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THE LAUGHING TERRAN

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The Laughing Terran

by
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dedicated to Second Mentor
John W. Campbell, Jr.

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The Laughing Terran is for the reader who enjoys action and adventure spiced with a most probable set of future worlds. Surplus Earth population, often indentured for life as payment for their transportation to new, poorly explored, and policed planets, includes some individuals who may choose the gladiator's role on Trippert's Planet, where either death, or great riches, prestige, and early freedom await them.

Tinker, the Terran, and Jakon Wy, rare, humanoid beast-like alien from a newly colonized planet, meet at the gladiator pens on Trippert's Planet, where a strange, unnatural relationship binds them. Together they survive the year's contests, only to face one another at the finals. Jakon Wy suicides, making it appear that Tinker has won, but before dying passes to Tinker a small silver cylinder, and he also leaves his "inheritance" to the Earthman.

Now gladiator Champion, free and wealthy, Tinker seeks out his alien friend's "inheritance" on the Planet of the Sluks, and struggles thereafter against both Terran and Sluk intrigues.

Unusually swift, trained and superior in combat, Tinker overcomes all -- until his alien friend's friends began their trial and torture. Can this be the Sluk "inheritance?"





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I

Almost fretfully the ship hesitated before its next longjump. *Super-space* mathematicians called it. *A long, wearisome and constricted wait*, Tinker called it. Babies squalled. Wives and husbands spat. Hissing sibilance of ship's normal operations inaudibly hypnotized. Tinker, long used to open and grand spaces of *Trippert's Planet* gladiator pens, repeatedly tensed his muscles; and he rolled from side to side in his small allotted precious and pre-paid passenger space, all of three foot by six foot, webbed and hung over and beneath and beside hundreds exactly alike. Human sweat wafting from every direction crinkled his nose. The eternal cacophony of human relations two by two, two by three—in every arrangement and order—dulled his senses.

How long to freedom? Tinker wondered again.

Ignoring a female's waving hand, he closed his eyes, driving his conscious mind inward against the black barrier. *Where had it begun? What are the keys?*

"There's my new gladiator!" the patron shouted as Tinker stepped from the shipwalk. Already the imported Terran's infectious grin and black, unruly hair captivated his new owner.

"Hold, Sire," the man in dusky grey uniform shouted over freeman's clamour. Fearing to touch one of the family, he yet dared the opening of palms. "The papers, Sire. Terrans cost much mass, Your Worship. Can't lose another. My job, you know." Though steady of voice, his black eyes danced as they pleaded. Though his body demanded, it yet it bowed obsequiously.

Amiably smiling, His Worship displayed teeth decorated with curlicues of precious metals and gems. His pasty white and fat face laughed, as though amused with queer perversities of little men. He said, "You lost one?" in rare condescension.

Visibly relaxing, eyes glanced sideways, sweeping His Worship's red and yellow background embossed with gold and silver and palladium, where each braid was encrusted with the rarest of rare stones — some, it was said, found only inward where lies the unexplored galaxies. The gateman squinted from the spiked white needles reflected brightly in even the pinkish yellow and sickly light of noonday. "Yes, Sire," he said. "A young hellion, like this one, but not so fine of face and form. His master pulled him through this very gate before papers signed, and before placing wrist bracelets. The young buck jumped upward and backward over the crowd, disappearing in a blink."

"A disgrace," — the powerful one snapped fingers to his retainer, one dressed in finery far above those surrounding, and whose right arm was chained to a large and locked satchel filled with useful items — "ah—they found him of course?"

The guard, perhaps a man of sixty with work-gnarled fingers and sparse, greying hair, bowed deeply. "Yes, Your Worship. Killed under proper Family Law, Sire. Cost six months pay, it did, though I was grateful, Sire. But a fraction of original mass-cost, of course."

Papers shuffled to fat fingers, and were passed onward with the remark, "You'll find Don Lu Abu Gladiators in good order."

*"Why"—the gateman seemed stunned as he looked upward—"Don Lu Abu himself!" He touched his open palms to his emblem, an embroidered crest of *Trippert's Planet* circle and crossed swords. "Pleased, I am, to help, Sire."*

Beaming, the fat one turned ponderously to his retainer. The Seal was brought forward and swiftly impressed on the import papers. In accordance with standard Family Law, Tinker was chained at the arms and legs, and he was at last released from his debarkation cage. Pudgy hands, soft like a gleeful child's, grasped Tinker's hard tempered ones, and he was drawn forward, beginning his tenureship.

Strange draft animals reminding of composites of Earth zoo beasts plodded in both directions along muddy streets; and each animal was beat or prodded or pulled by those of ragged clothes, arms and legs extended and withered as the sheaf of corn left too long beneath a drying sun.



Houses rose two or three stories above the near-solid stench, and were crazily joined as though each were patterned at the moment of construction.

“Now my brother Kel LuAbu will be shown for the braggart,” His Worship chattered pleasantly to no particular person. So self-pleased was he, that now and then he nodded and smiled to those so far beneath his world. “This one”— he prodded a detached Tinker beneath the arm at the chest — “is muscle. Action pictures—speed—oweeee!—Kel LuAbu’s turn —”

Alien dung mixed with rotted human faeces that burbled and swirled in muddy puddles.

— “Small. Terribly small”— Don LuA bu arrogantly stepped in and through the slimy pools, protected by hip-high black boots that glistened brightly at each step, the sickly fluids running off in oiled trickles. Tinker’s feet were bare, the retainer’s sparsely covered with embroidered soft wear that now appeared dull and soggy, “—but fast. What was it? First or third law of the ancients’ describing momentum?” He snapped fingers.

“I’m sorry, Sire. The law escapes for the moment. May I have your permission to research it?”

“No matter,” His Worship waved his fat hand. “Speed. Speed is what counts if mass is small. Velocity and mass combine creating momentum, and momentum imparts energy —”

The queerly fascinating blue animal with tall eyestalks tied by reins held by the withered hands of an old woman, pulled off the road, permitting them throughfare. Marching straight with eyes unturned, His Worship continued: “Kel says the alien fears not death ah—but this Terran, faster than most—very fast, they say.” Waving imperiously and unseeingly, children scattered like tiny birds at the narrow junction. “We shall see”—and again Tinker’s skin tightened at the impersonal pinch of thumb and finger — “will this flesh stand the rounds?”

The elevator shaft rose openly up the five hundred metre cliff, permitting them to scan commoner’s plain outward as far as eye could view, broken only by the ubiquitous Eemay landing fields, now covered with foaming ablatives. Once on the wind swept plateau, Don LuAbu breathed deeply, saying, “Ah — clean air.”

Tinker also pressed the infections of a thousand stench from his lungs. Far outward the shiny golden-spired rocket pointed to an overburdened Earth. Like tiny gnats, servicers flicked along the port bridge surrounding the craft. The concrete apron shimmered crazily from the warm air.

A thousand metres closer was the tall, rusted fence designed to shunt heat and noise. It swerved in and around Eemay guard shacks made of dingy, brown mud bricks.

Between the guard houses and their present position were thousands of equally dingy mud and brick hovels where people — free people — crawled like worms through sewers of their own making — mile upon square mile — the fabulous Trippert’s Planet, a swearword, perhaps a sewer — but freemen?

“There! To your right!” Tinker was again prodded. “Your home. Where you’ll win for me.”

Far off through haze and stink rose a wall high as the tallest of Earth’s buildings. “Tournament lands fall behind the barrier — beautiful — wooded — a land designed for excitements — colliseum where — there — there — to our right — and beyond — wonderful hidden places — we can view it all, you know — long range sensors and controls” — LuAbu waved again — “the wall’s, your home, you know. Tapered thin at top, thick like a dam, at the bottom” — His Worship’s eyes squinted as they foreshadowed his emotions, like some small child’s — “a prison for the lazy — luxury, whatever is wanted for those who please — those who win “

A small electric cart whined to a halt. Cautioned by a retainer’s hand, Tinker waited to seat himself. Stepping downward, two youthful, almost foppish retainers carried towels and disinfectant. Tinker’s feet were carelessly wiped clean and pushed into disinfectant, after which they were covered with synthetic but clean slippers. Just as his nose had rebelled in the stink below, now it rebelled at the cloying perfume sprayed upon him from toe to head. A third servant removed the Master’s boots, and, after careful and detailed cleansing of feet, replaced them with brown, real leather.

Tinker was permitted to sit, dangling his chains over the small car’s sides. LuAbu breathed heavily,



continuing as though he'd never been interrupted — "win the championship for me, freedom for yourself — wealth beyond your dreams" — he nearly whispered — "passage — free passage — paid for passage — to any planet of your choice"

When Tinker's new owner fell silent, only the click-clack of wheels against steel remained. Tinker studied the glazed eyes, so filled with red thread veins and surrounded by puffy, pampered cheeks. His mind triggered pictures of Trippert's Planet studied millions of miles earlier, and the reality was less, the coming perhaps less wise.

They approached the structure, surely as large as Terran Eemay Headquarters on Earth. Standing seventeen stories, it was a mile long, and possibly as deep. Lesser peaks studded its length. Architectural facades spoke of many minds, of many whims, and the various materials shined or absorbed light, or reflected clean, sculpted lines. It was a museum of rock from every planet inhabited by man, kept updated by the fabulous LuAbu wealth. It was simply one of Don LuAbu's country homes.

They were met by ten dressed in red-on-yellow. The carryall lifted them past the ten standing at attention, and it smoothly rolled into the main entrance below the largest spire. They emerged from bright tunnels expensively decorated with garish murals, into a foyer richly displaying soft furniture and conveniences, including multitudes of servants for every demand.

An exact duplicate of Don LuAbu rose, excepting his colour scheme was yellow-on-red: the same imperious manner, the same snapping of fingers — and when he did, the Sluk, Jakon Wy, stepped upward and faced Tinker.

"They're eyeing one another," Don LuAbu's twin wheezed in a similar almost whining voice.

The Sluk's long, bright yellow head, much like a pumpkin, was decorated with small, black, bead-like eyes. It's swollen body seemed decorated with green leaves, though on closer study was seen to be outer skin growth. Long arms and legs and foot pads were covered with fine silken growth.

Squawling emigrants and a violent shaking broke Tinker's reverie again. "Whatsa' mattah?" asked the young female, also the source of the shaking. "Too good ferns?"

Tinker forced his smile. Shaking unruly black locks, he said, "A good friend is dead."

Something strangely responded between them — Jakon Wy, a Sluk, and Tinker, a Human. Unusual, singular, a misshapen creature from a far planet: the longer bead-like eyes stared, the stronger came empathy. Tinker's chains rattled as he forced himself away. And they? — the two — they had misunderstood, the twins laughing and saying, "Fine final match, if they survive!"

For no obvious reason, and suddenly, both owners tired of their expensive toys and waved their hands, one by one. Four bare chested men with bulging muscles clamped steel bars to the chains and led them downward, step by step, through brilliantly lighted tunnels, along dripping and crudely cut tunnels, traversing crossways slick with algae and scuttling small life that clacked nails on concrete; they surfaced inside their new home, the dungeon-like fortress bulging with Terrans, and a small number of multi-weird aliens, each pitted or to be pitted in combat.

II

Once a day, along with the bound emigrants, Tinker single-filed to the exercise chamber, a round doughnut that surrounded the whole craft. Running in the same direction caused the massive, but inflatable device to turn oppositely. While some ran, others slid outward to exercise in other ways. Tinker slid now, having used his abnormal speed to outpace a persistent female. He found an unused cubicle with tension bars and harnesses. Closing the door, he lay on the lone mat, Tinker's arms doubled would have reached from corner to corner. *The first cell was bigger*, he thought, closing his eyes.

Tinker paced with feline grace. "This cell is not so bad," Jakon Wy whispered. "They throw us fresh hay



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daily, and we sweep the floor with the old."

Tinker's first laughter swept chambers, stirring others in some uncanny way, like caged monkeys who shiver from a lion's nocturnal roar. "What of food, friend Jakon? And water? Is it decent? Will it keep up our strength?"

"You have no need for strength, little one" — growled a bristly face between bars, his paws corded and shelled with growth, seeming to wring the iron for blood — "tomorrow! Tomorrow is initiation day." Teeth sharpened to peaks mawed open like Earth's fabulous and rare Lamprey Eel. "Who will pair with a flea?"

Tinker looked to Jakon who explained, "It's a once-a-year spectacular for the whole planet. We've the run of reserved lands from sunup 'til sundown, and those who survive are counted as full gladiators, given rights and privileges."

"Rights? Privileges?"

"Better cells, or rooms; better food. Females. Monetary symbols to use as we please."

"You've been through this?"

"Yes. Though not to finals. Money saved was insufficient for passage home." The Sluk's thick fingers twirled a small silver cylinder hung at his grotesque neck by a silver chain. "Finals found me sick, of no use to my master. He kindly permitted a new beginning because of my past performance --"

"Home? Did you hear Tiny?" The bristly monster addressed his bulky cell mate, a Terran bulging with muscles that seemed to have been sculpted into granite by ancients. "We'll smash the pumpkin-pineapple first, just for fun — then we'll play with the little Earth mouse."

No flutter, no ruffle disturbed Jakon's alien features. Tinker stepped closer, squarely facing the two between bars, his stature diminutive and demeaning, like a child's among adults. He lacked their reach, their mass, and perhaps their experience. Baby blue eyes uncluttered by age or the thin red veins of dissipation — innocent black locks freely swung beside an apparently friendly face — ludicrous contrasts. Tinker's smooth, moderate voice also contrasted against their harsh male baritones, as he said, "I've yet to kill, but tomorrow you two shall be first blood," and then he did that thing which chilled human bone marrows and the yellow fluids of the chitinous. He laughed a queer screaming noise that echoed down the thousand cells and spurred the sleeping animals to turn about.

When Tinker woke by Jakon's furry touch, the late sickly pink-night sky was gone, washed away by the deep blood red of early morning. "I'll pair with you, friend Tinker," the strange alien softly sibilated.

Somehow that invisible bond had already been forged, a mingling of alien psychic chemistries.

Grunts came loud from straining gladiators — or those who meant to be — as they tussled one with the other to tone up muscle, and to pump adrenalin into finely honed bodies, preparing for death day. Food was pushed into each cell with slender sticks. Although reluctant at first, Tinker commented, "Wonderful! Mostly synthetics on Earth. And the water is clear and cold."

"Health is important to good fighting," Jakon explained simply.

Afterwards they were marched like cattle into open plains before the base of the dormitory wall. Everywhere were seen instruments for the teaching of death, and the development of muscle and tone and reaction. Their scraggly line numbered a thousand. Jakon whispered, "Look for the two big ones."

When the last had been herded into formation, a bald headed Terran, arms and legs decorated by thick yellow bands, strode arrogantly forward.

"Tripods! — along the upper walls," Jakon whispered. "Former revolt — no chance — no escape, my friend, except through the games. Each gun controlled by trackers assigned to each."

Tinker's head turned to search out the bristly alien. "I heard of one who escaped at port — and died."

The banded one's voice, now amplified, came as though by rote. "Some are new, some old. Those who've just arrived know that you are not gladiators until the day's end — if you survive. For the best games, only the fittest are wanted."

Tinker spotted the giant who was also looking toward them, his hideous grin not more than twenty men



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distant.

The speaker turned a page. "There are no rules in this first contest. The national circuit tracks each of you for betting and viewing. Wounded will not be helped until sundown."

Jaken also spotted their adversaries.

A second page turned: "No weapons except rocks, sticks, anything you can make of your clothes, belts — anything available in the field or on your person." A page pipped. "The bell signals alert. One warning! Anyone who attacks before the bell forfeits right to life. Everyone is watched by either his owner or owner's representative, and they shall signal when death shall be awarded."

A final page turned: "Some have signed away earnings for accumulation points. Anyone may sign as many times as he wishes at standard rates."

When dismissed, Tinker and Jakon strode together toward rocks some distance beyond. Others hurtled gulleys and fallen logs to cross the twisted gamelands. Some were already paired, and some raced outward in threesomes and foursomes.

"Best to establish a territory, and stand," Jakon advised, leading the way. "Those who hide are branded as cowards and will be hunted by all."

"Watch for the two," Tinker reminded. "They follow."

"Do you prefer rock or club?" Jakon asked. They scrambled up loose gravel and through a line of stubborn brush that was tall enough to hide man or alien.

Tinker tittered queerly. "The club of my fist, the rock of my foot." The Sluk's beady eyes scanned his Terran friend, seeming to return the calm smile.

Field lights cast deep shadows as they traversed two natural cliffs split by two large boulders. "You laugh, friend. Is life always amusing?"

Tinker shrugged. "Sometimes. A habit. A manner of being, like your hide is part of you. But you, friend Jakon. What is the value of the small cylinder that you clutch whenever death is mentioned?"

The Sluk paused and began to speak, and then he strangely shook his ungainly head in the Terran negative. "I — I cannot communicate the thought."

An open space surrounded by boulders and floored by smooth, white sand, formed a tiny amphitheatre. "Watch your eyes for sand," Jakon cautioned. "Here there are advantages. Open space. Level ground. Does it please?"

"No matter," Tinker chuckled — not nervous, but open and friendly. "I've trained for all terrain."

They hunched back to back at the centre of their chosen position. When the bell sounded, Tinker jogged Jakon's tough hide. "By the rock, near the twisted tree. Shadows."

Jakon whispered, "The right. Second also in shadow." Tinker could not see with Sluk eyes.

Like two sprinters, the two giants, one alien and bristled, the other Terran and muscular, raced toward them. The Terran carried high over head a roughly spherical rock. The other swung a tree limb, prepared to swat the small Earthling. Tinker's lips parted and a trill broke that could not be distinguished between laughter and a snarl. Jakon deliberately absorbed the thrown stone with his tough petallike hide.

Tinker hunkered lower, as though waiting to be swatted. At the very last possible moment he gracefully sidestepped the swinging limb, stepped inward, and his fist exploded in the alien's stomach.

An Earthman would have died. Drawing upon unknowable reserves, the sharp-toothed and bristly one raised itself on strong knees, pushing the limb outward like a sword. As lithe as a panther, Tinker smoothly sidestepped, then pirouetted inward and, using his two hands as a club, came at the alien's head with tremendous speed. The skull crushed, crackling like an overripe nut. Alien brains green and red spilled over clean sand.

Even before the alien was stilled, Tinker, with peculiar swiftness, swung behind Jakon's opponent, but Jakon had already crushed his opponent's neck.

"Look behind," Jakon whispered coarsely, as loud as his nature permitted.



Jakon dropped his dying opponent, leaping far behind Tinker like some incredible animal, landing behind the third Terran. “Threesome,” Jakon explained.

The startled Earthman, caught between two deadly foes, made a wise decision, fleeing before Tinker’s chilling laughter and Jakon’s disconcerting stare.

Time and again Jakon fingered his silver cylinder, and all that day they watched after one another.

III

The Terran female persisted. Apparently Tinker had become a challenge, a test for her charms, an obstacle that *must* be overcome. Swinging loosely in his allotted space, hands tightening and loosening over woven knots, Tinker stared unhappily at nothing at all.

“More brothers, next load,” she gabbled effortlessly. “That’s muh younger brothers. Two with me—ah—they go ever’ where, so’s they kinda’ protect me. See?”

Tinker had long ago marked the two behind, one moderately large, not more than 1.8 metres, the other smaller. The tallest had sandy hair, the smaller, red. Neither held features common to hers. He doubted her story, and waited.

“Eemay says we”—and she waved at the two behind—“we make good stock. Maybe no more than thirty, forty years, and we be free. Why you not take up with me?” she pouted. “More men than can count on muh toes and fingers has volunteered to be with me.” She pretended a coyness which did not quite come off.

Tinker waited, saying nothing. Sooner or later, it had to come. When she signalled behind, the larger of the two approached to unfasten the cubicle nets surrounding Tinker and defining his transport space. Two males entered, received by Tinker’s grin. The other immigrants, long party to the chase, quieted, and for all of Tinker’s experience, that hush sounded as loudly as those preceding his kills in the coliseum.

The big one attempted crude distraction, while the younger dived. Swiftly—virtually faster than the eye could respond, Tinker was elsewhere, and then behind the smaller. Again, like the flick of a slingshot, or the twitch of a tongue, the smaller was beneath the larger, the larger was down, trampolining in the webwork, and Tinker was bending arms to breaking points. He leaned close to their ears and whispered: “Trippert’s Planet, my friends.”

They blanched and scuttled.

Closing the web work again, Tinker relaxed, even as his weird sound scattered the blood hungry. They would not bother him again.

When had the *time* come?

*Paired with Jakon, they’d fought each inhuman and bloody spectacular to win. Then had come the time. Tinker was torn between his compulsion for **freedom and his strange** and almost overwhelming attachment to the alien, animal-like Sluk.*

Jakon My also felt the attraction. When others heard Tinker’s laughter—sometimes hideous or poisonous, or overbold, or sniggering, or joyous, or near-silent titters—they shrank or raged, according to their kind. But not Jakon. What brought this Sluk, a caricature of the human, and the tiny, compact Tinker together? Why were there no other Sluks, or even females here?

Tinker, powerful by training and abnormal speed, healthy, black of hair and blue of eye, young, accoutered as other normal Terrans, yet he felt no compulsion whatsoever for the Terran females brought to him during successive wins and awards.

They remained all-time favourites by the hungry and betting populations, and then the time neared. The last time before finals!

When the red sun had coloured side pits, and the throngs rumbled and gabbled behind their laser protectives, here was the year’s finest gladiator pair pitted against their runner-up—drama, tension, love for life, but mostly love for death in all weird forms.

From opposite sides of the revetment two laser spurts formed a silent, white V on Tinker’s exposed hand beamer popping it like a toy balloon. Tinker dropped the hot remainders. Jakon Wy’s husky voice whispered loudly. “You—Tinker. Catch.”



The beamer glistened silver and gold through the air, and it was caught with fascinating swiftness. "Thanks!" shouted Tinker. His characteristic nervous energy trilled through the pit, bouncing from laser opaque plastics to scatter across ceramitized shapes forming obstacles between pairs.

The crowd stirred, and now they rose en masse to cry with typical blood frenzy. The elite and gladiator masters wagered ever upward, prodded anew by over stimulated glands.

A single beam flared atop Tinker's s-shaped revetment. A distraction? What of the unarmed Jakon at his flank?

Crawling to the barrier's side, and stooping low, near the earth, Tinker triggered random shots at a probable position and then leaping with a swiftness constantly under-estimated by others, he flew to Jakon's left and rear, passing the ungainly weird concrete obstacles one by one — a race for death, and there, at one hidden position, he waited, silently, patiently.

"Aeeeeia! Tinker! Tinker! Sheeeea! Shhhhh!" shouted the melange, for the crowd could see both strategies while the gladiators must deduce both the plan and the act.

Sand coloured hair bristled from a near smooth pate and muscles ballooned nearly as huge as Jakon's. Tinker smelled his slick sweat and fear stench as the opponent came hunched low about one ablative sink and then around another.

Tinker suppressed a nervous titter. He seemed to move as fast as the loosed death beams when he at last flowed around the corner. Mercifully his ray punched through yellow skin to the white skull and pink gelatin virtually instantaneously.

Wheeling, Tinker raced behind Jakon's barrier. Jakon's long, leathery arms snapped a rock, whipping it behind and to the right of the racing Tinker for diversion.

Tinker dived behind Jakon, throwing up the hand gun and shouting, "Hoy, Jakon. Your turn!"

Wordlessly the long practiced teamwork complemented and re-complemented one another. Heads massively weaved in three directions following individual participants. Tinker exposed himself like the flick of the lizard's tongue, jolting attention from Jakon.

Jakon crept slowly, and then from the rear he attacked. Again was the char of flesh, the odour of death, and the merciful kill.

Roars strived to fill the death theatre. Debts were called and paid.

Semi-finals were again successful.

IV

Near the last jump, netting was unstrung, and general assembly called and formed. Immigrants reluctantly pressed together as the ship's Captain pushed through to a makeshift rostrum. Bright red and blue Eemay colours starkly reminded of the coming indentures, and their — for the most part — lowly positions therein. They hushed. He spoke of their landing on *Astairian* soil. He reminded that each could be shot for desertion, that they must fulfil their contract in payment for shipping mass, that the good life awaited them within or without Eemay service after dutiful service. "Some come as free men," he reminded, "but all others must await debarkation orders, which will probably take two days after landing."

Details droned lazily; feet shuffled and coughs increased dimensions and distances were quoted. . . .

"How far we have come, friend Tinker," Jakon whispered as they stepped arm in arm through the pre-champion suites. "A year ago we waded in muck, where beginners are humbled and weeded before they start, and the stench of sewers wearies the spirit as well."

Plush carpeting pressed against their feet, and the walls toned with costly paintings, also lined with priceless antiques. "Who was it, friend Tinker, said that space was not free?"

Subdued as the furnishings, Tinker chuckled when they passed the two identical rooms, the first labelled TINKER BIKISS, and the second 3AKON WY.

"One may opt for Eemay," Tinker reminded.



“Most Terrans opt for Eemay service,” said Jakon.

“Yes. But who will spend forty years indentured?”

Unlike their first pen crowded with hustling beginners and bedded with stone and straw, here was furniture of the finest quality, colours of the brightest, sweet and sour scented Lowers, most brilliant and most fascinatingly designed. “And this?” — Tinker waved — “at each step our masters have added material values: first one’s own cell, but still of hard brick and lacking heat; then running water and heat; and up and still up — a fine room, comfortable, but without rugs with beds that creak in the night; and then is added soft flooring, but skimpy and thin; and up ever more — to this. Only the wealthy on Earth can afford space. Here we are treated according to accomplishment, but still abide in prison. A wall of stone to our right, guards below and above ground

On entering, Tinker sat, sinking low. Jakon’s head bobbed, as though with fatigue. He asked, “The story, friend Tinker. We’ve been busy, you and I. Tell me. How did this — Trippert’s Planet begin? And why?”

Tinker simultaneously frowned and chuckled as he scratched a bare foot against plushness and strove to dig memories. Somewhere they started, but they seemed unreal. At last, “Earth population pressures — Trippert’s Planet was founded by Terran Emigration Authority — EEMAY. Humans — mostly humans — pay their mass travel by means of the indenture system.

“Overcrowded, one becomes colonist, and can work out the indenture, as you know. Eventually colonists are permitted to work out their own government. Here — ” Tinker waved.

Jakon’s tiny black-bead eyes centred themselves on Tinker’s bright blue. “Earth is not exploitive, I’ve been told. Here is over-wealth in the hands of few, and — ”

Tinker shrugged. Memories were perhaps behind a barrier. “Friend Jakon, I know very little more than you. I can guess that corrupt Eemay or free settler groups got control of everything: transportation, economy, food, power, and so on, and that such groups formed family fiefdoms — ”

“Why would Terra permit —?”

Tinker rose to follow his keen sense of smell, and behind thick, cleverly carved doors he discovered the sweet-scented stimulant. Selecting a yellow carafe, he poured. “Population, I suppose. Earth is too busy to monitor every planet, leaving administration and control to Eemay. What Eemay does is Earth’s policy, and Earth’s policy is Eemay.”

“Population can be controlled,” Jakon softly suggested.

Tinker, sipping slowly, struggled for his thought. “Again yes, Friend. But our biologists showed that any species which inhibits the chance joining of genes and stabilizes populations, also dooms itself to mediocrity, if not eventual extinction.”

Jakon’s fibrillations moved in pulses upward and downward which, from long familiarity, Tinker knew to be symptoms of either great anxiety or deep sorrow. “Ah yes. Biology. We Sluks know so little — and would know more. Perhaps” — his voice lowered and slowed — “perhaps we are too late — too late.”

Tinker’s laughter, suddenly a susurrant like the rustling of bees, approached Jakon, even as tears formed and dropped. They reached together, human hands against Sluk pads, and they looked deeply into each others’ eyes. “Tomorrow is friend against friend,” Tinker said.

Jakon’s head fibrillated violently while one hand softly caressed the little silver cylinder at his throat.

After nets were reslung, and each compartmented according to allotment, the Captain announced landing time. Tinker thought of mornings earth-time, ship-time, and Trippert’s-time. Somehow they all seemed unreal except that last morning . . .

Spirits thundered painfully beneath skin and leather Terran and Sluk, while the morning’s heavy light slanted greedily through barred windows. Foppish men with weak muscles and heavy stomachs, dressed and belted and garnished with bright stones glazed in ice, settled to rest and to wait and to bet.

Golden hand beamers crusted with delicate whirls and fully charged were handed to both Jakon and



®
*Tinker by equally foppish men, retainers decorated frosty white, sea-deep green, and moon-blue.
One chubby face tugged at Tinker's leather braided in gold, and said, "Bets are with you, Oh Champion."
Tinker glowered, and pulled away.*

*Jakon's black and white halter was adjusted while his retainer whispered, "We pray you quick victory,
Sire." Jakon's long, yellow head fibrillated, and he, too, twisted away.*

*The door opened silently. Don and Kel, the LuAbu twins, entered. Neither would understand their new
champions' feelings.*

*Seats overflowed. Lights spilled boldly overhead, giving neither sides nor ends advantages. Ablatives
sprayed freshly over concretements had hardened during the night. The air tasted of aseptics. No birds sang,
no water gurgled, no wind blew beneath the protective plastic.*

*Tinker waved from long habit, bringing cheers, hazzahs and, yes, occasionally boos. The shouts meant
death, demanded death.*

*Jakon's long, supple arms also waved desultorily, and many who voiced for Tinker now also voiced for
Jakon.*

*Twenty pieces separated them, different in shape, in size and hue. Tinker made final adjustments to his
ornate harness, by habit. The first barrier, almost as tall as his 1.7 metres, snaked backward and forward
across new, brown sand. He checked his beamer and then, hesitantly, like the doubting paw of a curious cat,
his right hand wavered: whether or not simply to reholster it and --?*

*Then suddenly, too fast for the eye to follow, his beamer flew from right to left hand. No reason. A motion
born of pressures, an outlet for his raging seas.*

*Blurs of motion and sound blends pushed the huddled crowd into greys and whites until Tinker's eyes
seemed to pinpoint a direction to his left halfway down the arena. The crowd responded, so Tinker knew
where Jakon stood, or lay.*

*He prodded himself slowly forward, pressing thick soles into deep, clean sand. The crowd, misconstruing
his reluctance as innocent bravado, roared like a hundred waterfalls, signifying the beginning of the end of
their most gratifying blood-red season.*

*He must first crawl through a glistening red latticework. Carelessly he exposed himself, pulling himself
effortlessly, but uncharacteristically slowly through the tangle of pipeworks.*

Jakon My waited quietly.

Photons spurted over Tinker's head, and the screams alerted him.

*He flew beneath the cluster of concrete yellow leaves that protruded from the arena floor like rows of teeth
in a turbine blade. Lying prone, pushing his head into fine sand, he prodded his beamer gently ahead. There!
A slight motion — green against green — Jakon Wy's feet seemed to stretch long from behind a convex shape
looming unclimable and tall, like the feather plume from some giant and strange and alien bird.*

Tinker sighted the beamer from long habit.

Merging cries of the thirsty mingled with squeals of praise and angry words of warning.

*As though his inner conflict were at last resolved, Tinker climbed the imitation flower petal, boldly waving
to the noisy blood thirsters. Agilely he jumped from piece to piece toward his old friend's position. The
monsters responded wildly cheering this great and foolish act of derring do.*

*With great show, Tinker poured hot beams near Jakon's position and waited for the flash of death he knew
would come.*

Sand near his feet boiled into sputtered glass. Bubbles melted and cooled and melted again.

But Jakon missed, too.

Like a maddened animal, Tinker plunged to ground. Speeding about a corner, he fired wildly.

Alas!

*Jakon nonetheless fell silent, his towering strength bending, then bursting. Yellow fluids aimlessly
disturbed the dry sands. Only Tinker knew that Jakon had turned upon himself during the suicidal plunge.*



Ignoring the thunderous praise, Tinker threw down his laser and, kneeling, cried, "It's me, Old Friend." He choked back tears, but they came with his giggles.

"It is me, friend Tinker," came the low, whispered response.

"Neither of us could " A furry paw rose weakly. Jakon fumbled at the silver cylinder chained about his neck "Another way "

"Why is this? Why suicide?" Tinker chided gently, resting the misshapen and ungainly head on his arm.

"No matter. Almost too late. Inside — the cylinder and the pouch at my side — Sluk inheritance and debts — directions."

Tinker patted thick green sides. "Easy. Maybe the medics —"

The furry paw again rose slowly. "Too late — cylinder — valuable — yours — take — to — Astair claim my inheritance — yours — the cylinder—"

Before had been sound and motion and colour. Reason had fought fire from black bead-like eyes. Now was stillness, a green ungainly carcass with long awkward arms and furry pads, all green. And now? Splotchy yellow from a char- hole where once had beat an alien but fine heart.

Jakon My, Old Friend, is dead.

V

The ship docked, and the ramp at last reached Astairian soil. Tinker paused momentarily before descending to breathe deeply, embracing the cool, clean air that swept away stink of cramped quarters, and the ghost of smells and tastes from a hundred different worlds.

All Terran Emigration ports are called Port Authority. Each colony planet has a Port Authority, and each unreleased planet is controlled by the ever-present Eemay, those Terran representatives who are the sole representatives of man wherever he emigrates.

