. They were marsupials. I wondered if I would ever become a connoisseur of pouches.

We couldn't hear the music from the amphitheater, but once a group of pic-nickers made music of their own in our meadow. The instruments looked strange, though you could figure out familiar principles, but they listened good. There was one number especially that Laus described as "a magnificently improvised true passacaglia" and I (being something of a historical scholar myself in this field) called "jamming a real zorch boogie." Mavra said we were both right, and Bast implied we were both wrong but kept quiet about it.

A high civilization...but apparently not a mechanical one. Nothing visible beyond quadruped-power and simple applications of water wheels and wind-mills.

Help in repairing the ship began to look like an impossible dream. And sup-plies were running low. Water ran near us, but food...

"With civilization of this level," Laus pronounced confidently, "contact will be no problem." Bast shifted in his lap and indicated that she'd like a little more attention higher up the spine. "We've seen no evidence of armies or weapons, and the first Giants were friendly toward Bast even though she was, presumably, more alien to them than we shall seem."

I think Laus was set for a good half hour's discourse on why contact pre-sented no problems, when

Mavra pointed out the now always open airlock. "There's a Giant," she said. "I think it's the one Bast met first, and he's alone. How about now?"

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**If hand-holding** and breath-holding had marked our watching of Bast's encounter with this Giant, it was nothing to our tenseness now. We knew what Laus was doing. God knows he'd told us all about it often enough, and especially why Mathematics was the all-important M in the BLAM courses.

He was proving to a civilized alien that he too was a civilized being, more than an animal. He was demonstrating by diagram that he knew that this was the second planet (with two moons yet) in a system of seven. He was teaching his system of numbers and doing simple arithmetical exercises. He was proving that the square on the hypotenuse of a right-angle triangle equals the sum of the squares on the other two sides. He was using prepared pieces of string to show that the circumference of a circle is three and (for simplicity) one-seventh times as long as its diameter.

That was what he was doing, in theory. What we saw was this:

The Giant looked first astonished, then amused. *A man runs into the damndest things in this meadow!* He reached out a hand to stroke Laus's hair. Laus withdrew on his human dignity and began making marks on his pad. As he pointed from his drawing up to the sun, down to the planet itself, the Giant grinned, imitated the gestures, and then ran his large hand down Laus's back. He looked puzzled. *Feels more like cloth than fur.* Laus picked up a handful of pebbles to go into his counting routine. The Giant picked up a stone and threw it away, then looked a little resentful when Laus failed to chase it. Laus held up two pebbles and made a mark on his pad. The Giant rubbed his odd-feeling back again, then reassured himself by rubbing his hair. Laus shook his head indignantly and held up three pebbles. The Giant reached for them and tossed them in the air. He watched them, then looked back with some astonishment to see Laus still unmoved. He rubbed Laus's hair again, then jumped back at something he saw in Laus's eyes.

I don't know whether I heard Mavra say "Oh dear God...!" or felt it coming through our palms.

Laus had dropped the pebbles and got out his strings. As Laus spread the long one on the grass to make the circle, the Giant approached hesitantly. *I didn't get the other game, but this looks simple.* He lifted the string and held it at arm's length, above even his head and far out of Laus's grasp. He dangled it tantalizingly as Laus tried desperately to snatch it. The Giant began to smile. *Fine; this is what it likes.* He began backing away, Laus jumping and snatching after him. Then sharply Laus stopped and reached over for more pebbles.

Back to that routine, I thought; but Mavra was ahead of me. Her hand wasn't in mine, and when I turned she was half out of her workclothes.

"Look," I glugged. "I know I've been patient a long time, but is this quite the moment."

"Damn this zipper!" she said intently. "Give me a hand." And she went on peeling.

I needed two sets of eyes. Through the camouflage-bushes I could see that I'd been all wrong about Laus's use for the pebbles.

And him without even a slingshot.

The first stone smote the Giant in the forehead all right, but the rest of the sequence didn't follow. All it did was to irritate the hell out of him. He lashed out with one backhand blow and Laus was stretched on the grass.

