

Gordy is so good at creating believably alien characters that once at a convention I tugged on his face to see if it would come off. (It didn't, but I'm not entirely sure that proves anything.) Two of his most fascinatingly unique aliens decorate the following story. If you squint at the plot, you'll notice that it's one of the hoariest cliches in the business – turned around one hundred eighty degrees. The art of diplomacy is a subtle and difficult one . . . especially out there in the field.

BROTHER CHARLIE

I

The matter of her standby burners trembled through the APC9 like the grumbling of an imminent and not entirely unominous storm. In the cramped, lightly grease-smelling cockpit, Chuck Wagnall sat running through the customary preflight check on his instruments and controls. There were a great many to check out – almost too many for the small cockpit space to hold; but then old number 9, like all of her breed, was equipped to operate almost anywhere but underwater. She could even have operated there as well, but she would have needed a little time to prepare herself, before immersion.

On his left-hand field screen the Tomah envoy escort was to be seen in the process of moving the Tomah envoy aboard. The Lugh, Binichi, was already in his bin. Chuck wasted neither time nor attention on these – but when his ship range screen lit up directly before him, he glanced at it immediately.

"Hold Seventy-nine," he said automatically to himself, and pressed the acknowledge button.

The light cleared to reveal the face of Roy Marlie, Advance Unit Supervisor. Roy's brown hair was neatly combed in place, his uniform closure pressed tight, and his blue eyes casual and relaxed – and at these top danger signals, Chuck felt his own spine stiffen.

"Yo, how's it going, Chuck?" Roy asked.

"Lift in about five minutes."

"Any trouble picking up Binichi?"

"A snap," said Chuck. "He was waiting for me right on the surface of the

bay. For two cents' worth of protocol he could have boarded her here with the Tomah."

Chuck studied the face of his superior in the screen. He wanted very badly to ask Roy what was up; but when and if the supervisor wanted to get to the point of his call, he would do so on his own initiative.

"Let's see your flight plan," said Roy.

Chuck played the fingers of his left hand over the keys of a charter to his right. There appeared superimposed on the face of the screen between himself and Roy an outline of the two continents of this planet that the Tomah called Rant and the Lugh called Vanyinni. A red line that was his projected course crept across a great circle arc from the dot of his present position, over the ocean gap to the dot well inside the coastline of the southern continent. The dot was the human Base camp position.

"You could take a coastal route," said Roy, studying it.

"This one doesn't put us more than eight hundred nautical miles from land at the midpoint between the continents."

"Well, it's your neck," said Roy, with a light-heartedness as ominous as the noise of the standby burners. "Oh, by the way, guess who we've got here? Just landed. Your uncle, Member Wagnall."

Aha! said Chuck. But he said it to himself. "Tommy?" he said aloud. "Is he handy, there?"

"Right here," answered Roy, and backed out of the screen to allow a heavy, graying-haired man with a kind, broad face to take his place.

"Chuck, boy, how are you?" said the man.

"Never better, Tommy," said Chuck. "How's politicking?"

"The appropriations committee's got me out on a one-man junket to check up on you lads," said Earth District Member 439 Thomas L. Wagnall. "I promised your mother I'd say hello to you if I got to this Base. What's all this about having this project named after you?"

"Oh, not after me," said Chuck. "Its full name isn't Project Charlie, it's Project Big Brother Charlie. With us humans as Big Brother."

"I don't seem to know the reference."

"Didn't you ever hear that story?" said Chuck. "About three brothers – the youngest were twins and fought all the time. The only thing that stopped them was their big brother Charlie coming on the scene."

"I see," said Tommy. "With the Tomah and the Lugh as the two twins. Very apt. Let's just hope Big Brother can be as successful in this instance."

"Amen," said Chuck. "They're a couple of touchy peoples."

"Well," said Tommy. "I was going to run out where you are now and surprise you, but I understand you've got the only atmosphere pot of the outfit."

"You see?" said Chuck. "That proves we need more funds and equipment. Talk it up for us when you get back, Tommy. Those little airfoils you saw on the field when you came in have no range at all."

"Well, we'll see," said Tommy. "When do you expect to get here?"

"I'll be taking off in a few minutes. Say four hours."

"Good. I'll buy you a drink of diplomatic scotch when you get in."

Chuck grinned.

"Bless the governmental special supply. And you. See you, Tommy."

"I'll be waiting," said the Member. "You want to talk to your chief, again?"

He looked away outside the screen range. "He says nothing more. So long, Chuck."

"So long."

They cut connections. Chuck drew a deep breath. "Hold Seventy-nine," he murmured to his memory, and went back to check that item on his list.

He had barely completed his full check when a roll of drums from outside the ship, penetrating even over the sound of the burners, announced that the Tomah envoy was entering the ship. Chuck got up and went back through the door that separated the cockpit from the passenger and freight sections.

The envoy had just entered through the lock and was standing with his great claw almost in salute. He most nearly resembled, like all the Tomah, a very large ant with the front pair of legs developed into arms with six fingers each and double-opposed thumbs. In addition, however, a large, lobster-like claw was hinged just behind and above the waist. When standing erect, as now, he measured about four feet from mandibles to the point where his rear pair of legs rested on the ground, although the great claw, fully extended, could have lifted something off a shelf a good foot or more above Chuck's head – and Chuck was over six feet in height. Completely unadorned as he was, this Tomah weighed possibly ninety to a hundred and ten Earth-pounds.

Chuck supplied him with a small throat-mike translator.

"Bright seasons," said the Tomah, as soon as this was adjusted. The translator supplied him with a measured, if uninflected voice.

"Bright seasons," responded Chuck. "And welcome aboard, as we humans say. Now, if you'll just come over here –"

He went about the process of assisting the envoy into the bin across the aisle from the Lugh, Binichi. The Tomah had completely ignored the other; and all through the process of strapping in the envoy, Binichi neither stirred, nor spoke.

"There you are," said Chuck, when he was finished, looking down at the reclining form of the envoy. "Comfortable?"

"Pardon me," said the envoy. "Your throat-talker did not express itself."

"I said, comfortable?"

"You will excuse me," said the envoy. "You appear to be saying something I don't understand."

"Are you suffering any pain, no matter how slight, from the harness and bin I put you in?"

"Thank you," said the envoy. "My health is perfect." He saluted Chuck from the reclining position. Chuck saluted back and turned to his other passenger. The similarity here was the throat-translator, that little miracle of engineering, which the Lugh, in common with the envoy and Chuck, wore as close as possible to his larynx.

"How about you?" said Chuck. "Still comfortable?"

"Like sleeping on a ground-swell," said Binichi. He grinned up at Chuck. Or perhaps he did not grin – like that of the dolphin he so much resembled, the mouth of the Lugh had a built-in upward twist at the corners. He lay. Extended at length in the bin he measured a few inches over five feet and weighed most undoubtedly over two hundred pounds. His wide-spreading tail was folded up like a fan into something resembling a club and his four short limbs were tucked in close to the short snowy fur of his belly. "I would like to see what the ocean looks like from high up."