Viewed far out, through sparse service skeletons, was the grubby administration building, no more than three stories. Standing from its roof, Tinker knew, he'd view the fat ship standing squat beneath the towering steel crane that stretched its ungainly neck like some monstrous skyscraper.

It was authority.

Crude sheds sprawled along the far side. Other frame structures built long ago from black grained Astairian wood, stretched bleakly dark in semi-circular arcs on each side of the tallest building, and several paralleled one another, arc within arc.

As always, one structure seemed to blaze most prominently with cheap glitter, and usually, like others of its kind on other worlds, it was indeed manufactured of the cheapest materials: bare, unpainted, slatted roof, open sides to all kinds of weather — it was the trade building, a long roofed- over space where the planet's native goods could be bartered and stacked for loading, provided its value elsewhere justified the vast expenditures of mass-energy.

For hundreds of acres around the whole was the flat, dark plane upon which could be seen no tree, bush, or grass — a concretized landing platform sometimes sprayed with ablative materials — a heat sink. Excepting the fuel tanks buried far beneath the ground, and intricate pipes that twined everywhere, the blast apron was usually the most expensive portion of Port Authority.

From the service tower Tinker stepped lightly onto freshly cooled surface where the sharp, acrid odours of scorched ablative still lingered. His keen eyes caught the early morning reflection of an ancient sun from the sub-space flat-dish facing skyward perhaps one to two and a half kilometres away. A light grey mist still shrouded the lower grounds.

Nearby Tinker absently noted the red and blue Eemay flag with round, green inset, and he chuckled at the anomalies: perhaps months by ships, perhaps years via sub-space, and no one yet predicted or explained the why.

His explosive impulse attracted curious looks from passing Eemay troopers all neatly dressed in standard issue: bright red shirt, blue trousers and white sponge-fibre bandanna.

One trooper's eyes instinctively glanced to papers held by Tinker asserting freeman status, and Tinker asked, "Transportation?"



The wind-lined visage, maybe sixty years old with only a few more years until time was served, pointed gnarled fingers, “Through Eemay Inspection, right two streets, and beyond the cargo shed. Corral there with Lacertas” — the trooper turned to go, but faced Tinker again — “unless you’re rich enough to purchase a land vehicle —”

Tinker’s good natured gurgle skipped the space between them, forcing the withered one’s lips upward into a faint smile. “Thanks, but no thanks, friend. If Lacertas are poor man’s ways, they’ll do just fine for me.”

High above jungle valleys Tinker Bikiss directed his newly purchased Lacerta along mountain folds that snaked crazily, following tectonic patterns already old at man’s beginning. The slow but dependable beast was not a lizard as suggested by its Terran homonym, being a placid herbivore with stony ridge above a sharp pointed skull, and four feet-splaying nails that seemed to scratch grooves in the hardest rock. Light reins extended from Tinker’s hands to pierced eyelids.

Alone at last, and free, and youthful in full measure of vigour, Tinker could not keep song from throat, and he pushed music outward with expanded lungs, the music and words bouncing from strange trees garlanded with red and purple mushy things from which small insects emerged momentarily, as if to view the sudden and bewildering sight of wild-eyed and curious Terran. Small, green femur-like creatures also peered curiously from behind iron-rich rocks.

Sweet scents billowed about their slow wake. His aria to freedom travelled outward and across steeply chiselled chasms opened thousands of centuries earlier when crushing forces tussled deep within the planet’s crust; and his heart’s song clanged against rocky spires standing daintily, even boldly, high over head; strange and wondrous birds fluttered silently outward making wary circles.

Tinker checked his Lacerta and turned to cross-check those trailing with supplies and baggage purchased, of course, from Eemay. *Somehow* — the thought crossed his mind — *he’d seen all of this before. In what way did he belong?*

The morning sun, too yellow by *Trippert’s Planet* standards, and perhaps overly ripe and golden by Terran standards, seemed to whisper his name. Tinker pushed himself upward to sit cross-legged across a horny ridge, and he urged his new, sluggish companion to the crest of a trail where he drew rein.

In the far background was Simka Mountains glistening whitely from snow patches and from where shaded hollows seemed to flow, five ungainly peaks blustered upward like five fat fists into thin air, higher, it seemed, than land should go. Those mountains, according to Jakon Wy’s written instructions, would be directly south of Jakon’s homesite. Tinker fingered the small silver cylinder now hanging at his browned throat.

In sloppy waves, the oft grotesque timber line wavered up and down slopes as though drawn by the hand of a child. Wind murmured through the narrow pass, carrying a promise of eternal spring, and there seemed to be a second quiet melody that only Tinker could hear. What cared he for Earth, or the deadly games? Or the Champion’s badge so recently earned? Or of any material thing? When there was this —!

Space and sun and wind and rain and bulging life and freedom to live and freedom for spirit — the wind whispering up the narrow canyon chortling with him, and each carried the other’s message elsewhere after meeting.

Already Tinker felt he’d found multitudes of friends. It was Jakon Wy’s planet, was it not? And though he knew none closely, except the dull witted Lacerta now cropping tall, strange grasses at the road’s side, thousands upon thousands of beasts and plants and insects flew and fluttered and scuttled and wheezed and squeaked and jumped, bounding from rock to rock, leaf to leaf, branch to branch

Earth has not witnessed such as this for a hundred years, his soul seemed to explain.

Jakon’s Valley! *Badlands* Eemay had named it. *The valley* lay far south of Port Authority beyond reach of the average immigrant, and yet still within control of the jealous Eemay authority. He would expect to find a few Sluks and renegade Terrans, mostly Eemay deserters, hiding in narrow canyons. Geography and economics, Eemay had said, slowed Terran growth in this direction. And, though Astair was a land of mountain folds thrusting steeply upward and downward, this part — *Jakon’s Valley* — was especially rugged, lawless, free. . . .

According to the map, *Jakon’s Valley* began at the rise where he now sat, and it passed eastward to tall mountains that reflected the sun’s afternoon light like coloured beacons. How long had he been? The planet rotated slightly



slower than Earth by one sixteenth, and he'd counted away three Astairian months. Tinker shrugged. No matter. He'd later learn to convert.

Foothills rolled before him in descending waves, like curves on the down trough of a steep wave; and they held a greenery that reminded of the natural things of man — green forests, green grasses, green gardens. But even that was an illusion, Tinker knew, that would dissolve on approach into strangeness that gave a joy to his new life in the discovery of new and wonderful things!

His Lacerta squeaked, and Tinker tensed. His hand almost casually touched his beamer, and his eyes, still crinkled from a slanting sun ray, peered carefully through narrow slits.

A chance stimulus? A random nothing?

The blue of the lake at valley's far end was real, and beside his trail rushed pell mell the happy cascade of clear water. Bending low, but still observant, he scooped with his hands and drank, revelling in natural flavours.

Again the wind murmured its cadence, and that with the rushing waters, and the rustle of strange tree fibres, the stir and scratch of small things behind hidden rocks, all combined into a symphonic sursurra that lifted his heart and eyes again.

At his left were tumbled boulders strewn like playthings — red, green, brown, purple. Dark shadows seemed to invite into cool caves, and once he saw a brown, free thing hop from shadow to shadow.

As his eyes adapted, he could make out differences. What had first appeared green was a blend of different colours as wild and exotic as the last forest park land in the Earth Amazon, with its myriad colourful flowers and birds. One tree — and he chose to think of it as such — was tall, like a willow, and thick fruit hung at the ends of bending branches like heavy weights from the ends of whips. Next was a flower bowl, petals parted just enough to view tall standing stems inside.

Tinker sensed his oneness with all about, and peripheral life moved. Two melodious whistles came from broken rocks in cliffs to his right, and those notes were almost immediately answered by two lower pitched squeaks from his left. A tiny miniature Lacerta scooted over his foot, up the true and larger Lacerta's thick, implacable leg, down the other side, and bounded up the cliff as though its feet were sticky paper. And so quickly it had happened. All life here seemed to move quickly.

A low bellow shivered the air, saying, "Chuck-chuck chuck-chuck," like a petrol engine about to stall. It seemed that all life stopped short momentarily to honour its source, and then life again scurried hither and thither.

Tinker was far stronger than most men; and he was swifter, by an order of magnitude. Yet he shivered at the strange challenge he now faced. To locate Jakon Wy's heritage and to settle in peace — a long, long lifetime of peaceful peace.

Darkness came, and this night he laid his course through it. The night was dimmer than ever. It seemed that the storm which had broken from the north and west now came from the mountain valleys. Gusts of wind moaned distantly through the trees or sounded close at hand with sudden rushings. Big clouds, also, were poured in broken streams across the sky, so that the stars were blotted out in great parts.

When daylight came, Tinker went to the brow of the hill overlooking the deep valley, and stretched Jakon's crudely drawn map before him. His new home should be down-valley, east, about sixteen kilometres, and perhaps six to the right. Drawing glasses from his pack, he peered at an assemblage of wooden cabins beside the stream bed and perhaps ten kilometres in line with the irregularly shaped lake. They were similar to others he'd passed near Port Authority, constructed according to recommendations given by early Eemay survival bulletins.

Large garden squares bordered each cabin, marching in orderly rows and columns at each side, forming a village larger than anticipated. Northward were flat grasslands that spread to rising foothills.

Criss-crossing the valley and over the rolling meadows, Tinker finally spotted what must be his inheritance, to his right, and southeast. The log cabin, like those of Terran settlers, sat on a low grassy knoll behind a vast jumble of rock formations that twisted and roughed their way upward as though ploughed by fierce lightning strokes. Jakon's chamber — whatever that was — would be in cliffs somewhere behind that cabin, according to the map, and



domesticated Lacertas could rest in the large barn to the right also constructed of the same dark black hardwood.

In a straight line viewed through glasses already stretched to limits of resolving power, Tinker estimated sixteen kilometres east and six kilometres south — say seventeen kilometres to his holdings. Even as he remorsefully accepted Jakon's gift of life, he readied himself to accept Jakon's mysterious inheritance. Characteristically he exploded a staccato of sound that seemed to blend well with wild things.

Late that same night Tinker led his three Lacertas up the gentle slope before his new cabin. They'd served him well, across burning desert, through cold passes, and lands shrieking with snow and ice, across hot jungle with stink and burbling ooze —.

He staked the Lacertas on long homespun rope so they could crop thick tall standing grasses. Stopping before the first broken fence rail, he laughed again. It was home. His. The fence could be repaired in time, and he'd enjoy the slow, lazy work in space so big so large that not the richest man on Terra could afford such. And there was the mystery behind the house, the cavern. . . .

The cabin, black even against growing shadows, loomed with blacker eye-skull windows. There! A flick of white? Already Tinker's hand touched beamer, yet he was unsure and his other senses — ears and nose, too filled with strange odours, stranger sounds.

The village was perhaps sixteen kilometres distant. Astair was a different world, he chided himself. And what would Astair have of retired gladiators? Or their suspicious habits? His laughter tinkled outward again.

But the gladiator's reflexes cannot be deadened so easily, as though the nagging voice of a woman might slow the tide of the world, or the chiding of the priesthood might convert the devil. No. Like breathing, both breath and reflexes permit life, otherwise one dies.

He did not walk directly to the wooden house, but rather stepped behind brown growths slick with wet fluids, and from among them he carefully studied the cabin. Jakon had written that no one lived in the cabin, and also that Sluks would not live in Terran villages, preferring, instead, their secret and ancient ways — and also that no other Sluk would think to touch Jakon's inheritance.

But what of men?

The flapping of a freshly painted sign attracted Tinker's attention. It had been tacked to a post of the crudely fabricated porch. It read: KEEP OFF, PROPERTY OF JAKE CARTER ENTERPRISES. ANYONE FOUND TRESPASSING WILL BE KILLED.

Tinker chortled a golden sound when he deliberately strode toward the sign almost as though careless. Pity the poor Terran who thought so.

Every sense alert, Tinker's lips curled upward, and he tipped his broad Eemay issue hat backward, permitting the last of the sun's golden rays to mark his ebony black hair. Swiftly and easily, he tore the sign's thin fibres, strewing them carelessly about; and then, one hand on beamer, he casually pushed open the door which squeaked a shrill objection from sagging wood pressing against wood.

He stepped inside.

Thin sheets reminding of spider webs hung from rafters and were filled with tiny insects wrapped snugly in cocoons. Some sheets hung loose with gaping holes, as though torn. Tinker found no one inside, although the back door was open, and footprints lay on the dust.

Old prints, or today's?

As expected, the fusion pak was gone. No matter. Tinker replaced it with one of standard Eemay issue. The small fusion generator from which years of power could be drawn for heat, water filtration, cooking, or dozens of things if the right attachments were available, also gave off garish light to the dusky interior.

Old Terran food tins lay scattered about. Tinker kicked one, making it clatter across the filthy floor. Cold camp fire embers lay in profusion on the black, nearly unburnable hardwood floor. He used one of the partially burned sticks to brush aside webbing, paying careful attention to the possibility of poisonous insects, as described by his recently acquired Eemay booklet.

Three crudely chiselled chairs and one table furnished the dusky interior and dust garnished everything. Tinker



knocked on the cabin's wooden logs with a stick, making a steel hard sound.

He found the long, wide barn cleaner than the house after the ever-present webbing was rolled about on a stick. Rings were built into posts that could be used to attach Lacerta reins. He'd let the animals graze outside for now.

Still uneasy—and he did not know consciously why—he searched behind the cabin at last reaching the mound of rocks slightly to the left of the cabin. If it had been the true Sluk home—at least the entrance to one—it was so cleverly fit that only with special knowledge on Jakon's map would one search for the thin hairline up and up and across and down and down.

Tinker rejoiced at the mystery, his chortle rebounding hollow, as though itself filled with the ghosts of the past.

Reflecting, Tinker again fingered the silver cylinder. One learns much about another species when you fight them to the death, or with them. Tinker probably knew more of Sluks than any other Terran, including those who'd lived a lifetime on Astair among them. Expressly forbidden to settle planets with intelligent species, Terran Emigration Authority searched for Earthlike planets from among a hundred million stars and a thousand million planets, finding them rare, like egg-sized diamonds among common gravel.

But with Terra packed like lemmings going to sea, who could turn down the gift of a shared Astair by this unknown and unexplored species calling themselves Sluks?

Tinker was unable to learn more at Port Authority, where pressures overrode simple curiosity. The Port held many Sluks, mixed with Eemay like mythical cowboys and Indians; and they'd seemed so friendly, so talkative—until he'd mentioned his inheritance and his quest.

Tinker's laughing eyes whipped around again: a beautiful place, and all his. He made several trips to the grazing Lacerta, unloaded the packs, and finally placed them in an even row on the sagging porch. He was tired. His muscles ached, a strange feeling for a gladiator whose every moment was spent in exercise and development of skills. Forty hours he estimated, but the push had been worthwhile.

He got out a double-bladed hand axe—only one to an emigrant whether or not they could pay more—and began hacking around the base of a peculiar pale blue plant until he'd freed one of its stems. Laying it aside temporarily, he surveyed the other growths, selecting one that would serve as a broom, chopping through the soft stem quickly.

Setting the fusion pak to low, he laid five *hilif*—a stringy fruit high in protein according to the Eemay booklet—on the greaseless plate. The crisp, pleasing odour penetrated his nostrils, and his mouth watered. Tart juices rolled about his tongue, and he contentedly chewed at last.

Afterwards he stretched his hard body against the harder wood to rest.

He wondered: *With all this, why would friend Jakon face death and slavery?*

VI

Each sense honed and alerted like a shining star, Tinker yet could not bring to conscious thought what troubled him; sleep would not come. And then he heard the soft snap of twig, the low rustle of leaves against boots. Already the sun, diffused, and low, a dark red against the far mountains, signalled day's end.

Tinker moved silent and fast, diving through the doorway and into tall standing foliage. Moments later she, a Terran female, came boldly along the pathway. Her jacket and shirt, both of homesun fibre, contrasted sharply with boots and sun hat, the former being shiny and probably Terran import and expensive, the latter equally anomalous. She had blue eyes and sandy hair. Perhaps she was but a year or two older than Tinker. But her eyes—yes, that was it. They seemed to be red and tired, as though long sleepless.

Tinker stepped out behind, saying, "Hello," and he smiled openly. Meanwhile his every sense scouted ahead and behind for others.

She paused while Tinker looked her through and through with dancing blue eyes.

"Enjoying the view?" she asked, pushing forward her breasts and breathing deeply.

"My pleasure," Tinker waved, unembarrassed.

She fluffed her hair with slender, well cared for fingers, "I'm Carlotta. Carlotta Slovak."

"Tinker Bikiss." He bowed low and smiled broadly. "Passing through?" He waved her toward the cabin. "My



® first guest. Welcome ah—Miss or Mrs. Slovak?”

Hesitating momentarily, she said, “Miss—I suppose it’s all right—you’re living here and all—belonged to one of the Sluks, you know. A Jakon Wy. ‘Course he’s not been back for a year, and there *are* other claims now.” She looked at him from the corner of her eyes. “Jakon Wy? The Sluk? Know him?”

The trained, surviving, gladiator watches for response and counter-response, and conversation is much the same as fighting in that respect. One first makes a motion, or creates a stimulus, which in this case is the speaking of words. Immediately thereafter one watches the other to note the word’s effects. Meanwhile your antagonist reasons similarly, and one races ahead to anticipate counter-response also simultaneously attempting to reason the motive behind the stimuli and counter-stimuli, and certainly attempting to predict future moves. In this complicated and deadly game, only those who learn well and swiftest survive. With Tinker, habit prevailed. “Yes,” he said, “I knew Jakon Wy.”

“Friend?”

“Not exactly. Not any more.”

“Not exactly?”

“No.”

She pursed together her lips, making a tight line with the red nearly hidden. “What do you mean by that?”

“We speak Terran Universal?” Tinker’s blue eyes danced, but his lips, too, pressed grimly.

A glossy insect winged briefly between them. Clacking broke through the woods at their right. She sighed, and laughed good-naturedly. “All right. I knew Jakon.”

“He’s dead,” Tinker responded warily.

She froze. “You’re sure?”

“Yes. Killed on *Trippert’s Planet*. In the games.”

Her eyes at best vacant, suddenly lived again. “*Trippert’s Planet*? Then no one owns this place?”

“I do,” Tinker said quietly.

The way she said, “Can you prove it?” implied she didn’t believe he could.

Tinker nodded. “A proper Sluk will, duly witnessed. I am the—ah—inheritor—and I also accept all debts.” He smiled again. “There is also a small matter of claim filing at Terran Port Authority. Two claims, you see, pretty Miss Slovak, and both as tight as the laws of either species.”

Eyes widened in amazement, she exclaimed “A Sluk inheritance?” as though also disbelieving, but truly amazed.

“Yes.”

Her eyes searched, crossing from the lock of black hair that mushroomed from beneath his broad brimmed hat, to the other side, and back again. “And you intend to—to stay?”

“Yes.” He wondered at how consistent had been response to his claims, both with the Sluks at Port Authority, and here, this Terran female.

“Does anyone else know of this?”

“Port Authority, I told you.”

“No. No. I mean—well—here? In this valley?”

He shook his head. “To my knowledge, you’re first. I came through the West pass.”

She walked slowly toward the cabin, kicking at a stone with her expensive boot. Only grey shadows of evening filled the sky, and her features were dimming even as the light dimmed. Her tone lost its quickness and had become, well, more confidential. “You aren’t settler, or colonist. What do you want with this patch of land?”

“No. I wasn’t. I’m not. And yes,” he waved his hand in a grand and eloquent gesture, “it once belonged to a close friend. I feel strength on it, and would value it highly for those reasons alone. But there is more of value here, I think.”

She shrugged. “There is nothing here. You can see it all in daylight. An old cabin, like hundreds, and dirty. And land is—well—everywhere.”

Quietly he insisted that for him, there was more here.

“Will you sell it?” she suddenly asked.



®

Though he had no intention, at any price, he asked “How much?”

Her figure was grossly overpriced. He shook his head. “It’s not for sale.”

“Everything has its price.”

He smiled.

“The Sluk didn’t tell you much about this valley, did he?”

They had reached the porch. Tinker pulled a light-pale from his bags and expanded its brilliant cone so that light cast a sphere about them, bringing facial expressions to life again. He indicated that she should be seated first. She smiled again, and now he could see the deep dimples of her cheeks. “Suppose you tell me about this valley,” he suggested.

“Jake. Jake Carter. He owns the valley and everything in it.” Then she noticed the sign fragments, and her breath caught sharply. “Do you know what you’ve done?”

“Ah yes! Someone—I say—someone has put nasty messages on my porch,” he clowned.

“You’d do well to learn of Jake Carter” she said, concerned.

“—and his enterprises?” he interrupted.

“—and Sluks,” she finished.

With simple but fervid loyalty, he said, “Jakon was my friend, a good friend.”

“You’d do well to learn more of them,” she snapped peevishly.

Was he really interested, he wondered? Or was it simply the companionship after so many years, penned up as gladiator of the royal stables? “Why don’t you tell me about Sluks?”

She searched his eyes to learn if he was again clowning. At last she said, “You *are* innocent “

“And?”

“Well, first, there’s Jake. Jake Carter. He owns, as I’ve said, everything. I mean *everything*, in this valley. He controls the men, the Sluks, the stores, the transportation, money, goods, everything, just absolutely everything “

“Does he own you?”

Even in the light her face seemed drawn, and although she attempted to control her reaction with some success, his trained eye noted the tension increase. “I should have told you from the start. It’s Misses—Mrs. Carlotta Carter, not Slovak. Or rather” — she continued, as though quite confused — “Slovak was, is — well, my maiden name.”

Tinker chuckled.

“Can’t you see? I don’t like the things Jake does. He tortures Sluks or humans indiscriminantly.”

“And you feel free to tell me this?”

Again the decided confusion, the floundering. “No — yes — well, you’re new. I can — perhaps — get you safely back to Earth if you leave before Jake learns of your presence.”

“Mass-energy? Are you a billionaire Mrs. Carlotta Slovak Carter? To offer a stranger free passage?”

Again the confusion. Then, “I had hoped that — well — I can’t explain.” After a pause, as though considering alternatives, she said, “Terran Immigration Authority shouldn’t be here, you know. Sluks are highly intelligent.”

Tinker shrugged. “Sluks invited us — and I can’t see that it’s hurting either us or the Sluks — only two million or so on the entire planet.”

“Well — they are — quite capable of mixing with us on social and activity levels, but there are things about them which speaks of age, and not at all well understood. Especially by Eemay.”

“Such as?”

“I’m — I’m not at all sure. There are only hints of it now and then. The inheritance is part of it. What it is and how it works, no one knows.” She suddenly changed the subject again. “How did Jakon Wy die?”

“Killed himself in the games, to save me.”

Blood drained from Carlotta’s face. Worse yet, she knew that he knew that she was trying to hide her shock, and that multiplied the effect. But was the shock from the way Jakon Wy died? Or was his quiet announcement that he’d been a professional gladiator the stimulus? “There’s my Lacerta,” she announced, looking out the darkened doorway. “I’ll have to go now.”



He grabbed her arm, just as she started to rise, “Wait, Mrs. Slovak —”
“Carlotta. Call me Carlotta.” She stared pointedly at her hand, and he let it go.

“All right, Carlotta. What of the inheritance?”

“I—can’t tell you more. I don’t know more. It’s just— well— things I’ve heard, and maybe they were simply stories and maybe not. Jake. He would skin you every metre were he to know that you’ve inherited. You’re not safe here, or anywhere in this valley.”

He laughed aloud, and all the world became carefree again with his over-powering mood. “Then who can tell me?”

“Jake— Jake Carter, maybe. That’s why he wants this property, I think. But there’s always the Sluks, themselves. They live most everywhere, and those who do work in the village strangely come and go —”

When she turned the last time, her expression seemed softer. She touched him on the cheek with slender fingers. “Leave. Leave before its too late.”

His grin widened, and the wind tugged at his long, black curly hair at the doorstoop. “No.”

She shrugged and glanced about the boundaries as though in search of someone who might be watching. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

They walked close in the dark to her grazing Lacerta, it’s ugly head looming like an irregular stone block. “One favour?” she asked, stepping lightly up the small stirrup ladder. “Don’t tell anyone that I’ve talked with you, or offered to buy you out, please.”

He nodded in agreement.

She looked steadily into Tinker’s eyes that reflected the harsh glow from the fusion-pak light. “There is something that I like about you.” She tugged at her beast’s eyelids. “Stay close to your guns.” Then she slapped a black stick against the beast’s back and pulled her white hat tighter and she did not look back.

VII

The biggest strong man for hundreds of square kilometres was Jake Carter — big in size — almost two metres — strong with power and hungry for it, rich with money and lands and busy with enterprises, impressed with his own ability to create and sustain fear.

Yet his full face, browned by the wind and reddened by birth, was flabby and not so dark as those who worked for him long hours beneath the deep yellow Astairian sun.

Above his thin lips bristled the neatly clipped moustache done with the aid of expensive tonsorial tools imported all the way from Earth. And above the fine line was a nose some said so long that it’s own weight had begun to bear it downward, forming a hook, though none dared say so to his face.

Leaning back in his padded swivel chair, also an astronomically expensive import, Jake placed shining, genuine *Swampworld* Dahrero boots on his black ebony desk. He pointed a lazy finger at the bound and gagged figure on the floor. “Kill him,” said he. “Now!” That last tore from his throat raw and gravelly, like sputtum on the victim’s face, adding another layer to the mud and blood already coating him.

“We’ve given him a pretty good lesson, Jake.” The smaller man now speaking stood respectfully before Jake’s desk. He was perhaps seventy years old, dressed in homespun and certainly braver than the younger man beside him who would not have dared address their boss so. “He’s got a wife and kids in the canyon, and maybe that’s why he didn’t come to unload the wagon when you sent out the call.”

Jake Carter flicked an imported cigar from the rich ivory and gold embossed case at his desk. He sniffed it, licked it, lit it, and watched the heavy smoke billow and curl for several long seconds before piercing the speaker with coalblack eyes. “Knock it Kindred. You’ve maybe lived a long and successful forty years with Eemay, but your indenture’s over and you’re in my territory. Retirement comes earlier here, and no side benefits.”

Kindred glared almost in challenge but finally shifted his eyes. The other two bent and carried the beaten man out the door and past others who found so little of interest in the happening they hardly bothered to shift their eyes upward.

Jake Carter had plans. For many years he’d held the valley and its surroundings. Someone called Som Toomey was behind Jake, they said. No one had seen or heard of the man.

Jake scraped hard heels from desk top, pushing papers across, and again began the long, tedious chore of



inventory and accounting, a task that no underling could be trusted to do.

The peach-bright sun was already hot when Tinker's Lacerta scraped across the narrow bridge over the foaming cataract where wilderness ended and farmland began at what appeared to be the village dividing line. Tilled fields, small garden patches, fences, both red stone and black wooden log cabins became increasingly dense as the small village was approached.

Across the narrow bridge, made of stone in deference to the damage done by Lacerta when they scabbled across was a downhill grade. Soon he was at the outskirts of the village he'd seen from the far valley's ridge the day before.

To his front, right and left, were tall standing mountains? green and brown and white tipped; and below was a bowl of green, a perfect setting for the far off deep-blue lake-jewel whose pendant was the closer rich black and red stone of the village proper.

Thrashing waters below the stone bridge spewed swiftly downward to widen in a clear-moving stream bordering the left bank of the clustering houses. The clear air penetrated his lungs with crispness that was lacking on Earth or on *Trippert's Planet*. He breathed of it deeply, and with his outward breath came also a laughter that startled a nest of flying things.

Oh what a joy to be!

Now that he was closer he could see the buildings as mostly dirty, scabrous things, many beyond repair long ago, and simply left to rot when others were built close by. For that reason, especially, the town was strung out overlong beside the right river bank.

Passing a small bewhiskered man dressed in homespun with a sack marked *Seeds* slung over his right shoulder, Tinker asked, "Where can I find the Jake Carter Enterprises?"

Behind the thicket of dusty whiskers was a scrawny wizened face that peered upward. "You must be new here ain'tcha?"

Tinker touched his broad-brimmed hat. "Yes, sir! Tinker's the name. Tinker Bikiss. Where may I find the great Jake Carter?"

Whether it was Tinker's open, forthright and friendly response, or the bubbling chortle that rolled out to join with glistening eye, or both, the shrunken character pointed. "Just down that way. You'll see a sign."

Tinker thanked the man and rode off, watching the old one from the corner of his eyes. The man removed his hat, scratched his head, and stared.

The big sign said, JAKE CARTER ENTERPRISES in letters a quarter as tall as the scrubby building itself, and no other sign was as big as Jake Carter's.

The corral, built in an oval at the town square, evidently was there to protect pedestrians from the ungainly Lacerta. Tinker parked his beast inside, lazily scanning the grubby little buildings on each side of the square. Most had been thrown together with convenient black logs and dirt floors. Wine wafted from some openings as he passed. Trading posts, living quarters—hotel, maybe. The sign said *Sleeping Quarters*. There were liquor saloons, gambling houses, boarded-up warehouses, odds and ends shops with irregularly shaped pieces of iron hanging from open rafters as well as both new and used homespun cloth.

The building that stood out just a trifle bigger and better—the spaces between the logs having been cemented and painted white instead of being stuffed with the usual native mosses that quickly turned brown—was the Jake Carter Enterprises, standing proud and lofty between two empty spaces.

Not consciously, but still quite methodically, Tinker noted the geometry and spacing of every object—there a railing, over there a balcony, above in the roof line a peak indicating an attic space between the roof V and the decorative overhang made by every other log at each corner. When Tinker pushed back his hat, letting his black, curly hair tumble out his mind and body was prepared to fight as well as if he'd been prepared for the pits.

He smiled as he walked toward the entrance, slapping dust from Eemay issue trousers before stepping into the brightly lit interior—costly luminescent panelling. In a most natural way, his eyes swept from right to left.

There were three men in unkempt red and blue Eemay uniforms, probably deserters, playing cards at his right. A standard fusion-pak separated those three from two clerks who worked on papers at long tables backed against



the rear walls. A husky brute of a man, as tall and solid as any Tinker had met in the games, stood closest to the door to his left, weighing seed in a wooden scoop. Between that man and the three at the table was a door also at his left, and it was the only other door in the room.

The card players froze, the clerks held stiffened, rustling papers, the seed pan overflowed, and all five men stared. “Good morning, friends.” Tinker’s almost cherubic face seemed to laugh with his voice, and he smiled innocently and he nodded his head to each.

The big man set back the seed sack, wiped his hands against his pants, stepped from around the sacks, narrowed eyes, and said, “Your name and business?” His voice rumbled, but came both cold and clipped. Tinker grinned upward from his diminutive height. “Tinker. Tinker Bikiss. Business is with Jake Carter. Personal.”

“Mr. Carter don’t see nobody ‘thout he has a ‘pointment, and ‘t get that, ye’ tell your business.” The big man seemed to sweep Tinker away as though he were a pesky insect.

Tinker carefully removed his hat, laying it on a feed bag. “Mr. Secretary Whoever-you-are,” said he, with liquid voice “Jake Carter will see me.”

The other four men laughed loudly at this ridiculous scene, a mite of a man facing up to the bear of a man, and all present knew Randal Stone’s brutality — otherwise why would Jake have hired him?

But the most humorous thing was that the stranger also laughed, and with them, not in the least embarrassed or angry, as though a joke had just been played.

The husky, not too bright Randal Stone almost smiled too, his mouth line twitching upward for just a moment before saying, “Well — OK. Now you’ve had your joke, just who are you?” His face again became grim.

“No joke, friend,” Tinker bubbled. “I’m really Tinker Bikiss, and I’ll see Jake Carter.”

The joke had twisted too far now. Those about the scene cackled uncontrollably and this probably more than Tinker’s ridiculous stance turned Randal Stone’s face from brown-white to red-white. Randal reached his paw over the feed sacks to grab the little man, but as casually as though stepping away from the reach of a fumbling infant, Tinker stepped aside — and worse, he sniggered.

Randal Stone rubbed his eyes. Chortling around him increased, bouncing from the brightly lighted but drab, smoky ceiling and across the open space, landing inside Randal’s ears, thence to his slow brain where it burned. Randal Stone scraped his hands against his thighs again, as though to rid them of sticky molasses, and he stepped big and bulky from behind feed bags. A lightning quick left arm reached for Tinker while the right arm, thick as a wagon wheel cocked backward, a certain combination of moves that none before had been able to circumvent.

It was simply unbelievable. The little man seemed to weave out and across and he was beyond Randal’s reach. Four men rose as one, their almost hysterical amusement changed suddenly to quick interest, sensing something quite different, something out of the ordinary, indeed.

The little man?

He still grinned with white laughter, clean, sparkling teeth, and happy, friendly crow-footed eyes accentuated by black unruly hair that waved with the pleasure of each well grooved motion. And irony upon embarrassment, the little man said, “Come, come friend. You’ll hurt yourself. I’m dangerous. Now — kindly move aside. I’ll find Jake Carter myself.”

Randal’s eyes became slits, his jaw muscles rigid ropes, and he lunged unthinkingly toward Tinker, both arms outstretched.

