

THE SEEDLING STARS
JAMES BLISH

BOOK FOUR

WATERSHED

The murmurs of discontent - Capt. Gorbel, being a military man, thought of it as "disaffection" - among the crew of the R.S.S. Indefensible had reached the point where they could no longer be ignored, well before the ship had come within fifty light years of its objective.

Sooner or later, Gorbel thought, sooner or later this idiotic seal-creature is going to notice them.

Capt. Gorbel wasn't sure whether he would be sorry or glad when the Adapted Man caught on. In a way, it would make things easier. But it would be an uncomfortable moment, not only for Hoqqeah and the rest of the pantrope team, but for Gorbel himself. Maybe it would be better to keep sitting on the safety valve until Hoqqeah and the other Altarians were put off on - what was its name again? Oh yes. Earth. But the crew plainly wasn't going to let Gorbel put it off that long.

As for Hoqqeah, he didn't appear to have a noticing center anywhere in his brain. He was as little discommoded by the emotional undertow as he was by the thin and frigid air the Rigellian crew maintained inside the battlecraft. Secure in his coat of warm blubber, his eyes brown, liquid and merry, he sat in the forward greenhouse for most of each ship's day, watching the growth of the star Sol in the black skies ahead.

And he talked. Gods of all stars, how he talked! Capt. Gorbel already knew more about the ancient - the very ancient history of the seeding program than he had had any. Desire to know, but there was still more coming. Nor was the seeding program Hoqqeah's sole subject. The Colonization Council delegate had had a vertical education, one which cut in a narrow shaft through many different fields of specialization in contrast to Corbel's own training, which had been spread horizontally over the whole subject of spaceflight without more than touching anything else.

Hoqqeah seemed to be making a project of enlarging the Captain's horizons, whether he wanted them enlarged or not. "Take agriculture," he was saying at the moment. "This planet we're to seed provides an excellent argument for taking the long view of farm policy. There used to be jungles there; it was very fertile. But the

people began their lives as farmers with the use of fire, and they killed themselves off in the same way."

"How?" Gorbel said automatically. Had he remained silent, Hoqqeah would have gone on anyhow; and it didn't pay to be impolite to the Colonization Council, even by proxy.

"In their own prehistory, fifteen thousand years before their official zero date, they cleared farmland by burning it off. Then they would plant a crop, harvest it, and let the jungle return. Then they burned the jungle off and went through the cycle again. At the beginning, they wiped out the greatest abundance of game animals Earth was ever to see, just by farming that way. Furthermore the method was totally destructive to the topsoil.

"But did they learn? No. Even after they achieved spaceflight, that method of farming was standard in most of the remaining jungle areas - even though the bare rock was showing through everywhere by that time."

Hoqqeah sighed. "Now, of course, there are no jungles. There are no seas, either. There's nothing but desert, naked rock, bitter cold, and thin, oxygen-poor air - or so the people would view it, if there were any of them left. Tapa farming wasn't solely responsible, but it helped."

Gorbel shot a quick glance at the hunched back of Lt. Averdor, his adjutant and navigator. Averdor had managed to avoid saying so much as one word to Hoqqeah or any of the other pantropists from the beginning of the trip. Of course he wasn't required to assume the diplomatic burdens involved - those were Corbel's crosses - but the strain of dodging even normal intercourse with the seal-men was beginning to tell on him.

Sooner or later, Averdor was going to explode. He would have nobody to blame for it but himself, but that wouldn't prevent everybody on board from suffering from it. Including Corbel, who would lose a first-class navigator and adjutant.

Yet it was certainly beyond Corbel's authority to order Averdor to speak to an Adapted Man. He could only suggest that Averdor run through a few mechanical courtesies, for the good of the ship. The only response had been one of the stoniest stares Corbel had ever seen, even from Averdor, with whom the Captain had been shipping for over thirty Galactic years.

And the worst of it was that Corbel was, as a human being, wholly on Averdor's side.

"After a certain number of years, conditions change on any planet," Hoqqeah babbled solemnly, waving a flipper-like arm to include all the points of light outside the greenhouse.

He was working back to his primary obsession: the seeding program. "It's only logical to insist that man be able to change with them - or, if he can't do that, he must establish himself somewhere else. Suppose he had colonized only the Earthlike planets? Not even those planets remain Earthlike forever, not in the biological sense."