"I can manage that for you," said Chuck. He went up front, unplugged one of the extra screens and brought it back. "When you look into this," he said, plugging it in above the bin, "it'll be like looking down through a hole in the ship's bottom."

"I will feel upside down," said Binichi. "That should be something new, too." He bubbled in his throat, an odd sound that the throat-box made no attempt to translate. Human sociologists had tried to equate this Lugh noise with laughter, but without much success. The difficulty lay in understanding what might be funny and what might not, to a different race. "You've got my opposite number tied down over there?"

"He's in harness," said Chuck.

"Good." Binichi bubbled again. "No point in putting temptation in my way."

He closed his eyes. Chuck went back to the cockpit, closed the door behind him, and sat down at the controls. The field had been cleared. He fired up and took off.

When the pot was safely airborne, he set the course on autopilot and leaned back to light a cigarette. For the first time he felt the tension in his neck and shoulder blades and stretched, to break its grip. Now was no time to be tightening up. But what had Binichi meant by this last remark? He certainly wouldn't be fool enough to attack the Tomah on dry footing?

Chuck shook off the ridiculous notion. Not that it was entirely ridiculous – the Lugh were individualists from the first moment of birth, and liable to do anything. But in this case both sides had given the humans their words (Binichi his personal word and the nameless Tomah their collective word) that there would be no trouble between the representatives of the two races. The envoy, Chuck was sure, would not violate the word of his people, if only for the reason that he would weigh his own life as nothing in comparison to the breaking of a promise. Binichi, on the other hand . . .

The Lugh were impeccably honest. The strange and difficult thing was, however, that they were much harder to understand than the Tomah, in

spite of the fact that being warm-blooded and practically mammalian they appeared much more like the human race than the chitinous land-dwellers. Subtle shades and differences of meaning crept into every contact with the Lugh. They were a proud, strong, free, and oddly artistic people; in contradistinction to the intricately organized, highly logical Tomah, who took their pleasure in spectacle and group action.

But there was no sharp dividing line that placed some talents all on the Tomah side, and others all on the Lugh. Each people had musical instruments, each performed group dances, each had a culture and a science and a history. And, in spite of the fantastic surface sociological differences, each made the family unit a basic one, each was monogamous, each entertained the concept of a single deity, and each had very sensitive personal feelings.

The only trouble was, they had no use for each other – and a rapidly expanding human culture needed them both.

It so happened that this particular world was the only humanly habitable planet out of six circling a sun which was an ideal jumping-off spot for further spatial expansion. To use this world as a space depot of the size required, however, necessitated a local civilization of a certain type and level to support it. From a practical point of view this could be supplied only by a native culture both agreeable and sufficiently advanced to do so.

Both the Tomah and the Lugh were agreeable, as far as the humans were concerned. They were not advanced enough, and could not be, as long as they remained at odds.

It was not possible to advance one small segment of a civilization. It had to be upgraded as a whole. That meant cooperation, which was not now in effect. The Tomah had a science, but no trade. They were isolated on a few of the large land-masses by the seas that covered nine-tenths of their globe. Ironically, on a world which had great amounts of settleable land and vast untapped natural resources, they were cramped for living room and starved for raw materials. All this because to venture out on the Lugh-owned seas was sheer suicide. Their civilization was still in the candlelit, domestic-beast-powered stage, although they were further advanced in theory.

The Lugh, on the other hand, with the overwhelming resources of the oceans at their disposal, had by their watery environment been prohibited from developing a chemistry. The sea-girt islands and the uninhabited land masses were open to them; but, being already on the favorable end of the current status quo, they had had no great need or urge to develop further. What science they had come up with had been mainly for the purpose of keeping the Tomah in their place.

The human sociologists had given their opinion that the conflicts between the two races were no longer based on valid needs. They were, in fact, hangovers from competition in more primitive times when both peoples

sought to control the seashores and marginal lands. To the Tomah in those days (and still), access to the seas had meant a chance to tap a badly needed source of food; and to the Lugh (no longer), access to the shore had meant possession of necessary breeding grounds. In the past the Tomah had attempted to clear the Lugh from their path by exterminating their helpless land-based young. And the Lugh had tried to starve the Tomah out, by way of retaliation.

The problem was to bury these ancient hatreds and prove cooperation was both practical and profitable. The latest step in this direction was to invite representatives of both races to a conference at the human Base on the uninhabited southern continent of this particular hemisphere. The humans would act as mediator, since both sides were friendly toward them. Which was what caused Chuck to be at the controls now, with his two markedly dissimilar passengers in the bins behind him.

Unfortunately, the sudden appearance of Member Thomas Wagnall meant they were getting impatient back home. In fact, he could not have come at a worse time. Human prestige with the two races was all humanity had to work with; and it was a delicate thing. And now had arisen this suddenly new question in Chuck's mind as to whether Binichi had regarded his promise to start no trouble with the Tomah as an ironclad guaranty, or a mere casual agreement contingent upon a number of unknown factors.

The question acquired its full importance a couple of hours later, and forty thousand feet above nothing but ocean, when the main burners abruptly cut out.

Illustration by RICK BRYANT



Chuck wiped blood from his nose and shook his head to clear it. Underneath him, the life raft was rocking in soothing fashion upon the wide swell of the empty ocean; but, in spite of the fact that he knew better, he was having trouble accepting the reality of his present position.

Everything had happened a little too fast. His training for emergency situations of this sort had been semi-hypnotic. He remembered now a blur of action in which he had jabbed the distress button to send out an automatic signal on his position and predicament. Just at that moment the standby burners had cut in automatically – which was where he had acquired the bloody nose, when the unexpected thrust slammed him against the controls. Then he had cut some forty-two various switches, got back to the main compartment, unharnessed his passengers, herded them into the escape hatch, blown them all clear, hit the water, inflated the life raft, and got them aboard it just as the escape hatch itself sank gracefully out of sight. The pot, of course, had gone down like so much pig iron when it hit.

And here they were.

Chuck wiped his nose again and looked at the far end of the rectangular life raft. Binichi, the closer of the two, was half-lolling, half-sitting on the curved muscle of his tail. His curved mouth was half-open as if he might be laughing at them. And indeed, thought Chuck, he very well might. Chuck and the envoy, adrift on this watery waste, in this small raft, were castaways in a situation that threatened their very lives. Binichi the Lugh was merely and comfortably back at home.

"Binichi," said Chuck. "Do you know where we are?"

The curved jaw gaped slightly wider. The Lugh head turned this way and that on the almost nonexistent neck; then, twisting, he leaned over the edge of the raft and plunged his whole head briefly under water like a duck searching for food. He pulled his head out again, now slick with moisture.

"Yes," said Binichi.

"How far are we from the coast of the south continent?"

"A day's swim," said Binichi. "And most of a night." He gave his information as a simple statement of fact. But Chuck knew the Lugh was reckoning in his own terms of speed and distance, which were roughly twelve nautical miles an hour as a steady pace. Undoubtedly it could be done in better time if a Lugh had wished to push himself. The human Base had clocked some of this race at up to eighty miles an hour through the water for short bursts of speed.

