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*It was the grisliest trophy of them all. Hanging there in the main club room of the Trottersmen, it was a grim reminder that not all the members were idle playboys who had bought their memberships with animals shot from ambush in the interdicted kraals of Africa or the blue mist-jungles of Todopus III.*

*It was a strange trophy, plaque-mounted between the head of a Coke's hartebeest and the fanged jaws of a szlygor. There was the damnedest watchfulness in the eyes.*

*It had been Nathaniel Derr's final grant to his club. A visitor to the Trottersmen's gallery (invited down for the weekly open cocktail party) could walk through room after room filled with the bloody booty of two hundred hunting expeditions Derr had commissioned. A visitor (whether hip-booted spacer or effete dignitary) would surely marvel at the quantity and diversity of wildlife Derr had mastered. Photoblox showed him proudly resting one foot on the blasted carcasses of Mountain Gorilla and Cape Lion, butchered Hook-lipped Rhino and puma. Hides with the Derr emblem branded on them festooned every wall: cheetah and javelina, Huanaco and Sika Deer, deeler and ferri-cat. The mounted heads were awesome: bull elephant and prestosaur, king cobra and desert wolf. The wordhunter seemed weightless when applied to Nathaniel Derr; perhaps*

*agent of destruction might have approached the reality.*

*Even among the Trottersmen he had been sui generis. His fellow clubmen had called him a fanatic. Some even called him butcher—but not publicly. Nathaniel Derr had left the Trottersmen almost thirteen million dollars.*

*And the final trophy.*

*But if the visitor was particularly trustworthy, and if they had all taken several stingarees too many, and if the visitor wheedled properly, the Trottersmen might just tell him the story behind that gruesome trophy.*

*The story of Nathaniel Derr's last kill. And of his visit to the planet Ristable.*

\* \* \* \*

The day, like all the days since he had arrived on Ristable, was too placid for Derr. Had the planet sported thirty-two kilometer an hour gales, or freezing snowstorms, or unbearable heat as in the veldt ... then he would have gladly suffered, and even reveled in it. Discomfort was the hunter's environment.

But this baby-bath of a world was serene, and calm, and unflurried.

Nathaniel Derr did not care to have his hunter status challenged, even by the climate.

He stared out of the slowly-moving half-track truck, watching the waist-high, unbroken plain of dull russet grass whisper past. He felt the faint stirring of the winds as they ruffled his thick, gray hair.

Derr was a big man: big of chest, big of hand. Big even in the way he watched, and the way he fondled the stet-rifle. As though he had been born with the gun grafted to him.

His eyes had the tell-tale wrinkles around them that labeled him a watcher. In a stand of grass, in the bush, or waiting for a flight of mallards to honk overhead, he was a watcher. Again, there was something else, less simple, in his face.

A hunter's face...

...but something else, too.

“Hey, you!” he yelled over the noise of the truck's antique water-piston engine. The nut-brown native who drove the half-track paid no attention. The truck made too much noise. Derr yelled again, louder: “Hey, you! Dummy!” The native's oblong head turned slightly; he inclined an ear; Derr yelled, “What is this we're going to?”

The native's voice was deep and throaty, a typical Ristabite tone. “Ristable, *shasir* Derr.” Nothing more. He turned back to the driving.

Derr let his heavy features settle down into a frown. The word “ristable” seemed to mean many things on this planet. First, it meant “home,” the name of the world; and now it was the name of a ceremony or something he was about to attend. He had heard it used several other ways during the past week.

Nathaniel Derr turned his thoughts inward as the half-track rolled over the grassland. The past week; he dwelled on it sequentially.

When he had applied to the Mercantile System for supercargo passage on a liner out to the stars, he had hoped for bigger hunts, better kills, finer trophies. But though it had cost him more for this one trip than all the safaris he had staged on Earth—and they were many, many—so far his appetite had only been whetted. The szlygor he had bagged on Haggadore was a puny thing ... even though it had gutted three of his bearers before he'd gotten the 50.50 charge into the beast's brain. The prestosaur was big, but too cumbersome to have been any real threat. The ferri-cat and the deeler had been the roughest. The deeler was more an asp than a spider, but had exhibited the deadliest traits of both before he had slit its hood with his vibroblade. The ferri-cat had dropped from a feathery-leafed tree on Yawmac; and it was proof indeed that Derr's age had not diminished his strength, for he had strangled the fearsome yellow feline. Even so, the vibrant surge of the *maximum kill* had been absent. Perhaps he had expected too much.