"Why would we have limited ourselves to Earthlike planets in the first place?" Corbel said. "Not that I know much about the place, but the specs don't make it sound like an optimum world."

"To be sure," Hoqqeah said, though as usual Corbel didn't know which part of his own comment Hoqqeah was agreeing to. "There's no survival value in pinning one's race forever to one set of specs. It's only sensible to go on evolving with the universe, so as to stay independent of such things as the aging of worlds, or the explosions of their stars. And look at the results! Man exists now in so many forms that there's always a refuge somewhere for any threatened people. That's a great achievement - compared to it, what price the old arguments about sovereignty of form?"

"What, indeed?" Corbel said, but inside his skull his other self was saying: Ah-ha, he smells the hostility after all. Once an Adapted Man, always an Adapted Man and always fighting for equality with the basic human form. But it's no good, you seal-snouted bureaucrat. You can argue for the rest of your life, but your whiskers will always wiggle when you talk.

And obviously you'll never stop talking.

"And as a military man yourself, you'd be the first to appreciate the military advantages, Captain," Hoqqeah added earnestly. "Using pantropy, man has seized thousands of worlds that would have been inaccessible to him otherwise. It's enormously increased our chances to become masters of the galaxy, to take most of it under occupation without stealing anyone else's planet in the process. An occupation without dispossession - let alone without bloodshed. Yet if some race other than man should develop imperial ambitions, and try to annex our planets, it will find itself enormously outnumbered."

"That's true," Capt. Gorbel said, interested in spite of himself. "It's probably just as well that we worked fast, way back there in the beginning. Before somebody else thought up the method, I mean. But, how come it was us? Seems to me that the first race to invent it should've been a race that already had it - if you follow me."

"Not quite. Captain. If you will give me an example!"

"Well, we scouted a system once where there was a race that occupied two different planets, not both at the same time, but back and forth," Gorbel said. "They had a lifecycle that had three differ-

ent forms. In the first form they'd winter over on the outermost of the two worlds. Then they'd change to another form that could cross space, mother-naked, without ships, and spend the rest of the year on the inner planet in the third form. Then they'd change back into the second form and cross back to the colder planet.

"It's a hard thing to describe. But the point is, this wasn't anything they'd worked out; it was natural to them. They'd evolved that way." He looked at Avedor again. "The navigation was tricky around there during the swarming season."

Avedor failed to rise to the bait.

"I see; the point is well taken," Hoqqueah said, nodding with grotesque thoughtfulness. "But let me point out to you, Captain, that being already able to do a thing doesn't aid you in thinking of it as something that needs to be perfected. Oh, I've seen races like the one you describe, too - races with polymorphism, sexual alteration of generation, metamorphosis of the insect life-history type, and so on. There's a planet named Lithia, about forty light years from here, where the dominant race undergoes complete evolutionary recapitulation after birth - not before it, as men do. But why should any of them think of form-changing as something extraordinary, and to be striven for? It's one of the commonplaces of their lives, after all."

A small bell chimed in the greenhouse. Hoqqueah got up at once, his movements precise and almost graceful despite his tubbiness. "Thus endeth the day," he said cheerfully. "Thank you for your courtesy, Captain."

He waddled out. He would, of course, be back tomorrow. And the day after that.

And the next day - unless the crewmen hadn't tarred and feathered the whole bunch by then.

If only, Gorbel thought distractedly, if only the damned Adapts weren't so quick to abuse their privileges! As a delegate of the Colonization Council, Hoqqueah was a person of some importance, and could not be barred from entering the greenhouse except in an emergency. But didn't the man know that he shouldn't use the privilege each and every day, on a ship manned by basic-form human beings most of whom could not enter the greenhouse at all without a direct order? And the rest of the pantropists were just as bad. As passengers with the technical status of human beings, they could go almost anywhere in the ship that the crew could go - and they did, persistently and unapologetically, as though moving among equals. Legally, that was what they were - but didn't they know by this time that there was such a thing as prejudice? And that among common spacemen the prejudice against their kind -

and against any Adapted Man - always hovered near the borderline of bigotry?

There was a slight hum as Averdor's power chair swung around to face the Captain. Like most Rigellian men, the lieutenant's face was lean and harsh, almost like that of an ancient religious fanatic, and the starlight in the greenhouse hid nothing to soften it; but to Capt. Gorbel, to whom it was familiar down to its last line, it looked especially forbidding now.