Chuck calculated. With the small outboard thrust unit provided for the raft, they would be able to make about four miles an hour if no currents went against them. Increase Binichi's estimate then by a factor of three – three days and nights with a slight possibility of its being less and a very great probability of its taking more. Thought of the thrust unit reminded him. He went to work unfolding it from its waterproof seal and attaching it in running position. Binichi watched him with interest, his head cocked a little on one side like an inquisitive bird's; but as soon as the unit began to propel the raft through the waves at its maximum cruising speed of four miles an hour, his attention disappeared.

With the raft running smoothly, Chuck had another question.

"Which way?"

Binichi indicated with a short thick-muscled forearm, and Chuck swung the raft in nearly a full turn. A slight shiver ran down his spine as he did so. He had been heading away from land out into nearly three thousand miles of open ocean.

"Now," said Chuck; locking the tiller, and looking at both of them. "It'll take us three days and nights to make the coast. And another three or four days to make it overland from there to the Base. The accident happened so quickly I didn't have time to bring along anything with which I could talk to my friends there." He paused, then added: "I apologize for causing you this inconvenience."

"There is no inconvenience," said Binichi, and bubbled in his throat. The envoy neither moved nor answered.

"This raft," said Chuck, "has food aboard it for me, but nothing, I think, that either one of you could use. There's water, of course. Otherwise, I imagine Binichi can make out with the sea all around him, the way it is; and I'm afraid there's not much to be done for you, Envoy, until we reach land. Then you'll be in Binichi's position of being able to forage for yourself."

The envoy still did not answer. There was no way of knowing what he was thinking. Sitting facing the two of them, Chuck tried to imagine what it must be like for the Tomah, forced into a position inches away from his most deadly traditional enemy. And with the private preserves of that enemy, the deep-golfed sea, source of all his culture's legends and terrors, surrounding him. True; the envoy was the pick of his people, a learned and intelligent being – but possibly there could be such a situation here that would try his self-control too far.

Chuck had no illusions about his ability to cope, barehanded, with either one of his fellow passengers – let alone come between them if they decided on combat. At the same time he knew that if it came to that, he would have to try. There could be no other choice; for the sake of humanity's future here on this world, all three races would hold him responsible.

The raft plodded on toward the horizon. Neither the Tomah nor Binichi had moved. They seemed to be waiting.

They traveled all through the afternoon, and the night that followed. When the sun came up the following morning they seemed not to have moved at all. The sea was all around them as before and unchanging. Binichi now lay half-curved upon the yielding bottom of the raft, his eyes all but closed. The envoy appeared not to have moved an inch. He stood tensely in his corner, claw at half-cock, like a statue carved from his native rock.

With the rising sun; the wind began to freshen. The gray rolling furrows of the sea's eternal surface deepened and widened. The raft tilted, sliding up one heavy slope and down another.

"Binichi!" said Chuck.

The Lugh opened his near eye lazily.

"Is it going to storm?"

"There will be wind," said Binichi.

"Much wind?" asked Chuck – and then realized that his question was too general. "How high will the waves be?"

"About my height," said Binichi. "It will be calmer in the afternoon."

It began to grow dark rapidly after that. By ten o'clock on Chuck's chronometer it was as murky as twilight. Then the rain came suddenly, and a solid sheet of water blotted out the rest of the raft from his eyes.

Chuck clung to the thrust unit for something to hang onto. In the obscurity, the motion of the storm was eerie. The raft seemed to plunge

forward, mounting a slope that stretched endlessly, until with a sudden twist and dip, it adopted a down-slant to forward – and then it seemed to fly backward in that position with increasing rapidity until its angle was as suddenly reversed again. It was like being on a monstrous seesaw that, even as it went up and down, was sliding back and forth on greased rollers.

At some indeterminate time later, Chuck began to worry about their being washed out of the raft. There were lines in the locker attached midway to the left-hand side of the raft. He crawled forward on hands and knees and found the box. It opened to his cold fingers, and he clawed out the coiled lines.

It struck him then, for the first time, that on this small, circumscribed raft, he should have bumped into Binichi or the envoy in making his way to the box. He lifted his face to the wind and the rain and darkness, but it told him nothing. And then he felt something nudge his elbow.

"He is gone," said the voice of the envoy's translator, in Chuck's ear.

"Gone?" yelled Chuck above the storm. "He went over the side a little while ago."

Chuck clung to the box as the raft suddenly reversed its angle.

"How do you know?"

"I saw him," said the envoy.

"You –" Chuck yelled, "you can see in this?"

There was a slight pause.

"Of course," said the envoy. "Can't you?"

"No." Chuck unwound the lines. "We better tie ourselves into the raft," he shouted. "Keep from being washed overboard."

The envoy did not answer. Taking silence for assent, Chuck reached for him in the obscurity and passed one of the lines about the chitinous body. He secured the line tightly to the ring-handgrips fastened to the inner side of the raft's edge. Then he tied himself securely with a line around his waist to a handgrip further back by the thrust unit.

They continued to ride the pitching ocean. After some time, the brutal beating of the rain slackened off; and a little light began to filter through. The storm cleared then, as suddenly as it had commenced. Within minutes the raft heaved upon a metal-gray sea under thinning clouds in a sky from which the rain had ceased falling.

Teeth chattering, Chuck crawled forward to his single remaining passenger and untied the rope around him. The envoy was crouched down in his corner, his great claw hugging his back, as if he huddled for warmth. When Chuck untied him, he remained so motionless that Chuck was struck with the sudden throat-tightening fear that he was dead.

"Are you all right?" asked Chuck.

"Thank you," said the envoy; "I am in perfect health."

Chuck turned away to contemplate the otherwise empty raft. He was, he told himself, doing marvelously. Already, one of his charges had taken off .

. . and then, before he could complete the thought, the raft rocked suddenly and the Lugh slithered aboard over one high side.

He and Chuck looked at each other. Binichi bubbled comfortably.

"Looks like the storm's over," said Chuck.

"It is blowing to the south of us now," said the Lugh.

"How far are we from land, now?"

"We should come to it," said Binichi, "in the morning."

Chuck blinked a little in surprise. This was better time than he had planned. And then he realized that the wind was blowing at their backs, and had been doing so all through the storm. He looked up at the sky. The sun was past its zenith, and a glance at his watch, which was corrected for local time, showed the hands at ten minutes to three. Chuck turned his attention back to Binichi, revolving the phraseology of his next question in his mind.

"Did you get washed overboard?" he asked, at last.

"Washed overboard?" Binichi bubbled. "I went into the water. It was more pleasant."

"Oh," said Chuck.

They settled down once more to their traveling.

A little over an hour later the raft jarred suddenly and rocked as if, without warning, it had found a rock beneath it, here in the middle of the ocean. For a second Chuck entertained the wild idea that it had. But such a notion was preposterous. There were undersea mountains all through this area, but the closest any came to the surface was a good forty fathoms down. At the same time the envoy's claw suddenly shot up and gaped above him, as he recoiled toward the center of the boat; and, looking overboard, Chuck came into view of the explanation for both occurrences.