Then the Giant backed away in consternation. My God! another one! But he didn't back fast, and Mavra's light on her feet. There she was, curving against him, looking up at him with soft wide eyes. And as his face relented and the old grin came back, he reached out for her and she dropped lithely, rolled

over, and con-templated that mirror up there.

In vague general design, I suppose, she wasn't too different from his Giantess, but the size and the hair and the breasts would all be enough to keep any such thoughts out of his mind. Gently, soothingly, happily he stroked her, exactly as I was stroking Bast, who had just jumped into my lap with an ill-tempered remark about people who spend their time staring at unimportant things and neglect the comfort of cats.

It all seems obvious when you look back on it from the vantage of God knows how many years; and up till the day he died, some three *here*—*years* ago, Laus was always ready with a speech on why the BLAM boys should have foreseen it.

"The science fiction writers seemed to be a step ahead," he'd say, "and the scientists followed their line. It seemed so logical. This was how to communicate with any intelligent being. But practically it meant 'any intelligent being with a Copernican view of his own world and an understanding of the mathematical use of zero.' In other words, nobody in the highest civilizations of our own Earth up until only a few hundred years ago. The noblest Roman of them all couldn't have understood my planetary diagram. The finest Greek mind would have been con-fused by my system of numbers. From what we know now, the best men here would understand about pi and about the square of the hypotenuse; with such an architectural culture it's inevitable. But what chance contact would? Even in our own contemporary Earth?"

And Mavra would always cut him off, eventually, by saying, "But isn't it better this way? If you had made contact, we'd simply have been lost aliens, trapped in a civilization that could never help us home. As it is," and she'd yawn and stretch gracefully, "we've conquered the planet."

Which we have, of course. Like I said, I don't know how long it's been. At the rate my great-great-(I think)—grandchildren are growing up, I must be pushing a hundred, which is the expectancy the actuaries gave me when last heard from; but I feel good for maybe another fifty.

There are hundreds of us by now, and we're beginning to spread into the other continents. Give us another generation or two, and there'll be thousands. It isn't hard to teach the kids something that combines duty and pleasure to such an extraordinary degree as multiplying. (Though I always doubt that Laus had his proper share of descendants; he took his crash-landing harder than I did mine.) And we teach them other things too, of course, all that we can remember of what all three of us knew.

(Funny: it still seems trine even with Laus gone...and by now even I know a fair amount of BLAM to pass on.)

And we teach them what Bast knew, and never meant to teach us. We still miss her. It's sad that she had a much shorter lifespan and no mate. But then otherwise she and her tribe would have been competition—and pretty ruthless, considering how much their long training would make them better at it.

But we learned enough from her. We know how to make the Giants feel that it's a pleasure to give pleasure to us, and a privilege to provide us with food and shelter. No clothes, since we saw they puzzled the one I still think of as Our Giant (Mavra still lives in his home). We don't need them much in this climate (I wonder if we ever needed them as much as we thought we did on Earth?), and besides our genes seem to have learned something from Bast too. Our great-greats are hairier than the hairiest Earth man, even a white. (This was a blow to Laus; he never quite got over having to stop scraping his face.)

The Giants obey well, for a race new to the custom. (Oh, sure they had pets before, but the type of pets that obey *them*.) Their medical science isn't bad; they've been training special doctors for us for some time, and this year they're building a hospital. There are farmers making a good living out of foods which we like but which never had much market before. They've even started cultivating that weed I accidentally discovered which is so much like tobacco and makes such a fine chaw.

The camouflage-bushes have grown naturally (with a little irrigation and fer-tilization when there were no Giants around). They have no idea where we came from, and since they have no notion of

evolution or the relation of species, they've decided it doesn't matter. When they do reach that point, their paleontologists can undoubtedly knock up a few fossil reconstructions near enough to suffice as our ancestors.

And meanwhile we're ready, whenever our people land, to hand over to them a ready-conquered planet.

But it's been a long time. In all these years, wouldn't a scoutship have...?

Sometimes I can't help wondering:

Have Bast's people landed on Earth?