But Ristable was just *too* dead, *too* boring, *too* unexciting.

The planet was old; so ancient; all mountains had long since flattened away; undisturbed grassland swayed from one end of the single great continent to the other. The natives were simple, uncomplicated agrarian folk, who just happened to thresh from their grasses a sweet flour much enjoyed by gourmets on a hundred worlds, and worth all the plasteel hoes and rakes the merc-ships could trade.

So here he was on Ristable, where the rubble of the glorious ancient cities lay at the edges of the grasslands, slowly dissolving into the land from which they had come.

The past week had been one of utter boredom, while the natives went about their haggling, the merc-ship's crew stretched and mildly leched, and the big red sun, Sayto, burned its way across the sky.

No hunting, too much sleeping, and a growing disgust of the slothful natives. It was true they were anxious to learn about civilization—take the driver of this half-track—but though they mimicked the Earthmen's ways, still they were farmers, slow and dull. He had watched them all week, tending their farms, having community feasts, and taking care of the animals that lived out on the plains.

In fact, today had been the first break in the monotony. Nerrows, the captain of the merc-ship, had come to him that morning, and offered him a chance to see a “ristable.”

“I thought that was the name of the planet?” Derr had said, pulling on his bush-boots.

Nerrows had thumbed his cap back on his crewcut head, and his slim face had broken lightly in a smile. “When these people come up with a good word, they don't let it go easily. Yeah, that's right. The planet *is* Ristable, but so are the animals out there.” He jerked a thumb at the grasslands lying beyond the hut. “And so is the ceremony they have once a week ... ristable, that is.”

Derr had perked up sharply. “What ceremony?”

Nerrows smiled again, and said, “You know what the word ‘ristable’ means in this usage? I didn't think so; it means, literally, ‘Kill Day.’ Want to take it in? The ship won't be unsaddled here more than a couple days, so you'd better take in all you can.”

Derr stood up, smoothing out his hunt-jacket, slipping into it, sealing it shut. “Is it safe? They won't try to lynch me for observing the secret ceremony, or anything?”

Nerrows waved away the worried comment. “Safest planet on our route. These people haven't had wars since before man was born. You're completely safe, Derr.”

The hunter clapped the captain on his thin shoulders, wondering inwardly how such a scrawny sample could get to be a merc-ship officer ... he'd *never* make it where it counted ... as a hunter. "Okay, Captain, thanks a lot. Got someone who can direct me out there?"

\* \* \* \*

Derr tapped the native again. "How much farther?"

The native's horny shoulders bobbed. "Ten, 'leven k'lometer, *shasir* Derr. Big ritable today."

Derr pulled a black cigar from the cartridge ring, one of ten in a broken row across his jacket. He lit it. Drew deeply. He never kept extra cartridges in the rings; if he hadn't bagged his quarry by the time the stet-rifle was empty, Derr felt he deserved to die. That was his philosophy. He drew down on the black cigar, let a heavy cloud of smoke billow up over his head.

The ancient water-piston half-track rolled steadily out into the grasslands. They passed a pile of rubble; Derr recognized it as another of the lost cities. The faintly pink columns rose spiraling, then broke with ragged abruptness. Strangely-pyramidal structures split down the middle. Carved figures with smashed noses, broken arms, shattered forms ... forms which could not be understood ... humanoid or something else?

As they came abreast of the ruined city with huge clumps of grass growing up in its middle, Derr crossed his legs in the back seat, and he said, "Those cities, who made them?"

The native shrugged. "Don't know. Ritable."

Ritable again.

The half-track passed walking natives, heading toward a plume of gray smoke that twisted out of the grasslands ahead. Eventually, they drew up on the edge of a widely-cleared dirt area. Surrounded by the waist-high russet grass on all sides, it was like a bald spot on someone's head. The dirt was packed solid and hard with the footprints of a hundred thousand bare feet. The smoke rose from a large bonfire used to summon the natives. Even as Derr watched, the crowd that had already gathered swelled at the edges.