A gray back as large around as an oil drum and ten to twelve feet in length was sliding by about a fathom and a half below them. At a little distance off Chuck could make out a couple more. As he watched, they turned slowly and came back toward the raft again.

Chuck recognized these sea-creatures. He had been briefed on them. They were the local counterpart of the Earthly shark – not as bloodthirsty, but they could be dangerous enough. They had wide catfish-like mouths, equipped with cartilaginous ridges rather than teeth. They were scavengers, rather than predators, generally feeding off the surface. As he watched now, the closest rose slowly to the surface in front of him, and suddenly an enormous jaw gaped a full six feet in width and closed over the high rim of the raft. The plastic material squealed to the rubbing of the horny ridges, giving but not puncturing. Temporarily defeated, the jaws opened again and the huge head sank back under the water.

Chuck's hand went instinctively to his belt for the handgun that was, of course, not there.

The raft jolted and twisted and rocked for several moments as the creatures tried to overturn it. The envoy's claw curved and jerked this way

and that above him, like a sensitive antenna, at each new sound or jolt. Binichi rested lazy-eyed on the raft's bottom, apparently concerned only with the warmth of the sun upon his drying body.

After several minutes, the attacks on the raft ceased and the creatures drew off through the water. Chuck could catch a glimpse of them some thirty yards or so off, still following. Chuck looked back at Binichi, but the Lugh had his eyes closed as if he dozed. Chuck drew a deep breath and turned to the envoy.

"Would you like some water?" he asked.

The envoy's claw had relaxed slightly upon his back. He turned his head toward Chuck.

"If you have any you do not desire yourself," he said. Chuck got out the water, debated offering some to the Lugh out of sheer form and politeness, then took his cue from the fact that Binichi appeared asleep, and confined his attentions to the envoy and himself. It surprised him now to remember that he had not thought of water up until this moment. He wondered if the Tomah had been suffering for it in silence, too polite or otherwise to ask for some.

This latter thought decided him against eating any of the food that the boat was also provided with. If they would reach land inside of another twelve or fourteen hours, he could last until then. It would hardly be kind, not to say politic, to eat in front of the Tomah when nothing was available for that individual. Even the Lugh, if he had eaten at all, had done so when he was out of the raft during the night and storm, when they could not see him.

Chuck and the envoy drank and settled down again. Sundown came quickly; and Chuck, making himself as comfortable as possible, went to sleep.

He woke with a start. For a second he merely lay still on the soft, yielding bottom of the raft without any clear idea as to what had brought him into consciousness. Then a very severe bump from underneath the raft almost literally threw him up into a sitting position.

The planet's small, close moon was pouring its brilliant light across the dark waters, from a cloudless sky. The night was close to being over, for the moon was low and its rays struck nearly level on the wave tops. The sea had calmed, but in its closer depths were great moving streaks and flashes of phosphorescence. For a moment these gleams only baffled and confused his eyes; and then Chuck saw that they were being made by the same huge scavengers that had bothered the raft earlier – only now there were more than a dozen of them, filling the water about and underneath the raft.

The raft rocked again as one of them struck it once more from below.

Chuck grabbed at the nearest ring-handhold and glanced at his fellow

passengers. Binichi lay as if asleep, but in the dark shadow of his eye-sockets little reflected glints of light showed where his eyeballs gleamed in the darkness. Beyond him, the envoy was fully awake and up on all four feet, his claw extended high above him, and swaying with every shock like the balancing pole of a tightrope walker. His front pair of handed limbs were also extended on either side as if for balance. Chuck opened his mouth to call to the Tomah to take hold on one of the handgrips.

At that moment, however, there rose from out of the sea at his elbow a pair of the enormous ridged jaws. Like the mouth of a trout, closing over a fly, these clamped down, suddenly and without warning, on the small, bright metal box of the thrust unit where it was fastened to the rear end of the raft. And the raft itself was suddenly jerked and swung as the sea-creature tore the thrust unit screeching from its moorings into the sea. The raft was upended by the force of the wrench; and Chuck, holding on for dear life from sliding into the sea, saw the creature that had pulled the unit loose release it disappointedly, as if sensing its inedibility. It glittered down through the dark waters, falling from sight.

The raft slammed back down on the watery surface. And immediately on the heels of this came the sound of a large splash. Jerking his head around, Chuck saw the envoy struggling in the ocean.

His black body glittered among the waves, his thrashing limbs kicking up little dashes and glitters of phosphorescence. Chuck hurled himself to the far end of the raft and stretched out his hand, but the Tomah was already beyond his reach. Chuck turned, and dived back to the box at midraft, pawing through it for the line he had used to tie them in the boat earlier. It came up tangled in his hands. He lunged to the end of the raft nearest the envoy again, trying to unravel the line as he did so.

It came slowly and stubbornly out of its snarl. But when he got it clear at last and threw it, its unweighted end fell little more than halfway of the widening distance between the raft and the Tomah.

Chuck hauled it in, in a frenzy of despair. The raft, sitting high in the water, was being pushed by the night wind farther from the envoy with every second. The envoy himself had in all this time made no sound, only continuing to thrash his limbs in furious effort. His light body seemed in no danger of sinking; but his narrow limbs in uncoordinated effort barely moved him through the water – and now the scavengers were once more beginning to enter the picture.

These, like any fish suddenly disturbed, had scattered at the first splash of the Tomah's body. For a short moment it had seemed that they had been frightened away entirely. But now they were beginning to circle in, moving around the envoy, dodging close, then flirting away again – but always ending up a little closer than before. Chuck twisted about to face Binichi.

"Can't you do something?" he cried.

Binichi regarded him with his race's usual unreadable expression.

"I?" he said.

"You could swim to him and let him hang on to you and tow him back," said Chuck. "Hurry!"

Binichi continued to look at him.

"You don't want the Tomah eaten?" he said at last.

"Of course not!"

"Then why don't you bring him back yourself to this thing?"

"I can't. I can't swim that well!" said Chuck. "You can."

"You can't?" echoed Binichi slowly. "I can?"

"You know that."

"Still," said the Lugh. "I would have thought you had some way – it's nothing to me if the Tomah is eaten."

"You promised."

"Not to harm him," said Binichi. "I have not. The Tomah have killed many children to get at the sea. Now this one has the sea. Let him drink it. The Tomah have been hungry for fish. This one has fish. Let him eat the fish."

Chuck brought his face close to the grinning dolphin head.

"You promised to sit down with us and talk to that Tomah," he said. "If you let him die, you're dodging that promise."

Binichi stared back at him for a short moment. Then he bubbled abruptly and went over the side of the raft in a soaring leap. He entered the water with his short limbs tucked in close to his body and his wide tail fanning out. Chuck had heard about, but never before seen, the swiftness of the Lugh, swimming. Now he saw it. Binichi seemed to give a single wriggle and then torpedo like a streak of phosphorescent lightning just under the surface of the water toward the struggling envoy.