"Well?" he said.

"I'd think you'd be fed to the teeth with that freak by this time," Averdor said without preamble. "Something's got to be done. Captain, before the crew gets so surly that we have to start handing out brig sentences."

"I don't like know-it-alls any better than you do," Gorbel said grimly. "Especially when they talk nonsense - and half of what this one says about space flight is nonsense, that much I'm sure of. But the man's a delegate of the Council. He's got a right to be up here if he wants to."

"You can bar anybody from the greenhouse in an emergency - even the ship's officers."

"I fail to see any emergency," Gorbel said stiffly.

"This is a hazardous part of the galaxy - potentially, anyhow. It hasn't been visited for millennia. That star up ahead has nine planets besides the one we're supposed to land on, and I don't know how many satellites of planetary size. Suppose somebody on one of them lost his head and took a crack at us as we went by?"

Gorbel frowned. "That's reaching for trouble. Besides, the area's been surveyed recently at least once - otherwise we wouldn't be here."

"A sketch job. It's still sensible to take precautions. If there should be any trouble, there's many a Board of Review that would call it risky to have unreliable, second-class human types in the greenhouse when it breaks out."

"You're talking nonsense."

"Dammit, Captain, read between the lines a minute," Averdor said harshly. "I know as well as you do that there's going to be no trouble that we can't handle. And that no reviewing board would pull a complaint like that on you if there were. I'm just trying to give you an excuse to use on the seals."

"I'm listening."

"Good. The Indefeasible is the tightest ship in the Rigellian navy, her record's clean, and the crew's morale is almost a legend. We can't afford to start giggling the men for their personal prejudices -

which is what it will amount to, if those seals drive them to breaking discipline. Besides, they've got a right to do their work without a lot of seal snouts poking continually over their shoulders."

"I can hear myself explaining that to Hoqqeah."

"You don't need to," Averdor said doggedly. "You can tell him, instead, that you're going to have to declare the ship on emergency status until we land. That means that the pantrope team, as passengers, will have to stick to their quarters. It's simple enough."

It was simple enough, all right. And decidedly tempting.

"I don't like it," Gorbel said. "Besides, Hoqqeah may be a know-it-all, but he's not entirely a fool. He'll see through it easily enough."

Averdor shrugged. "It's your command," he said. "But I don't see what he could do about it even if he did see through it. It'd be all on the log and according to regs. All he could report to the Council would be a suspicion - and they'd probably discount it. Everybody knows that these second-class types are quick to think they're being persecuted. It's my theory that that's why they are persecuted, a lot of the time at least."

"I don't follow you."

"The man I shipped under before I came on board the Indefeasible," Averdor said, "was one of those people who don't even trust themselves. They expect everybody they meet to slip a knife into them when their backs are turned. And there are always other people who make it almost a point of honor to knife a man like that, just because he seems to be asking for it. He didn't hold that command long."

"I see what you mean," Corbel said. "Well, I'll think about it."

But by the next ship's day, when Hoqqeah returned to the greenhouse, Gorbel still had not made up his mind. The very fact that his own feelings were on the side of Averdor and the crew made him suspicious of Averdor's "easy" solution. The plan was tempting enough to blind a tempted man to flaws that might otherwise be obvious.

The Adapted Man settled himself comfortably and looked out through the transparent metal. "Ah," he said. "Our target is sensibly bigger now, eh. Captain? Think of it: in just a few days now, we will be - in 'the historical sense - home again."

And now it was riddles! "What do you mean?" Corbel said.

"I'm sorry; I thought you knew. Earth is the home planet of the human race. Captain. There is where the basic form evolved."

Gorbel considered this unexpected bit of information cautiously. Even assuming that it was true - and it probably was, that would be the kind of thing Hoqqeah would know about a planet to which he

was assigned - it didn't seem to make any special difference in the situation. But Hoqqueah had obviously brought it out for a reason. Well, he'd be trotting - out the reason, too, soon enough; nobody would ever accuse the Altarian of being taciturn.

Nevertheless, he considered turning on the screen for a close look at the planet. Up to now he had felt not the slightest interest in it.

"Yes, there's where it all began," Hoqqueah said. "Of course at first it never occurred to those people that they might produce pre-adapted children. They went to all kinds of extremes to adapt their environment instead, or to carry it along with them. But they finally realized that with the planets, that won't work. You can't spend your life in a spacesuit, or under a dome, either.