Strangely enough, a path quite wide and straight leading out to the grasslands was left in the circle of natives.

"What's that?" Derr asked the driver, motioning to the circle, to the path, to the Ristabites watching at nothing. The native motioned him to silence and Derr realized, for the first time, that there wasn't a sound in the crowd. The natives, male and female, children and old dark-brown crones, stood silently, shifting their feet, watching, but not speaking.

"Come on, boy, open up!" Derr prodded the native angrily. "What's this whole thing ... what's that path there...?"

The native spun around, looked at Derr for a moment in annoyance and open anger, and then vaulted out of the half-track. In a moment he was lost in the crowd.

Derr had no other choice: he slung the stet-rifle over his shoulder, and slid up onto the rollbar between the driver's cab and the back seat, getting a better view of what was happening.

What was happening, as he settled himself, was that a medium-sized animal—the ones taken care of by the natives, and labeled, inevitably, ristables—was loping in from the grasslands; on six double-jointed legs.

It was the size of a large horse, or a small black bear. It was dull gray in color, mottled with whitish spots along the underbelly. Its chest was massive. It was built as an allosaurus might have been. Smooth front that rose straight up to a triangular skull with huge, pocketed eyes set forward on each side of the head. The back sloped sharply at forty-five degrees, ending in a horny tail. The head was darker gray, and had one gigantic unicorn-like horn protruding from a space midway between the eyes. No ... as Derr watched it coming closer, he saw that the horn was not single; there was a smaller, less apparent horn stuck down near the base of the larger one.

The beast also had two groups of vestigial tentacles, appearing to be six or eight to a cluster; one on either side of its body, halfway up the massive neck.

This was a ristable. As everything was ristable.

The beast charged down the path between the natives, much like a bull entering the *Plaza de Toros*, and stopped in the center, its little red eyes glaring, the two front paws clopping at the dirt, leaving furrows.

Abruptly, a native stepped out of the crowd, and removed all his clothing—little enough to begin with—and called to the animal (Derr continued to think of it as a bull, for no good reason, except this seemed to be a bullfight), clapping his hands, stamping his feet.

*Bullfight*, Derr thought. *This is more like it*. Then he thought, *Ristable. Kill Day*.

The native moved slowly, letting the beast edge in on him. It pawed the ground, and snorted through a pair of breather holes below the horns. Then the native leaped in the air, and chanted something unintelligible. As he came down in the dirt, the animal moved sharply, and charged across the cleared space. People in its line of attack stepped back quickly; and the native leaped agilely out of the way.

It went that way for over an hour.

The ristable charged, and the native leaped out of its path.

Then, when Derr was convinced it would go on this way till darkness ... the dance changed. Radically.

The native settled down cross-legged in the dirt, and clasped his hands to his chest. He settled down, and the bull charged. He settled down ... and...

*Great God!* thought Derr in horror, *he's sitting there, letting it gore him. He's...*

Then it was over, and they carried the native away, as the ristable loped back down the path to the grassland.

There was no reaction from the crowd: no dismay, no applause, no notice taken.

Derr slipped back into the half-track, bewildered; and sometime later, though Derr was unaware of it, the driver came back the truck, stared at him silently for a few seconds, then vaulted over the low door, and started the engine.

Derr stirred slightly as the half-track rolled away from the cleared space. His tracker's mind registered that the dirt was of a darker hue than when they had arrived; and that the rest of the natives were walking swiftly back toward the village ... carrying something sodden; but he seemed to be far lost in thought.

The half-track passed the natives, and arrived in town an hour before the sodden cargo was brought in and laid to rest alongside hundreds of previous loads filling identical graves.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm not going on with you, Nerrows," Derr said.

"You know we'll be heading out—Artemis, Shoista, Lalook, Coastal II—and we won't be able to pick you up for almost three months." He stared at Derr with annoyance.

"I know that."

"Then why do you want to stay?"

"There's a trophy here I want."

Nerrows' eyes slitted down. "Watch that stuff, Derr."

"No, no, nothing like that. The ristable."

"You mean the animal out there in the fields, the one they go fight every week?"