One of the scavengers was just coming up under the Tomah. The streak of watery fire that was Binichi converged upon him and his heavy shape shot struggling from the surface, the sound of a dull impact heavy in the night. Then the phosphorescence of Binichi's path was among the others, striking right and left as a swordfish strikes on his run among a school of smaller feed fish. The scavengers scattered into darkness, all but the one Binichi had first hit, which was flopping upon the surface of the moonlit sea as if partially paralyzed.

Binichi broke surface himself, plowing back toward the Tomah. His head butted the envoy and a second later the envoy was skidding and skittering like a toy across the water's surface to the raft. A final thrust at the raft's edge sent him up and over it. He tumbled on his back on the raft's floor, glittering with wetness; and, righting himself with one swift thrust of his claw, he whirled, claw high, to face Binichi as the Lugh came sailing aboard.

Binichi sprang instantly erect on the curved spring of his tail; and Chuck, with no time for thought, thrust himself between the two of them.

For a second Chuck's heart froze. He found himself with his right cheek

bare inches from the heavy double meat-choppers of the Tomah claw, while, almost touching him on the left, the gaping jaws of the Lugh glinted with thick, short scimitar-like teeth, and the fishy breath of the sea-dweller filled his nostrils. In this momentary, murderous tableau they all hung motionless for a long, breathless second. And then the Tomah claw sank backward to the shiny back below it and the Lugh slid backward and down upon his tail. Slowly, the two members of opposing races retreated each to his own end of the raft.

Chuck, himself, sat down. And the burst of relieved breath that expelled itself from his tautened lungs echoed in the black and moonlit world of the seascape night.



Some two hours after sunrise, a line of land began to make its appearance upon their further horizon. It mounted slowly, as the onshore wind, and perhaps some current as well, drove them ahead. It was a barren, semiarid and tropical coastline, with a rise of what appeared to be hills – light green with a sparse vegetation – beyond it.

As they drifted closer, the shoreline showed itself in a thin pencil-mark of foam. No outer line of reefs was apparent, but the beaches themselves seemed to be rocky or nonexistent. Chuck turned to the Lugh.

"We need a calm, shallow spot to land in," he said. "Otherwise the raft's liable to upset in the surf, going in."

Binichi looked at him, but did not answer.

"I'm sorry," said Chuck. "I guess I didn't explain myself properly. What I mean is, I'm asking for your help again. If the raft upsets or has a hole torn in it when we're landing, the envoy and I will probably drown. Could you find us a fairly smooth beach somewhere and help us get to it?"

Binichi straightened up a little where he half-sat, half-lay propped against the end of the raft where the thrust unit had been attached.

"I had been told," he said, "that you had oceans upon your own world."

"That's right," said Chuck. "But we had to develop the proper equipment to move about on them. If I had the proper equipment here I wouldn't have to ask you for help. If it hadn't been for our crashing in the ocean none of this would be necessary."

"This 'equipment' of yours seems to have an uncertain nature," said Binichi. He came all the way erect. "I'll help you." He flipped overboard and disappeared.

Left alone in the raft with the envoy, Chuck looked over at him.

"The business of landing will probably turn out to be difficult and

dangerous – at least we better assume the worst," he said. "You understand you may have to swim for your life when we go in?"

"I have given my word to accomplish this mission," replied the envoy.

A little while after that, it became evident from the angle at which the raft took the waves that they had changed course. Chuck, looking about for an explanation of this, discovered Binichi at the back of the raft, pushing them.

Within the hour, the Lugh had steered them to a small, rocky inlet. Picked up in the landward surge of the surf, the raft went, as Chuck had predicted, end over end in a smother of water up on the pebbly beach. Staggering to his feet with the solid land at last under him, Chuck smeared water from his eyes and took inventory of a gashed and bleeding knee. Binding the cut as best he could with a strip torn from his now-ragged pants, he looked about for his fellow travelers.

The raft was flung upside down between himself and them. Just beyond it, the envoy lay with his claw arm flung limply out on the sand. Binichi, a little further on, was sitting up like a seal. As Chuck watched, the envoy stirred, pulled his claw back into normal position, and got shakily up on all four legs.

Chuck went over to the raft and, with some effort, managed to turn it back, right side up. He dug into the storage boxes and got out food and water. He was not sure whether it was the polite, or even the sensible thing to do, but he was shaky from hunger, parched from the salt water, dizzy from the pounding in the surf – and his knee hurt. He sat down and made his first ravenous meal since the pot had crashed in the sea, almost two days before.

As he was at it, the Tomah envoy approached. Chuck offered him some of the water, which the Tomah accepted.

"Sorry I haven't anything you could eat," said Chuck, a full belly having improved his manners.

"It doesn't matter," said the envoy. "There will be flora growing farther inland that will stay my hunger. It's good to be back on the land."

"I'll go along with you on that statement," said Chuck. Looking up from the food and water, he saw the Lugh approaching. Binichi came up, walking on his four short limbs, his tail folded into a club over his back for balance, and sat down with them.

"And now?" he said, addressing Chuck.

"Well," said Chuck, stretching his cramped back, "we'll head inland toward the Base." He reached into his right-hand pants pocket and produced a small compass. "That direction" – he pointed toward the hills without looking – "and some five hundred miles. Only we shouldn't have to cover it all on foot. If we can get within four hundred miles of Base, we'll be within the airfoils' cruising range; and one of them should locate us and pick us up."

"Your people will find us, but they can't find us here?" said Binichi.

"That's right." Chuck looked at the Lugh's short limbs. "Are you up to

making about a hundred-mile trip overland?"

"As you've reminded me before," said Binichi, "I made a promise. It will help, though, if I can find water to go into from time to time."

Chuck turned to the envoy.

"Can we find bodies of water as we go?"

"I don't know this country," said the Tomah, speaking to Chuck. "But there should be water; and I'll watch for it."

"We two could go ahead," said Chuck, turning back to the Lugh. "And maybe we could work some way of getting a vehicle back here to carry you."

"I've never needed to be carried," said Binichi, and turned away abruptly. "Shall we go?"

They went.

Striking back from the stoniness of the beach, they passed through a belt of shallow land covered with shrub and coarse grass. Chuck, watching the envoy, half-expected him to turn and feed on some of this as they passed, but the Tomah went straight ahead. Beyond the vegetated belt, they came on dunes of coarse sand, where the Lugh – although he did not complain, any more than the envoy had when he fell overboard from the raft – had rough going with his short limbs. This stretched for a good five miles; but when they had come at last to firmer ground, the first swellings of the foothills seemed not so far ahead of them.

They were now in an area of small trees with numbers of roots sprouting from the trunk above ground level, and of sticklike plants resembling cacti. The envoy led them, his four narrow limbs propelling him with a curious smoothness over the uncertain ground as if he might at any moment break into a run. However, he regulated his pace to that of the Lugh, who was the slowest in the party, though he showed no signs as yet of discomfort or of tiring.