Now Tinker had many choices. He might have simply backed out the door; or he may have clutched the big man by either arm, using leverage with the man’s own speed and mass; or he might have dropped lithely to the floor and levered the bulky body over his own feet; or he could easily have kicked the giant’s knee cap, or face, or arm; or he could have plunged his gladiator hardened fist — either hand — into the pit of Stone’s stomach and terminated the distasteful incident there and then, or — well, there were literally hundreds of alternatives, and none really of much effort considering Tinker’s capacities and background.

Tinker did none of the obvious. He simply stepped beneath the big man’s outstretched arms, made two quick side steps and from behind swiftly booted the bear’s rear end, adding to the man’s rush through the open doorway,



his arms still outstretched and empty of everything except perhaps a little stale air.

Randal Stone painfully flew outward where he lost his balance and flopped red faced down into the red, powdery dust, not *too* unlike the unwelcome Saturday night drunk.

Tinker sounded that infectious laughter that had stirred *Trippert's Planet's* blood thirsty, startling those watching. But only for the moment.

Oh the roar was mighty from Jake Carter Enterprises that day, and it was certainly enough to wake Jake Carter himself, had he been sleeping. And there was a shadow of a movement across the light in the crack at the door's bottom that perhaps only Tinker noted.

Randal rose ponderously, even awkwardly, like a tall tree that has been finally felled, and resists rising again. His hands, thick and heavy, reached for the tiny gas laser at his side. In a blur, Tinker's laser was already out and melting down Randal's half drawn gun. The big man's motion, once started, halted slowly, and with a bewildered look, he finally twisted his red neck to look downward, finding his meaty paw blistered red, and he, at last, dropped the gun into the fine, red street powder.

The stench of fear passed Tinker from the rear, even as the loud guffaws choked off. When Tinker's friendly chortle began again, fear also replaced Randal's sullen features.

As though designed to find a ghastly and terrifying meaning in the minds of each, Tinker said, "I'll find Jake myself, friends." Already he was at the silent door and opening it.

Red faced and ready, Jake growled, "Who are you? What do you want?" One hand beneath view probably held a beamer.

Tinker noted other things in passing: Terran clothes — grey hunting jacket embossed with red initials, blue and white scarf at the neck, yellow silken shirt.

"Tinker Bikiss," came the announcement quite cheerfully and unafraid. The door closed behind.

"And?"

"You're Jake Carter?" Eyes at last latched and locked.

"And if I were?"

"Money," Tinker said. "A matter of money."

Visibly relaxing, Jake said, "Well" — and he smiled thinly at last — "you know how to interest Jake Carter, young fellow." His hand wandered below the desk, and his other hand waved at a chair.

Tinker ignored the offer. "Fifteen thousand Eemay dollars." He unbuckled his belt pouch, withdrawing the money. "Jakon Wy's keys please." The money was tossed carelessly to the desk, and Tinker's hand stayed over it, palm up, waiting.

Jake's imitation smile disappeared as suddenly as it had come, and his face reddened deeply, the wary look of the vulture having returned. "Who are you?"

"I've already told that. Tinker Bikiss. I've recorded Jakon's property at Port Authority, and I've been given and I've accepted the Sluk inheritance — with all of its debts."

Jake ignored the money. "What's your angle? Farming?" He looked at Tinker's hand. "No. Mining? Transportation and trade?"

"No."

"A hired killer, that's it! But who would dare hire around here?"

"No." Tinker's calm was unsettling.

Jake fumbled in his special box for another long-leaf, never permitting one hand to stray far from a certain position. He wet the speciality, lit it, and inhaled deeply. "Eemay! Some sort of secret service for Eemay?"

The long-leaf was tapped against a tray made of the skull of an unfamiliar animal while waiting on an answer that did not come.

"Well, man, you must have *some* angle. Everybody does. This is my territory, you know. Eemay doesn't touch a thing here. Recorded deeds mean nothing, and I say the property is mine. You leave this valley alive only at my good will. And the property has my sign on it."



Probably Tinker's casual way of saying, "Not any more. I destroyed the sign," startled Jake as no amount of bluster would.

"Where did you come from? What has Jakon Wy got to do with you?"

"Earth" — said Tinker, quietly — "and *Trippert's Planet*."

"By God! A beam fighter! "Hot excitement flushed through Jake. "Say! I could use you here. What kind of salary would satisfy? I've got jobs that'll make both of us rich."

"No. The keys, please. You've got Jakon's loan. Enough for Jakon Wy to leave the planet, wasn't it? But not enough to return, as you planned, right?"

Jake leaned back, calculatingly puffing and timing his answer. "Sooo. Jakon became a beamer on *Trippert's Planet*, and that's where you met him?"

Tinker did not respond.

"Dead?"

Tinker nodded affirmatively. Jake's relief was visible. "Well, then, that settles that. Neither Jakon nor any of the Sluks can regain the land, and the land is mine." He patronizingly shoved the money back to Tinker, one hand still straying close to that careful position.

"No." Tinker shoved the money back. "I'll be back for the keys in one hour, Jake. Have them or not as you will. Either way, I'll see you here."

Tinker also placed his hand on his beamer. "Your hand, Jake."

"What?"

"Your other hand. Place it on the desk, or shoot now. Which shall it be?"

When Tinker turned, striding regally away, one thin twisted moustache seemed to bobble with indecision, and a big bear's face reflected conflict of hate and fear, and large paws clutched and unclutched.

Snagging his hat from the feed bag, Tinker turned again, nodded pleasantly, and said, "Good morning, gentlemen."

VIII

The metallic rattle of black hardwood on hardwood sounded as Tinker rounded a street corner coming face to face with a giant juggernaut of a wagon powered by one of the ubiquitous fusion paks. Wheels, perhaps four metres diameter, were made of rubber and low pressure for use in swampy tundra, deserts and the like. But except for the wheels and the ultra-modern power source, the axle and a few hidden parts, the remainder was burned or carved from black native hardwoods. Atop the crudely built wagon, and perhaps three metres higher than the wagon's one and one-half metre sides, was a cab, unglassed, but with two leather hinged doors. The whole was so poorly designed that its driver couldn't see Tinker any better than Tinker could see the driver close up. A sign on its side in big red letters pronounced JAKE CARTER TRADERS.

"Money," Tinker murmured spontaneously. "Even Port Authority can't afford what Jake brings from Earth."

The clank of hardwood against hardwood and the clink of stone against stone drifted from most of the village shops characterizing the early morning as a busy, but easy-going settlement. A slow moving *Lacerta* drifted by guided by one who slumped with fatigue. Several Sluks padded along, their leathery leaf-like skins curled at ends, indicating great age. Red dust twisted into tiny tornadoes from gusts that came from higher ground to cross the lower.

The sign said PACER RE in large print, and immediately below the sign was the notice *A Jake Carter Concession*.

The proprietor, an elderly Sluk, had kinky green folds that had begun to turn reddish brown, as though some fungus had attacked. Small sunken eyes, black beads just like Jakon Wy's, followed Tinker's like some bird of prey. The narrow gourd-like head had lost yellow, to become a dirty brown also probably from age.

Iron pieces: flat straps, angles, bolts, and irregular shapes hung like butchered meat from the ceiling, as did hides of sundry hues and shapes. Homespun rope twisted into kinky shapes and crossed the ceiling from which also hung homespun cloth.

Hardwood kegs and pegs lined the log cabin. Strangely shaped and coloured seeds dangled from homespun rope



on the wall at Tinker's left. Two double-headed axes, steel shining brightly like quicksilver, stood against the same wall, and above that hung a single strand of *Lacerta* reins as thick as his wrist.

One fusion paksquatted at the floor's centre, holding an aluminium pan from which a light, yellowish steam rose, its odour thick and sweet. Other unopened boxes and ropes and cloths lay scattered.

Stepping lithely before the proprietor Tinker asked, "Are you Pacer Re?"

Beady eyes steadily probed even while the head inclined perceptibly in the Terran affirmative.

Tinker pointed to the window sign. "Why? Sluks were first."

"We're an old race, friend," the husky whispered voice explained. "But that is not your concern."

There was the great patience, the quiet waiting, a quality perhaps absent in a restless species; and it came to Tinker like a waterfall cascading heavily, the poise, the silent mannerisms, the gestalt of Jakon Wy.

"I have Jakon Wy's inheritance" — Tinker paused — "and his debts." He withdrew from his belt pouch a small medal worn nearly smooth, and he laid it carefully on the tiny stone table that separated them.

The native Sluk did not glance at the token, and its eyes bored steadily. "You've come from Carter Enterprise?"

"Yes. I paid Jakon's debt and demanded his keys."

At last the elderly Sluk dropped eyes to study the token, which it picked up with gnarled fur-covered fingers. "An old piece," it mused. "One of the ancient — and valuable."

"It is yours. Jakon's debt, he wrote."

As though deeply in thought, Pacer Re clicked the coin against the counter several times, and his long head fibrillated. Finally, "You are?"

"Tinker. Tinker Bikiss."

"Have you come from — Earth?"

"Only indirectly. I knew Jakon Wy on *Trippert's Planet*."

Was Tinker mistaken? Did the Sluk show the equivalent of Terran surprise?

"And."

"We were together as gladiator's pair-mates."

"Ah — yes. Tinker. Tinker Bikiss." The Sluk's eyes moved aside and to the coin. After some silent thought during which the head continued its rapid fibrillation, Pacer Re nodded. "We will accept the debt — friend —"

But one debt remained, said Jakon's note, and that would be known to Tinker in proper time, after full collection of the inheritance.

Streets were strangely quiet and barren. Tinker pushed back his hat; black curls dropped; and he swaggered with what might have appeared to be over-confidence. Myriads of subliminal impressions coalesced: the empty streets, an empty wagon, a settling of dust at a certain place near a corner, the glint of sunlight from a place across the street and near Carter's building

Tinker dropped flat against the dust, and three streaks of white, hot death focussed from three different directions. In the space of as many seconds he'd holed three men, then flipping his body to the left, he landed one hundred and eighty degrees around. Such a difficult manoeuvre would be impossible to anyone other than a highly trained athlete. In one sweeping motion he'd caught one on the roof and across the street, and another on the building behind, slightly to the left — that made five

Tinker stood and his laughter, though not vengeful, reminded of a youngster at play, and one who'd found a curious thing or had heard something delightful. He strode brazenly across the street, although to the knowing, every sense was alerted and operating at keen pitch.

"Jake!" Tinker shouted at the doorway. "The keys. Do I come in for them?"

Only the creak of Jake Carter's large sign sounded in the desolate streets.

Tinker turned down the focus and burned large holes at several letters.

Meekly, as though prodded from behind, one of Jake's clerks opened the door and pushed out the keys, a bundle of five pieces that looked outwardly like stone carvings, one sandy red, one dirty white, one grey, and two black. "Jake says to tell you there's nothin, in the chamber, so he felt kind of cheated on collateral."



“Well, thank you. And tell Jake I’m deeply grateful for his kind co-operation.”

Carter’s Enterprises held men who were defensive by nature, and perhaps the brightest had long ago been terminated. So those remaining heard a sound that haunted them. They mused that Tinker was the devil, for only the devil could move so fast, shoot so straight, and push Jake to the appearance of surrender.

Yet others, though they may have shivered at Tinker’s sound, also knew that Jake was clever, and that in the longest run, Jake would dominate. Tinker, possibly crazy — dangerous crazy — was yet not so feared as clever, tricky Jake Carter, a man who sought revenge on the slightest pretext

So even as Tinker placed the box of keys into a sack, and slung the sack over his Lacerta, Jake Carter’s approach jacketless and weaponless, would not be out of character.

“Talk?”

“Sure,” Tinker answered almost carelessly. “Anytime.”

“You say Jakon Wy sold the property to you?”

“No. I’m Jakon Wy’s inheritor, both property and debts.”

“All right. The debt is paid, the keys returned. I left word that nothing was found in the Sluk chamber. So your alien friend left me five pretty stones for a lot of money. I think the land is mine as interest on the money, and payment for his deception.”

Tinker’s voice, pleasant, even friendly, seemed to prod. “No.”

Jake fingered an unlit cigar; his eyes seemed to narrow; his hands nervously wiped up and down on his silken shirt.

“I’ll buy it. You’re not the settler type. What do you want, farming?”

“That’s odd,” Tinker frowned. “You’re the second to offer.”

Jake, noticeably stiffened and asked, “Who else? How much?”

Tinker shrugged.

“I’ll pay twice.”

“No.”

“I had an option to buy, you know,” Jake lied.

“Let’s see it.”

Several seconds passed. “It was verbal. I’ve got witnesses.”

Tinker’s laughter spread across Jake’s face stirring it like a nest of snakes. “Sure, you’ve got witnesses for anything you want.”

Jake’s face turned from light pink to dangerous red. He blustered, “You’re not planning to fight me, are you Mr. Bikiss? I own this valley and everything in it. Even Eemay asks permission to come here.”

“The Sluks?” Tinker softly suggested. “And me?”

The points, though slender, were viable. “Sluks come and go. Good ones stay and pay my fees. You” — Jake pointed — “couldn’t live here long.”

Tinker’s chuckle, a kitten’s purr, preceded the soft, “You don’t own me, Jake, and I’m in the valley until I decide to leave it.”

Carter’s lips compressed, forming a tight, straight white line. He swivelled on the balls of his feet and strode angrily off.

IX

Tinker may have appeared casual as he rode across the stone bridge over sluicing waters and past farm lands and onto high roads where large rocks loomed like beasts of prey and where alien foliage separated one silhouette from another.

Not so. His every sense was peaked.

In a way his problem — to survive — was not unlike the tournaments where, by accepting one’s own subliminal responses triggered, say, by a shift of dust, a flight of birds, or the pointing fingers of the crowd, the human nervous system spontaneously integrates these factors and presents an irrational but sure solution.

Sometimes Tinker whistled, and sometimes he sang, but always his body tensed and untensed and listened.



All at once, quite irrationally, he knew they waited for him at a large boulder and a narrow pass just wide enough for his awkward Lacerta.

The rocky road, deeply scratched by passing beasts, was strewn with pebbles and clawed out stones. At such times insects stop stirring and crackling, birds disappear from the air and other silent things seem to be heard by the innermind.

The chunky grey and red streaked boulder damming up the roadside was too tall to climb, and so was the granite cliff at Tinker's left. Around was too far. He could turn back, of course; or he could stake out the Lacerta and creep on hands and knees up the path, depending upon his quicker speed. Characteristically he did none of these things.

Tinker backed his Lacerta about ninety metres down trail to a clearing, and beneath the shade of flower blossoms that dangled bell-like from soft-fleshed ferns, and with great bustle, he prepared camp. Soon the clack and snick of cooking implements both metal and stone filled the quiet, and by a blazing fire he sang, or he whacked wood against wood or wood to axe, to feed the fire.

Completing his pretend dinner, he placed his hat over his sack, to simulate himself sleeping, and he covered most with homespun blankets. Then quieter than the small animals hidden here and there, Tinker slid to hide in a rocky crevice nearby, there to wait ever so patiently.

No itches or tickles, scratches and pin pricks from sucking and squirming things could disturb at this so vital but elementary task of waiting. The fire became low cinders, no longer crackling, and what smoke remained rose upward in stringy, skimpy lines. Branches rustled at last, and a sudden whirl of insects brought the knowledge that two crawled silently toward the trap; they were as visible to Tinker's mind as if they were cast in brilliant lights.

They crept forward like hungry prey until Tinker's quiet, "Freeze, gentlemen. There's a beamer on you," suddenly halted them.

They dropped their weapons.

"Now stand" — Tinker ordered — "and move to the fire."

Tinker retrieved their weapons and seated them as though they were honoured guests before grey coals, and then there chortled a sound that made each man think of dying. So deeply had stories of Tinker's laughter penetrated their imaginations, and so fearful did it now sound, that both the larger and smaller man shook as with palsy.

"You" — Tinker pointed to the taller, a man with long, lean features, perhaps thirty years old — "what are you after?"

As though unused to the killer role, obviously embarrassed, the man wiped his brow with a dark and sweaty cloth. "An outlaw — we were told — been stealing from folks, hereabouts."

"And what had you intended doing about it? Shoot the man while he slept?"

The smaller man, about Tinker's height, but not quite so thick in muscle, punched the other with his elbow. "Never mind, Mike. This fellow's on to us. You kin tell. Said it was either you or us, is what Jake said."

The larger man nodded, noticeably relieved. "Louis tells the truth. When Jake says do something, you either do it or you die. We ain't no butchers, Mister, honest. Just trying to protect our hides."

"Families?"

"Yea," said the smaller. "This is Mike Gannis and I'm Louis Conner. I got a wife and kid, Mike has two kids."

Tinker's silence unsteadied them, and they both tried to talk simultaneously.

Tinker raised his hand. "Hold. I want to think."

Then — "What will Jake do now that you've failed?"

The one calling himself Louis Conner shrugged. "Depends on how he feels. We tried. We failed. Usually that's better than not trying."

"Sure," Mike interrupted. "But we ain't got no proof we even tried. That's what bothers me. Jake is upset by you. Worse than anything I've seen. He is growly and ugly, and most likely will do anything"

Tinker's sudden expulsion, a long and winding laughter filled with almost anything the imagination could conjure, strained their nerves and tightened their stomach muscles — but Tinker only brought forth a pencil and small notebook upon which he wrote, *To Jake Carter: Mike Gannis and Louis Conner tried to kill me on the trail. I'm letting*



them go, but the next time you set men on me, I'm coming direct to you. Cordially, Tinker Bikiss.

He handed the note to the smaller man, a merry look to his features. With that behind, he climbed upon his Lacerta and passed through the narrow pass all the while singing loudly a melody taught to him by Jakon Wy, and probably telling of battles and glories of yesterday, but in a language that neither of those behind would understand.

A lonely man will speak to his beasts of burden, as though their understanding makes up for social vacuums. But when Tinker told his Lacerta, "What a pleasure to breathe again the cool, clear and quiet air," as though expecting an answer, he spoke from self-content: fullness, zest for living, an instinctive need to share his feeling of oneness. Yet there were mysteries working beneath the external vigour, so while he unloaded his sack and staked the animal in the open where grazing was best, his fingers unconsciously stroked the small metal cylinder now hanging at his own neck.

Why had Jakon Wy killed himself? Could any alien love another alien so fully? Would he, Tinker, have done so much? And what secret had Jakon left? Jake Carter would not have wanted Jakon's holdings without the presumption of profit. And who was Carlotta Slovak Carter? What did she want without her husband's knowledge?

Jake Carter would not, could not, forget the confrontation, and neither would his community of deserters, but where from all the luxuries surrounding Jake?—pneumatic wagon tyres, canned goods and liquors from Earth, luminescent panels, and more. There had to be another over Jake, but who, and what, and why?

After he'd cleaned up scraps from his evening meal, and the sun was low enough to cast shadows larger than life, Tinker rearranged the sparse furniture and cleaned out the ever present webbings. Although the dark walls reflected little light, Tinker liked what he saw. In a few days, with water and scrubbing, he'd have the place clean again.

He arranged his bags on the stone slab he'd selected for sleep and turned off the light.

Yet he could not sleep. *What does a man like Jake Carter do with his spare time?* he wondered. Did such a man know how he was hated by all? Did he care? Tinker had felt the hate everywhere, like he was able to feel the breath of death. *Well — he did not yet hate the man.*

When the sun was gone, and Tinker slept, his senses yet heard, registered, integrated, and reported. A shrill squeal not unlike the peal of lightning crackles over-riding radio signals came from outside. Crazy shrieking, flying things — birds — began their black dancing courtship. Other sounds registered too: ticks, slaps, whistles, staccato burbles — but none that explained his restlessness.

Tinker woke suddenly, unthinkingly stepping to the open doorway, a square of black bordered by a darker black. He idly noted that the porch creaked, and that the stir of air had pushed down cool from the mountains.

Then it happened. . . .

The black, cool, calm exploded with the actinic glare of death from a photon beam as thick as a man's wrist, obviously the large military cryogenic model. He smelled the perfect hole of the near inflammable black wood before he saw it. And before the cabin could be holed again, Tinker was already belly down in hiding behind tall bushes just beyond the small path leading to the porch.

Whoever operated the ungainly device knew how to use it. In a systematic and very military pattern the holes grew in number until only the smallest of midgets could have escaped, and then only by accident.

Tinker admired the workmanship: There *had* been time to escape; yet the cabin was made worthless in minutes.

But what of the heavy duty laser? Only Eemay troops have control of such cumbersome, expensive items, and then only in the company of troops and under orders.

Tinker hugged the ground, letting the loose soil run through his fingers, and he wondered what was of such value here? Precious minerals? Drugs? Power?

With great effort, he suppressed a wild chuckle. Such anomalous behaviour was not simply need to release nervous energy. Life was interesting. He was glad he'd come, glad he'd been friend to Jakon Wy, thereby inheriting both kinds of considerations. Reminded of his inheritance, Tinker again absently fingered the metal cylinder about his neck. On impulse he removed the cylinder and buried it at the base of thick bushes where he lay. He suppressed another snigger as he bellied closer to the ground, and peered in the direction of the beamer. Already the acrid odour



from holed timber made his nose itch, and he suppressed an impulse to sneeze, too.

A last torrent of light came from the woods toward which he now crawled, and then all was still, too quiet: only the whisper of wind hissed through trees and brush and now and then the scrapings of Lacerta staked nearby.

Tinker sensed the man's presence. Minutes ticked patiently by. Tinker crawled slowly, quietly, resting his hand beamer on a knoll, and he waited.

There. Just a touch of shadows. Like the flick of an insect Tinker depressed the stud, and as quickly the shadow came alive. A deep bellowed curse followed, and afterward the loud scrapings of a fleeing Lacerta as it bullied its way through the night brush.

Tinker laughed loudly, making even the wind seem to still and the night to swallow the noise, at last merging it into a natural rhythm of nature.

He also slept outside the remainder of the night.

X

Tinker woke with the splatter of rain in eyes and mouth. An overcast sky streaked carelessly slate grey.

Inside the cabin, where laser fire had indeed destroyed a great deal, he at least found dry, undamaged homespuns which he put on.

With the now torrential rain, rivulets of water gushed across the ground. Tinker's mind, a hurly burly of nervous energy, fastened itself on Jakon Wy's peculiar keys. Empty chamber, Jake had said. If so, then why so valuable to Jake?

Taking the small box from his sack, he spilled the five pieces of stone carvings on the makeshift table. One was sandy red, one dirty white, one grey, and two black. Why five keys? If anyone could follow Jakon's reasoning, Tinker felt it was he. But could any human truly understand the thinking of an alien species? And here— five crazy stones. Keys ?

Behind the cabin was the stone cliff. Tinker returned to inspect the baseline more closely, finding slight depressions that did in fact hold the five keys. By now the downpour had lessened and several rainbow ribbons had appeared. He placed the keys in the depression and, as he'd surmised, and certainly as Jake already knew, the stone door rolled smoothly, silently back, revealing a dark opening with sides only faintly reflecting the new rising sun.

A stone door that rolls silent and smooth?

Sluk's had left behind ancient cities that crumbled and lay ancient in their silence. But nowhere in them were hints of secret passages or secret, silent doorways. Perhaps— perhaps— just perhaps Jake and others smelled a truth.

...

Tinker returned with a small hand lantern and entered the small chamber, perhaps not more than two metres by three metres by six. It seemed to have been carved slick and polished from raw rock, as a sculptor might first carve and then polish a valuable stone.

As he felt the walls and ceiling with sensitive fingers, he wilted, dropping heavy and unconscious. Without sound, the door closed swiftly.

It seemed to Tinker that he lay naked on his back, looking up into a vast chamber from which light seemed to come brightly at every point. He flipped onto his stomach, and found himself suspended halfway between floor and ceiling as though by some energy source that controlled his organic body as easily as an electromagnetic field might control iron.

Soft breathing and the gentle rustle of garments pierced his confusion, and though he flipped himself over and over, he could see nothing.

Slowly, like the murkiness that follows the deep sea, from surface to depths, the images appeared, sometimes wavering like rising smoke, sometimes stretched and distorted like mirrors that were rounded and bent. At last the images solidified, all arrayed in the finest of cloth, contrasting greatly with the sloppy cast off appearance that Terrans had come to expect, these five Sluks viewed him with their small, black, bead-like eyes, as though he were a specimen suspended or impaled in some grand collection.



They stood on a ramp that curved to his right and left slightly higher than his head. He leaped upward, thinking to land behind them, but his head pushed into some invisible barrier that gently returned him to his original position.

The black eyes continued their unhurried stare. Tinker studied them, at last recognizing one dressed in sandy red robe. “Pacer Re?” he asked.

The large gourd-like head fibrillated slightly, and nodded the Terran affirmative.

“I don’t understand,” Tinker said.

“We have brought you here because of the debt,” Pacer Re explained.

Buoyantly held like a helpless fish, and naked, Tinker carelessly shrugged. Obviously puzzled, he said, “I gave you the coin according to Jakon Wy’s instructions. Is that not his debt?”

Each head turned to the closest, and whispered. The elder with a face almost shrivelled and darkly coloured, body covered in fine garments of white, whispered the loudest. “He must go to trial.”

Glancing from Sluk to Sluk Tinker now saw that all were older than Pacer Re. His laughter seemed to burst invisible bonds. He asked, “Why have you done this?” And then, as though absorbed by unseen energies, his laughter dulled and muted. “Jason was my friend. He gave me life, his inheritance, and I was to repay his debts.”

“Have you repaid them all?” Pacer Re asked.

Tinker paused. He shook his head. “There is another.”

“And who is that?” whispered one in black, leaning slightly forward.

“I was only told that I’d know when I met the one.”

Silence.

“Then, “Where is the small cylinder that you wore about your neck?” Pacer Re asked.

“That’s my business,” Tinker answered, his voice now tight and humourless.

“We are supposed to receive the silver tube,” Pacer Re explained.

“Yes. Give us the tube and we’ll free you,” one in grey suggested.

Tinker ignored them. His toes and fingers felt cotton, his eyes searched for escape, or opportunity. Always there was one thing, one small item that could be advantageous to the alert. So Tinker searched. . . .

“This is but the first stage,” explained one in sandy red. “The trial is painful. You may not survive it. The cylinder is of no use to you, and means much to us.”

Tinker chuckled.

“Tell us the tube’s location and you’ll be spared,” another in black said.

Tinker’s special laughter broke through and chilled them.

When he woke again he lay upon a bare stone in a small, windowless cell, and the hard stone door seemed to be the only opening, though he could not visualize how it was opened. There were no moveable objects, and light, though ubiquitous, was sourceless. *Stone and science*, Tinker pondered. Had Sluks recaptured old skills, or had they never lost them? In either case, why the deceptions? What were their motives?

Restlessly prowling, knotting and unknotting muscles in frustration, again and again he ran sensitive fingers over the stone bed, on the stone floor, and along the walls and doorway. Some thing—some little discrepancy—bothered, and he could not fasten on it.

The door opened for Pacer Re and it mysteriously closed again.

“I’ve come to plead with you again, Terran Friend,” the Sluk voiced in its natural whisper. “Give us the tube and you are free.”

“Friend?”

Small black eyes steadied into Tinker’s open blue ones. The small runs of fibrillation up and down the long neck showed a disturbed Pacer Re.

“Friends bind one another when they talk?”

“You are quick, too quick, Friend Tinker. We dare not risk it.”

“Jakon was quick, as is most of the Astairian life.”

“Yes. Jakon. Jakon was—well— younger.”



“And a friend to you — to all of you?”

“He was one of us. The tube is not yours. You should deliver the tube to us, and your final debt will be paid.”

Tinker shook his head. “Jakon Wy neither wrote nor said such. You, yourself, have received an ancient coin — a debt, Jakon wrote.”

“And the final debt?”

“Jakon wrote that I’d know. I don’t know.”

Pacer’s expression, the equivalent of a human sigh, seemed genuine. “Our brother explained all of this to you on his death?”

“He charged me with his debts and I was to receive his inheritance. All else was written. I’ve followed his writing.”

“How do we know that you don’t lie?”

Tinker remained silent.

“You could have — might have — tortured our brother, like the Terran Jake Carter would do.”

No answer.

Like the fires that sometimes burned in Jakon, Pacer Re suddenly exploded with “Jakon Wy would not have given the cylinder to a Terran.”

Even as his muscles pushed and tested for invisible bonds, Tinker laughed his old fire of sound. “Jakon and I were brothers on *Trippert’s Planet*. Many times he saved my life, and I his. We lived together, we fought together, and we tasted together one another’s glory. There can be no closer bond than that which lay between us.”

Pacer’s head fibrillated nervously. “Tell me how Jakon died,” his eyes probed Tinker’s with the question.

“We were assigned against one another in the finals to determine the annual champion. Jakon killed himself rather than fight me — by choice.”

“Ah — the death games — *Trippert’s Planet*. We have heard — and how did Jakon become gladiator?”

“That I don’t know. It was his choice. Earth, my home planet, is overcrowded and unpleasant unless one is quite wealthy. Moving from one planet to another costs much more than ordinary people can pay. To siphon off populations, and yet to pay that heavy mass cost, the government provides settler planets, such as this one, where one may choose to indenture under Eemay service, usually for two thirds of expected life.”

“There is not another choice?”

“There is a second and only choice given by the wealthy rulers of *Trippert’s Planet*. Those who live in gladiator trials are given free passage and wealth. I can only guess from what I’ve learned here, that Jake Carter loaned Jakon Wy enough money to ship off Astair, but not enough for return; and with the same choices facing Jakon, he chose the same path that I chose.”

Tinker relaxed, his muscles sore and tired from useless trial against unstrainable bonds. “There are so many secrets, here, unknown to Terrans, why should I co-operate with you? Your future plans will not include my freedom where such secrets might be loosed.”

Pacer Re’s silent fibrillation increased.

“What was Jakon Wy to you?” Tinker asked.

“He was — he was —” the whispering voice halted, apparently puzzled. “There are no words between us. An entity like us, a Sluk, a relative, though complexly related — if you but knew our language —” and then the voice trailed out, almost wistfully.

“Close?” Tinker prodded. “Like Terran brother and sister? Mother and father?”

The Sluk nodded. “Yes. But different.” Tinker seemed to feel the eyes soften.

“But I was his life and death brother. Nothing can be closer,” Tinker boasted.

“You think so — but you? — a Terran?”

“All right,” Tinker decided. “I’ll tell you exactly how Jakon died,” and he did so, leaving clear each detail.

“Where did Jakon Wy use his death ray?” Pacer Re strangely asked.

“Above the place where lies the Terran heart.”

“We know all about Jake Carter, and we understand his motives,” Pacer Re explained after some silence. “But



other human motives we do not understand. Did Jakon Wy have the same opportunities, no more, no less, than the Terran?"

Abruptly, after Tinker's affirmative answer, Pacer Re almost sadly announced that Tinker must stand the trials; and just as abruptly he left, after which the invisible bonds released Tinker.

Tinker paced the small cell. Deep inside he felt that the Sluks could not permit him to live with his new knowledge of their powers: some that tied one as surely as steel bonds but invisible and immovable, and other powers implied.

The two million Sluks above ground wandered through shattered ruins that held no secrets and lay covered with variegated mosses and vines.

But below ground?— if that's where he was. Light came shadowless from everywhere. Stone moved not ponderously, but like Titanium balanced on slickly oiled hinges.

An old race, Pacer Re had said.

The Eemay booklets described how Sluks had invited human settlers.

Submersed motivation? Dangerous intrigue?

Had they but known, they could have freed him without concern. He felt no special sense of identification with his kind, and his nervous laughter echoed out and filled shadowy ears. What did he really care about Sluk versus Terran? Months of pitting Terran against Terran, Sluk against Terran, and both against outworlders of various kinds had lost him the right to identify.

His shoulder and head throbbed, and he stretched out upon the lone stone slab. Maybe he slept and maybe he didn't, but at the time it seemed that he did.

XI

No blood stains discoloured the stone in the torture chamber, and the torture instruments — if that's what they were were shiny and clean. Apparently they'd drugged him for the instruments always focussed inward and outward, from bright clear to soft and fuzzy.

Invisible chains again bound him. Expressionlessly the five peered at him from a circular walkway. Imponderable tons seemed to resist each tiny motion, yet Tinker's liquid voice wafted upward and across the chamber like an insane ghost.

There are many kinds of pain known to every gladiator: the sharp needle pain to the dull, throbbing, generalized pain. They began that first day on skin, seeming to rough it with sandpaper, or grit. Tinker's mind, trained to block out pain, and to act regardless of consequences, blocked it at first, but then his inability to move, to act, also probably inhibited the block, and suddenly he felt the pain, every roughened feature of it, combining both the sharp gritlike pricks and the wide ranging absorbing after-effects. His skin seemed to break into raw, meaty pustules. His stomach pumped vainly, but was not permitted to move, and a kind of dizzying sickness came to him that he could not leave.

Always they asked for Jakon Wy's cylinder, and always he smiled a sickly smile.

Tortured beyond belief, exhausted, he fell into death healing stupor in his stone cell, and when he woke the following morning he found no sore, no roughened skin, no mark at all on his remarkable body.

On another day they seized upon his extremities, seeming to break each bone with care and deliberation — and another day his vision seemed to yell, until but a light blur remained. Yet on each following morning he was miraculously whole again.