"Besides, they had had form trouble in their society from their earliest days. For centuries they were absurdly touchy over minute differences in coloring and shape, and even in thinking. They had regime after regime that tried to impose its own concept of the standard citizen on everybody, and enslaved those who didn't fit the specs."

Abruptly, Hoqqueah's 'chatter began to make Gorbel uncomfortable. It was becoming easier and easier to sympathize with Averdor's determination to ignore the Adapted Man's existence entirely.

"It was only after they'd painfully taught themselves that such differences really don't matter that they could go on to pantropy," Hoqqueah said. "It was the logical conclusion. Of course, a certain continuity of form had to be maintained, and has been maintained to this day. You cannot totally change the form without totally changing the thought processes. If you give a man the form of a cockroach, as one ancient writer foresaw, he will wind up thinking like a cockroach, not like a human being. We recognized that. On worlds where only extreme modifications of the human form would make it suitable - for instance, a planet of the gas giant type no seeding is attempted. The Council maintains that such worlds are the potential property of other races than the human, races whose psychotypes would not have to undergo radical change in order to survive there."

Dimly, Capt. Gorbel saw where Hoqqueah was leading him, and he did not like what he saw. The seal-man, in his own maddeningly indirect way, was arguing his right to be considered an equal in fact as well as in law. He was arguing it, however, in a universe of discourse totally unfamiliar to Capt. Gorbel, with facts whose validity he alone knew and whose relevance he alone could judge. He was,

in short, loading the dice, and the last residues of Corbel's tolerance were evaporating rapidly.

"Of course there was resistance back there at the beginning," Hoqqeah said. "The kind of mind that had only recently been persuaded that colored men are human beings was quick to take the attitude that an Adapted Man - any Adapted Man - was the social inferior of the 'primary' or basic human type, the type that lived on Earth. But it was also a very old idea on the Earth that basic humanity inheres in the mind, not in the form.

"You see. Captain, all this might still have been prevented, had it been possible to maintain the attitude that changing the form even in part makes a man less of a man than he was in the 'primary' state. But the day has come when that attitude is no longer tenable - a day that is the greatest of all moral watersheds for our race, the day that is to unite all our divergent currents of attitudes toward each other into one common reservoir of brotherhood and purpose. You and I are very fortunate to be on the scene to see it."

"Very interesting," Gorbel said coldly. "But all those things happened a long time ago, and we know very little about this part of the galaxy these days. Under the circumstances which you'll find clearly written out in the log, together with the appropriate regulations - I'm forced to place the ship on emergency alert beginning tomorrow, and continuing until your team disembarks. I'm afraid that means that henceforth all passengers will be required to stay in quarters."

Hoqqeah turned and arose. His eyes were still warm and liquid, but there was no longer any trace of merriment in them.

"I know very well what it means," he said. "And to some extent I understand the need - though I had been hoping to see the planet of our birth first from space. But I don't think you quite understood me. Captain. The moral watershed of which I spoke is not in the past. It is now. It began the day that the Earth itself became no longer habitable for the so-called basic human type. The flowing of the streams toward the common reservoir will become bigger and bigger as word spreads through the galaxy that Earth itself has been seeded with Adapted Men. With that news will go a shock of recognition - the shock of realizing that the 'basic' types are now, and have been for a long time, a very small minority, despite their pretensions."

Was Hoqqeah being absurd enough to threaten - an unarmed, comical seal-man shaking a fist at the captain of the indefeasible?
Or -

"Before I go, let me ask you this one question, Captain. Down there is your home planet, and my team and I will be going out on its surface before long. Do you dare to follow us out of the ship?"

"And why should I?" Gorbel said.

"Why, to show the superiority of the basic type. Captain," Hoqqueah said softly. "Surely you cannot admit that a pack of sealmen are your betters, on your own ancestral ground!"

He bowed and went to the door. Just before he reached it, he turned and looked speculatively at Gorbel and at Lt. Averdor, who was staring at him with an expression of rigid fury.

"Or can you?" he said. "It will be interesting to see how you manage to comport yourselves as a minority. I think you lack practice."

He went out. Both Gorbel and Averdor turned jerkily to the screen, and Gorbel turned it on. The image grew, steadied, settled down.

When the next trick came on duty, both men were still staring at the vast and tumbled desert of the Earth.