This even space was broken with dramatic suddenness as they crossed a sort of narrow earth-bridge or ridge between two of the gullies. Without any warning, the envoy wheeled suddenly and sprinted down the almost perpendicular slope on his left, zigzagging up the gully bed as if chasing something and into a large hole in the dry, crumbling earth of the further bank. A sudden thin screaming came from the hole and the envoy tumbled out into the open with a small furry creature roughly in the shape of a weasel and about the size of a large rabbit. The screaming continued for a few seconds. Chuck turned his head away, shaken.

He was aware of Binichi staring at him.

"What's wrong?" asked the Lugh. "You showed no emotion when I hurt the –" His translator failed on a word.

"What?" said Chuck. "I didn't understand. When you hurt what?"

"One of those who would have eaten the Tomah."

"I . . ." Chuck hesitated. He could not say that it was because this small land creature had had a voice to express its pain while the sea-dweller had not. "It's our custom to kill our meat before eating it."

Binichi bubbled.

"This will be too new to the Tomah for ritual," he said.

Reinforcement for this remark came a moment or two later when the envoy came back up the near wall of the gully to rejoin them.

"This is a paradise of plenty, this land," he said. "Only once in my life before was I ever lucky enough to taste meat." He lifted his head to them. "Shall we go on?"

"We should try to get to some water soon," said Chuck, glancing at Binichi.

"I have been searching for it," said the envoy. "Now I smell it not far off. We should reach it before dark." They went on; and gradually the gullies thinned out and they found themselves on darker earth, among more and larger trees. Just as the sunset was reddening the sky above the upthrust outline of the near hills, they entered a small glen where a stream trickled down from a higher slope and spread out into a small pool. Binichi trotted past them without a word, and plunged in.

Chuck woke when the morning sun was just beginning to touch the glen. For a moment he lay still under the mass of small-leaved branches with which he had covered himself the night before, a little bewildered to find himself no longer on the raft. Then memory returned and with it sensation, spreading through the stiff limbs of his body.

For the first time, he realized that his strength was ebbing. He had had first the envoy and then Binichi to worry about, and so he had been able to keep his mind off his own state.

His stomach was hollow with hunger that the last night's meager rations he had packed from the raft had done little to assuage. His muscles were cramped from the unusual exercise and he had the sick, dizzy feeling that comes from general overexposure. Also, right now, his throat was dry and aching for water.

He pulled himself up out of the leaves, stumbled to the edge of the pond and fell to hands and knees on its squashy margin. He drank; and as he raised his head and ran a wrist across his lips after quenching his thirst, the head of Binichi parted the surface almost where his lips had been.

"Time to go?" said the Lugh. He turned to one side and heaved himself up out onto the edge of the bank. "We'll leave in just a little while," Chuck said. "I'm not fully awake yet." He sat back stiffly and exhaustedly on the ground and stretched his arms out to bring some life back into them. He levered himself to his feet and walked up and down, swinging his arms.

After a little while his protesting muscles began to warm a little and loosen. He got one of the high-calorie candy bars from his food pack and chewed on it.

"All right," he said. And the envoy turned to lead the way up, out of the glen.

With the bit of food, the exercise, and the new warmth of the sun, Chuck began to feel better as they proceeded. They were breasting the near slopes of the hills now, and shortly before noon they came over the top of them, and paused to rest.

The land did not drop again, but swelled away in a gently rising plateau, into distance. And on its far horizon, insubstantial as clouds, rose the blue peaks of mountains.

"Base is over those mountains," said Chuck.

"Will we have to cross them?" The envoy's translator produced the words evenly, like a casual and unimportant query.

"No." Chuck turned to the Tomah. "How far in from the coast have we come so far?"

"I would estimate" – the translator hesitated a second over the translation of units – "thirty-two and some fraction of a mile."

"Another sixty miles, then," said Chuck, "and we should be within the range of the airfoils they'll have out looking for us." He looked again at the mountains and they seemed to waver before his eyes. Reaching up in an automatic gesture to brush the waveriness away, the back of his hand touched his forehead; and, startled, he pressed the hand against it. It was burning hot.

Feverish! thought Chuck. And his mind somersaulted at the impossibility of the fact.

He could see the two others looking at him with the completely remote and unempathetic curiosity of peoples who had nothing in common with either his life or his death. A small rat's-jaw of fear gnawed at him suddenly. It had never occurred to him since the crash that there could be any danger that he would not make it safely back to Base. Now, for the first time, he faced that possibility. If the worst came to the worst, it came home to him suddenly, he could count on no help from either the Tomah, or the Lugh.

"What will they look like, these airfoils?" asked Binichi.

"Like a circle made out of bright material," said Chuck. "A round platform about twelve feet across."

"And there will be others of your people in them?"

"On them. No," said Chuck. "Anyway, I don't think so. We're too short of personnel. They operate on remote-beamed power from the ship and flash back pictures of the ground they cover. Once they send back a picture of us, Base'll know where to find us."

He levered himself painfully to his feet. "Let's travel," he said.

They started out again. The walking was more level and easy now than it had been coming up through the hills. Plodding along, Chuck's eyes were suddenly attracted by a peculiarity of Binichi's back and sides. The Lugh was completely covered by a short close hair, which was snow-white under the belly, but shaded to a gray on the back. It seemed to Chuck, now, however, that this gray back hair had taken on a slight hint of rosiness.

"Hey!" he said, stopping. "You're getting sunburned."

The other two halted also; and Binichi looked up at him, inquiringly. Chuck repeated himself in simpler terms that his translator could handle.

"Let's go on," said Binichi, taking up the march again.

"Wait!" said Chuck, as he and the envoy moved to follow up the Lugh. "Don't you know that can be dangerous? Here –" He fumbled out of his own jacket. "We humans get sunburned, too, but we evidently aren't as susceptible as you. Now, I can tie the arms of this around your neck and you'll have some protection –"

Binichi halted suddenly and wheeled to face the human.

"You're intruding," said Binichi, "on something that is my own concern."

"But –" Chuck looked helplessly at him. "The sun is quite strong in these latitudes. I don't think you understand –" He turned to appeal to the Tomah. "Tell him what the sun's like in a country like this."

"Surely," said the envoy, "this has nothing to do with you or me. If his health becomes imperfect, it will be an indication that he isn't fit to survive. He's only a Lugh; but certainly he has the right, like all living things, to make such a choice for himself."

"But he might be mistaken –"

"If he is mistaken, it will be a sign that he is unfit to survive. I don't agree with Lughs – as you people know. But any creature has the basic right to entertain death if he so wishes. To interfere with him in that would be the highest immorality."

"But don't you want to –" began Chuck, incredulously, turning toward the Lugh.

"Let's go on," said Binichi, turning away.

They went on again.

After a while, the grasslands of the early plateau gave way to more forest.

Chuck was plodding along in the late hours of the afternoon with his eyes on the ground a few feet in front of him and his head singing, when a new sound began to penetrate his consciousness. He listened to it, more idly than otherwise, for some seconds – and then abruptly, it registered.

It was a noise like yelping, back along the trail he had just passed.

He checked and straightened and turned about. Binichi was no longer in sight.

"Binichi!" he called. There was no answer, only the yelping. He began to run clumsily, back the way he had come.