On one day his vision seemed to follow long hallways that trailed dozens upon dozens of Tinker Bikiss' trailed by more Sluks who also appeared in multi-numbers. Only momentarily would his mind clear, and then the strange mirror upon mirror effect would return.

Little by little they took away his human memories in some strange manner occluding them and reinforcing the occlusions by pain stimuli. Similarly they seemed to force upon him the soul and life of the Sluk: He as an infant beside a dazzling waterfall shimmering in silver and gold, an irrepressible child who, precocious beyond years, yet played tricks upon older Sluks; Sluks trained in the martial arts and later educated in the sciences and arts. Yet when he tested these memories they evaporated as though made of gossamer rainbows — startlingly beautiful and real but



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always too far to reach.

They seemed to place him in different chambers: cold dripping with fetid water and scuttling things; blazing hot, the stones shimmering with their internal heat; dark chambers, where stirred no sound except the echo of one's thinking; until finally the thin slant of light gliding from a high slit above could not stir him to explore.

At times the sense of feel seemed to leave his feet, and he seemed to swim down long, shiny corridors as though dragged like a toy balloon.

Again Tinker seemed to waken, this time to a room all-filled with cones and rods and spirals and pyramids in every colour; and there was still that single slit of light, sparkling pleasantly like diamond dust, as though seen from long, long ago and far away, from perhaps the stars. . . .

There was a long diminishing period of awareness. Little by little his senses flew, and pain increased, until one day the tiny, new window above his head seemed to become more real. He focussed on it and it became steadily his symbol for all he'd once been and all his mind's image told him he was — a real kind of rhythm, sometimes dark, sometimes light, and so inaccessible — but real — real. . . .

Tinker's spirit indomitably searched for any weakness, but alas, there was soon nothing but the square window every tenth day or so — and the memory that perhaps was his, perhaps was not, but one that regressed daily against his will.

He supposed that his mother had been dark of hair, like his, and perhaps his father had been gifted with nervous laughter, too. But he was unsure, even, that he'd had a mother and father. What then? Of course, his dreams told him, he'd been a Sluk. He'd actually been Jakon Wy, but he was unsure.

Earlier strange shots vaccinated and protected against diseases. His memory told of evaluations and placements and early conflict and struggle. He was a nameless, faceless, personalityless thing in an empty society. Yet always there seemed to lurk some strong personality that drew him onward, that represented authority and direction. Whenever he culled that memory deeper pain seemed to bounce him away.

He graduated from a system that was truly a marvel, all done with machines and technology — then recurred that deep, deep pain whenever he tried again to remember.

Fleeting fragments, tests, sickness, operations — broken pieces of struggling memories that might or might not be.

When his mind cleared again, he focussed on finding their weakness. There had to be one. He'd been trained to find, if not genuine weakness, at least relative weakness. Given time, or concentration, or luck, he'd find it. That belief sustained him during moments of clarity.

"Tell us again how Jakon Wy died," Llenka Ja, the Sluk dressed in white, would ask.

Or, "Why did Jakon Wy die?"

Most often, "Where is the tube?" and "Why do you resist, Friend Bikiss?"

Tinker convinced that only the absence of the tube kept him alive, remained ever silent.

At one moment his mind was back on Earth, though dimly seen. Sometimes he felt that three large things trailed him to a nightly cul-de-sac to punish him for an imagined wrong — and then he was back viewing the black rectangle above his head against a ghostly presence.

By now unable to discriminate between mental and physical reality, Tinker strived to reach the black hole. His neck twisted and through a queer vision that doubled and redoubled he again saw the objects: rods and cones and pyramids. He twisted. Miraculously he moved, cold stone pushed his shoulder blades, and he *felt*.

Reality?

Real or not, his body acted. He arched himself, and though he felt like swimming through a permeating syrup, he moved, slowly, gently, little by little. Slowly, oh so slowly, the idea came even as his body acted. He pushed the rectangular block below the window slot, and something in the room seemed to quicken when he moved the formation. Then, atop the block, like lifting against an unbelievable gravity, he raised the cone. As though in a dream world, gripping the smooth, natural features with grit and fingernails, he finally hunkered himself to the base of the slit, his feet gripped the smooth top grimly, pushing away at the pyramid.

The shape slipped and crashed on the stone floor, and suddenly time awakened and Tinker knew that seconds



were seconds and minutes, minutes. Almost his shoulders would not go, but he twisted and, throwing one shoulder out of joint, he slid through, loosening his grip.

It was a dark and lonely fall. Tinker hit water, losing consciousness, no longer caring whether this was again a dream, or some mad world finally releasing a tortured spirit.

XII

“Well, a’comin to, I see!” The voice was raspy, like the shriek of rusty metal. “Ain’t never seen such a batter o’ blood, and still alive. Open that swollen hole that must be your mouth, and take a little more o’ this tonic.” The spoon pried his lips apart. Tinker felt fire across his tongue that slowly trickled down his throat. His body heaved with the effort to cough. From far away, like one of his torture nightmares, Tinker heard *Cheek-cheek-wheel Cheek-cheekwhee*.

“Lommy Joe ain’t a’ goin t’ let ya die without a fight.” A rasping half cough half laugh followed. “And by the looks a ye’, it’s a’ goin t’ be a fight.” The irritating laugh followed again, like the simulation of a death cough.

There was a blur of light. Tinker tried to move his arms but found he couldn’t. His eyelids, puffed and sore, refused to open. “Put skunk fat over your hide, I did,” continued the raspy voice. “Course wasn’t real Earth-like skunk, but out here I just names any critter by things I find in the ‘cyclopedia. An’ why not? They’s as good a names as any, I sez, and they suits Lemmy Joe just fine.

“Like tadpoles, they is. Little wiggly fellows what scrunches up ‘tween rocks and hides and effen you steps on one, whooooo, what a goshawfullest smell!”

Tinker tried to speak, but failed.

“Well, they’s fat an’ that sweetens the skin and heals the bruises, effen kin stand the smell. But it don’t hurt Lemmy Joe none,” he half chuckled. “Anyways, they’s no gals out here t’ smell, and they’s no Eeemay t’ tell, neither.”

Tinker managed to wiggle his head slowly. He vaguely felt pressure about his body—perhaps covers being placed over him. The fire of liquid shocked again.

“An I reckon th’ smell ain’t a’ goin t’ hurt you none, neither. The way your nose looks, ya ain’t a’ goin t’ smell fer a long time, anyways.”

Rough rubbing against his skin woke Tinker a second time, perhaps much later. Lights were bright, even blinding, and the temperature too high. His eyes, now slits, at least saw the old one administer.

“Awake again, are ye?”

Only a squeak came from his swollen throat, and again he heard the distant and strange *Cheek-cheek-wheel Cheekcheek-whee*.

“Don’t know how ye’ lived? Only way into the river is from cliff tops, an’ a long channel what cuts through Simka Mountains maybe ten, maybe twelve miles, and no entrance anywhere. Heh! Your skin just naturally lost its temper and came through cracked and bleeding.” The old one shook his whiskered head. “New sir. Jest don’t see how any man or beast could come through the cauldrons alive”

Cheek-cheek-wheel Cheek-cheek-whee, came the cheery sound. Tinker’s head raised from the fur covered headrest. He strained, and at last pulled himself to sit. Dressed in patchy red and blue Eemay issue, the man who called himself Lemmy Joe filled his palms with a bright yellow mixture that poured syrupy from a purple gourd hanging from the blackwood wall. “I—I— thank you for the help, Mr.— ah— Joe.” Tinker’s voice gravelled. His throat, though improved, ached.

“Lommy Joe. Folks don’t use mister way out. Fact is, there ain’t no folks hereabouts, either.” The bright yellow mixture, pungent, distasteful, was gently rubbed into Tinker’s open wounds.

Tinker surveyed his arms and legs and body. “Bruises. Cuts. But I was tortured. Should be broken bones, cut tendons.”

“Sit still, will ye. No, son. The only thing you got is water-logged and battered. No bones broken, no muscles cut. Been out o’ your head. Said foolish things, with the fever.”

Finished with rubbing, Lemmy Joe pushed Tinker back to rest. At the stove he set rocks over an open fire vented



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by blackwood logs. “Your name, Stranger?”

“Tinker Bikiss.”

“Tenderfoot, I reckon! Never seen the likes, though. How come you ain’t dead is a mystery.” Lemmy Joe ladled pungent but nourishing stew into a gourd. Tinker was able to hold it. “Well the fever’s broke, and you’ll mend like new, now. Jest holler for more stew effen you want it.”

Tinker ate, and then he laughed. Lemmy Joe chuckled, and then joined with the brazen laughter. Outside was the *Cheek-cheek-wheel Cheek-cheek-wheel*

Tinker slept and rested.

In time he regained his voice, his spontaneous and unexpected laughter, and his strength and speed. Lemmy Joe donated an old pair of homespun too long worn and dirty. Instinct kept Tinker near the man. He helped with chores and listened. Mainly and repeatedly he heard the story of his being fished from the mighty, raging river “I never seen the likes,” Lemmy Joe would begin, whether they squatted beside the river to fish, or set traps, or cut wood Tinker would look to the man’s face and smile, his black, unruly hair waving jauntily in the breezes. “I come down hyar t’ fish, as I do most every day, an’ I sez t’ myself, what’s that? Is it a log what’s fallen in and come ashore? Or some strange animul what got itself drowned and now the corpse is come t’ Lemmy Joe’s place fer burial?”

Tinker would nod. Usually at most times came the *Cheek-cheek-wheel Cheek-cheek-wheel*, from the forestland beyond the cabin. Lemmy Joe called the creature that made the omnipresent noise a Bob-o’ Link, but after seeing it Tinker thought perhaps it was closer kin to a ground gopher.

“Yes, sir. It was a human corpse. Or leastwise it looked like one, all black and white and bloated and streaked with deep scratches and cuts, and red with blood.

“Wal,” Lemmy Joe would continue. “I pulls in the corpse, not too gentle, neither, ‘cause I figures it’s all over anyways. An’ I flips it over and there it was, a face all battered with red patches and puffed nose and mouth, and eyes what peered from sunken puffs.”

Tinker might smile or chuckle or even chortle at this point.

“An’ you knows what?”

Tinker would shake his unruly hair again.

“It breathed. So help me, an’ I’ll die a’ moanin’ effen it ain’t true. The corpse was a’ breathin.

“I opened the corpse’s mouth, but the tongue was already out, so I didn’t need t’ pull at it. Then I turned it over an’ barrels o’ water comes a’ gushin.

“Know what I did then?” The old fellow’s whiskers would bob with iron rust laughter.

“Felt fer broken bones. Found none a’ tall. Had a time gettin’ thet corpse up t’ the cabin, and a’ layin you out “

Tinker chose the heavy work, moving rocks to build fences or to clear fields. When Lemmy Joe one day trekked to the nearest community for staples, a distance of many miles, Tinker was fully recovered, but he bided his time, continued to build up his strength and waited. And while Lemmy Joe was absent, Tinker pondered: Long ago he’d placed five strange stone keys in Jakon Wy’s chamber. What had happened then? If Jake Carter were to be believed, he’d entered the chamber, and at least did not report anything other than emptiness. Why did the Sluks render him unconscious? Of course, Jakon Wy’s cylinder.

He visualized the tiny silver object which he’d worn so openly about his neck. What was the cylinder? What could it mean, and why?

Particularly, why had Jakon Wy given Tinker the keys to such torture?

The talkingness man on Astair returned: “Know who’s the biggest man around?”

Tinker chuckled.

“Jake Carter. Calls himself Jake Carter Enterprises.”

Lemmy looked naturally and directly into Tinker’s blue eyes. “Valley thataway maybe forty, maybe fifty miles. Passes are heavy with Jake’s men a’ lookin for some super human fellow what always laughs like the very devil, they



says. Had a good description of him—black curly hair, olive brown skin bordering on red, from the sun, they says. Quick—quickest man they ever seen. Shot down most o’ Jake’s first line men, made fools o’ some, including Jake himself—and no bigger than you, they says.”

Lemmy Joe looked away, wiping his beard against a dirty sleeve. “Never cared much for Jake Carter, myself. Worked for him a year. Bad as Eemay, he is.”

Tinker never heard another word about Jake Carter, although Lemmy Joe told his other stories repeatedly. Only vague hints came from Lemmy Joe about the Sluks, too. “Never bothered me none, and I never bothered them neither,” Lemmy Joe would say. “They lives out there”—he’d wave—”and sometimes some says they has secret caves what goes through the mountains, and some says they ain’t. Knowed some oldtimers what claims they’s air holes drilled high up the cliffs, but effen so, Eemay never found none.”

Finally, “Knowed the day would come,” was all Lemmy Joe would say when Tinker at last waved good-bye.

Tinker stood easily at the crest of a hill where the faint trace of a trail began. “Good-bye, and thanks, friend Lemmy,” Tinker said. “I owe you“

The old man waved, wiping away what seemed to be a tear on crusty sleeves. Outside somewhere came *Cheekcheek-whee. Cheek-cheek-wheel*

XIII

The trail marked out by Lemmy Joe wound about foothills, down through lush valleys where the flush of life sounded mysterious and thick, and over steep, barren mountain passes. Later Tinker would reach a path travelled by others, and there Jake’s men would be on watch.

No Lacerta this time, he walked briskly for perhaps thirty-two kilometres before reaching the junction. “Turn right there and follow over the hills,” he’d been advised. “It’s sure enough rugged, and no path, neither, but it’ll get ye’ there effen ye’ don’t weaken. Heh! An’ you don’t look like you’re ’bout to weaken anyways.”

When the yellow-red sun had begun to dip below mountain peaks, perhaps three and one half kilometres from the junction, Tinker selected a place of shelter away from the evening breezes. Inside a folded square of brown, scratchy homespun he found Lemmy Joe’s dried fish and hilef, and he ate both with relish. The evening was yet warm. He bundled together branches to form a head rest and he slept, though at the back of his mind was the scratching of insects, the whisper of branch against branch, and an occasional flutter of birds hopping from starlit bough to branch.

The sun, hidden behind dense clouds blown by strong, gusty winds, couldn’t announce the wet morning. The cold whipped through heavily laden homespun. Tinker was in no great hurry—financially independent, responsible only to self, wistfully living with the memory of his close and great friend Jakon Wy—Tinker unhurriedly selected shelter beneath overhanging rocks in a cave on the side of a steep gorge. Inside were bits of fur, small bones, and feathers. He idly wondered what Astairian animals had fallen and to what kind. Already his mind seemed to blend together the better known and rare Terran animals with those encountered here.

Heavy black clouds poured open like huge soup ladles and water rose in the gorge until it lapped at his feet. Animals of strange quality washed downward on bits of flotsam, and even whole blackwood trees floated by. Small creatures peered upward, wet, isolated. Species indifferently met species and the torrent rose higher.

Even as the water crept higher Tinker raised his head like one of the storm tossed animals growling defiance, and he laughed a throaty message that wavered upward, finally to lose against competing thunder and wind and rain. Dart lightning brightly stoked the hollows.

Tinker searched with his hands and feet for a precious route upward. Easing himself beneath a second rocky overhang that sheltered from the elements. Each lightning stroke brought the water ever higher, until it had covered the lip of his earlier resting place. From there it spilled upward in streamlets, then lapping curves, then rushing rivers. Fur and feathers and bones bobbed, rocked and swept outward, and still the waters rose until they lapped at his new place.

He climbed higher, slipping and clutching, to tighten upon any small projection. A lesser human might not have done what his trained sense of balance, delicate touch, and muscular control did. Face battered by wind-blown water,



revelling in the challenge, he pulled himself to the topmost ledge, and he lay there to watch the high rising waters.

Body tucked together closely, he slept. Rain slowed to a mere drizzle; the wind puffed vainly. Sometime during that night his mind caught and reported upon a mighty roar accompanied by yellow and red light that bloomed beneath heavy rain clouds. He wondered, now awake, *A nuclear bomb? A ship landing where no field should be?*

Nonsense, he convinced himself; and he returned to blessed sleep.

Dawn brought cleansing winds and a certain sweetness. Pink-blue sky filled the background for a circling bird that glided easily, gently on silent wings of spectacular beauty.

What better fun than to track the trackers? Tinker decided this day to backtrack to a major pass, the original from which he'd first overlooked Jakon's grand valley. According to Lemmy Joe, Jake's men would be waiting there, also.

He had to climb over steep often hazardous slopes, sometimes through narrow gorges, and across cold and lonely passes. His keen eyes — sensitive for motion, campfires, tethered or grazing Lacerta, anything at all that meant men — skilfully but leisurely searched.

It was late afternoon when Tinker found them three days later. Scouting carefully he determined that one was positioned with heavy laser overlooking the pass, that a second slept, and that a third kept the camp alive with steaming food and other ordinary duties. Lacerta were tethered near a small stream also near their main supply tent.

If all the passes were so well manned, Jake Carter was indeed furious.

When it was dark Tinker crept silently to the tethered Lacertas. He cut free their reins and moved them out as quietly as their scratching and scrabbling permitted. Several hours later, after he'd cached them safely elsewhere, he returned to watch.

The smallest, and one who'd taken watch over the campsite, raised the early morning cry. "Louie! Monty! He's got the animals!"

After minutes the tall, slender Monty came down from the gun perch, and the fatter Louie had ambled over from the opposite side through dense bushes.

"How do you know anyone got 'em?" Monty gruffly asked.

"Cause I staked 'em," came the indignant reply.

While the three huddled together to discuss the missing Lacertas, Tinker slipped upward to the ambush site where he lifted the heavy cryogenic rifle from its base, and, carefully erasing his tracks, he repositioned the gun in a place of his own choosing.

"Why that dirty scavenger!" Monty loudly yelled. "Hey! Louie! Johnson! He is here. The gun is gone—!"

Monty thrashed around kicking bushes, throwing rocks, and all the time rolling his hand beamer from side to side in frustrated search for a target. Tinker suppressed his chuckle, choking it down to a slow, low gurgle.

Johnson reached the crest first, and then Louie, who whined hysterically, "Well I ain't goin' down to tell Jake we lost three Lacertas *and* a heavy cryo."

"I'm the one who lost the rifle," Monty fearfully cried. "Lacertas can pull stakes, but not rifles. I might just as well head for hill country now." He nervously fingered his hand beamer.

"We've still got one heavy gun. We can just continue on watch," suggested Johnson.

Louie spat. "Sure, but what direction should we guard?"

"Over there," Johnson pointed toward bushes where Tinker hid. "By the pasture. Over by Louie's bedroll. He ain't at the pass, I can tell you. He's got us under watch, or how could he've done what he did?"

From such impeccable logic, the three huddled together nervously throughout the remaining day.

That night, struggling hard to stifle another overwhelming laugh, Tinker returned the Lacertas, staking them well.

Louie's morning scream woke the drowsing pair. Monty and Johnson came running, both waving their hand beamers randomly.

"That does it," Monty took command. "You, Louie. Go tell Jake what's goin' on."



“Now, Monty,” pleaded Louie. “You know how Jake is “
“Get! “ Monty roared, pointing his gun at the little man.

Tinker could stifle his impulse no longer, and at last he permitted his laughter to chase after Louie and the beast’s long, flopping tail; and even louder he laughed when Monty’s and Johnson’s scared guns slashed through trees and burned brush in search of the laughter’s source.

He tired of the game, and easily skipped past the frightened guards, climbing steep banks a kilometre west of where Louie scuttled after Jake Carter. Now the roaring yellow and red light he’d thought he’d seen the night of the heavy rains came to mind, and just for fun, he pitted his growing strength and restored skill against the ever more rugged terrain, making a straight line North.

Perhaps thirty-two kilometres by wing, eighty by ground trails, Tinker found unmistakable *Lacerta* scratches that he followed West until they opened on a wider pathway of black loam. Marks from the expensive and large pneumatic wheels pressed downward.

He shifted again to ridge lines and high hills that rimmed the new, broad valley, which was fortunate, because within another two kilometres he’d spotted the first of two guards hidden at each side of cliffs that faced one another. These permanent stations were buttressed with rock and cemented with concrete.

Guards here? And what use the narrow passageway? What did it hide? What did it protect? Port Authority was several thousand kilometres distant. Eemay knew of no other trading settlement this far north. No alternative made sense, considering how energy-poor were Terrans. Was someone guarding a valuable Sluk ruin?

Tinker surmounted the sharp crags hours later. Ninety metres below and perhaps one hundred and fifty metres away from the cliff’s base was a spaceport, modern in every sense that Port Authority was modern: Fuel tanks below ground, concrete apron, large gantry that serviced the rocket, and the spire of girders and wires that towered almost as high as the hills.

Wishing for binoculars, he counted five—no, six—human figures that moved from one large block building to another. One of the large, boxy, low pressured vehicles moved slowly across the flat plain of rock. It stopped before a long flat roofed shed where unloading began. Two guards sat at the roof’s edge, one at each end.

Tinker’s throat purred. Jake Carter Enterprises? Big man, indeed, if this was his. A man who could afford rockets and space port—well. . . .

Was this the source for Eemay contraband, such as the cryogenic lasers?

But what could make profit for Jake Carter on such a lonely planet? Sluks? Did Jake, or even Eemay, suspect the hidden aliens and their obvious advanced scientific attainments? Jake Carter Enterprises was beginning to appear like the tip of the iceberg, too.

Thievery? Piracy?

“There are two guns aimed at you, Mr. Bikiss,” spoke the fire hardened and familiar female voice.

XIV

Jake Carter leaned back as though pushing himself away from a fine evening meal. “Tell me again, Monty. How did the gun disappear.”

Monty, of course, was terrified. All of Jake’s men knew it, and so did Jake, which fact pleased Jake as though it had been a fine evening meal.

“Louie told the truth, Jake. Honest. I watched the pass. Never took my eyes from it. Louie and Johnson can swear to it. All of us did our jobs just like you told us to do.”

Astairian blackwood is hard, virtually unburnable, and Jake found many convenient uses for it. Now, for example, a small piece could be whittled with a specially imported knife that was razor keen and long and dangerous. Monty’s eyes followed each stroke, knowing full well that Jake might use the knife to carve on him, or, for fun, might very well find some other misuse for the pointed hardstick. How else had Jake been able to control Eemay dropouts and the other rugged backwoodsmen?

“And the beasts?” Jake asked, his tone low, almost sympathetic.

“They was gone, and when we looked in the morning, they was back.”



“You’re sure it was him?”

“The laughter, Jake. He laughed at us, like nobody could or should. Sent shivers up and down. Not human, Jake. It was him, all right.”

Jake’s demeanour seemed to change, but one could never know about such a man. He looked to the equally fearful Johnson and Louie and asked, “That’s what you men heard? Johnson? Louie?”

They agreed, and also described the laughter. Mention of that disturbing sound strangely seemed to take Jake’s attention safely away. “Let them go, boys,” Jake ordered. “He probably didn’t use the pass.”

Visibly relieved — for everyone liked the three — Monty and Louie and Johnson were untied. Jake’s mind, already seething with a deep need for vengeance, a searing hate for one small Terran with blue eyes and black unruly hair, concerned itself most fully with what must be his next orders for capture of the ex-gadiator.

Somewhere else on Astair, perhaps deep in the Simka mountains, perhaps some place where Terran had never before gone, five elders sat together and reasoned: Pacer Re, Llenka Ja, and three yet to be named.

“The council should know,” Pacer Re said, “that we do not know the full effects of the field on Terrans. My reason for periodically returning to World Zero was lack of knowledge of the effects.”

“Pacer Re speaks truthfully,” Llenka Ja said. “I, myself, did not know about the deviations at first.”

“But,” queried an unnamed one, “we tested the field on their metabolism when the Terrans first arrived. There was first the miner, and then two trappers, and later one of their military. Were we correct to report the effect null on the Terran, as it is on the Sluk?”

“Yes.” Pacer Re answered carefully, his head fibrillating with great concern. “Our data was correct. The field was nullity on the metabolism of those sampled. Somehow this Terran friend of Jakon Wy’s differs. We would have destroyed him had we not every few days returned him to World Zero.”

“Even so,” said another unnamed one, “would he not be controlled, watched, guarded?”

Pacer Re nodded sadly. “He was kept in the slow stasis field, and should not have been able to move so high. “Then what happened? How — ”

“Please, I regret circumstances as much as anyone. More. For I did truly like the Terran, and I fear . . . well, but no matter. Somehow he moved the mechanisms controlling the field, and that upset the balance. Where he achieved the great energy to do what he did, we know not, and that, of course, is part of the mystery. According to our measures the Terran biology should not have generated such great energy ,’

The third unnamed one spoke all their thoughts: “Yes. We understand. Biology is our central problem. We must know more. Much, much more.”

Pacer Re further explained that no trace of the Terran had been found after he’d pushed himself out through the narrow cleft above the steep canyon overlooking the most fearful river on Astair. “That he is not dead, that he is living, that Jake Carter searches for him still — well, that is the greater mystery, and indeed shows our lack in this matter.”

“Above all,” said Llenka Ja, “we must recover Jakon Wy’s --”

“Yes. Yes,” they all interrupted.

“— now here is one possibility for his recapture --.”

XV

Her hair was red this time, and her bush clothes probably genuine leather, and expensive, but it was still Carlotta Slovak Carter, and she held the tiny laser on Tinker quite as steady as would any man.

A second, but male, rose from behind craggy rocks to Tinker’s right, and that man moved with gladiators’ grace and quickness, which fact startled Tinker more than the existence of the hidden spaceport below.

“We meet again,” Carlotta said, quite pleasantly.

Tinker, almost the clown, but certainly in jest, bowed and smiled. “You honour me, Mam. First at my humble cabin, and now this.” He waved about. “A splendid, isolated view, and a wonderful place for casual walk among the hills — just a touch of pink-blue sky, perhaps touching elbow to elbow — and ah what a view — strange vistas before our eyes.” The man was perhaps 1.7 metres, dark featured, but Terran. The man could be dangerous, perhaps even



®
as swift as Tinker.

“You enjoy my husband’s toys, then?” Carlotta waved to her assistant. “Timeby — watch his moves, please.”

Tinker obeyed an order to step back; his eyes shifted rapidly, scanning for opportunity. Not yet. He relaxed.

“Timeby? *Trippert’s Planet?*”

Steady eyes met Tinker’s and the man simply nodded.

“Two years ago? Fourth, maybe fifth rank?”

Again the silent nod.

Tinker smiled. “Yes. I remember. Fourth rank. Took your earnings and left. Probably got Eemay to indenture the remainder, then — by the looks now — deserted. Fourth rank — insufficient passage money — no uniform now”

“Tie him up, Timeby,” Carlotta ordered.

Tinker grinned when Timeby answered with, “No. There’s no safe way. He — knows tricks.”

“Then how’ll we move him?”

Timeby threw the rope to Tinker. “He knows.”

Tinker squatted, binding the rope about his own ankles, and leaving slack for hobbling, as Timeby supervised from a distance. He turned on his belly and wrapped the rope tightly about his wrists, leaving a long rope tail. Timeby carefully handed his two guns to Carlotta, saying, “Watch closely,” and with exceeding care, he finished tying Tinker, finally pressing one knee against Tinker’s back while checking each knot.

“Shot up my cabin?” Tinker guessed.

Timeby grunted assent.

“Knew it had to be one well trained. The holes were well spaced — an expert — not done to kill, either.”

Timeby raised Tinker to his feet.

“Why?” Timeby’s hands were covered with a thin film of brown plio-protein, standard for burn treatment. “Hand burned?” Tinker grinned.

“Some,” Timeby muttered.

Now that Tinker was trussed safely, Carlotta and Timeby turned back to the port as viewed beyond the cliff’s edge. Timeby nodded his head in her direction, probably indicating that hers was the final decision. The peer group relationship between gladiators demanded that they be truthful to one another, even when opposed to each other. Tinker waited patiently.

“We wait,” Carlotta stated matter of factly. Furrowing her brow, as though concentrating on some unexpected problem, she explained, “Next ship is due. We’d fry in the open on that apron.”

Later she thoughtfully directed Timeby to make Tinker comfortable, then disappeared for several minutes to come back with pack, cooking utensils and, after a second trip, burnable brush. She continued to refuse questions.

Tinker’s body rested easy, relaxing as was his wont before undertaking great physical efforts. Behind his back his wrists though bound tightly moved slowly up and down over a tiny rock projection. . . .

Part of Tinker also registered the hot hardness, the sharp pricks of shattered rock beneath, and the heat of the golden red sun as it painted his already browned skin.

When Carlotta stood, Tinker’s senses registered the curve of her, her femaleness and her walk and motion beneath the colourful yellow and black outfit. He felt no attraction.

What was Carlotta’s stake? What her objective? With or against her husband?

Whenever Timeby’s eyes flickered away, Tinker pressed strongly against the stone. Not much, but some progress.

. . .

“Coffee, Mr. Bikiss?” Carlotta asked sweetly.

“Hold it,” Timeby waved her away. “Turn over,” he ordered Tinker.

When Carlotta asked why, he explained that Tinker probably would and could grasp her between his strong legs and hold her until freed. He tied Tinker’s legs together before permitting the coffee.

Timeby fed him by holding the cup — not true Terran coffee, but some sweet-acrid *Astairian* substitute — and



he also fed him long strips of dried meat from some unidentifiable species.

They waited quietly. At last the expected low rumble came like powerful thunder above, and it increased to the bull roar of a thousand cataracts. Light blazed red through high overcast skies, then suddenly a piercing blow torch of brilliant yellow-red vied with the sun for attention. The shaft grew from a circular plate to a three hundred and thirty-three metre streamer even as the roar increased in volume, and then the ship balanced above the streamer, now thirty times as long as the ship itself.

Ablative covering the rockport curled grey, then black and white like frozen bubbles from a pot of boiling water. The giant cone force-fired air to billowing, and red dust and grey smoke curled up the cliff walls surrounding the port. The stench of burning fuel and crackling ablative wrinkled their nostrils.

While the apron cooled small bulldozers swept away the spent heat sink, piling it high and trucking it somewhere far across the field as efficiently as those at Port Authority. Other tank trucks sprayed the rock and concrete apron. Soon the dancing heat waves ceased.

In what seemed the greatest of non-sequiturs, Carlotta said, “You disappeared after entering Jakon Wy’s chamber.”

A second strand had at last parted beneath Tinker’s steady rubbing. “Why were you spying?” he asked.

Pursing her lips, she reflected long, then, “Perhaps I can tell you soon. Please answer my questions.”

Tinker shrugged and laughed lightly, taking the opportunity to scrape hard beneath his wrists. “Sluks took me. Must have crept up from behind.”

Was that a question on Timeby’s face?

“Sluks?” She shook her head. “Never heard of Sluks taking anyone. They’re quite pacific. We’ve been here five years, and no Terran --”

“Well, maybe they just looked like Sluks.” Tinker chortled at the thought—huge ungainly beasts much taller than man, much more mass. “Your husband and his men under disguise.” Even Timeby laughed at that. He loosened Tinker’s leg ropes again. “Your husband will be pleased when you bring me in,” Tinker added. “He’s got many men looking for me.”

She bit her lip, as though stopping an explanation quite reluctantly.

“What’s this port for?” Tinker asked. Another strand parted.

“You’ll have to ask Jake,” she shrugged. “What did Jake want of you? That cheap little cabin? An empty cave? An imaginary Sluk inheritance?”

Tinker shifted his position, and again scraped the rope. “We couldn’t agree. Whatever it was, I wouldn’t give. Simple?”

“And that was —?”

Tinker shrugged.

“Well— what did the Sluks want?”

“Nothing really. Just a token, a present, a tube, small and silver, given to me by my dead friend, Jakon Wy.”

She was obviously puzzled, and disbelieving. She asked “Did they say what it was good for?”

“Your turn,” Tinker smiled. “Is Timeby yours, or Jake’s?” He looked from one to the other quickly

Biting her lips, she said, “O.K. I’ll level. Timeby works for me, not Jake.”

“And your husband permits?”

Tinker was sure she’d started to vocalize, “He doesn’t know —” but she chopped off the answer. He’d asked a key question, but for what door? Could Jake trust this well trained fighter simply to walk freely among his clods? If there was not already a deep division that could be exploited then probably— most probably— Jake was unaware of Timeby’s presence—or at least his training. Another strand parted. He relaxed with the conviction that the rest could be separated without too much effort.

“The Sluks. You say they were Sluks. Did they simply discuss things with you?— keep you prisoner?— just what?”

“They tortured me,” Tinker answered honestly. “Couldn’t believe that I was Jakon’s friend.”



Shaking her head and frowning, she came closer. "I don't believe it. Scars? Or something to back up that story?" "Good metabolism," Tinker smiled. "Helps, doesn't it, Timeby?"

Carlotta stamped her foot, a womanly trait, and shook her pretty head, while Timeby watchfully shrugged. "That doesn't make sense. None of it. Sluks don't harm people, they want little." She motioned toward the ship. "We'd better get down there now."

Timeby's eyes shifted, and that was the moment. Tinker was up and on the man with deadly working hands. Timeby was a good man, and faster than average, but an order of magnitude below Tinker. One jump with partially bound legs, two swings with speeding hands, and Timeby fell unconscious.

Even before Carlotta could turn, Tinker held the cryo gun. Her eyes at first squinted unbelievably then widened in fright. Tinker laughed loudly, a sound that seemed to reach craggy nests high above and to stir birds to flight. Sliding backward and beyond her reach, he unfastened the rope with a free hand.