Derr nodded, checked the stet-rifle, though he was not going hunting for a while yet. "That's it. But there's something important these natives don't know about that creature."

"Yeah? What?"

"How to kill it."

"What are you talking about?"

Derr settled back on the cot, looked at Nerrows carefully. "I talked to some of the natives when I got back yesterday from that ceremony. They go out every week to fight the ristable."

"So?"

"They always lose."

"Always?"

"Every damned time. They haven't won a bout with those beasts for as long as they can remember. Do you know that they plant their dead in rows of two hundred?"

The captain nodded. "Yes, I've noticed that."

Derr pulled a cigar loose, lit it, smiled grimly. "But there's something you *didn't* know ... namely, they plant rows on *top* of the rows. What's out there now," he waved at the native cemetery, "is the

five-hundredth generation, or something like that. They've been fighting the ristables, dying regularly, and being planted for time beyond memory.”

The captain looked bemused. “The best fertilizer, they tell me.”

“Ah, that's just it!” Derr waved the cigar melodramatically. “They've been winding up like that for centuries ... without once winning.”

“Don't they *want* to win?”

Derr looked perplexed for a moment, spread his hands. “From what I can tell, from what I was able to get out of the Headsman, they just don't know any other way. They've been doing it that way, *just* that way, since before they can remember, and they don't know why. I asked the Headsman, and he stared at me as if I'd asked him why he breathed.

“Then he answered that it was just the way things were; that's all.”

Nerrows scuffed his feet at the hard-packed floor of the hut. He looked up at Derr finally. “What's that got to do with you?”

“I got the permission of the Headsman to go into the cleared space, in place of a native; some week soon. He thought I was nuts, but he'll soon see how an Earthman fights!”

\* \* \* \*

For ten weeks Derr had watched them get mauled and bloodied and ripped and killed. Now, stripped to the waist, clad only in a breechclout, the ornately-carved bush-knife in his thick, square hand, Nathaniel Derr moved into the cleared space to face his first ristable.

The beast loped in from the grasslands almost immediately, passing between the natives lining the path without touching anyone. *Strange how it seems to know what it's to fight, and not bother any others*, he thought, hefting the razor-bladed weapon. Sweat had begun to stand out on his face, and the smooth handle of the knife felt slippery in his grip. He dried his hand on the breechclout, and took the knife again.

The ristable lumbered into the clearing, and Derr made note that it was not the one he had seen the week before last, nor the week before that, nor last week. Each week seemed to bring another beast—at some unknown, unbidden signal—ready to gore a nut-brown native with that deadly, alabaster horn.

Derr circled around the edge of the clearing, feeling the heat-stink of the natives behind him. The beast pawed and circled, too, as though uncertain.

Then it charged. It shot forward on six double-jointed legs, its tentacle clusters flailing, its head lowered, the breath snorting from its breather holes.

Derr spun out of the way. The beast pulled up short before it rammed the crowd.

It turned on him, staring with little red eyes.

Derr stared back, breath coming hot and fast. He felt good; he felt fine; he felt the kill coming. It was always like this.

The ristable lurched forward again, this time seeming to make a short, sharp, sidestepping movement; Derr had to be quick. He managed to twirl himself past the beast with only a scant millimeter between his flesh and that bone-white horn.

The ristable brought up sharply, stopped, turned, and glared at Derr.

This was the *pojar*, as the natives called it. The time to stop, the moment to sit down and be killed. So Derr sat down, in the manner he had seen the natives do it ... and oddly, the crowd exhaled with relief.

The ristable pawed, snorted, charged.

It came for him ... and suddenly Derr was up, thrusting himself from the dirt with the strength of his legs, and the ristable could not stop its movement, and it was past the spot where Derr had sat cross-legged, its horn tearing the air viciously where Derr's chest had been a moment before.

But Derr was not there to die.

He was whirling, clutching, and in a stride and a breath he was on the ristable's back; and the knife hand came up with a slash and the blood, and down with a thud and the blood, and back again with a rip and more blood, and three times more, till the ristable convulsed and tried to bellow, and tipped over, the legs failing in precision step.

Derr leaped free as the ristable collapsed to the dirt. He watched in silence and power, the awe and fury of the triumphant hunter flowing in him like red, rich wine; watched as his trophy bled to death on the sand.