Some eight or so yards back, he traced the yelping to a small clearing in a hollow. Breaking through the brush and trees that grew about its lip, he looked down on the Lugh. Binichi was braced at bay upon his clubbed tail, jaws agape, and turning to face half a dozen weasel-shaped creatures the size of small dogs that yelped and darted in and out at him, tearing and slashing.

The Lugh's sharp, tooth-studded jaws were more than a match for the jaws of any one of his attackers, but – here on land – they had many times his speed. No matter which way he turned, one was always at his back, and harrying him. But, like the envoy when he had been knocked into the sea, Binichi made no sound; and, although his eyes met those of Chuck, standing at the clearing edge, he gave no call for help.

Chuck looked about him desperately for a stick or stone he could use as a club. But the ground was bare of everything but the light wands of the bushes, and the trees overhead had all green, sound limbs firmly attached to their trunks. There was a stir in the bushes beside him.

Chuck turned and saw the envoy. He pushed through to stand beside Chuck, and also looked down at the fight going on in the clearing.

"Come on!" said Chuck, staring down into the clearing. Then he halted, for the envoy had not moved. "What's the matter?"

"Matter?" said the envoy, looking at him. "I don't understand."

"Those things will kill him!"

"You" – the envoy turned his head as if peering at Chuck – "appear to think we should interfere. You people have this strange attitude to the natural occurrences of life that I've noticed before."

"Do *you* people just stand by and watch each other get killed?"

"Of course not. Where another Tomah is concerned, it is of course different."

"He saved *your* life from those fish!" cried Chuck.

"I believe you asked him to. You were perfectly free to ask, just as he was perfectly free to accept or refuse. I'm in no way responsible for anything either of you have done."

"He's an intelligent being!" said Chuck, desperately. "Like you. Like me. We're all alike."

"Certainly we aren't," said the envoy, stiffening. "You and I are not at all alike, except that we are both civilized. He's not even that. He's a Lugh."

"I told him he'd promised to sit down at Base and discuss with you," cried Chuck, his tongue loosened by the fever. "I said he was dodging his promise if he let you die. And he went out and saved you. But you won't save him."

The envoy turned his head to look at Binichi, now all but swarmed under by the predators.

"Thank you for correcting me," he said. "I hadn't realized there could be honor in this Lugh."

He went down the slope of the hollow in a sudden, blurring rush that seemingly moved him off at top speed from a standing start. He struck the embattled group like a projectile and emerged coated by the predators. For a split second it seemed to Chuck that he had merely thrown another life into the jaws of the attackers. And then the Tomah claw glittered and flashed, right and left like a black scimitar, lightning-swift out of the ruck – and the clearing was emptied, except for four furry bodies that twitched or lay about the hollow.

The envoy turned to the nearest and began to eat. Without a glance or word directed at his rescuer, Binichi, bleeding from a score of superficial cuts and scratches, turned about and climbed slowly up the slope of the hollow to where Chuck stood.

"Shall we go on?" he said.

Chuck looked past him at the feeding envoy. "Perhaps we should wait for him," he said.

"Why?" said Binichi. "It's up to him to keep up, if he wants to. The Tomah is no concern of ours."

He headed off in the direction they had been going. Chuck waggled his head despairingly, and plodded after.

IV

The envoy caught up to them a little further on; and shortly after that, as the rays of the setting sun were beginning to level through the trees, giving the whole forest a cathedral look, they came on water, and stopped for the night.

It seemed to Chuck that the sun went down very quickly – quicker than it ever had before; and a sudden chill struck through to his very bones. Teeth chattering, he managed to start a fire and drag enough dead wood to it to keep it going while they slept.

Binichi had gone into the waters of the small lake a few yards off, and was not to be seen. But through the long, fever-ridden night hours that were a patchwork of dizzy wakefulness and dreams and half-dreams, Chuck was aware of the smooth, dark insect-like head of the Tomah watching him across the fire with what seemed to be an absorbing fascination.

Toward morning, he slept. He awoke to find the sun risen and Binichi already out of the lake. Chuck did not feel as bad, now, as he had earlier. He moved in a sort of fuzziness; and, although his body was slow responding, as if it was something operated by his mind from such a

remote distance that mental directions to his limbs took a long time to be carried out, it was not so actively uncomfortable.

They led off, Chuck in the middle as before. They were moving out of the forest now, into more open country where the trees were interspersed with meadows. Chuck remembered now that he had not eaten in some time; but when he chewed on his food, the taste was uninteresting and he put it back in his pack.

Nor was he too clear about the country he was traversing. It was there all right, but it seemed more than a little unreal. Sometimes things, particularly things far off, appeared distorted. And he began remarking expressions on the faces of his two companions that he would not have believed physically possible to them. Binichi's mouth, in particular, had become remarkably mobile. It was no longer fixed by physiology into a grin. Watching out of the corner of his eye, Chuck caught glimpses of it twisted into all sorts of shapes: sad, sly, cheerful, frowning. And the Tomah was not much better. As the sun mounted up the clear arch of the sky, Chuck discovered the envoy squinting and winking at him, as if to convey some secret message.

"S'all right – s'all right –" mumbled Chuck. "I won't tell." And he giggled suddenly at the joke that he couldn't tell because he really didn't know what all the winking was about.

"I don't understand," said the envoy, winking away like mad.

"S'all right – s'all right –" said Chuck.

He discovered after a time that the other two were no longer close beside him. Peering around, he finally located them walking together at some distance off from him. Discussing something, no doubt, something confidential. He wandered, taking the pitch and slope of the ground at random, stumbling a little now and then when the angle of his footing changed. He was aware in vague fashion that he had drifted into an area with little rises and unexpected sinkholes, their edges tangled with brush. He caught himself on one of the sinkholes, swayed back to safety, tacked off to his right . . .

Suddenly he landed hard on something. The impact drove all the air out of his lungs, so that he fought to breathe – and in that struggle he lost the cobwebs surrounding him for the first time that day.

He had not been aware of his fall, but now he saw that he lay half on his back, some ten feet down from the edge of one of the holes. He tried to get up, but one leg would not work. Panic cut through him like a knife.

"Help!" he shouted. His voice came out hoarse and strange-sounding. "Help!"

He called again; and after what seemed a very long time, the head of the envoy poked over the edge of the sinkhole and looked down at him.

"Get me out of here!" cried Chuck. "Help me out."

The envoy stared at him.

"Give me a hand!" said Chuck. "I can't climb up by myself. I'm hurt."

"I don't understand," said the envoy.

"I think my leg's broken. What's the matter with you?" Now that he had mentioned it, as if it had been lying there waiting for its cue, the leg that would not work sent a sudden, vicious stab of pain through him. And close behind this came a swelling agony that pricked Chuck to fury. "Don't you hear me? I said, pull me out of here! My leg's broken. I can't stand on it!"

"You are damaged?" said the envoy.

"Of course I'm damaged!"

The envoy stared down at Chuck for a long moment. When he spoke again, his words struck an odd, formalistic note in Chuck's fevered brain.