Tinker, eyeing Carlotta carefully, wound the rope into a coil, threw it over his shoulder, helped himself to a back pack, and, waving the rifle overhead, he shouted, "We'll meet again — Mrs. Carter" and his chuckle disappeared with him beyond the stoic rocks.

XVI

Somewhere on the Terran desert base, not far from a teeming metropolis, a lonely Earthman, an officer according to the uniform he wore, thumbed through negative reports, now and then shaking his head in wonderment.

Subject landed on Astair via Trippert's Planet. This we understand to be a minor deviation in the overall plan. Subject now located in operational region Five-oh-one.

No further instructions had gone out via the special courier ships to Astair.

Then, *Subject contacted. Did not respond to pre-arranged code signal. Instructions requested.*

Two questions had gone out: "Had agent met and identified the proper Terran?" and, "How was identity determined?"

Answer: Double agents would not have anticipated the weird laughter; his speed would be impossible to duplicate.

A long description of Jake Carter's activities followed, as well as discussion of the complexities introduced by Jake Carter's search for vengeance against the Terran. Instructions were requested again.

Instructions went out thereafter on each courier: *Locate by any means and return to Terra.*

The last note reported on his capture and escape.

"Damnation!"

Instructions: *Locate at any cost, and return to Terra.*

XVII

Circling the mysterious spaceport along a ridge that was broken and marked with steep declivities, Tinker found a place that was protected, yet gave him a grand view of the happenings below. Carlotta's pack thankfully contained water and concentrates. He nibbled slowly on concentrates, and waited patiently for the red sun to fall and the sky to blacken.

During the silent, black night he scrambled to a shaft of loose shale that seemed to flow from the mountains to the valley and, at last, slipping and sliding, he reached a ledge not more than sixteen centimetres wide barely providing purchase. There he hid his pack, unloosed and uncoiled his rope, snugly tying the rope to an overhanging rock from which he swung the seven or eight remaining metres to the valley floor.

Seconds later he'd reached the long warehouse, sure that guards above could not see him any better than he could see them. Edging around the first corner, and then the second, as silent as a predatory animal, he finally faced the rocket from which dim lights glowed.

The door slid smoothly and quietly at finger's touch. Pushing it just enough, he squeezed into the enlarging dark hole, and closed the door.

Blinding lights flashed. An amplified voice gruffly shouted, "Hands overhead, stranger. The tripod's full power is aimed at you."



Cold steel links caught his wrists even before his eyes had compensated, and they were bound behind his back. Another set of hands removed the heavy gun at his shoulder.

“Well, now, who do we have? A wild barbarian?” The man’s voice was high pitched and arrogant. The odour of home-brew permeated. Tinker was roughly and carelessly turned about. There were four dressed in homespuns, and each man in his own way reminded Tinker of his first trials, where the arrogant overpreened, the conceited patted themselves for wins yet to be. One had lips that formed a big U and another held a crooked s-shaped smile; a third held his mouth propped open with long white teeth. The fourth, beefy, thick moustache, laughed, at which Tinker laughed louder, an act that by itself seemed to sober them all.

As they moved him along, Tinker’s eyes danced like his laughter, and they swept from box to box, rank upon rank, along the whole length of the warehouse.

He marvelled at the technology evidenced—huge power transformers large enough to handle an entire city, or a fullscale port—storage tanks labelled for water, fuel, and other chemicals—fusion paks, both stored and working. Large pipes and small of all colours ran through and beneath the building. This was no ordinary port, Tinker concluded, but a thing that only governments could own and operate. But under control of a Jake Carter? Something was wrong, dreadfully wrong—but what?

Tinker’s cell, warm and simple compared to that of the Sluk’s, held familiar bars and locks and a small, comfortable cot, as well as the real luxury of a mattress. Tinker slept profoundly, satisfied that none yet guessed who he was or where he was wanted. At the pinkest of early morning light, he was carelessly guarded and unshackled and walked up stairways and down hallways to a modern office.

Inside a young woman performed normal secretarial duties, and inside the next door were two desks side by side.

The older, lean, sharp featured, waved away the two guards, while the younger tugged out proper forms. Looking up he asked, “Your name?” in his sternest, most commanding tone.

Tinker’s throaty, delightful laughter might have infected pretty ladies at tea, as certainly would have the quick showing of white teeth and black curls that bobbed with his slightest effort.

But these were not ladies at tea; these were military men, apparently, and they were stern men, serious men, who felt mocked.

Tinker’s perfect timing followed: He stepped backward so quickly, opened the door, and in a zip of motion disarmed the two guarding him with perfect two-handed co-ordination. He flipped their weapons over, butt to palm, adjusted the beams to needle, and faced the astounded officials.

“Call in the guards outside the doorway,” he demanded.

The young woman, though terrified, responded first. Tinker pleasantly waved his guns at them, and asked that they lay down their arms, which they did.

He tied the seven, exchanging his torn, dirty homespuns for fresh taken from one guard with the same general build. Then trusting his sense of direction, a tempered thing like his skill and speed, he unerringly chose the right pathway to the surface.

Still he was mighty curious about the contents of boxes that stacked row upon row, ceiling high.



® The big warehouse was as silent as a granite mausoleum. Only once did he slip behind a large tank when two men walked in curious cadence, like army cadre.

Down centre aisle he slipped between two rows of boxes where, using the needle beam at low power, he burned through one of the boxes. Echoes drifted lonely when the square piece dropped into his hand.

He found concentrated foods, and later hand beamers, and grenades, and night glasses — that last had trapped him — all the guards wore them at night — and shoulder rifles, and *Great Trippert's Planet!* cryogenic weapons by the box load.

Muffled footsteps slowly echoed.

He grabbed three grenades, two more hand beamers, one shoulder rifle, virtually the size of the cryos, and one nightglass. Sprinting, he dashed into the outside blackness, and to cliff's base.

His rope was gone!

Thinking fast, he tossed one hand beamer up on the ledge and ran like fury back to the warehouse which he entered and where he slipped in moments to one aisle near the end.

Patiently he waited. He heard it again, the muffled footstep, and then the sharp click of boot on stone.

Unpinning one grenade, he tossed it over the boxes toward the far end. The lightweight roof tore open, exploding outward, racks fell, and boxes burst open, one burning furiously. Undecipherable shouts followed the aftermath. Tinker suppressing a chuckle, swung overhead into the girders where he pulled himself prone, squeezing between roof and truss.

During the extensive search, the hot afternoon sun baked him and sweated him like a steam bath; his stomach and head and nose itched from dust; his arms ached from the long tension, still he suppressed waves of snickers and titters and chuckles.

“Damn it!” one said below. “He’s discovered them. Look at these boxes, burned open.”

Others came running to see.

Later that afternoon someone reported finding the beamer at the cliff ledge where Tinker had first been spotted. “Had help,” they concluded. “Why in hell didn’t you guys see him go up?” someone shouted at those on roof guard.

Men were detailed to search the hills, and Tinker knew he’d won.

Night glasses place a ghostly glow on anything radiating heat. Tinker moved with them, himself gliding in and out like a ghost. How easily they’d followed him!

Outside, he shimmied up a corner rainpipe. One guard, as bug-eyed with night glasses as was he, sat stifflegged near the building’s far end, scanning, ever scanning the distant cliffs. The other paced nervously nearby. Tinker counted steps, and at the right moment scrambled the remainder of the distance upward. Stocking the man like a padded animal, he skilfully rendered him unconscious, and before the man could fall, caught him and lowered him. Moments later he’d bound and gagged the other startled guard.

Below, and far away, like tiny fireflies in the meadows, the large search party wheeled here and there. And also below, but close by, was still one of the large wheeled carryalls silent and dark, it’s heat long ago dissipated in the whispering, cool night winds.

Tinker added a tripod to his weaponry, now that he had the lumbering giant. He powered it and moved it slowly toward the searching contingent until, like a waddling giant, it at last passed through the guard gap just as noisily and hungrily and officially as if it belonged there.

Gratefully he abandoned the machine, embracing the cold night air like an old friend; and he climbed until finally caressed by high winds where ordinary men seldom climb.

His chilled and muted laughter sounded outward from indifferent crags hardly disturbing already resting denizens, and then he, too, curled together and slept.

XVIII

A pinkish yellow sun probed welcome light through the stoic peaks surrounding Tinker. High wheeling birds that nested in the evening’s eyrie furnished eggs raw and sweet. A light haze already shaded the sky, and in the East, long, sparse white wisps painted streaks.



Reflecting, Tinker counted four forces arrayed against him: Sluks, Jake Carter, Carlotta, and the mysterious port? Had Eemay established a secret base? And if so, for what reason? Was Carlotta spying out the base for her husband, Jake? If so, then why did Carlotta react negatively against Jake?

Perhaps it was time to quit reacting, and to force answers from others. Certainly until certain clues were known, and problems solved, he'd not be permitted return to Jakon Wy's cabin: Jake Carter would see to one part, and the Sluks to the other. But where did the apparently friendly Carlotta fit in?

Tinker scabbled lithely from precarious hold to the faintest trace of pathway. He checked his weapons: shoulder gun, cryo, one beamer and two grenades. Quite an arsenal, but none as dangerous as Tinker himself.

He followed the liquid trickle of water downstream. Once a four-legged animal with scabrous skin crashed directly through thick hedges and waddled toward him, uncaring. Tinker moved aside, guessing that its ugly, wet, skin was probably poisonous, for such animals seem indifferent to external danger.

Patrols still vigorously scoured the badlands. He had to climb high several times to avoid them, and later he had to do the same to avoid Terran settlers along the river bank where their black cabins blended into Astair's natural ruggedness.

He paralleled Jake Carter's valley, travelling East, revelling in solitude and the smells and sights and sounds in this, Jakon Wy's environment.

He drank from cool cascades, working his way over the ridge where water separated into eastern and western streamlets. There, rising in isolated peaks, were ghosts from the past: stone and clay and metal of an ancient city that tangled downward in skeleton frames and tumbled bones. Spires were rubble pointing death fingers to the free sky. Green vines with lavender and yellow flowers twined about most, climbing the mounds like gay skirts that deliberately seek to hide a sculptor's random holes.

Tinker viewed but a fraction of the ancient city, for the whole valley was rubble, and so much must remain buried beneath swallowing vegetation like some unkept burial grounds.

Tinker stared, strangely stilled, yet emotionally moved, drinking in not only its stark and naked beauty, but all of its implications shouting loudly from each rugged, rusty spire. Sluks were—must be—an ancient race—and their dead cities, he'd been told, were scattered from pole to pole. Xenobiologists, Tinker knew, were wrong to assert no secrets among these dead bones.

Secrets did exist, and they lay hidden, actively living, somewhere within mountain ranges or deep underground. Perhaps, most likely, Jake Carter's interests were in ferreting out such secrets. But what of Carlotta? And the mystery port? Enough armaments were stored for a full scale invasion—but invasion of what? And where?

Eemay? But who else? It *had* to be Eemay. Only Eemay controlled resources so vast.

Trippert's Planet, and the families? Possible, but hardly likely. Only Eemay controlled interplanetary flight.

Across the vast pastel written in the ancient city's death stones nesting birds rose now and then, wheeling high, and returning lazily with twigs or insects. Suddenly the panorama was shaken when the lazy atmosphere crackled lively, and flocks peppered the sky, their bulk like big black balls squawking and screeching in complaint—and then they settled again.

Tinker, keeping to the underbrush, worked his way downward until his descent intersected a worn pathway, and above this he hid.

In time, and quite suddenly, Llenka Ja, the Sluk who had questioned and tortured him stepped from around folds of flowery green, his skin—memorized by centimetres—blending well.

Tinker, not normally vindictive caressed a recent will moulded in abnormal fires, and there crept upon him a strong desire; the vision of Llenka Ja walking so freely coalesced to create in Tinker a most dangerous hunting animal.

Appearing and disappearing like a teasing gnat, Llenka Ja travelled through thick foliage below. Every now and then Tinker shinnied a tall tree or broken spire to locate his prey. At last he came to where the Sluk must pass, and there he hid overhead, senses alert. He leaped and in moments Llenka Ja lay unconscious. In another, his arms and legs, grotesquely like Jakon Wy's, were tightly bound. Then, like some diminutive Tarzan of another age, another



time, Tinker boosted the bulky Sluk over shoulder and sped away, placing kilometres between the ancient city and his captive.

When the Sluk regained consciousness, he whispered, “We meet again, friend Tinker Bikiss,” as though they were met over the same fishing pond, each with pole and hook in hand.

Tinker almost giggled. “The one in dirty white—one of five who sits in judgment. Friend? Sluk’s that make raw flesh of healthy skin and muscle?” Tinker had dragged and carried his captive far from the ancient city, high above the valley, near the snow line. No faintest smile did he show. “Yes! *Friend* Llenka Ja.”

“You will of course torture and then kill me.” Llenka Ja whispered huskily. “Had you not escaped, you should first know, your trial would be ended, after which we would have been the closest of friends”—the Sluk’s head fibrillated and its eyes bored steadily—”as close as Jakon Wy.”

Tinker slapped the gourdlike head. “Liar. Explain!”

“No. What I have to say would not be believed. It is best that you torture me and then kill me. Some day you will learn the truth, we hope.”

“Truth?”

“Are there cuts and bruises on you?”

“Perhaps I heal more rapidly than most.”

The Sluk’s eyes did not waver, nor did his head stop fibrillation.

Tinker loosed the bindings. “Run!” he commanded. “It will amuse me.”

No response.

“A weapon? Suppose I give you a stick? A stone? Suppose I strip myself bare?”

“I will not fight, friend Tinker.”

Again Tinker lashed out with open palm, slapping the head with blurred hatred. “Friend?”

The proud head seemed to bow with great shame. “There was no other way. We—had to know—the ancient arts are not complete—”

“Explain!”

The head came erect. “There are no Terran words, no conviction without experience.”

“You explain in riddles, *friend*.”

When Llenka’s head again fibrillated, so much like Jakon’s long familiar habit, Tinker knew he would not, could not torture. But what to do with the torturer?

“Is it more civilized for me simply to kill you?”

Llenka’s eyes seemed to brighten, his head momentarily to stiffen. “Will you permit suicide?”

How strange. Jakon had committed suicide rather than engage him in combat to death. Holding his rifle carelessly, as though inviting contest at arms, Tinker impulsively threw over his hand beamer.

Llenka Ja’s eyes glowed appreciatively, and unhesitatingly he turned the beamer on himself, placing it at a point just above where the Terran heart would be. A single pencil beam spurted, like the short-lived streak of a glowing comet, and he slumped—yet his eyes lived. “In my right hand,” he whispered, “a tube—like Jakon’s—my inheritance are yours, friend Tinker” and with that strange ending he died, just like Jakon Wy had died.

XIX

The sun drove shadows from the barren rocks. Tinker, preoccupied with the puzzle of Llenka Ja, carelessly topped the ridge, only absently noting the scattering of small rocks and shale on the path he followed. Had he not slipped on loose shale, the first laser beam would have holed him, instead of missing and going on to sizzle gnarled vegetation. Tinker dived for cover, the nearest small boulder barely able to shield his body even when he hunched it into a tight ball.

Someone gruffly swore. “Missed the dirty Lacerta!” Another low and rumbling voice shouted, “Rainey! Get behind him. Larry, keep at his side, so he can’t turn on Rainey. Mike! Gordy! Pin him.”

Lasers fired starkly against naked rocks, spitting and chipping and flaking ancient stones with sharp snaps and sizzles. The odour of death tickled Tinker’s nostrils, and still he—disconcertingly—chortled loudly.



The sound rounded out and held steady above them, and like stilled jungle animals that hear the king of beasts roar, all action suddenly ceased. Tinker dived for another rock, an alert beamer missing him by centimetres. Over there! Either Rainey or Larry's hat moved slowly to one side. Tinker waited, and then snapped his beam.

"Larry's been holed!" Rainey shouted hysterically.

Sudden rock shards scattered in Tinker's eyes and face on their raging response. Tinker shifted two shots over the top without aiming just before jumping to a third rock.

"Losing your nerve, Superman?" called a heavy, familiar voice. That one, Tinker remembered, would be the large man at Jake Carters.

Tinker gurgled spontaneously even as rock scattered down slope. He guessed where Rainey must be, snapping his beamer just as a stone thumped behind. Turning frontward again, he pulsed over the boulder, and then two more quickly, he rolled downhill just as his pulse was returned.

The next rock was taller, permitting him to stand. They obviously hadn't expected the quickness of his movements, although he was still exposed to whomever stalked from behind. Echoes of rolling stone and slaking bursts died away. Smoke rifted slowly upward where beamers had burned scattered foliage. He slitted his eyes against the brilliant noonday sun, and waited.

There — at his right — the flaring of a light hand beamer.

Someone had accidentally wounded a small animal and in its crazed pain it ran toward Tinker showing razor sharp and dangerous teeth. Tinker had to shoot it, but too late! The slap of bootsole on rock preceded the blow that would have crushed an ordinary skull. The next blow might have crushed his for sure, had not someone with extraordinary hatred not shouted, "No Rainey. Save him for me."

There was the vague memory of being cruelly scraped downhill into shadows. Harsh pain flowed into his head like water into a sinking vessel. An intolerable thirst constricted his throat. When he awoke, he was tied belly down. His tongue tasted of mud, his lips were cracked and salt-bloody, his face lacerated and his scalp bleeding. Senses normally well balanced now swirled like a cyclone and he struggled inwardly to prevent his stomach from emptying. Ribs and back were unbelievably battered.

A Lacerta wheezed. Tinker raised his head, pushing himself awkwardly to knees. "He's comin' too," the voice of Randal Stone announced. Here and there sunlit shafts speared through leaves. Dust motes danced before Tinker's eyes. Someone poured cold water on his aching head.

"Have they gone?" Randal asked.

A squeaky voice answered, "Yea. Told 'em Jake said for them to go on, that you'd bring in the little feller."

"Fine. Just fine. I want this little fellow alone for a while longer. Those kicks Matt gave were just teasers. Make him a mite sore, is all. I want him *conscious*."

Lacertas squeaked again. As Tinker's head cleared, he silently, invisibly tensed muscles, all the while his mind reviewed and checked — Good! They'd tied him from the front. Time by would have known better

Randal loomed over him, a large man, a battle cruiser pushing into the small scout ship. "Comfy, Tinker?"

Tinker's deep black hair trailed in mats over one eye as he looked up. "Almost," he sniggered.

The giant laughed, too, placing his club like hands in front of Tinker's eyes. "Damn good thing we didn't run into him in the bush," the shrill-toned man behind Tinker reminded. "Still he got Larry."

Randal's eyes puckered; his mouth tightly closed. "Yea. That's something else." Then he pushed Tinker's chin upward. "Remember me, *Mr. Bikiss*?"

Hands like Randal's were meant to maul. The man would probably draw back far before he struck, Tinker reasoned. Under present conditions, Tinker's skill and training and quickness would be discounted. Perhaps provocation might trigger him. "That clumsy fellow at Jake Carter's, right?"

As Tinker had expected, Randal's first blow came from a distance, and he had time to roll, taking far less punishment than either could have imagined.

Tinker, chuckling almost good naturedly, chided, "Cowards hit bound men."

"Maybe we better wait, Randal," the one behind Tinker argued nervously.



Good, Tinker thought. *That even's odds for what's next.*

Tinker rode the next punch, too, this time appearing in a dazed condition he shook his freshly bleeding wounds. Sarcasically he said, "Stand me up and I'll have farther to fall."

"Good idea, little man," Randal responded. "I'll do just that."

When the bear's paws reached beneath Tinker's armpits to raise him to standing position, Tinker seemed to totter. Now he could see the smaller man with the wheezy high-pitched voice. "I don't know," the little man spoke again, "Jake may not take this too well. 'Sides it don't seem quite fair—"

"Shut up, Matt," replied the burly one. "He's got more than this comin'. You ain't seen what he done, like the rest of us. And when Jake gets him, these little taps ain't nothin', wait and see."

The round swing came, charged with power. This was it!

Tinker's reaction time moved him in a blur. He caught and clamped the moving arm between two bound arms and his chest, he levered with bound feet, adding velocity and mass. By his own inertia the big one swung about and fell.

Faster than Matt's responses, Tinker flipped Randal over and, bounding high into the air, landed with tilted heels exactly at Randal's solar plexus. Air gushed outward with a grunt. Like a trampoline Tinker bounded onto Randal's throat, not to crush, but to hold, and with one broad sweep of his bound hands he clubbed the semi-conscious Randal to full, merciful unconsciousness. Matt foolishly tried to hold Tinker from behind. Tinker fell limp, permitting himself to be dragged several feet backward. He brought his bound arms over his head, effectively securing the other's head, and adroitly flipped Matt upon the ground near Randall. At once Tinker was at Matt's throat, his thick soles pressing and choking. "Untie my hands," Tinker ordered, simultaneously suppressing a choking, overwhelming need to laugh.

Matt fearfully did as directed, and Tinker untied his own feet.

Tinker's eyes were swollen and red, his usually shiny black hair crusted by brown and red blood mixed with native dirt and rotting leaves. His nose bled. His cheeks were cut and swollen. What was beautiful was the smile that pierced through all of his swollen features, through Matt's fear. The sound that accompanied the smile plunged Matt into a pool of terror, and Matt shook as though with palsy.

When Randal Stone had regained consciousness, Tinker pleasantly said, "You lose too easily."

Randal hugged his neck with one big paw, shook his shaggy head, and looked around.

"He did it himself," Matt explained. "Too fast. Couldn't stop him."

Randal glowered.

"I guess I should tie you and beat you," Tinker mused, "but why?" Since Tinker stood against the pair without visible evidence of weapon, both understood the challenge. The little man's palsy increased, while Randal, Jake Carter's bully, cringed.

Tinker searched his bag, locating the new Sluk cylinder, apparently it was of no interest to anyone. He tied their hands behind their backs, and then with strange dignity, sent them outward.

He freed the Lacertas and then washed in a cold mountain stream, later relishing concentrates from his pack.

After rest he paralleled a trail until it swept like the widening of a river into gentle grass slopes on the bank of the cascading stream opposite from Jake's village. From this vantage point visibility was clear, and he could see for several kilometres in each direction.

When darkness closed the valley like the door on a subterranean cavern, both final and complete, Tinker donned the pilfered night-glasses that made warm log cabins stand eerily, and walking figures to appear like ghosts on a screen.

The streets were barren. Shadow by shadow Tinker danced until he reached Jake Carter's building. He climbed the walls, catching rugged protuberances with bare feet and fingers until he'd reached the attic window. There he eased himself into the dusty apex, a triangle decorated with ganzelike sheets and tiny insects that glowed like little eyes. He wiped them away and lay down between two thick rafters. Weapons he checked and carefully laid them at his easiest reach. The back pack became his pillow.

What better place to recuperate? Tinker suppressed his nervous impulse to laugh and then slept.

XX



The rumbling and creaking of passing carts awakened Tinker. He peered from the tiny triangular attic opening, marvelling at the low pressure pneumatic tyres hybridized with crudely home-made cab and wagon beds. Inside the crude carryalls were boxes that he now knew contained enough weapons for a planetary invasion.

Red and gold fingers stabbed through the Eastern mountains. One wagon stopped, outlined by the morning light, and before Carter's door below Tinker. A young man who appeared to walk with the proud bearing of the military opened the door. Jake Carter's polished voice spoke: "Welcome, Otan. Come in." The door thumped shut.

Glass clinked against glass — a pause — then: "Well, Ray, I've played your game for five years. Yes. I got my share. But don't you think I should go up another notch?"

In clear, concise tones: "You've been recommended, Mr. Carter. Wait."

"That little matter of Tinker Bikiss won't be held against me?"

"It may. It may also be held against me."

Silence.

Then, "Yea. I heard." A chair scraped. "What's his angle? Eemay?"

"Hardly."

Another wagon rumbled by.

"How many this time?"

"Loads or wagons?"

"Both."

"Two loads, seven wagons."

"Wheew. Someone upstairs is hurrying. Bikiss?"

No answer. Perhaps someone had nodded.

"Let me fill that again, Ray." Glass touched glass again. Very faintly liquid trickled.

"Why couldn't Bikiss be enemy?" Jake asked.

"Intelligence. We have resources."

"Such as --?"

Angry, hard, fast: "Sometimes you ask too damn many questions, Jake. Maybe that's what bothers upstairs."

Apologetic: "Sorry."

Pause.

"It's just that I've worked hard to control this territory. Nothing happens that I don't know, whether human or Sluk. I control communications and traffic. I run contraband lines hardly big enough to float themselves, as cover. One wagon a month. I should get more recognition for the cover I provide, and for securing the area."

"You exaggerate, Jake." Voice cold and brittle.

Tinker visualized the vain Jake Carter bristling his choppy moustache when he answered, "You'd better back that up."

Undisturbed: "First, Tinker Bikiss. Second, a lot of wild settlers and deserters are dug in beyond your reach —"

"But they're a scared lot, and ___"

"—third, Sluks come and go in unknown ways. Have you learned *that* secret?"

Pause.

"Well — yes. Though I've had some luck following, they don't torture well."

Conspiring, softer tone: "Maybe, Jake, if you came through with just a little on the Sluk's secret — or maybe something on their lost arts." The voice trailed out.

A third wagon rolled by. On instinct Tinker buried the strange slender cylinder in the old sawdust and dirt beside a rafter. He also lay the cryo rifle and two grenades between two rafters. Within days webs would hide them.

Before the talk ended, Tinker wiggled through the narrow opening, flipping himself unseen to the roof. Crouching and running, he reached the rear corner nearest the river. Logs that extended alternately layered at the corner provided easy descent, and from the ground he sprinted behind buildings near the river, finally hiding behind large



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and squared black logs.

When the next wagon brazened through, Tinker ran behind, caught the high rear axle and swung upward where he could squeeze between the narrow ledge that linked the crude axles together and the bottom of the wagon box.

The ride was rough in spite of the expensive low-pressure tyres. At closer study he saw no iron links, no screws or

nails or metal bands—simply wood and rope. Only certain necessary parts such as wheels, powerpaks, and gears were imports, and yet their price in energy consumed was unthinkably high.

If not Eemay, then who or what?

Obviously the mysterious port and Jake Carter were linked. Sluks apparently gave Jake trouble in subtle ways. Tinker smiled. Knowing Jakon Wy, his stubbornness and careful training, Llenka Ja's choice of suicide; secret places, and modes of torture—well, he'd just trust Sluks to give Jake trouble. And with those two—Otan, wasn't it?—and Jake peeling off Sluk hides—trouble indeed!

Yet somehow everything didn't fit. Why would Llenka Ja commit suicide, then extend that small silver tube and his—Llenka Ja's—inheritance? If the tube were meant to be inimical, then everything he knew of Jakon Wy was false. On the other hand if the tube were a true gift, then everything he knew of Llenka Ja and the gruesome five was false.

There was also the peculiar problem of Carlotta and her gladiator Timeby. Now where did Carlotta get the connections to afford an ax-gladiator? And what was the real connection between villain Jake Carter and sweet, reasonable Carlotta Slovak Carter?

The crack through which Tinker viewed his passage was so small it teased. They jounced slowly, even sedately, for hours on end, and the board proving wide enough, Tinker spread out arms and legs for balance, and he slept.

Awareness returned slowly, deceptively. Senses seemed to float through cotton, all soft and pillowy. At last he knew his right eyelid to be forced back by some external agent, and hazy light tickled his sensitivities. As though through the wrong end of a large cone he heard: "He's ready, Doctor. Shall I notify General Estion?"

"In a moment, Hilda. We must be sure, or the General's time will be wasted."

Pressure on his right arm. Faint touch of the prick of needle. He willed himself to move, finding that he was unable. Pause.

Rattle of instruments, an echoey, stretched out sound, and then, the male again: "Terribly naive, this one. To think a base such as ours would permit unauthorized entry twice."

Female voice hummed agreement.

A chair thump, like a drum with wet head. Then, female: "Muscular, isn't he. Almost barbaric. Who is he?"

Water slushing from faucet, reminding Tinker of a mountain cataract magnified a thousand fold.

The right eyelid pressed back again, and the glare of light, hazy, painful.

"All right. Get the General."

Tinker counts seconds. At fifteen hundred, he quits. Time sense is distorted, sometimes making the count longer, sometimes slower, according to his heartbeat; and he has no control over his heart, or other autonomic functions, as he should.

A voice, high pitched, and fast, like a tape run at high speed, like a squeaky mouse gibbering: "Ah yes. Thank you, Doctor. Hilda, leave us. The recording is on?"

"Yes," female voice.

A long wait, and the thud of a door that seems to jolt the whole system, like the twang of bow string or the vibration of a note on the low end of a bass viol.

The wet snarl of a throat being cleared, and then the voice, slower, but still high tenor: "Mr. Tinker Bikiss. We've looked for you. Don't be disturbed about the sounds. Some will seem too high, some too low. It's the time sense. Your metabolism is undergoing strange evolutions, but you'll soon compensate. You'll be able to ignore it while we talk."

Tinker places attention on his right toe. Where is it?



“You’re wondering why I use the word *we*, saying that *we* will talk. You’ll be able to answer when I command. You’ll do so compulsively, at my direction.”

Tinker doubts the General’s ability to make him do anything, but he increases watchfulness.

“Now we’ll start with your name. Give it to me, please.”

He is a puppet, the General the master. His mouth opens. “Tinker Bikiss.”

“Good! Good! Just right. Now let’s see. Where should we begin? Home planet. Which is it?”

Visions of sunny skies, warm, blue cloud-studded oceans, high mountain plains, and green mountain passes, tall buildings, huge buildings, acres upon acres of buildings press into Tinker’s mind. Earth is marblized beautiful, multi-coloured from space, or deep brown and green and black close up. Yet for all those images, the strangeness of Jakon Wy’s Astair begs attention. He opens mouth to say, “Astair,” and that, of course, was also truth, in a sense.

“Hmmm. Needs some adjustment.”

Tinkle of glass against glass. Press of needle against flesh.

Quiet.

“Now. Tinker Bikiss. You are from Earth. We have knowledge. You have come to Astair only recently via *Trippert’s Planet*. You will remember your arrival here.”

Scenes crowd upon him: the large Eemay airport encircling dusty patches, the Eemay cadre in their red and blue, supplies, the ungainly Lacerta....

“What continent?”

Confusion.

“Tinker Bikiss. Answer yes or no. North America?”

“Yes.”

“Sector.”

Confusion.

“Upper Northeast?”

“Yes.”

“Your training index?”

No answer. Tinker’s mouth stretches and pulls grotesquely, but no inner stimulus attaches.

“Come, come. Everybody on that continent is trained for something. Selected young, you know. Tell me your training index.”

Tinker struggles silently.

Overlong pause. Tapping of pencil on table top, or cane on floor. It booms, like a deep oil drum.

“I’ll come back to that. Now, then, you were sent to Astair?”

“No.”

“You don’t work for a Terran organization?” The tone, though distorted, comes clearly surprised. No answer. A mumble next, that Tinker’s mind untangles to mean — “be something wrong with this drug. Never happened before.

“Why were you spying on us?”

“To learn where the wagons go.”

“Why?”

“Curiosity.”

Great surprise. “What! You rode all night beneath a wagon merely to satisfy personal curiosity?”

Another pause. “Do you work for the fake Carter Enterprises?”

“No.”

“Do you work for Eemay?”

“No.”

“Do you work for native Sluks?”

Struggle. Searing memories of pain and torture. “No.”



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“Do you work for any branch of Terran military?”

“No.”

“You came only for personal reasons?”

“Yes.”

“Where were you before Astair?”

“*Trippert’s Planet.*”

“That’s correct. Now. You *were* a gladiator?”

“Yes.”

“What family?”

“LuAbu.”

“Ah ha! You work for the families?”

“No.”

“What did you do there?”

“Gladiator.”

“Were you freed or escaped or indentured?”

Confusion.

“Did you leave through indenture to Eemay?”

“No.”

“Escape?”

“No.”

“How did you leave?”

“Payment. Won finals.”

Another tangle of noise, and then, “. . . explains reported speed, I suppose. Must be exceptionally fast to survive the games. Genetic differences.”

“Why did you choose Astair?”

“Given Sluk inheritance.”

“Ah. How did you come by the Sluk inheritance?”

“Sluk gladiator was pair-mate.”

“And you’re friendly with Sluks?”

“No.”

Another long pause. “— something inconsistent --”

“Is your attitude neutral toward Sluks?”

“No.”

“Have they approached you?”

“Yes.”

“Ah. And what do they want?”

“My inheritance.”

Tone of great surprise: “Your inheritance?”

“Yes.”

“What is the inheritance?”

Confusion.

“Define your inheritance.”

“Debts plus a cabin plus a small silver cylinder.”

Pause. “A silver cylinder?”

“Yes.”

“What is it, what does it do?”

Confusion.



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“What is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do they offer for it?”

“Torture.”

Flick of a switch—long pause—tapping again. “Doctor!” Slamming of door in normal time. Footsteps that seem to drag at least one per minute: “Have you known the Exhibitor to fail?”

“No sir.” Voice fast and squeaky.

“No record of it failing?”