It died soon enough.

Then the natives seized him.

“Hold it! Stop! What are you doing? I won, I killed the thing ... I showed you how to do it ... let me go!” But they had him tightly by the arms and the waist, without word and without expression. They started to take him away, back to the village.

He struggled and screamed, and had they not taken the blade from him he would no doubt have slashed *them*. But he was powerless, and screamed that he had done them a favor, showed them how to kill the ristable.

Then when they had him tied in the hut at the edge of the village, the Headsman told him...

“You have killed the ristable. You will die.”

As simply as that. No question, no comment, no appeal, he was to die. The night came all too soon.

\* \* \* \*

When the moons were high overhead he called for the Headsman. He called, and the Headsman thought it was for a final wish, a boon. But it was not, for this was not a Ristabite: this was the Earthman who had not known the way of it, who had killed the god ristable.

“Look,” Derr tried to be calm and logical, “tell me why I'm to die. I don't know. Can't you see, if I'm to die, I have a right to know *why* !”



So the Headsman drew from tribal legend, from memories buried so deeply they were feelings in the blood without literal word or meaning, but were simply “the way of it.”

And this was it ... this was the secret behind it, that wasn't really a secret at all, but just the way of it:

Who the ruler, and who the ruled [the Headsman said]? Take the blood in your veins. How do you know that at one time the blood might not have been the dominant life form of Earth, ruling its physical bodies, using them as tools. Then, as time and eons passed, the blood turned its thoughts to other things, maintaining the bodies merely as habitations.

It *could* be so ... if the blood ruled you, and not you the blood, it could be so [the Headsman said]. The last thing you would do, under any circumstances: the spilling of blood. Don't you wince when you bleed, when you cut yourself, and you rush to bandage yourself? What if it were so, and you had lost the racial memory that said I am ruled by my blood ... but still you would know the way of it.

That was how it was on Ristable. At one time the bulls, the ristable beasts, ruled the natives. They built the cities with what were now atrophied tentacles. Then as eons passed, they turned to higher things; and allowed their bodies to graze in the fields; and let the natives feed them; and let the cities rot into themselves.

As time passed, the memories passed—oh, it was a long time; long enough for the mountains of Ristable to sink into grasslands—and eventually the natives had no recollection of what they had been, not even considering themselves ruled, so long and so buried was it. Then they took care of the ristables, and one last vestige of caste remained, for the bulls accepted sacrifices. The natives went to die ... and one a week was put beneath the sod ... and that was the way of it.

So deep and so inbred, that there was not even a conscious thought of it; that was simply the way of it.

But here was a stupid Earthman who had not known the way of it. He had won. He had killed a god, a ruler, deeper than any rule that ever existed...

*That* was the secret that Derr learned; the secret that was not even a secret really: just the way of it.

“So if there is anything I can grant,” said the Headsman in true sorrow, for he bore this Earthman no malice, “just tell it.”

And Nathaniel Derr, the great white hunter from Earth, thought about it.

Finally, as they untied him, taking him to the cleared area outside the village where he had killed the god ruler, the final twist came to him. Then he made his request, knowing the Mercantile Ship would come months too late, and there was nothing to be done.

He made his request, and they tied him between the posts, and finally the new ristable came, with its snow-white horn lowered, and fire in its eyes.

He watched the ristable pawing and snorting and charging, and he knew his request would be carried out.

*How strange*, he thought, as the tip of the horn plunged deep to the softness that lies within all hard men. *Of all the trophies I've gathered...*

Then there was no thought of trophies.

\* \* \* \*

*So there it is, hanging between the hartebeest and the szlygor in the Trottersmen's trophy room. There was no choice about hanging it; after all, thirteen million dollars is thirteen million dollars. But it does give the members a chill from hell.*

*Still, there it hangs, and usually the room is closed off. But occasionally, if drinks are too many, and wit is abundant, the tale will be told. Perhaps not always with accuracy, but always with wonder.*

*Because it is a marvelous job of taxidermy.*

*There are even members who are willing to pay to find out how the Ristabite natives who did the job were able to retain the clean white color of the hair...*

*...and that damned watchfulness in the eyes.*

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