"It is regrettable," said the envoy, "that you are no longer in perfect health."

And he turned away, and disappeared. Above Chuck's straining eyes, the edges of the hole and the little patch of sky beyond them tilted, spun about like a scene painted on a whirling disk, and shredded away into nothingness.

At some time during succeeding events he woke up again; but nothing was really clear or certain until he found himself looking up into the face of Doe Burgis, who was standing over him, with a finger on his pulse.

"How do you feel?" said Burgis.

"I don't know," said Chuck. "Where am I?"

"Back at Base," said Burgis, letting go of his wrist. "Your leg is knitting nicely and we've knocked out your pneumonia. You've been under sedation. A couple more days' rest and you'll be ready to run again."

"That's nice," said Chuck; and went back to sleep.

V

Three days later he was recovered enough to take a ride in his motorized go-cart over to Roy Marlie's office. He found Roy there, and his uncle.

"Hi, Tommy," said Chuck, wheeling through the door. "Hi, Chief."

"How you doing, son?" asked Member Thomas Wagnall. "How's the leg?"

"Doc says I can start getting around on surgical splints in a day or two." Chuck looked at them both. "Well, isn't anybody going to tell me what happened?"

"Those two natives were carrying you when we finally located the three of you," said Tommy, "and we —"

"They were?" said Chuck.

"Why, yes." Tommy looked closely at him. "Didn't you know that?"

"I – I was unconscious before they started carrying me, I guess," said Chuck.

"At any rate, we got you all back here in good shape." Tommy went across the room to a built-in cabinet and came back carrying a bottle of scotch, capped with three glasses, and a bowl of ice. "Ready for that drink now?"

"Try me," said Chuck, not quite licking his lips. Tommy made a second trip for charged water and brought it back. He passed the drinks around.

"How," he said, raising his glass. They all drank in appreciative silence.

"Well," said Tommy, setting his glass down on the top of Roy's desk, "I suppose you heard about the conference." Chuck glanced over at Roy, who was evincing a polite interest.

"I heard they had a brief meeting and put everything off for a while," said Chuck.

"Until they had a chance to talk things over *between themselves*, yes," said Tommy. He was watching his nephew somewhat closely. "Rather surprising development. We hardly know where we stand now, do we?"

"Oh, I guess it'll work out all right," said Chuck.

"You do?"

"Why, yes," said Chuck. He slowly sipped at his glass again and held it up to the light of the window. "Good scotch."

"*All right!*" Tommy's thick fist came down with a sudden bang on the desk top. "I'll quit playing around. I may be nothing but a chairside Earth-lubber, but I'll tell you one thing. There's one thing I've developed in twenty years of politics and that's a nose for smells. And something about this situation smells! I don't know what, but it smells. And I want to find out what it is.

Chuck and Roy looked at each other.

"Why, Member," said Roy. "I don't follow you."

"You follow me all right," said Tommy. He took a gulp from his glass and blew out an angry breath. "All right – off the record. But tell me!"

Roy smiled.

"You tell him, Chuck," he said.

Chuck grinned in his turn.

"Well, I'll put it this way, Tommy," he said. "You remember how I explained the story about Big Brother Charlie that gave us the name for this project?"

"What about it?" said the Member.

"Maybe I didn't go into quite enough detail. You see," said Chuck, "the two youngest brothers were twins who lived right next door to each other in one town. They used to fight regularly until their wives got fed up with it. And when that happened, their wives would invite Big Brother Charlie from the next town to come and visit them."

Tommy was watching him with narrowed eyes. "What happened, of course," said Chuck, lifting his glass again, "was that after about a week, the twins weren't fighting each other at all." He drank.

"All right. All right," said Tommy. "I'll play straight man. Why weren't they fighting with each other?"

"Because," said Chuck, putting his glass back down again, "they were both too busy fighting with Big Brother Charlie."

Tommy stared for a long moment. Then he grunted and sat back in his chair, as if he had just had the wind knocked out of him.

"You see," said Roy, leaning forward over his desk, "what we were required to do here was something impossible. You just don't change centuries-old attitudes of distrust and hatred overnight. Trying to get the Lugh and the Tomah to like each other by any pressures we could bring to bear was like trying to move mountains with toothpicks. Too much mass for too little leverage. But *wecould* change the attitudes of both of them toward us."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" demanded Tommy, glaring at him.

"Why, we might – and did – arrange for them to find out that, like the twins, they had more in common with each other than either one of them had with Big Brother Charlie. Not that we wanted them, God forbid, to unite in actively *fighting* Big Brother: We do need this planet as a space depot. But we wanted to make them see that they two form one unit – with us on the outside. They don't like each other any better now, but they've begun to discover a reason for hanging together."

"I'm not sure I follow you," said Tommy, dryly.

"What I'm telling you," said Roy, "is that we arranged a demonstration to bring home to them the present situation. They weren't prepared to share this world with each other. But when it came to their both sharing it with a third life form, they began to realize that the closer relative might see more eye-to-eye with them than the distant one. Chuck was under strict orders not to intervene, but to manage things so that each of them would be forced to solve the problems of the other, with no assistance from Earth or its technology."

"Brother," Chuck grunted, "the way it all worked out I didn't have to 'manage' a thing. The 'accident' was more thorough than we'd planned, and I was pretty much without the assistance of our glorious technology myself. Each of them had problems I couldn't have solved if I'd wanted to . . . but the other one could."

"Well," Roy nodded, "they are the natives, after all. We are the aliens. Just how alien, it was Chuck's job to demonstrate."

"You mean –" exploded Tommy, "that you threw away a half-million-dollar vehicle – that you made that crash-landing in the ocean – on purpose!"

"Off the record, Tommy," said Chuck, holding up a reminding finger. "As for the pot, it's on an undersea peak in forty fathoms. As soon as you can

get us some more equipment it'll be duck soup to salvage it."

"Off the record be hanged!" roared Tommy. "Why, you might have killed them. You might have had one or the other species up in arms! You might –"

"We thought it was worth the risk," said Chuck mildly. "After all, remember I was sticking my own neck into the same dangers."

"You thought!" Tommy turned a seething glance on his nephew. He thrust himself out of his chair and stamped up and down the office in a visible effort to control his temper.

"Progress is not made by rules alone," misquoted Chuck complacently, draining the last scotch out of his glass. "Come back and sit down, Tommy. It's all over now."

The older man came glowering back and wearily plumped in his chair.

"All right," he said. "I said off the record, but I didn't expect this. Do you two realize what it is you've just done? Risked the lives of two vital members of intelligent races necessary to our future! Violated every principle of ordinary diplomacy in a hairbrained scheme that had nothing more than a wild notion to back it up! And to top it off, involved me – *me*, a Member of the Government! If this comes out nobody will ever believe I didn't know about it!"

"All right, Tommy," said Chuck. "We hear you. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

Earth District Member 439 Thomas L. Wagnall blew out a furious breath.

"Nothing!" he said, violently. "Nothing."

"That's what I thought," said Chuck. "Pass the scotch."

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