“I’ll check again, General, but I’m quite certain of the answer now.”

“Do that.”

Tapping again: “There are blank spots in his answers. Has this happened before?”

“What!”

“Check it out.”

Pause.

“General. It would have to be quality of the drug—some impurities, perhaps—or simply his unpredicted genetic cluster—I don’t have equipment to check either, sir.”

“—well. He’ll have to go back by rocket. Let them worry over it. They’ll take him apart like a fusion bomb. We’ll know at the next shipment.”

Tapping again. “Flush the stuff out of him, but mind you, do it in his cell. He’s a trained gladiator.”

Two different pitches—fast clack like a cane, and the soft thud like a shoe—then the door screeches shut.

He lay on a low cot, the cell windowless, heavily barred to a corridor, his wrists linked by chains. His head ached. Water and a large white pill lay beside him with a note that advised he take the pill. He hid it beneath his cot and drank the water.

Nothing short of the heavy cryos would eat through links that bound him. What was it all about? Invasion of Astair? By whom, of whom?

Expense showed everywhere. Add to the obvious, only equipment that responded to brain waves could have identified him as an intruder, and also rendered him unconscious during his recent ride. That represented ultra-expense, and size

Tinker choked down his instinctive chuckle, muting the sound so that it was barely able to squeeze through thick bars to the grey, barren hallways. If Sluks had been tortured, and if military bases were being built, those facts might explain why Sluks had tortured him.

Was Jake Carter being deceived?

Upstairs might well represent a complete military structure with Jake as dupe and front man. Sluks had invited Terrans to settle Astair, for unclear reasons, and though they seemed regressive, Tinker knew they controlled superior force. . . .

Yet Eemay controlled all space, or so they thought. And Eemay represented central command with virtually full authority and powers. Yet here, on Astair, were smuggled Terran weapons and secret rocket bases. . . .

But if Sluks had superior technology, then why should they fear. . . ?

Every answer posed problems, and every problem seemed to pose an incomplete answer. Maybe he should have refused Jakon Wy’s inheritance. He grinned and rolled over on his hard, flat stomach. For now, there was good food and watchfulness.

They thought they were being exceedingly careful when they transferred him from his cell to the awkward wagon. With one guard in front and one in the rear, they marched him down a short hallway, up a stairway with exactly twelve steps, to exit outside in the hot sun. A dry wind blew, and everywhere between their blocky building and the apron was red, silt sand. Sand rolled in troughs and crests, some nearly covering hidden concrete blockhouses that had gone unseen from the faraway bluff. Sand rose over their heads and over the tallest equipment. Tinker recognized this as the beginning of the great Astairian desert, explaining the need for low pressure wagon tyres. His view of the



secret base had to be enlarged; obviously more than the rocket apron and warehouses were located here.

He was prodded up and inside one of the tall standing wagon cabs where they chained him to a metal stanchion. The driver, a young blond man with round face and thick body, scowled when he chuckled.

The wagon jerked forward, rolled several hundred metres up and over shifting dunes, then stopped while a chain link fence was opened by guards standing there.

Fabulous! Only the weight of a whole government, highly industrialized, or the combined families of *Trippert's Planet*, could afford such mass-cost. . . !

Eventually they rolled over their last sand dune and onto the concrete apron, and soon they pulled to the side of the long warehouse where Tinker was not exactly unknown, or at least his effects.

Guards came out and unshackled him. He, apparently slumped in rest, suddenly became an engine of destruction. So quick did Tinker act, that one guard was already unconscious and going down before the second guard could raise his rifle. Tinker clamped manacled hands on the fallen gun, swung it about, and jabbed the second guard's neck. In a whirlwind of unexpected speed, Tinker twisted about, flipped the gun, and pointed it at the young driver, who was only part way out of the cab with just his head and shoulders. "Hold," ordered Tinker. "I'll follow you down your side. You'll pick up the fallen men, and push them into the cab."

Then, "Whatever it takes to convince the roof guards, you'll roll through the pass. After that, you're free," Tinker directed.

Nodding quite soberly, the driver rolled forward unchallenged. When Tinker spotted the rocky cleft, he snagged pocket beamers from the fallen guards, said "Thanks," and dropped off.

Laughing loudly, like an animal again free in its own environment, he leaped upward and raced across barren rocks to the crevice.

Wrist bracelets were another problem.

XXI

Tinker's characteristics did not include arrogance and false pride. His spirit was controlled more by the gentle breezes of mood that swept along his nervous system like the startled flight of birds that cleave to the sky for security.

To Tinker, the great shock of life was the immediate awareness of the moment, almost always exhilarating, and ending in laughter that automatically expressed pleasure in the contest of life.

He found wild *hilef* abundant, and cool mountain streams that seemed perpetually to trickle from snow-capped heights. His wrists chafed from the persistent rubbing of link against link, and keloids formed beneath the rigid metal. Yet his spirit was happy, his smile genuine, and animosity lacking against those who'd done him harm.

A pawn, he thought. A piece on a board moved from square to square, yet aware and rational. The game might yet be his, though he knew not its prize.

Beneath his selfish soaking of sun and wind, however, seethed a churning that forced its way to surface. He must know more of Sluks, and their reasons for inviting Terrans to colonize Astair.

He ranged like a wild thing, from valley to snow-caps, wearing little but tattered homespun, and armed with a single beamer whose charge he conserved. One day he spotted another of the ancient cities, a pile of tumbled rubble lying between two towering peaks of crystal white. Jungle growth did not cover these bones because of altitude. A moat stagnate with algae and detritus, overflowed banks of two rivers between which sat the dead city, water also filled the plain that fronted the city.

Tinker circled the foothills until he found a narrowing of the moat at the steep cliff's base. In a day he made a rope from vines found on the lower hills. With the rope he was able to swing over the diseased water, landing on crumbling stones decorated with bird nests and their droppings. Birds swung upward with hysterical squawks and squeaks while Tinker scrambled down. He dusted himself off, and his laughter ran through dead holes, across empty spaces, and would have curdled the shadow of ghosts had there been any.

Old cities are known for many things. Here Tinker found death and decay, and more. He found an ancient stone culture that gave no evidence whatsoever of scientific attainments—stone baked hovels, stone utensils, baked clay



® heiroglyphs—stone, stone, everywhere stone.

He supposed that Earth technologists had already noted and commented on these remains, and others scattered across Astair. But he also wondered if any had found the doorways too small, the buildings too small, the steps too small, for the average Sluk?

That night he cuddled like a ball for warmth, huddling in an empty room all filled with cobwebs, shards, and dust that seemed to echo a past poorly understood. Morning came with its austere diamond cold sun. Through the thin air came cold breezes that brought the call of a bird perhaps greeting its own peculiar god, or perhaps facing an eternal enemy. Outside otherwise was stillness: yet some instinct made Tinker move cautiously, overriding again his nervous, spontaneous laughter.

Though the sun momentarily blinded him, he knew at once on stepping out that he was surrounded. From ten directions strange tubes pointed at him, held by ten Sluks. As he weighed professional alternatives, one spoke, saying, “Tinker Bikiss. We’ve searched for you.”

Tinker tossed aside his black hair. His blue eyes bored into the black eyes that pinned him like a strange insect. Gourd-shaped heads fibrillated nervously. He grinned whitely, giving every impression of the youngster who’d simply been caught doing some minor wrong. “I suppose,” he said carelessly, “now back to the torture chambers?”

“No. We truly regret the—necessity. We would speak rationally with you.”

Tinker glanced across the circle. No. He could perhaps get several, but others could curl their fingers before he broke the circle. He seated himself cross-legged toward the speaker, his arm bracelets clinking loudly, sharply in the ratified air.

“You have two tubes, two inheritances.”

“But no debts,” Tinker facetiously reminded. His eyes looked over the speaker’s head, searching, probing, for some advantage.

“Ah yes! The debt. Do you yet know the last who is owed by Jakon Wy?”

“No.”

“Now that you’ve gained Llenka Ja’s inheritance, do you know more?” Even through the Sluk whisper the speaker was calm, even friendly, a characteristic Tinker had come to label as hypocritical.

“No.” How had they known of Llenka Ja? His suicide had taken place secretly, far away from the others, and the cylinder taken and hidden without others’ knowledge?

“I’m Braton Ke,” the speaker nodded his clownish head. “Would you mind giving us an estimate on why we tortured you? On why we did so, though we sincerely regretted the deed?”

Tinker shook his head in the Terran negative. “I can but guess. Jake Carter Enterprises has tortured Sluks, he’s after secrets, and Sluks distrust all humans. Then Sluks must also be concerned over the military activity, and the secret bases.”

Braton’s head remained unfibrillated. He solemnly bowed, as though acknowledging Tinker’s right to his opinion. “These are not the reasons. Will you believe? We are not a vengeful species?”

“It is true that Jakon Wy was not revengeful.” Still, clearly Tinker did not believe.

“Our manners have to some extent been borrowed from the Terran, our surface customs and behaviour, even our speech, its inflections and nuances. Isn’t that strange to you?”

Tinker nodded, curious and warily thoughtful.

“We are an ancient race. We have great weapons gathering dust, Tinker Bikiss. Why would such a race invite youthful Terrans?”

Tinker shook his head again. “I’ve seen no military might. I have no answers, Braton Ke. Suppose you demonstrate with the tubes that are held on me with obvious fright.”

Braton Ke pointed to a rock long ago shattered from an upper column, and, in a guttural whisper more suited to the Sluk throat than human, he apparently ordered another to demonstrate. The tube swung about. No sound, no blast of fury, no light, nothing at all came from the tube, so far as the ordinary senses were concerned. But the rock suddenly glowed from inner fires of many hues, even beneath the sharp actinic sun, and then disappeared.



Tinker bowed. “Your demonstration has been noted, Braton Ke.”
“But telling and showing is not sufficient,” the speaker argued. “There must also be trust between us.”
Tinker waved his chained arms around the semi-circle. “Trust? With weapons pointed?” He turned back to Braton Ke pointedly scowling, “Have you been tortured until flesh boils and muscles are cut like slender threads?”
“Look at your muscles and flesh, friend Tinker. I see no scars, no cut tendons.” Braton’s face again fibrillated, as though with agony, despair, or perhaps frustration. “Our torture was of the mind. Unlike Jake Carter’s, there was a purpose.”
Tinker waited.
“There is something that Terrans can supply our dying race.”
Was the guard nearest Tinker just a trifle more relaxed?
“What? Weapons? Energy? Ships? Slaves?” Yes. He was sure the Sluk was a bit more careless.
“No. We want no material thing. Knowledge, perhaps a trade. Knowledge is always good. Space we have in abundance. In any case our technology generally is superior, except—”
Tinker tensed.
“I can’t explain. It must be experienced,” Braton Ke abruptly whispered. “There is this which you must believe Jakon Wy’s inheritance was meant to come back to us. So was Llenka Ja’s. You can’t possibly know who is the final debtor until this comes about.”
Tinker laughed sardonically. “Torture couldn’t get the tubes, now it’s sweet reason, and mysterious allusions to things not well understood—eh, Braton Ke? But reason under”—and again he swept manacled hands about—
“tubes of force?”
Braton’s head fibrillated most rapidly. His bead black eyes nonetheless bored steadily. At last with the Sluk’s swift motion, he said, “I give you my weapon, Tinker Bikiss”—handing it butt first, he added—“and the others give theirs, too.”
Any one of the tubes at Tinker’s feet could have commanded a world’s fortune from Terran authorities, Tinker mused. And Jake Carter? He might have traded all of his far flung enterprises for just one.
Curiosity genuinely piqued, Tinker temporarily abandoned his near hopeless escape plans, but he also scorned the offering. “Now what?”
“It is your turn to trust,” answered Braton, his voice though whispered, seemed to plead.
They stared at one another. Perhaps no other Terran could have been asked for trust, as had Tinker. Certainly none other would have been given such powerful weapons. So long did they face one another that galaxies might have collided and gone on separate ways. Axiom after axiom was faced and turned about by Tinker, until nothing except trust, common ordinary trust remained. At last Tinker sighed. “Very well. Burn off these bracelets and I shall recover your tubes.”

XII

Weather and wind, stream and brush, the teasing sweet scent of wild things, all joined together to speed Tinker back through the mountain valleys and into the passes.
Lacertas were corralled in a roughly rectangular pen near the box canyon opening. One tiny figurine at Tinker’s right tossed dried vegetation to the slowly stirring animals. Four other small figures pushed and prodded two prisoners, harshly guiding them to the small house, also near the canyon’s sole opening. Minutes later they’d passed the house and now stumbled toward a strange stone structure at the canyon’s blind end. The structure’s turrets and wall walks and narrow window slits reminded very much of a diminutive castle without moat.
What seemed to be a heavy blackwood door bound with real iron hinges swung slowly open to receive the captives still propelled by the larger Randal Stone. The door shut with a clear, foreboding ring of iron against iron.
The shrill scream that echoed and re-echoed from the canyon’s dead end was wholly ignored by the tiny figures returning to the house.
Staying on the rim of the canyon, Tinker worked himself to the box end where he studied the two roof guards. Their lazy walk and indifference seemed to signal careless guardianship born of long privacy. Once he was sure of



their pattern — a rambling shamble around the perimeter in opposite directions, stopping now and then to gossip — Tinker found it easy to scramble unseen down behind the anachronistic building.

Near one of the narrow slits, as he'd guessed, climbing was easy because of crudely inserted stonework. Also the narrow slit was unbarred. He slipped sideways, dropping several feet to a dusty wooden floor musty with disuse like an old attic closet.

The room, probably designed for auxiliary storage, or perhaps for cryo activity, was rough hewn and boldly structured of native rock and smooth-planed blackwood timber. Tinker pressed the stubborn door inward centimetre by centimetre, so that its rusty hinges — also genuine, rare iron — blended squawling sounds with other background noises.

He was on a balcony overlooking one large room that was well lighted with glaring white light. Below him, and down to the far end, he viewed a tense and sickening scene. Carlotta Carter and Timeby were securely chained against rough hewn stones. Before them brazenly sat the sadistic Jake Carter bristling moustache and all. There were no guards.

Surrounding them on every wall and in the room's wide spaces, were every kind of instrument for torture.

Even the cruel and narcissistic Trippert's Families would not condone such ancient and barbaric practices.

Timeby's head fell unnaturally to one side. Carlotta's face flushed red, her eyes darted from side to side, her lips and teeth snarled with loathing and hatred and, yes, deep fear.

Secure with his vulnerability, commander of the day, arrogant, Jake Carter stood, placing hands on hips to face his wife. "This man," he said, sharp and demanding, "Who is he?"

"He belongs to the organization." Already puffed lips swelled further, distorting her mouth and expression.

"Ah yes. The organization. I've always suspected my pseudo-wife. I agreed to the organization's demands for five years, but do they think me a fool?" He paced two steps one way, and then back, then his voice raised like a whip lash, "Should I live under your spying for five years and permit more agents to infiltrate under your cover?"

"You work for them, too," she replied hotly. So angry did she seem to be that her whole body shook, making the chains rattle against the stone.

Jake nodded with false good nature. "I did. Apparently I'm not good enough for higher level. I'm just Jake Carter, good for holding down this god-forsaken frontier planet, and facing down unwanted. No more. I'm for Jake, and I'm starting the changes with you two."

Reaching for a glowing iron from the fusion stove, he stated matter of factly, "You'll tell me all about the organization before you die." The iron pointed directly at her eyes. "Oh, by the way" — he purred with silky oversweet voice — "Sluks have never talked here, but you're not Sluk material." His laughter might have reminded many of Tinker had they not known the two.

Tinker's beam came out. "Far enough, Jake. Drop the iron. Turn about and look at me."

He was a chilled man who dropped the smouldering iron, and a slow, wary one who turned; his eyes opened widely and his moustache quivered. Still he bluffed: "One call and I'll have you surrounded by a dozen men."

Tinker smiled. "Do that Jake. You'll be dead, and of course so will your men." The statement was fact, said calmly, with almost pleasantry, and it probably did more than anything to call Jake's bluff and to wilt his facade.

"What do you want? What business is this of yours?"

"When a man spends thousands of manhours scouring the country for me, anything of his is my business. And also there is the queer sensation of plain humanitarianism. Torture is for the sick. You're sick, Jake." His voice turned harsh and angry. "Release them at once, and don't think to hide behind one. I'll beam you no matter where you stand."

Timeby's head moved. Tinker was sure the man had regained consciousness. Jake stepped toward Carlotta. "No." Tinker commanded, "First Timeby."

Timeby crumpled into a weakened heap, but, as Tinker had guessed, had sufficient reserves to push himself erect.

When Jake pushed himself behind Carlotta as a surprise move, by the time Carlotta's throat was grasped, Tinker had already triggered. For a beamer a gun is the finger's extension, and wherever a finger can point, so can a beam. The thin pencil of dense photons spurted silently, cleanly holing Jake's leg. Pungent flesh scorched, like the odour



of burned pig. Jake cried aloud, releasing the girl to clutch at his ankle.

The guards above would be well used to screams of pain and giggles of terror.

Vaulting to the main floor, Tinker released Carlotta himself, saying to Jake, “I can’t be sure, but you may have a dangerous leg perforation. Do we take you with us, possibly to bleed to death? Or will you order your men in here so that they may take care of you after we leave?”

Within ten minutes it was over. All the men were accounted for, tied, and bundled together in the gruesome chamber except the two who watched at the canyon pass. Timeby recovered swiftly, riding as Tinker’s gladiator pair they finished the two remaining guards shortly afterward.

Even with gallons of nervous energy piling up inside, Tinker could not force himself to laughter as they left the canyon. They moved slowly along a stream bed ancient with weird fossils. “Bleeding again?” Tinker asked Timeby. Nodding, he looked to Tinker, conveying meaning without words. “No, friend,” Tinker answered, “You don’t get out of responsibilities so easily. I have other duties. Carlotta stays with you, and she’ll tend your wounds. You’ll protect her. In several days, with your healthy disposition and training, you’ll be able to move outward wherever you wish.”

Tinker threw weapons to the ground and a homespun sack containing concentrates. He carefully lifted the wounded man to the ground. “This looks good. Water swift and clean. Pasture behind dense brush. Carlotta can arrange good shelter.”

She’d been quiet throughout their hot ride, and now she spoke. “You treat us rather decently after our treatment of you, Tinker Bikiss. We’re more than grateful. Perhaps we’ll repay you one day.”

Tinker stared, then, “Yes. I have this curiosity. It eats at me. Why do you work separately from the Jake Carter Enterprises? What are you after? What organization do you represent?”

She struggled to cast off fatigue, countering with, “Where do you go from here?”

Tinker gurgled, at last losing his nervous energy. “I go to collect my inheritance.”

Her lips, compressing to a tight white line, communicated her inward struggle. “General Estion. I was planted to watch over Jake Carter while the General, who represents the organization, used Jake as cover against the Sluks.”

“That’s logical, and about what I expected you to say, Carlotta”—his manner was infectious, likeable—“but what or who is behind General Estion?”

Her eyes softened. “I’m sorry, Tinker. We owe you our lives and freedom from certain torture, but that information is exactly what we would have died to protect. I can’t tell you—not now. Please don’t insist.”

Tinker smiled wryly. Waving, he tugged the Lacerta’s eyelids with the reins and scabbled awkwardly away, his soft purr wafting behind like a soft perfume.

XXIII

Since the slow moving Lacerta would not bring him to Carter’s village before dawn or later, Tinker freed the ungainly animal, and plunged over peaks and through brushlands and deep scarlet valleys, carrying his backpack and beamer.

Two hours before dawn on the road near the village, he felt the presence of guards before he saw them. Avoiding trouble, he edged to the stream that flowed behind the village, and followed it closely.

Jake must have been stung badly, for they were everywhere, like bees that stir at dawn, like an armed encampment readying for attack.

Crossing the stream far below the village and working his way to the road again, he waited in thick brush beneath a tall tree. His time sense reported that the sun would soon claw above the hills, his fighting senses told him that patrols were near. A voice drifted to him, almost a whisper, “Charlie?”

“Yea. Your relief? Legs asleep.”

“Get down if you can. I’ll take next three.”

Leaves thrashed and finally, after a soft thud and swearing—“needles in my legs,” then thumps against the hard ground. “Don’t forget,” said the last whisper, “Jake says shoot that laughing fellow on sight. He still wants the other two alive.”



Tinker suppressed an involuntary titter.

Like some elementary manoeuvre Tinkerslithered through their defensive line. Since Astair had no moon, he rather flagrantly walked the streets, knowing that his dark form would be mistaken for one of Jake's men when seen from a distance.

Tinker finally stood beside the building, his keen ear sorting out sounds: Jake's sign squeaking when the breeze blew it backward and forward, the creak of logs, skittering of small rodents beneath the floorboards. Instinct whispered to him, but the dim red of the morning's sun already glowed to his far left, so he brazenly climbed the building and squeezed himself into the attic's small triangular opening.

Again his senses reported *something*. He lay still, every sense alert. In the distance came the yowl of some strange forest beast. Closer by far was the scrape of Lacerta staked at the village corral. Sheet-like webs brushed his face and body. His nose twitched from the tickle of dust while his deft fingers sought their way to Llenka Ja's hidden silver cylinder, his second peculiar inheritance.

Outside lights flashed on and Jake's loud, strong voice shouted, "All right Tinker Bikiss. You're surrounded by my men. Thirty of them. Everyone has a beamer pointed at your location, and we can hole the building until there's nothing left but insects.

"I've given orders that you be shot on sight. So, for now, this once, I'll give you three minutes to surrender."

Tinker again choked off his impulse to laugh, and he shouted, "How did you spot me, friend Jake?" His fingers found the small cylinder. As deftly, he pulled up the cryo rifle, wiping it free of webbing. Two grenades followed next. Wiggling backward, he pressed his eye to the cracks. Jake waved his hand to unseen figures.

"One minute remains," Jake shouted.

Tinker adjusted the cryo beam, spreading it wide, estimating that the distance to many of the men was too far for killing, but would likely burn. The sun, now stronger, stabbed one brilliant red beam on those below.

Like some efficient, pulsing machine Tinker blasted wide a hole through the logs. From his perch, he aimed and tracked, and the deadly, silent, intense photons waved across ranks of men who dropped their weapons to clutch at their faces with hands that blistered quickly.

He tossed one grenade toward the fast departing Jake, slung the heavy weapon to his back, and jumped lithely to the ground, the stench of burned flesh almost making him sneeze.

The grenade moved a geyser of dirt. Tinker bounded around the newly formed black hole so swiftly that the eye seemed to fool those not closely watching. Jake was down, his nose bleeding profusely.

Tinker's signature stretched across the town like the hand of a mad ghost, wavering and fearful, followed by a second grenade.

He raised Jake to his feet and slapped the dazed man to awareness, and then he pushed him along to the town's outskirts, by the stone bridge over the madly rushing water. Tinker stopped him and said, "You've given me a chance to live, Jake, now I'm giving you one." His blue eyes seemed to stop dancing as they bored into the bigger man's eyes. "Stay out of the way, or you're dead." Jake's eyes dropped. "Better yet, Jake. Move out. This country apparently can't hold us both. Next time I see you, you're dead. Understand?" Tinker shook the larger man, a tornado shuddering a tall, flimsy scaffolding. "Understand?"

Jake at last nodded in the Terran affirmative.

XXIV

Tinker's cabin stood as lonely and silent as the day of the rainstorm, and the same day he'd been captured by Sluks. The new sign, like the old, said JAKE CARTER ENTERPRISES. TRESPASSERS WILL BE KILLED. Tinker burned it with his beamer before stepping over to the low bushes behind which he'd hidden Jakon Wy's silver cylinder, his first mysterious inheritance.

Frowning, he scrutinized the ground closely. He kneeled, and ran his hands again and again through the loose dirt and red sand. There were no tracks, Terran or Sluk, but then later rains could easily have washed those away.

Closing his eyes, he brought up the memory: *The night was black: brilliant pencils of light streamed in pulses from a heavy cryo, each spurt lighting the ground as would lightning bolts from the sky:* He reached inside



his pocket. feeling the cold, hard cylinder, which he withdrew; he buried it— here — by that cluster of roots, but now what?— a gully. A gully? Yes. That’s it. Heavy rain had fallen, it was buried shallowly— perhaps it had washed.

...

He followed miniature canyons downward, in time coming to a dry stream bed where sand and gravel had piled high behind a downed tree. His eyes darted— there — shining brightly in the late morning sun and not more than six metres away, the silver cylinder — lying easily for anyone to pluck — Jakon Wy’s tube.

Trusting his senses to identify mysterious background noises, Tinker ate and rested openly in the woods, and late that afternoon, when the breezes were just then sweeping cold from higher peaks, he approached the Sluk chamber. Even though the strange keys were gone, the door slid open eerily, silently, and he was greeted not unexpectedly, by Braton Ke, alone, obviously eager and friendly. His dark pin-point eyes unashamedly followed the toss of the two sprightly cylinders. “Greetings, friend Tinker,” Braton whispered as the outer door closed, and an inner door somehow appeared where no door could have been. “As you see, I remain unarmed, and so will all other Sluks, while we will honour your right to bear arms. You may also keep the cylinder while I explain what must be.”

Tinker guardedly followed into the second chamber which was well lighted and lined with smooth stone that glistened and felt warm to the touch. “All right, Braton Ke. For friend Jakon’s sake, I’ll follow and I’ll listen. First, please explain the barbaric torture.”

They’d come to a blind passage. The door closed behind them. Braton Ke held up his arm, signifying to wait. A strange sensation, a weird distortion of senses, so familiar, yet distant, followed.

“That is most difficult— until you’ve received your inheritance.” Now the door opened elsewhere, and Tinker discerned small differences in the colourful patterns that swirled in the gleaming rock walls. “I’ll try,” Braton finished.

Suddenly they’d entered the room all filled with shining red shapes, cones, rods, pyramids, boxes, a dream once vaguely remembered, a reality that shocked Tinker’s mind and tightened his chest and muscles. Swarming unbidden to his mind came the memory of lying on a flat surface just like the one at the corner, and every so many days being exquisitely, deliberately, coldly, cruelly tortured.

Braton waved a furry paw about. “This room, or one like it, you’ll remember, friend Tinker. It is the— machinery — there are no closer Terran equivalents — that brings us back and forth to the hidden Sluk world.” Pointing to one device that he swivelled back and forth, he continued, “This, together with all the other — things — permits us to pass into a space your physicists and mathematicians call it a portion of Superspace — you use one of its manifestations in space travel— where the ordinary laws no longer apply — and although bodies seem real, as do houses and other objects, yet they obey the laws based on dimensions and constants and spaces that are grossly different from our here-now world.”

“— and that’s where Sluk’s hide?” Tinker asked.

“Yes. But there are not more than two million Sluks, as your world was told from the start. It is simply that we have an— ability — a means — to move from this here-now-world to this new state of geometrodynamics through use of— ah — equipment.”

“But why was I placed in one of these rooms every so many days after torture?” Tinker blurted.

“We are an old race, with many forgotten techniques and means, but we are unfamiliar with Terran biology — we Sluks know very little biology of any kind — and we feared that too long exposed to other constants would damage your body in some way. Originally, when we brought you to our — ah — inner world — we had calculated there would be minimal effect on your body. We were shocked to learn otherwise. The constants seemed inimical to you, contrary to what we’d learned from other Terrans. We estimated that you could be away from here-now geometry without damage for several days — and we drugged you to keep you in normal space, a room like this, during the period between.”

“The torture. Now I recognize it as not physical, but why?”

“Partly the effects of other space on your physiology, and partly deliberate. You’ll understand better later.”

The Sluk removed a crystal that cascaded green light and he pointed it at a part of the red pyramid. “This activates



the energies, so that both of us may pass through. Physically we are located in the same mountain space behind the cabin, but we aren't — locatable — I know no other words."

The room seemed to fade, and as it did, Tinker felt his skin prickle with sharp pain, his head compress, as though pounded with giant boulders, his arms to stretch and stretch, and his eyes to press inward. In spite of these effects he endured; the walls extended outward like two long infinite lines that almost met somewhere behind. Fresh air, cool even slightly sweetened, touched his nostrils.

As the room faded, another seemed to blend — to merge and then to blend — to harden, until there was no longer any way to sense the old room, and only the new room appeared to surround them. The blue light, which had been greenish, seemed to curve downward only half as far as the floor, as though sheared in mid-air. Yet he was able to see below this effect, too. The walls, still black-polished granite, were swirled with pinks and blues.

Tinker suppressed his nervous impulse as Braton Ke explained: "We Sluks are older than you by tens of millions of years. We're a race that has chosen the mysteries of — philosophy — the puzzles of life and death, rather than the search for material products.

"Your's is a young species that clings to material wealth and to expansion into space that goes with virility and youth. Who knows? Perhaps millions of years from now your race, too, will lose its thrust and choose a more sterile pathway, as did we.

"But the majority of us doubt that you will follow our narrow detour. We think that your very act of expanding into the complexities of the universe externalizes problems, thereby keeping attention focussed on material evolution as opposed to mystical or spiritual development." Braton Ke waved to the brighter light now visible down the long hallway, and they continued on; Braton also explained: "We once travelled to another planet much like your Earth, and only three light years from Astair. The gravity was higher, but otherwise it was a pleasant place, populated with ugly animals that had no impulse to evolve. They were a dying species.

"We borrowed what we needed there, returned to Astair, and have since been studying the matter of life and death."

Braton's head fibrillated slightly: "Some of us — most of — us — feel that a fusion of the two living patterns, Terran and — Sluk — will be healthy for both species, and perhaps will save ours from extinction, too. We have much — unimaginably much — to contribute to Terrans. Your species has virility, youth, and something else"

Tinker, though uneasily alert, hardly contained his interest and curiosity. He asked, "You mean biological fusion? Or fusion of ideas, knowledge, philosophies?"

Braton paused. "Yes — and more — as you will learn."

At first Tinker's eyes did not resolve the panorama before him. At the hallway's end blue light seemed to come from a very high ceiling, but as his eyes and brain adjusted he saw tall spires, domes, squares — a complete city, far below and stretching out a great distance, and the high ceiling stretched in his mind until it became at least as far away as the mountain was tall.

Braton Ke waited for Tinker to absorb the scene, then added, "Our penchant for study of the inner meanings of life — of life and death — drove us inward — into ourselves and into new spaces where conditions seemed more stable, tranquillity easier to control. For a thousand years or more — perhaps ten thousand years — we completely forgot Astair."

Tinker's eyes danced from side to side while his mind discriminated the messages, and he laughed softly. "A city. Thousands of Sluks moving and living. Where? Inside the mountain?"

Braton Ke shook his head in the Terran negative. "No. A different space. As you now understand, our surface cities lay forgotten and they crumbled. Those you see below — all of us — now play a dual role, and we form a common effort." They stood on a walkway, a virtual balcony, that followed around the walls of the large space. Tinker pointed to shafts of light that seemed to press from wall to wall and floor to ceiling in a dizzying array.

Braton Ke followed Tinker's gaze, and answered before the question. "The light? Secondary manifestation of energy that generates in space."

"But Sluks are walking through some."



“Yes. The energy — is— well — tuned — might be the Terran word — to react only against certain characteristics. We could eliminate the secondary light effects, but most have gotten used to it and now we feel more comfortable with its visible presence.”

Braton Ke eased a flat, golden object from his pouch. An invisible hand seemed to lift Tinker, and he and Braton Ke floated over the edge and descended slowly toward the city floor, three hundred and thirty metres below. Tinker’s eyes resolved other motes, other Sluks, moving through the air in like manner. Suddenly Braton Ke asked, “What would happen were all these devices and powers to be given to Terrans?”

Tinker’s nervous impulse was lost, muted, in the magnitude of open space, and during that short interim his mind formulated unflattering answers. “First we’d build extra-dimensional spaces, and rid ourselves of excess population; second, we’d breed again, and have requirement for more space.”

“And?”

Others meanwhile would use the devices to conquer, to gain riches, to take advantages, personal slaves, wealthy empires. I’m such an example of what might be, having been trained swifter than any Sluk or man. A thousand trained such as I am could take over a planet, a hundred thousand, all of civilization.”

“Then why has this not been done?”

Pensive, Tinker struggled to explain, only at last to shrug. “We are built on checks and balances, so that no portion has the opportunity to greatly outgain another portion. Superior offensive weapons always breeds superior defensive armaments, in time, and so the Terran natural aggressive cycle grows and turns. But in some instances, such as *Trippert’s Planet*, some small group gains total advantage over others, and” — Tinker shrugged again — “total corruption.”

Braton’s fibrillation showed concern and nervousness, and he held them in mid-air, still hundreds of centimetres above ground level. “Yes. It is as we reasoned.” Head now fibrillating rapidly. Braton Ke asked, “Suppose you should discover that your inheritance was all this? That we’ve accepted you as full member of our Sluk society, with all rights, privileges, and knowledge? What would you do with such an inheritance?”

While Tinker thought through this strange development, Braton landed them gently at the base of a delicately scented fountain that changed configuration delightfully. “I don’t know,” Tinker answered honestly.

“But would you turn the devices and knowledge over to your species?”

“No.”

“Even under severe torture?”

Tinker smiled as he looked into Braton’s small black eyes. “Do *you* think I can be made to talk under torture?”

“Now you know why —” Braton answered kindly in his normal hoarse whisper.

“Terrans have means, including drugs,” Tinker suggested.

“There’s another answer to that,” Braton said enigmatically, “but your will had to be measured, and its direction known.”

XXV

They faced him again: the sandy red cloak of Pacer Re, the unnamed ones, one in grey and one in black, and the new host, Braton Ke, also in black. Missing was Llenka Ja, who had been dressed in off-shade white.

“You have the cylinders?” Braton Ke asked with stiff formality.

Tinker withdrew them and tossed them carelessly into the air, catching them both with one hand.

Pacer Re waved one furry hand, and a strange object materialized before Tinker. It seemed to be a Sluk type seat with a flat shimmering space parallel to the plane of the seat and at almost chest height. “Please be seated,” Pacer Re huskily whispered.

He did so, by instinct keeping his arms and hands free from the shimmering surface. Pacer waved again. What appeared to be a hard surface black and smooth appeared between the shimmering surface and Tinker, only two indentations in it. Obviously they would hold the two silver cylinders. Pacer Re nodded, saying, “Place them.”

Again Tinker obeyed. There was a momentary part of a second’s wait, and then, like lightning accompanied by heavy thunder rolling across dense clouds, Tinker seemed to find himself compressed and forced into many worlds.



His senses whirled, and though his nervous system was trigger quick, even his reactions were too slow.

In one world he seemed to lie again on the sands of the gladiator pit on *Trippert's Planet*. Above him, deeply concerned, was the sad-faced Terran, black of hair, blue of eye, nearly naked and sweating. Somehow Tinker recognized himself.

In the second world, again was the Terran, puzzled deeply, holding a small cylinder, with the smell and taste of the trails, and the sounds of wild things calling.

Again his senses could not compensate sufficiently fast. Memories strange and foreign intruded, flooding his mental processes like an overflowing dam. Jakon Wy's voice whispered, *"Ah, friend Tinker. You've obtained my inheritance, and I again live."*

Hypnosis? Drugs? More strange and dangerous and weird power?

"Let me explain," Jakon seemed to whisper. *"Thousands of years ago we discovered how to control the flow of personality, under certain conditions, if biological functions are not too abruptly terminated. Personality, soul, the life essence, can be drawn and stored, and then under certain other conditions, it can be redrawn and life continued."*

Tinker's mind at first wanted to surround and negate the foreign presence, and perhaps had the personage been other than Jakon Wy, it would have been successfully and quickly done. But could he under any circumstances destroy his pair-mate?

Little by little—but quickly by other standards—his mind accepted, and his discipline forced everything from his conscious attention except that strongly heard inner voice of Jakon's. *"Where are you? How can you still live, without a body?"*

"The where is a complex philosophical-mathematical problem. I'm not capable of answering the question. But I now inhabit your body, to the extent you permit it." *Do I live, friend Tinker?"*

"Yes," admitted Tinker, grudgingly, and his laughter, almost forgotten, now surged to the surface in a sudden storm. *"Wouldn't a body of your own be better?"*

Momentarily silent, as though reflecting, or perhaps gathering information, or maybe even adjusting to reality again, Jakon then said, *"No Sluk bodies remain. The species is dead. Meanwhile Llenka Ja will soon be aware in a — half world — machinery? — there's no Terran equivalent — to wait."*

"Sluk bodies? Do you not reproduce? And what of you, friend Jakon? Do you go with Llenka?"

"I can live for now through you, if you'll permit — until we've solved the problem of bodies. Long ago when we made this space, turning our backs on Astair, we became sterile, and we borrowed bodies from Sluks, non-intelligent beasts from a planet only three light years distant and like Astair otherwise. Now the virility of the Sluk body is gone, it was nearly gone when we acquired it. And we—those who are yet composed of the life matrix, have at last agreed that the wrong fork was taken thousands of past years, and we now strive to cross over to the other branch, to return to natural space."

Tinker's strong muscles flexed and crushed the chair beneath. A breath of cool air touched his cheek. The velvet touch of soft light against eye sought his attention, as did his love for motion as told from unbidden memories. He steeled himself. All the objections instinctively gathered to mind: the repugnance of sharing self in all its ugly ramifications, and he said, *"A body is 'living', friend Jakon; you may, of course, share mine. I owe you that for the gift of life."*

"Ah, that is the debt — the final one that was to be paid, and I am the recipient of the gift of life through my inheritance to you. But more, if you'll search our memories, you'll find knowledge and unusual abilities in my present matrix. These, too, can constitute your inheritance, my gift to you."

"You're welcome. I've said it." Tinker answered soberly. *"But how much more worthy a body of one's own, to control without permission, to run free again, to fight the winds, and to cover self from chill, to race the mountains and the clouds, and to press for gain, and to loose laughter? With all the forces at your command, yet your technology cannot provide bodies?"*



“Vast forces, yes, but we know little of biology, and our time span — the Sluk body — is dwindling.”
“Terrans,” whispered Tinker aloud, so all the chamber heard. “Perhaps they have the means —”
Those assembled before him whispered a sigh. With his understanding, their tensions eased.

XXVI

Tinker could not stay longer in the unusual space. Already his mind envisioned things that did not happen, and the pain that began to wrack his body signalled that Tinker must return to normal space. He chose to return via the cave behind the cabin. His mind, dangerously interiorized, failed to utilize the messages from fine-honed senses, and his heart already burdgeoned with joy for return of an old and close friend — Tinker, in short, was careless.

“I’m sorry to do this to you,” Timeby gritted, when Tinker returned to the cabin, “it is the game.”

Tinker smiled at the time honoured expression, used by one gladiator against another when sides are suddenly switched. “I’ve been careless again.”

Tinker tied his own legs. Timeby flopped Tinker over on his stomach, causing Tinker to stretch hands behind, which were wrapped about the wrists. Then Timeby called, “Carlotta, hold the gun,” and finished tying Tinker.

She came from the shadows, her dress freshly changed, her face washed, and fear gone from her eyes, as were the deep colours of tiredness. “You won’t be hurt,” she assured Tinker apologetically. “I can’t make you understand the necessity for this, but you’ll thank me later.”

Somehow Tinker believed her, saying, “Everyone seems to know what’s best for me, and now you two. Apparently there’s little gratitude--”

Clearly discomfitted, she ordered Timeby, “Carry him crosswise. He musn’t get away this time.”

Timeby rolled him over several times, wrapping more rope about Tinker so snugly that he found difficulty breathing. He was tossed over the bigger man’s shoulders, carried like some grotesque sack, and finally thrown crosswise over the waiting Lacerta’s back, his face pushed roughly into the harsh hide. Timeby rode directly behind him, one hand pressed against his back for balance.

“Friend Tinker,” whispered Jakon inside Tinker’s mind. “Llenka Ja says it’s but a moment for Pacer Re to interdict.”

“You can communicate with Llenka Ja?” Tinker asked astounded.

“Yes. But what of it? Shall we free you?”

Tinker reflected. Obviously Carlotta was representing the same organization that hired Jake Carter, but Carlotta and Jake were not one. For some reason yet unclear, Timeby and Carlotta needed Tinker, and he could not believe they meant harm, although the possibility did exist that neither Timeby nor Carlotta knew the reason either. Then, “No, friend Jakon. Risking the community for me is too great a penalty. There is always the game, til’ death.”

“There is no community risk. Llenka Ja says they mean to take you away from Astair, and their motive is unclear.”

“That’s more reason to continue the game,” Tinker replied to his unseen visitor.

Their way went swiftly, through and over rough trails, far beyond Jake Carter’s trail watchers. Carlotta in time identified herself at the port entrance, and they were permitted to move inward directly to the ship at the slow but sure Lacerta scabble. “You’ll enjoy the stars, friend Jakon,” Tinker chided, “And this time space will be free.”

The ship stood tall and golden, a ready-pointing arrow to other worlds. It was, in fact, an efficient machine, but also a crude and expensive monster, one that demanded much mass energy for its services.

Tinker was bundled directly into the ship, handed over to another by Timeby who, along with Carlotta, had climbed the service tower along the passenger steps. Inside Tinker was flopped into webbing, still bound helplessly, where he was strapped and ignored.

“Enjoy with me, the trappings of free flight,” JakonWy punned to Tinker.

As though they’d been the last of the cargo, the golden spear shuddered. The groan of machinery pulsed through the ship subtly changing overtones. Then the roar changed to a shriek and the sudden lift off came.

Carlotta smiled sweetly when she untied his last knot. “Please Tinker. Hold your conclusions until we’ve reached Earth. There’s simply no way that I can explain. You’ll shortly be satisfied that I’ve done the right thing.”



His tinkly amusement filled the tiny cubicle like bees in their hive, killing the deadly silence. “You might have tried to convince me,” he shrugged, standing and stretching long cramped muscles. Then, “Timeby?”

She shook her head. “Stayed. Another job on Astair.”

“I could capture you and the ship,” he reminded, still flexing and unflexing muscles.

“Yes. But you’re a reasonable person. We’re in space — not even natural space — geometries have changed from Euclidean to Einstein-Schrodinger — and our destination Earth. You *can* interfere, but only at the risk of your own life. We’ve passed the point of no return.”

Tinker chortled, “Well — Earth!” He rubbed the calves of his legs. “Long time. Who would want me back there?”

She only smiled again. “Wait. You’re expected. Friends.” Rising, she pointed her hand to the doorway. “May I show you the ship?”

They entered a passageway golden smooth and brightly lit. It also doubled as a room. They passed through two more similarly constructed, both also empty. “Luxurious,” he said. “The ship that brought me to Astair — and for that matter from Earth to Trippert’s Planet — was not so empty. Cargo?”

“Oh, there’s cargo all right. Through the next seal. Open it.”

They had come to the largest and main hold where skins were strapped against walls by webbings, their present walk-way being merely a tubular ladder that permitted them to move up and down through the hold. “Skins?” asked Tinker, perplexed. “I can smell them — not cured well — but who would want those things?”

“Maybe you’ve forgotten that Earth hasn’t seen animal skins for several generations, and that most natural life there is gone. Compared to synthetics, real fur and leather is a luxury.”

“My legs and arms are alive again,” Tinker commented, turning back. He whisked himself to the ladder’s end, revelling in physical freedom again. There he waited, saying, “And the empty space? Why are these not filled?”

“You,” she answered, still smiling pleasantly. “You’re worth more to Earth than the most expensive cargo.”

The Eemay general seated stiffly against his thick padded chair gave Tinker the impression of being meticulous rather than stodgy. He seemed to neither force nor to submit his own view, yet he commanded, as though having both the right, and from long friendship. Tinker was clearly puzzled. The General said, “Miss Slovak — alias Mrs. Carlotta Carter — has briefed us on difficulties in arranging your return.” His eyes, peering through brown-framed glasses, dropped to a folder that he flipped and then laid closed on the desk top with palms flat over it. “You’ve been our employee Tinker. Once we’ve opened your memories, you’ll understand.”

“Memories?” Tinker, now dressed in shiny blue and red Eemay, flexed hidden muscles.

“Yes. Think of this. Everyone has a training index. They receive it young, and seldom are they permitted to deviate from the selection. It’s better, say, than a personal identification but meaningless number.

“Do you know your training index?”

General Estion had asked Tinker that very same question while under the influence of truth serum. Now Tinker found he could answer no better. Still, the proof of a negative does not constitute proof of positives, he reflected. He warily shook his head in the Terran negative.

“Understand, you don’t know. Yet you work for us” — the General flicked his reports — “It’s all here. Your early memories have been blocked. Neither desire on your part, or torture, or drugs could induce them to come forth until after we’ve operated.”

“I’m not inclined to permit an operation, General.” Tinker’s eyes pierced the General’s. He casually leaned back, but inside he’d already formulated action plans and the determination to use them as sure as breathing free air. “Besides, I clearly remember General Estion asking if I was Eemay, and I clearly said no, whereas sometimes I was uncertain of the answers.”

“Oh that,” the General’s arm waved, “We are dressed in Eemay, but we are not Eemay. It’s a cover. You and I and Miss Slovak belong to a special branch of Terran Security.”

“*He is truthful,*” Jakon whispered in Tinker’s mind. “*There is no hostility. He’ll open memories and no harm will come, I promise.*”



Had it not been for the unqualified trust Tinker placed in Jakon Wy, he, of course, would never have submitted to such a dangerous unknown as an operation, especially when he could not feel the need for it. They told him his memories were incomplete. His mind worked itself inward like a busy beaver, and no matter how many small memory trees it chewed down, he could not see anything but what he was, and he was complete. They told him that some memories were not real. Well, which ones? Every memory, like a vivid dream, sooner or later tarnishes with age. Some are more distinct than others, and the fact that some of his memories were blurred was only proof that his early life on Earth had been not very important.

Well, what about his gladiator training?

He'd not given it much thought before, but obviously his body had learned its lessons well. That kind of training was not something one remembered. The long chain of impulses required to remember would be not a survival trait, but a sure, quick means to death. So long as his body acted, and the choices made were correct, then that was the only memory important to the gladiator.

Well, then, what about parents? His early home life? School? And the all pervading training index?

The beaver in Tinker's mind gnawed down more and larger memory trees — and there seemed to be something about a happy early childhood — but for some strange reason the closer he got to those memories, the more they seemed to skitter. Besides, didn't everybody have memories the same? Some remembered things only because of great pain, and some only because of great pleasure. But in any case, one couldn't very well clutter up one's mind with incidentals, could one?

The operation itself was not very long, nor hurtful, nor even dangerous. They probed inside a particular region of his brain with a slender cryogenic needle so thin that it might have stopped a single bacterium from passing through, and so it had had to be made of double layers of monomolecules. Still, nothing happened until they injected certain double helix proteins that forced the growth of certain neurons again, and one morning he awoke and marvelled to his hidden friend, Jakon, "*I'm a test tube baby?*"

Jakon whispered no answer, yet Tinker knew the presence, and Jakon was particularly impressed. Together they followed the explosion of experience inside Tinker's skull. He was first of the created ones. School, too, was special. His speed, so unusual that he'd had early special training simply to learn to pull his punches around normals, had been part of a rather complex training index. His genetic inheritance had been blueprinted and designed to have the unusual speed. And with the terrible speed of his nervous system there had accompanied it the nervous release that caused gales of laughter, or titters of wind, or guffaws, or shrieks of hysteria-like, or chortles often choked down. This nervous release had not been foreseen by his genetic planners.

He'd lived two lives during his early youth, and always thereafter: one with normals, absorbing their attitudes, their behaviour and cultural responses, the other in secret study, always strengthening his fighting stamina and learning and growing endless gladiator skills and tricks.

As the neurons re-attached themselves, and he again gained access to a shelf of memories, as though they'd been placed there and waiting, the hypnotic memories dwindled to what they were, suggestions, dreams, make-believe, and he was restored to continuity with his past. Just as he'd been externalized to the nth degree for many years, he now relaxed in the ward, fully internalized. In particular, the memories that were key to his past and future were explored and met, as old friends might explore in depth where they'd been and what they'd done between meetings:

It had been a boiler day perhaps 50 degrees centigrade in their desert environment. Tinker had been called to his superior's office, Mark Thompson, a middle aged man of serious mein with thin lips, brown hair, and brown frame glasses, and the very same General who'd met Tinker on his return to Earth.

"You've done well, Tinker," the superior had said, broadening his smile. And well should he have smiled. Hadn't he been the originator of the plan? The very same who'd administered the creation of Tinker, with Tinker's special qualities? "Your new assignment is approved."

"Yes, sir." Tinker had replied with politeness. This man had guided Tinker all of his life. He'd seen that Tinker had the right education through the two years it had taken to grow from childhood through



adolescences and early adulthood, then had brought in all of the proper tutors to train Tinker in every way most advantageous to the plan. Tinker did not wish for parents, nor miss them, but if anyone could have been called close to the genetic creation called Tinker, it would have been Mark Thompson.

“You know of Trippert’s Planet?” The ersatz general had asked Tinker, as though Tinker had not had the very best review on the subject.

“Yes, sir.”

“What of Astair?”

“I’m not familiar with that name, sir?”

Thompson flipped a paper to Tinker, who snagged it from mid-air fast as the legendary hawk. “These are the coordinates, background, and other data you’ll need. Eemay was approached by a viable alien life form — pictures there in your material — and given unqualified permission to use their planet for immigration.”

Tinker’s mind swept over the facts the figures and the photograph, blotting up information like a satellite photo” graphing the planet. Large animals, bigger than humans, with leathery scales, furry paws, and bestial heads, more like gourds or long pumpkins than anything, peered with little black eyes from the photographs. “Their planet, sir? They’ve invited us, to live on their planet?”

“Yes. Fantastic, isn’t it. Fear of the Trojan horse, and Greek’s bearing gifts and all that. They’ve learned somehow that Terran Emigration is desperate for living room, and how few earth-like planets we’ve found. Well — the offer was snapped up, particularly after a quick survey showed nothing but old, crumbling cities, decaying with age and overgrown with vegetation, mostly primitive conditions, occasional rock-chambers, or wooden cabins — no power tools — all that.”

“But I thought it against our policy to interfere with another species,” Tinker objected.

“Yes. Our basic policy is unchanged. They invited us. And they’re a dying race. Make a difference, you know. Share the benefits of civilization and all that. Fuse with Terran’s superior culture, you know.”

Thompson glanced at the sheets Tinker returned, saying, “Here it is. Quarter century ago we started receiving rumours of something perhaps not quite right about the Sluks. Nothing we could definitely pin down. Reports came in slowly, two, three a year. A few Sluks travelled, just like some of the other alien groups we’ve met here and there, but most found our pay-as-you go economy leading them to indentured frontier life on planets of Eemay’s choice. So they apparently plan now to choose an alternative. They have fast, strong, almost animal-like bodies, and one has opted to gladiate at Trippert’s Planet.”

“The first, sir?”

“No. I thought so, until we did more research. Apparently they’ve begun this approach already, and there have been some Sluks who’ve made it to Trippert’s Planet, served a year, and then been returned to Astair. According to reports, one of the anomalies is that we can find no trace of the ex-gladiator on Astair.”

“Did the families actually return them?”

Thompson looked at Tinker as if to chastise. “Of course. The families would soon lose their roost were they not honest about returning winners, but more than that, we, that is, Eemay returned them. They were brought to Astair, and just disappeared.”

“Perhaps, sir, they were so disgusted they simply hid — they stayed in their own culture.”

“Perhaps. But not probable. Besides, that’s only part of the pattern. We can’t seem to learn much about Sluk society either. Sluks are friendly, obey rules of our settlements, but aren’t close to any Terrans.”

Thompson peeled a second bundle from his desk, throwing it at Tinker. “This is Trippert’s Planet data, **and rules** of the gladiator, as you’ve digested during your growth. You’ve been trained for Trippert’s Planet, and to win.”

Tinker already knew its contents so he passed it back. “I assume, sir, that I’m to make friends with a Sluk who is enroute there, and somehow become closer during combat than others have been able to do on Astair?”

“Yes. There’s one thing. To protect you and us, we’ll have to remove your memories and condition into



® *your mind false memories from Earth. We'll also place upon you a compulsion to make friends with Sluks."*

"Afterwards, sir."

"One of our agents will watch you at all times. You'll be brought back to Earth, and your memories restored to you here. Afterwards, we can debrief you on what you've learned of Sluks, and their true motives."

One day Tinker woke with the pleasant touch of tight flesh pressed against clean, white sheets in a cheery room. The windows were unbarred. An open doorway wafted a clean antiseptic odour, and nearby, on the tiny rectangular stand near his bed, sweet flowers scented the air. A young nurse entered. She was petite with curly yellow hair, small dimples, and she had a disposition as sweet as the flowers' heady odour. "You'll be healed in another day if you lie still and behave yourself." She adjusted temperature sensors and left.

After that he lay resting, permitting the operation to work, and letting his true memories sort themselves. Every now and then a whole string of events flashed across his mind associated in some way to one of his behaviour patterns or to things he shrugged off as of no importance. Sometimes his memories would scatter, squawking and wailing, like a group of ducks scattered from their favourite nesting place, flapping and screeching in confusion.

"The compulsion is gone, my friend," Jakon Wy whispered, *"But we remain friends."*

"Yes." Tinker agreed. He sipped cold water, then added. *"The compulsion brought me to you, but the compulsion is not the source."*

Several times a doctor checked sensors. If Tinker spoke at all, it was in answer to questions. Once he was asked if memories had begun to reassociate. Tinker nodded yes, and suppressed a titter. *"Such men have a serious side, friend Jakon,"* Tinker punned in secret, *"And are best treated seriously."*

The overwhite sunlight flowed through open windows late one day, blazing harsher than remembered through a skylless blue than remembered. The young nurse removed all sensors and his bandage, saying, "There. Look at yourself. See that the scars are gone, and also the keloids on your wrists." She held a small mirror before him.

"It's true, friend Jakon. My wrists are smooth and brown following the colours of my body, and the bandaged portion of my head shows no marks."

Jakon seemed to sigh. *"A wonderful biological science. We undead may yet have bodies, can we but persuade your government to contribute with their skills and knowledge."*

Tinker found his muscles of excellent tone when he walked. His quickness, too, was undiminished. His mind was still his, his attitudes were those of old, his close feeling with Jakon Wy unchanged.

Still an instinctive feeling brushed his mind, like the old shadows in the pits where danger lurked, but his senses had yet to find it. Without vocalizing the thought either to himself or to Jakon, he nervously prowled the long, narrow building from end to end, following the maze of branching halls wherever they went, studying, preparing himself as always for the unexpected.

Other patients were mostly Eemay regulars, their Eemay red and blue hung in small closets in each small room. Middle-aged veterans with deeply lined faces and leathery skins, weathered by the elements of strange planets and stranger suns, were dressed like he, in oversized hospital gowns and floppy slippers.

Outside—and he did step outside once until thumbed back by an Eemay sergeant—was hot sand, scrubby cactus growth. As far as he could see from most windows were buildings similar to his—thick, squat, long cement structures tied together with walkways sheltered from the hot sun.

One window opened to a region that splashed the deep blue sky out over jagged but low mountains lined with barrel cactus and shattered rocks. "Yes," to Jakon's quiet prod. *"A fence doubled, and surrounding us like a prison."*

"And guards with spotlights and weapons," Jakon added. *"To keep us in, or the curious out?"*

On the critical de-briefing day, an indifferent doctor entered with his short, important steps. He flipped through pages of notes and left. Five minutes later he again checked his notes. "You are special patient 11314?" he asked in clipped, nasal tone, as he also checked the identification number at the foot of the bed, and on Tinker's wrist.



“You’ll have to get out of bed,” he commented, still not looking at the patient.

Pushing shiny instruments on a low carriage, a taller man of slight oriental features entered. Close to the window he stopped and unfolded an innocent stool. “Sit here,” he directed, and Tinker obliged.

Two clamps so flimsy they couldn’t have held even a baby were placed about Tinker’s body and arms and legs.

One opened the gown at his back. Coolness of metal at the base and neck of his spine tingled. Tinker’s head was encased by a thickly woven netting, and blinders placed over his eyes, and soft, warm rubber around the remainder of his body.

A switch clicked followed by a buzzing sound that increased in volume and frequency until the whole world seemed to consist of a single strident pitch. The smallest man’s voice echoed throughout his brain, “We’re about to tap your store of experiences from the beginning of the experiment. According to my notes your first assignment was *Trippert’s Planet*, as an indentured gladiator.” There was a pause, then the nasal voice, still quite indifferent, said, “As an agent of Terra, you’ll cooperate fully, of course, but I must inform you that this procedure is experimental. Any resistance on your part can bring about permanent damage.”

Now Tinker knew the danger. He could not, would not permit them access to his relations with the Sluks; nor could he even hint at Jakon Wy’s presence. In one mighty surge, he ordered his body to break the flimsy bonds holding him — and he was unable to move — he was paralysed!

“This is my turn,” Jakon Wy seemed to whisper. *“The mysteries of life forces, their strengths and weaknesses, are known. Relax, friend Tinker. Permit them access to early memories. By then I’ll have blocked their primitive device.”*

Like remnants from a battle-wise and clever wolf one memory was already torn open, the feelings and thoughts, and smells and sights and sounds hurtling, tearing their way to rendezvous with the ready recording device:

“There’s my new gladiator!” the wealthy patron shouted as Tinker stepped from shipwalk. *Already the imported Terran’s infectious grin and black, unruly hair captivated his new owner.*

“Hold, Sire,” the gate man in dusky grey uniform shouted over freeman’s clarnour. *Fearing to touch one of the family, he yet dared the opening of palms. “The papers, Sire. Terrans cost much mass, Your Worship. Can’t lose another. My job, you know.”* Though steady of voice, his black eyes danced as they pleaded. *Though his body demanded, his body bowed obsequiously.*

Tinker’s mind faithfully followed grooves; indeed, he was not free to do otherwise, and Don LuAbu of the wealthiest of *Trippert’s Planet* families, prissied his way upward, to the enormous but rather secondary estate, and onward to meet his jealous twin brother.

Later Tinker’s mind faithfully grooved in on his initial meeting with Jakon Wy, and then the other gladiators with Jakon next cage.

“I’ve got it constructed, friend Tinker. Their crude machinery will not pump our nervous system further. Neither will you be harmed.”

It had been so real, the arrival, the introduction to *Trippert’s Planet*’s filth and poverty, and its overlordship, the cages, and the stench. Tinker’s mind reacted slowly this once, and then, *“What did you do?”*

Jakon spread concepts before Tinker’s mind which though intricate showed how to use the life energy in blocking the external stimuli forced upon him.

While Tinker’s first impulse was to jerk away from the invidious mechanisms, he nonetheless stilled it. Jakon Wy whispered, *“I’ve learned that a ship leaves for Astair within the hour, and at this base.”*

The doctor’s nasal whine came through the eternal buzzing. “There’s something wrong. Equipment’s not recording.”

The buzzing ceased, and so did Tinker’s paralysis. The little man unhooked wires and straps and other devices without yet a glance at Tinker, saying, “We’ll check it at the lab and be back this afternoon. Careful of the first tape.” Tinker and Jakon were alone.



“Yes,” Tinker said. *“We’ll leave. They’ll guess that the malfunction is inside me, and we’ve no idea what other machinery they have.”*

From the moment Jakon Wy had reported the ship’s availability, the two had known what direction their efforts must go. So well coordinated had they become as pair-mates in the pits, that even the mental processes seemed like adjuncts to otherwise well practiced movements. Tinker dressed in Eemay red and blue. Patients, nurses, and other staid members gave not the slightest attention as he boldly paced away. When they stepped from the air-conditioned block building where the sun shocked hot, a passing officer shouted, “Soldier!”

Tinker tensed, and turned. “Yes, sir.”

“This may be an army hospital, but the rules for military courtesy still apply.” Gold leaf washed white by the sun’s brilliance on the officer’s shoulder.

“Yes, sir!”

“Well damn it, salute!”

Tinker did so, and waited until the offended was satisfied.

The sergeant paced slowly back and forth. In an instant, Tinker was behind, past, and outside the immediate hospital entrance. Keys dangled in the lock of an army carry-all. Tinker’s memories, surging anew like opening a room filled with well organized tools, popped him into the seat. He turned the key, shifted, and, at moderate speed, aimed toward the gate.

“Are you sure you can handle the disruption frequencies?” he asked of Jakon.

Jakon was, and he did.

They were not sure of the port’s direction, and fearing to ask, they sped eight and a half kilometres and five minutes. From a sandy hilltop they viewed one of Terra’s sprawling cities, but no rocket lay sheltered in spires of steel, pointing toward the only door they wanted. *“Wrong way,”* Tinker silently muttered to Jakon Wy. Back through the forbidden gate they drove. *“Seventeen kilometres wasted, and time — valuable time.”*

“It is the game,” Jakon invisibly shrugged. *“Patience—”* cautioned his non-dead friend — *“together we’ve greater abilities than either alone, and formidable though is Terran society, with its omnibus control of people, its truth devices, and rabbit warrens -- we’ll achieve, old Friend.”*

Tinker sighed when at last they passed through the main base, all ten kilometres, with no more than a cursory check at one vehicle stop. Again they faced the desert and the sun and the heat and sand for twelve agonizing kilometres. The main rocket port entrance was unmistakable, for it was a structure that more nearly resembled a fortress than a gate. *“Truth field here. Very sensitive,”* Jakon advised.

“Carl you handle it?”

“Oh, easy, my Friend. Such fields were ancient thousands of years ago.”

The Eemay corporal was a small, dumpy man, perhaps eighteen or nineteen years old. His hat was just a trifle too large, as were his trousers, but he was a properly suspicious and efficient soldier when he asked, “Your business?”

“Special assignment”— Tinker lied —“orders unopened.” He had to press lips together to suppress an inopportune laugh, perhaps making himself appear more grim than necessary. “Maybe you can help me.” The Corporal watched the truth indicator as they talked and Tinker’s stern expression seemed to soften, as though he appealed to a fellow human. “My orders were just cut and I only know that I’m to make immediate report to Astair, and a ship leaving within the hour. Where is it? How do I dispose of the car? I was told there was some kind of motor pool—but I’m new—and— well—the time element— really, Corporal, I got lost, and I’m running terribly late

“

The lumpy guard, secure in his faith of the truth mechanisms, nodded. “Just a minute, I’ll check for you.” He reached for the phone. Tinker again choked back a nervous gurgle, pretending to cough instead. His body tensed. Jakon scanned using his hidden mental talents.

The Corporal hung up at last, saying, “You’ll have to hurry. Motor pool is first turn to the left after the stop and go light can’t miss it. One of the men will be waiting to give you a lift to the rocket. I’ve called mass computation. They’ll pick up your orders through usual channels later, but your timing is way off.” He pushed back red sleeves



over white gloves, “It’s 1031 now, the Astair rocket is scheduled for 1058.”

Tinkerraced the engine, shouting back, “You’ve been most helpful, Corporal.”

No one doubted Tinker’s story when they helped him up the ramp. How could they? He was dressed in proper Red and Blue, and he’d been through the truth gate, hadn’t he? And there were other things known only to Tinker and his secret, silent partner, Jakon Wy.

XXVII

“Captain Mason,” the fiercely irate General Estion bellowed, “are you saying that Jake Carter has armed the settlers — all of them — against us? That he’s in open revolt?” The General’s pink fingers pushed away his mundane paperwork, not caring if it fell from the desk’s edge and into the wastebasket.

“Yes, sir!” The Captain was older than the General by at least ten years, his face weathered in old army leather, an appearance that seemed to apply to all Eemay faces after so many years of bitter service. “Started the night the young — ah — barbarian — ah —”

“Tinker Bikiss?”

“Yes, General. Right after Miss Slovak brought the young man for return to Earth. Rumour says Mr. Bikiss gave Jake Carter an ultimatum to clear out or be killed next sighting.”

“Well,” grumbled the General, “Earth will know how to take care of trouble makers. But why is Jake displeased?”

“General” — the Captain steeled himself, having learned early in his career that oft times the carrier of bad news is identified with it — and the General’s mood did seem foul today — “seems like Jake Carter has ambitions. He’d approached agent Otan — Ray Otan, several times. Wants higher up the ladder, he says. Naturally since we’re using Jake Carter as cover against the Sluks, we’ve no place to promote him without giving away the deception. Apparently the matter of Tinker Bikiss has triggered Jake —”

“Damn the deception and their mythical Sam Toomey. What have we — what have we — tell me Captain Mason — just what in hell have we learned about the Sluks that we couldn’t have learned by open means, or force, if necessary?”

The Captain waited.

“What is the good of secret arsenals in hardened bases, when we’ve found nothing but brittle stone cities already fallen — and ancient, stupid Sluks?”

The Captain still waited.

“Well damn it, Captain. Say something.”

“Sir, I’m not familiar with Sam Toomey, or the myth.”

“It’s a secret, or was. When we first came an old grizzled veteran of Eemay, retired in good service, was found battered and raving down one of the inner canyons. Told all sorts of wild tales about cities within the mountains, and powerful machines that could nullify gravity, and he talked — well, Captain Mason, crazy — just like you’d expect anyone who’d fallen into the river and been swept away by wild currents to talk crazy — and that damnable bureaucrats sitting on their pants back” — here the General realized suddenly what he was saying, and to whom, so he lamely finished with — “well, no mind, no mind — go on!”

“Jake Carter seems to have organized the settlers into a special army. He’s in the hills now, but obviously he’ll be back.”

“My God — that far?”

“Yes, sir. Killed those who resisted, or refused to join.”

“All of them?”

“Well, sir, some did escape, into the hills.”

“Just how well armed are they, Captain Mason?”

“Quite well, sir. In accordance with Earth directives, to keep up the illusion that he’s an independent organization supporting contraband, that he was slowly building to take over a weakly defended planet, to act as bait for the Sluks to attack, to search out Sluk technology, if any — well, sir, we permitted Carter Enterprises a weaponry nearly as complete as our own, sir —”



“Yes—yes. I know, Captain. That wasn’t my idea. Fools at Headquarters. Sitting back on Earth. Know it all. Well damn it, Captain Mason, to hell with Headquarters. Let this be a lesson to you. Those asses that sit on paperwork can never know what’s on in the field. A career — forty years — shot to hell because some clever-scheming bastard with nothing to lose but an ink pen — well, I’m in my rights, Captain Mason. From now on I will take independent action.”

“Well—sir,” Captain Mason began cautiously to object.

"Captain?"

“Yes, sir.”

“That’s better. Our whole command could be wiped out. Our careful contingency plans, the work of a whole generation, brought up mass-load by mass-load at tremendous cost, not to mention danger to Terran settlers and innocent Eemay troopers,” the General’s face turned pink red to beet red. “What if Sluks have superior weaponry and choose this time to act?” His voice changed from high to roaring like that of an angry animal, “—that son-of-bitch Jake Carter.”

His poise returning, Captain Mason waited patiently, neither adding to nor detracting from the General’s temper display. The General motioned that the Captain be seated. “One reconnaissance vehicle, Captain?”

“No, General. We have the wagons.”

“The helicopter?”

“Yes, sir. It’s here now, loaded and ready for flights inward.”

“Jake’s ceiling?”

“About 330 metres in this weather. He’s got stacks of cryos?”

“Damn. What nut back on Earth authorized cryos, for God’s sake?”

“Shall I send it out now, General?”

At first Captain Mason did not think the General had heard his question, so long did the commander pause, then he said, “Colonel Stauchion’s return to Earth places me in an untenable position. Earth has not yet sent his replacement. Major Gorley’s sudden death places you in the Colonel’s spot. Neither the Colonel nor the Major would have doubted the purpose for our subterfuge and our original mission, but only the Colonel and myself were aware of certain intelligence compiled and available at Headquarters, Terran Eemay.” He tapped the Captain’s knees to punctuate his points. “In the absence of both superiors I’m justified in explaining this to you. Evidence does exist that Sluks have an advanced technology of some kind, that all is not quite what it appears with the Sluks. Is that clearer, Captain?”

Whether or not Captain Mason believed the rebelling General was not important, just so he answered correctly, and he did, saying, “Yes, sir.”

The intercom blurted out with “Port Authority says Rocket One Able Charlie landing, General. Supplies and one Eemay Special Forces Trooper under sealed orders.”

“We’ll talk again,” the General said. “See to the safety of the wagons, and bring the visitor here at once — or as soon as you can, Captain Mason.”

"Sir?"

The General looked up again and waited. Captain Mason was not sure second in command could make decisions with latitude, so he thought he better check first, considering the General’s mood. “The helicopter will be needed for reconnaissance but it could take me to Port Authority. I could pick up the Special Forces visitor there, and bring him back with men and the wagons and supplies there—”

“Yes. Yes. That’s the way. Fine, Captain Mason, you do that.” The General had already brushed minor details from his mind and had begun laying his plans for placing Astair under total military control, as it should have been from the start.

Though the sun was deeper yellow, Tinker felt good returning to this land of green-purple and pink-yellows.

“Ah, friend Tinker, I agree, but then it is home for me, and almost for the Sluk body we used so long,” Jakon silently whispered.



Tinker was apprehensive when he found an Eemay Captain waiting on him. It was strange that the Captain did not ask Tinker for his sealed orders, but then Tinker was dressed meticulously, and the Captain was deeply troubled; and furthermore, the sealed orders were probably for the General's eyes only. Already the Captain was apologizing. "This may be an unpleasant visit." He pointed to the lumbering wagons outside the Port entrance. "Major Gorley died, and the General's aide, Colonel Stauchion, is back on Terra. The General's mood is tough."

When they stopped before the awkward wagons, Captain Mason ordered that they be sprayed with ablatives, explaining to Tinker, "The Jake Carter problem. We've got to bring these supplies and men back to base, possibly through cryo activity."

"Do you have to move through the village to reach base?" Tinker asked, also explaining that he'd been on Astair before.

"Well -- no. I suppose we could take some mountain passes, but that would take weeks longer, and the General hasn't authorized it."

"Well — hmmm," Tinker squinted, as though deeply concerned. But his quick mind had already devised and jumped to an alternative. "What about the river's bank opposite the village? It isn't road, but your low pressure vehicles will climb rocks and gullies. If Jake Carter is in open revolt, they'll expect you to pass through town, and sooner or later every street will be cries-crossed with cryos."

Captain Mason studied the small, sinewy youngster closer. Apparently, he thought, this Special Forces trooper knew something about ground tactics as well. "All right. We won't be so close to the cryos, either — if we're lucky."

The wagons chewed up kilometres compared to Tinker's first lazy trip by slow Lacerta. They came to the main rise within weeks, and they traversed the pass safely, at last to view the clean fenced farmlands that checkered the vision before the village. Redistributing themselves, Tinker rode the first wagon, Captain Mason the second. Tinker waved his hand above the high wagon boards to show the way, and they lurched across a small gravelled stream, up a slippery moss covered embankment, down slope for tens of kilometres, and finally to the foothills that would lead them along the far side of the cascading river opposite from the village.

Within the hour they came opposite the village stone bridge. Dense photons poured from thickets, scorching the ablatives covered hardwood. "Down," Tinker shouted before the driver reacted. As predicted, the distance was too great for the heavy cryos to seriously endanger the wagons, and their present path was unexpected. Jake Carter's crew had apparently already settled in the village and set the trap. One of four guards assigned to each wagon corner now shouted, "A straggly line working their way to the river's edge across from us, Captain."

The wagon's speed and distance away from the trap should have worked in their favour. However heavy mortar rounds sounded around them. Had those firing the mortars been even superficially trained in the over-under-on fire control technique, three shots would have finished them all. The explosives, deep, penetrating, with power to dent even the heaviest armour, fell about the two vehicles in wild waves. Some fell far up the foothills, and many fell short, creating water geysers. Gravel and mud scattered like buckshot, adding to the confusion.

Smoke and dust hid the deep holes blasted ahead of the first wagon, and the wagon plunged downward so steeply that not even its powerful fusion pak and large tyres could effect its removal.

Fibre ropes were thrown from the second wagon to the first, and the first wagon towed backward. The first wagon detoured around the hole, and again it plunged downward, this time more steeply. Tinker curled himself into a tight ball, even as the wagon cracked loudly, and the axle burst. The wooden door of the cab jammed. Two iron frames pinned Tinker inside beneath a v-shape.

"Galen's neck is broken," someone shouted from behind and inside the wagon.

The shuffle of gravel rolling down the pit ended with a thunderous roar against the cab door just as the driver and three troopers scrambled to the pit's lip. The odour of heavy explosives lay everywhere. The clatter of tripod legs against hardwood sounded, and then a piercing whistle signalled from the second wagon, indicating that its way was blocked, too.

"In here, help!" Tinker shouted, and then his laughter burst outward like a flighty songbird startling those above,



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bringing immediate aid.

Someone shouted, "Hold on!" A tripod leg shoved inside the cab window just above Tinker's neck, and the creak of wood at last signalled that the cab door was again open.

Tinker could not release himself from the framework that pinned him. Pressure and noise from a close round bloodied his nose. Suddenly the v-frame was released. He shot upward so fast he seemed to fly, and he shouted, "Thanks, Soldier." Within moments he'd kneed himself up the hole's slippery, gravelled sides.

Three men were struggling with heavy tripods trying to secure them at the side of one of the slippery mortar holes. Water had already begun to flow from underground, making the hole's bottom soggy and mud red. Captain Mason commanded, "Quick! Move out!" He and four others scrambled head first over the hole's edge.

"They got our driver," one trooper mumbled.

Heads down, mortar shells thundering everywhere, gravel spattering, Tinker respectfully suggested, "We don't have much chance with tripods against mortar at this range, do we, Captain?"

Streaked with mud, uniform scorched and torn, hair awry, sans cap, the Captain nodded agreement. "They'll learn how to use the ZB-1's soon. Didn't know they had 'em. Must have changed the manifest without our knowledge."

A close round shook the pit, and large boulders worked loose from the side, slipping and splashing into the growing pool of water. The remaining eight troopers had arranged themselves at approximately equal intervals along the perimeter of the blast cone. "In the wagons" — Tinker pointed — "anything useful?"

Captain Mason pulled the manifest from his muddied shirt. He ripped open the envelope and withdrew a cluster of multi-coloured duplicates: white, salmon, yellow, pink, and blue. "Small stuff," he said, reading the manifest and shaking his head.

"How many men did you estimate across the river?" Tinker asked. Already he had thrown off his shoes and was digging his bare toes into the mud, readying to push his way up the rim.

"About a hundred. We'll have to redistribute our men, unless I can think of something"

Tinker squinted through the growing haze. "The cabin?" he asked, "Is that where your men saw them?"

Another round exploded near them, and the blue-grey haze seemed to thicken, making the log cabin across the river more indistinct. The Captain called to one of his men, who slipped and slid until he reached them. This man answered Tinker's question and Tinker, satisfied, counted the glint of sun against steel through the haze, stretching every gladiator sense until he knew what was there and what was not. Then he asked, "The mortars? Anyone spot them?"

"No."

But Jakon's silent whisper came to Tinker: "*On the roof. Jake Carter's. And another behind the fourth building on our right, and again on the roof.*"

"*That's why they're having difficulty zeroing in,*" Tinker commented to Jakon, then, to the others, "I've got them spotted, Captain Mason. One on Jake's roof in the distance, and the other four buildings to the right, behind the store, probably across the street.

"Group your men to cover me," he ordered, and with an abrupt and explosive laughter that seemed to shake the alien trees across the river he was off, and before Captain Mason could agree or disagree, Tinker had already bounded into the nearest shell hole, then, sixteen metres forward, and twenty-four, and --.

Disdaining the tripods, the troopers now held the heavy cryo units against the lips of the ridge and balancing themselves by sheer muscle power, they poured withering heat and light back across the river, both to blind and to cover for Tinker.

Tinker's unexpected thrust across the badlands caught Jake's men by surprise. Again and again his diminutive figure leaped up and down, faster than human reflex could follow, and then he plunged headfirst into the stirring, muddy water. One heavy beam exploded steam not more than three metres from where he'd dived.

They would be expecting him now, and ready. He shot upward and out from an unexpected side, swimming beneath the roiled waters like an angry fish. He zagged once across the river, made another shallow dive, and swam beneath the water until he'd found a place frothy white with bubbles and steam. Waiting, he smiled, and held his



breath: One minute, two minutes, three minutes . . . six minutes . . . ten minutes. Enough! Struggling to contain his nervous laughter, he exploded from the river's near edge, and already raced toward black logs piled high near the river's bank.

Staying but a moment, he sprinted toward Jake Carter's cabin where, with nimble and practiced fingers and toes, he swiftly climbed to the roof top.

Those men now closest to Tinker were ordinary immigrants, and, at best, drunken woodsmen or roughnecks trained for the normal rough and tumbles. Then, too, they were fighting for fear of Jake rather than for something they wanted, unless they were one of those fighting for Jake's money, or position within his petty empire. None, of course, were trained gladiators, and certainly none with the speed of Tinker. So it was not at all surprising that Tinker was able to rush the mortar crew, two bearded men, with great success. One, in the process of loading the unfamiliar mortar, froze too long; his mouth opened wide, and the round burped gently, taking the man's arm and leaving a spurting stump.

Tinker caught the other still in the act of drawing his handbeamer, and roughly threw him from the roof top, as he soon did the injured man. Then, picking up the still smoking mortar, he whirled it round and round, finally releasing it, and it arced outward and splashed innocently in the river below.

Two explosives shivered the air and dirt geysered upward near the pinned troopers. They were finally getting the range. Tinker let loose his terrible laughter and searched through the thickening smoke for another mortar. "*There. On the roof across the street,*" Jakon whispered.

Quick as thought, Tinker scrambled down the outside of Jake's cabin again, almost landing on one who manned a heavy cryo unit. The other, also an ordinary frontiersman, was no match for the great gladiator, and within seconds Tinker clambered atop Jake's building again this time with the heavy unit at his shoulder. He set the controls for pinpoint and highest range.

There! One man at the mortar was down. A slight adjustment, and again, the second man was down. Taking final and careful aim, he adjusted the cryo unit to the mortar barrel. "*It's beginning to glow dull red,*" Tinker whispered to Jakon. Soon the barrel passed through bright yellow-red, and then to white, and the mortar slumped into a blackened lump, like old candle wax.

Tinker's laughter again rolled across rooftops, piercing the dense smoke and shaking the men below like a fever. There was none who had not heard of this wild unhuman Terran, and especially Jake Carter, who had the most to fear in that special sound.

At Tinker's wave, Captain Mason's men sprinted from both sides of the crater, forming a zig-zag line that, though sparse, was more effective than Jake's undisciplined mob. As their distance closed, their effective fire power increased. The troopers hid and fired, rolled and counterfired, and then hid again and again. Whereas Jake's men stood exposed or made other amateur blunders, such as grouping together. But now there were only seven troopers against perhaps seventy-five. . . .

And then there were only six....

Tinker spun from the opposite wall like a blinding tornado, where he killed one. He raged up and down the line, his laughter shaking the men as no amount of physical force might have done — and they broke, they panicked at last, throwing their positions open and scattering toward the town's far side. Each that turned to run induced another until all were in flight, none knowing that their's was the superior force.

Captain Mason's troopers at last charged the river, holding their heavy weapons above the water and firing them in automatic spurts. They pushed and shoved their way up the slippery embankment.

Tinker, now standing on a rooftop three buildings removed from Jake's, loosed again his special laughter, emptying the town building by building. A grenade landed too near him, and he was seen by all the troops to topple hard against the ground. His nose bled, and his head was lacerated; his eyes went unseeing as his hands clutched the dry dust at his face. Smoke and dust almost hid the tall man with the thin moustache with hand beamer raised who also crawled along the dust toward Tinker.

Captain Mason rounded the corner just as the tableau was set. He shot first. Jake jerked awkwardly, arms flying



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wildly, his skull pierced at close range.

XXVIII

“Absurd! Simply astounding!” General Estion muttered to himself while flipping through contingency plans. His distrust for Eemay long-distance planning had always been paramount; and he left liaison work with civilian riff-raff to subservients. Now this latest, a full scale attack against his men and wagons — well — *he* was in the best position to know what should be done, not only about such as Jake Carter, but also about the Sluks.

Finally, leaning back against the overpadded chair, and placing lean, clean finger tips together, as was his habit, he reviewed Eemay’s basic reasoning again.

Their first suspicion had come through an old miner, charred beyond recognition by his own carelessness, and sans arms and legs, and sight. The pathetic near- dead man, through the wonders of modern science, unconsciously divulged a surprising story having to do with air vents near vertical cliffs overlooking completely inaccessible rivers.

Ravings of a sickened man, some had said, especially when such places were not to be found.

The second report, General Estion reflected, had come from a well known but minor figure, a drunkard. He’d reported strange Sluk chambers filled with cold light, and a city either buried deeply beneath the mountains, or beneath the ordinary ground.

A drug-crazed mind, they’d said, especially when costly drillings and reverberation tests proved that the ground, like Earth’s, was not hollow.

His cherry red intercom light flashed. “There’s someone here at your order, General Estion. Special Forces emissary, with Captain Mason.”

“Thank you, Doctor Carrott,” he absentmindedly replied. “I’ll come down.”

When was the secrecy lid placed on collected data? Shortly after the tenth strange compilation? Port Authority pilot, distance 250 kilometres from Port, reported that his rotor suddenly shattered, and he was plunging like a stone. Almost as though a soft hand had tenderly touched it, the craft slowed and settled gently on the ground. Now what kind of force — or weapon — could do that?

The pilot, they’d said, was an accurate, reliable witness, who told the same story under — ah — medical persuasion.

But then flying saucers had been an ancient mythos that followed man from planet to planet for generations. Strange what a defective nervous structure can do to a man’s impressions of reality.

Then he, General Estion, had been brought in, and afterwards the secret Astairian Special Forces created. The end of a brilliant career, he’d thought, and still thought so. Well, Carter’s Enterprises farce was over. Thanks to the Special Forces agent with Captain Mason, they’d won a brilliant battle, according to Mason’s reports. And now — well — now — he’d be justified in putting the laser dot to Eemay’s long delusion....

“Ah, General Estion,” Dr. Carrott invited at the door. “Please come in. Meet our visitor.” The doctor pointed to a seemingly slightly built Terran, now only partially clad, with tangled and muddy black hair and blue eyes. Red and Eemay clothes dangled cut and torn the height of the dressing table. Tinker’s eyes lay closed.

“This trooper,” continued the barely facetious medical doctor — “seems to have remarkable healing ability — twice normal metabolism, but quite well balanced for him. Injuries to lungs, multiple contusions, other internal injuries, but some have apparently already healed during his short five hours from there to here — at least scar tissue is evident, and Captain Mason’s description of symptoms match — don’t know” — Doctor Carrott shook his head as though deeply puzzled — “thought you’d like to see for yourself.” He shoved X-ray pictures before the General’s face.

General Estion ignored the technical photographs to stare at Tinker. His brow furrowed deeply. “Strange. Face is vaguely familiar

“I’ll have the swelling down before long, General. Those head contusions are responding well. He’ll probably be fit for duty before very long.”

Somehow the General could not shake the Doctor’s bare touch of sarcasm, and that face? “Let me know as soon



as the man is fit to talk,” he ordered. And, “Captain Mason?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Come with me.”

They returned to the General’s office where the General explained to the fatigued Captain that the Astairian mission had been changed, and that he wanted complete security between base and the village, and a cordon of troopers surrounding the village, as well as guards along the route from Port to base.

“Encephaloguards, sir?”

“No, Captain. Expense. Earth wouldn’t send more than the one we use here.”

The Captain hesitated. Not at all privy to the workings of budget level, he feared that he might speak too much and show ignorance, but he was also afraid that if he did not speak about what he knew, he’d later be condemned for noncooperation.

“Well,” said the General, recognizing some conflict, “speak out. We can’t make mistakes.”

“Troops, General. We have thirty.”

“Oh yes,” General Estion answered matter of factly. “I’ve forwarded orders to Colonel Swink at Port Authority. He’s to supplement. They’ll be sending another Colonel and Major, too, but you’ll carry on ‘til they arrive.”

“Very good, General,” Captain Mason saluted, and was about to turn.

“There’s more, Captain. I want all Sluks rounded up and penned in the former Carter village. All Terrans will be placed under martial law by noon tomorrow, and you’ll conscript whatever necessary to build a stockade about the village.”

Captain Mason’s face changed colour from healthy red to ashen grey. “Doesn’t that mean we’ll be violating the agreement, sir?”

“Yes, Captain. For the security and well-being of Terrans.”

That was about as far as the lowly Captain dared question.

After five days had passed, Doctor Carrott approached General Estion uneasily. The General waved the Doctor to a chair, and continued thumbing through his meticulously written notes. Doctor Carrott apologetically explained that, “The Special Forces trooper is miraculously healed, and ready for return to duty.”

General Estion did not respond.

“Ah— General— his name is Tinker Bikiss, the same interloper that we had under questioning “

The General, terribly busy with details in the development of his new military regime on Astair, and consolidation of his power, was annoyed. He looked up, tapping his pencil against the desk nervously. “What did you expect of me, Doctor?”

“Well, General, I thought you’d.”

“He came from the ship, didn’t he?”

“Yes, General, but --”

“He was in uniform? He saved the day for Captain Mason?”

“But --”

The General waved dismissal. “He must have been operating under cover, and now he’s in the open. Take him off sedation at once and send him to me.”

The doctor was about to speak again, but General Estion added, “Besides, *everything is* under martial law now Understand, Doctor Carrott?”

Tinker’s temper, usually calm and professional, bristled at the edges of irritability. Only light skin bruises showed above his left eye and left cheek, but his blue eyes remained blood red. He flexed unused muscles, noting the weakness.

“So,” General Estion good naturedly mused, “The one known as Tinker Bikiss is one of us. Special Forces?”

Tinker was about to answer, but was waved to silence by the over busy General.



“I’ve got new orders for you during our emergency.”

“Sorry, General,” Tinker responded most quickly. His trill of laughter choked off, and his blue eyes, banded by red threaded veins, bored deeply into the General’s grey eyes. “I’m not a trooper. Special Forces uses Eemay cover, not the other way about, as you should know.”

“*Careful Tinker,*” Jakon Wy wryly cautioned.

The General, normally a commander of men, was more puffed than normal by his self-assumed authority. His stare hard, cold, flat preceded, “Since four days ago, noon, Astair time, you’ve been under complete military rule — all civilians were automatically conscripted. You’re a trooper now.”

Tinker brazenly outstared the pompous one, and they seemed to dart sparks between them. Tinker’s eyes laughed, even as his mouth and throat and lips, and that gestalt triggered a fierce anger. The General’s voice, now harsh like a roughened whip, rose: “Mr. Bikiss. I’ll have no further interference with my post, from Special Forces or anyone else. Before you leave this post to work with the stockade riff-raff, you’ll explain in writing, in detail mind you, exactly why you’ve entered the storage warehouses several times, creating therein destruction and sowing dissent and confusion. Also why you’ve done these things out of uniform and without proper clearance in advance from me.”

Tinker, only smiling, unconcernedly shook his head in the Terran negative.

The General’s ire grew: “Furthermore, starting now, you’ll speak respectfully to superior officers as befits your new rank of private, saying *Sir* and *General*, and you’ll also begin by explaining just what the hell you’ve come back to Astair for, and why?”

Tinker chortled again, the sound rebounding from close walls like pebbles spat from a gun, enraging the General nearly beyond control. Just as the General’s hand reached for the intercom button, Tinker said most quietly, “General, if you can make a soldier of me, you’re welcome to use me on the stockades. But you should first know that there’s but one thing I’ve come back to do. I’ve seen and experienced the secret Sluk society — their cities and their technological devices, and I know some of their citizens — well — intimately

“As an agent for Special Forces, I’ve gained their confidence. On their behalf I may make trade of certain valuable items in return for certain Terran knowledge, skills and equipment.”

The General’s face, already pink, turned dark red with a blush of purple, and his fists clenched into rough cylinders of destruction. “Liar!” His fists drained white from their pressure against the desk.

“Captain Mason on radio again, General,” the secretary primly announced over the intercom.

“*I told you it wouldn’t work on the General,*” Jakon secretly whispered.

“Put him on,” shouted the highly irate General, now clenching jaw to jaw.

“*It is the game; we’ll try another way,*” Tinker mentally shrugged.

“General,” Captain Mason’s worried voice sounded, “there’s no Sluks to round up. A most unusual thing.”

“The village, you idiot. They’ve got shops.”

The Captain paused, then, most conciliatory in his manner, “We’ve checked for two days, sir. None have been seen since Jake’s revolt.”

Tinker, amused, chuckled again.

“Traitor!” General Estion shouted, “You’ve --”

Since the General was looking at Tinker, he responded, saying, “You forget, General. I’ve been under heavy sedation. Wasn’t your order and consolidation given during that period?”

“Radios! Miniature snoops.”

“Come again, General. Aren’t you reaching for spider webs? Are you or are you not authorized to speak for Terra on the Sluk matter?”

“Yes. Of course,” growled Estion.

“Fine. Then I want you to pass on the trade offer that the Sluks make, through me. You can send the message back addressed to General Thompson, Special Forces, Headquarters, Eemay, Terra. I’ll give you the call numbers.”

The General, unmoved, glared and said nothing.



“The Sluks want to trade knowledge on the whereabouts of a whole, viable Terran-like planet, unpopulated, for certain biological skills, knowledge, and equipment.”

“General Estion,” Captain Mason’s voice reprovingly said. “I can’t think of anything I’ve done to deserve the label of traitor. Will you please explain?”

“Not you, you idiot,” the General shouted through the intercom. “I’ll recontact shortly.” He turned the instrument off.

Clenching and unclenching white fists, the General waited, and so did Tinker. Then Tinker added, “Come, General. You know that knowledge of an Earth-like planet is more prized than a thousand Eemay troops. You can’t afford not to investigate my offer, as Sluk mediator.”

At last the General had decided. He depressed the intercom switch, saying, “Sergeant. Private Tinker Bikiss is about to leave my office. When he does, you’ll place him under arrest for treason. If he resists in any way, he is to be shot at once. Understand?”

Generals, though mighty, are not always perfect. Neither are they expected to follow up on their own orders, leaving such details to Colonels and Majors and such. The Sergeant outside the door, better fit for paperwork and serving out his duty time on Astair, rather than the fighting end of Astair, was also fat and dumpy. His aggressiveness index might have been rated close to zero. “I’ve been told to arrest you, sir,” his thin voice apologetically explained to Tinker.

“Fine, Sergeant. Please lead the way,” Tinker motioned with his hand.

“*Can you contact Llenka la, again, my friend?*” Tinker asked of Jakon Wy.

Jakon mentally assured him. They’d reached the stairwell, and Tinker still smiling to the Sergeant, again indicated he’d follow.

It’s time for force, but adroitly, and in its proper place. My original plan called for persuasion and reason, but you can see how the General is more interested in self-aggrandizement; and he now takes Terran authority into his hands.”

Jakon Wy passed along the message, saying, “*It is done, friend Tinker, but they wonder. Aren’t you about to bring the very confrontation we’ve so long avoided?*”

Having reached the cell, Tinker almost lazily reached out and tugged the portly trooper inside, where quietly and efficiently, he was bound and gagged with his own clothing. Tinker clanged shut the door, and strode off, still attired in his newly issued Red and Blue. “*Not directly. I may need only certain items. Pass the word to Llenka la. It depends on my words with Captain Mason.*”

XXIX

Though they were not privy to its purpose, surviving Carter men sweated in building the new stockade. Troopers fanned throughout the valleys and rivers, up mountain sides, through forests of strange design and fierce repute, in search of men — and the others, those aliens, those Sluks who had invited mankind to rest here on Astair, those who had the effrontery to build their Trojan Horse so openly. Little by little stragglers trailed in — one, two Terrans at a time, sometimes in bandages, sometimes on wooden slabs. But at no time was one Sluk discovered and brought forth.

Captain Mason greeted Tinker with a sense of relief. Tinker, smiling broadly, tossing his coal black hair above his eyes, explained the General’s duplicity.

“I wondered,” Captain Mason frowned. Neither did he question Tinker’s duplicity, for hadn’t the man, at great personal risk, saved his life for his troopers, and won the day with Jake Carter’s revolt? “General Estion’s orders seemed so in violation of our original agreement with the Sluks — ”

Behind them men levered huge, black logs into holes, and the ring of axe against hardwood and the buzz of saw clambered to be heard.

“Can the General be stopped?” Tinker asked.

“I can’t — the General’s got control over communications to Port Authority and — well — a Captain is — just nobody at all when compared against a — General. My word would not be taken.”



Tinker laid his hand on the other's arm. "If the General were missing, Captain, would you be the ranking officer?"
"Yes. But --," Captain Mason looked squarely into Tinker's steady eyes, "—I won't do anything illegal. He's already called for replacement of a Colonel and Major from Port Authority. They'll be here within a day. Then — well — there's the matter of military law which the General promulgated. No soldier dares — mutiny!"

Wanting badly to co-operate, but failing to see how, Captain Mason added, "I *have* been given complete discretion over the number of troopers to draw from Port Authority until the new officers arrive"

They shook hands at the bridge. Tinker said, "You'll hear from me, Captain. I want to check out the rumour that the General is missing." He suppressed a giggle.

"*You know what must be done,*" Tinker reminded Jakon.

"Oh, and one more thing Captain Mason." Tinker walked back over the bridge. "Will you check to find a certain Timeby among your crew?"

Captain Mason indeed did find Timeby, bare chested, covered with red and brown mud and sweat. Black sawdust clung to the gladiator's trouser legs dried like old blood. Timeby wiped his brow and looked quizzically to Tinker, who laughed at the sight, saying, "Don't be surprised, friend Timeby. There is the saying from the pits. You know. Friend one day, foe the next — and today is our day for friendship."

Timeby relaxed, his dark, stern face barely bordered with the trace of a smile.

"We've got a job to do, you and I, and — ah, thanks Captain Mason," Tinker waved to the officer and prodded Timeby across the bridge.

Somehow the Colonel and Major never arrived. Their helicopter had taken off in time, but then, under the exigencies of military rule, no one could be expected to follow the helicopter with another, could they? And especially since there was only one helicopter in the first place.

"*They are down and on foot many kilometres distant,*" Llenka Ja advised Jakon Wy, who in turn advised Tinker.

The sun had ballooned itself and turned pink-red by the time Tinker reached the agreed rendezvous. A brown, leathery bag, bulky and large, lay across his Lacerta. Now and then Tinker looked it over, checked the ties, repositioned it, and sometimes he even talked to it. He had no desire to harm the General.

"*We've bagged a General,*" Tinker once punned to Jakon.

An hour later and between two steep cliffs beside a cool, gurgling stream, Tinker turned the awkward package over to the waiting Timeby, and also instructed the ex-gladiator on how to find the remote Lemmey Joe's.

"*By Terran rules,*" Tinker explained to Jakon Wy, "*Captain Mason is Commander.*"

"*Then it's time to let him know,*" Jakon chided.

XXX

General Thompson, all spruced in royal Eemay blue and red, four shining stars holding together his lanky shoulders, stepped lively from the rocket servicing platform. He greeted Tinker with a veneer of friendship, saying, "Had the message not been verifiably yours, and had it not also promised fabulous wealth, an Earth-like planet — well"

Tinker introduced Captain Mason, who noticeably stared at Thompson's bright, new stars.

"Yes. They're real. No cover. Your message stirred the government as nothing else might have — but I'm warning you, Tinker. Anything less than a whole planet and your life is forfeit." He refused another word as they marched stiffly to Port Authority's private offices.

General Thompson commandeered the ranking Colonel's office. He seated himself and at once folded hands together on his lap, sternly saying, "All right. Start explaining. Begin with the defective equipment at the hospital. Your doing, wasn't it?"

Tinker smiled broadly. "Yes."

"Why?" Thompson's eyes remained uncompromising.

"I couldn't permit certain experiences to be extracted because the knowledge might have been dangerous to



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Terra.”

“Can’t accept. Explain!”

“I’ve information for which I was built. Sluks *are* an ancient race. They were already ancient when man was crawling from the ooze. They *do* have skills and knowledge both advanced and extraordinarily different from man’s. Through friendship on *Trippert’s Planet*, I am now as much Sluk as I was ever a Terran — and” — Tinker waved away Thompson’s next question — “don’t ask me to explain.”

Almost casually — though Tinker noticed — General Thompson’s right hand strayed to his coat pocket, and he frowned. “Sell out?”

Tinker’s chuckle, obviously suppressed, met his old mentor’s eyes as openly as did his blue eyes. “No.”

Though General Thompson seemed to relax, Tinker could tell he was yet wary. “The knowledge you’ve accumulated would be dangerous to us? Right?”

“Yes.”

“Danger from who? Sluks?”

“No.”

“Man himself?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm. Accepting that for a moment, and aside from the fact that you are not the one to judge, where is the Earth-like planet for which Sluks intend to receive biological skills, knowledge and equipments?”

“Sorry. Can’t tell until the trade.”

“Well” — Thompson shook his head, a very faint smile touched his grim lips — “if this is a trick, you couldn’t have picked better bait. Tempting, of course.” Deliberating, he turned to Captain Mason. “You should know that I’ve complete authority over Astair because of this bait. Is it still under this — unilaterally — ah — misdeclared martial law?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right.” Thompson turned back to Tinker. “Let’s get to the point. If Sluks are hiding, and in fact if they do have a superior culture and science, why do they need anything from us?”

“They aren’t superior in all things. They’ve overspecialized in aspects of — well — regions of reality that Terrans are not. Mostly of the mind, and how it works, and other things.

General Thompson’s frown may have been play acting, but it was pronounced. “Biology is basic to mind, isn’t it? How can they do one without the other?”

“As you should know, Thompson, I’m not trained in either, but I know, and you know, that there can be different specialities, different hierarchies of knowledge that spring from the same matter. You’ll have to take my word —”

“Sorry! Not good enough. Even a child could have spotted that basic error in reasoning. Mind doesn’t exist without matter.”

“It —”

“But,” and the General spread out his fingers, “your bait is big.”

Tinker remained silent.

“How do we resolve the conflict, Tinker?”

Tinker waited.

“Oh, it isn’t that the plan is a complete loss, I suppose,” General Thompson stated sarcastically, waving his hand about the office. “General Estion was out of order — but it’s hardly likely that his action could create much stir back on Earth, now, is it? He *was* tops in his field, hardly to be questioned, especially against a —”

“Say it, Thompson,” Tinker smiled. “An android of Earth’s own creation.”

The General nodded. “And cost? We’ve spent more than a thousand trillion mass-dollars in building up fortifications here, and laying the foundation for contingency plans.” He turned back to the quiet Captain. “Do you, Mason, believe that Terra compiled all that just for fun?”



© Captain Mason, of course, could only blanche.

Jakon supplied the alternative. *“We’ll take him to the city, friend Tinker. The General has stubborn Terran logic on his side.”*

Even stubborn Terran logic had to give, making room for new postulates, once the nature of the forces controlled by the Sluks came visible to General Thompson. He abruptly realized that Earth was simply not in the same league, nor was the labouring and pompous Eemay, nor the full might of Earth and all of her arsenals.

Tinker explained that, “Apparently the knowledge that mind and body are one is perfectly valid for certain kinds of science and knowledge, but is not the entire truth. The Sluk need for a full-blown technology of biology is urgent, General Thompson, and they are prepared to trade. But, in all honesty, would Earth handle everything you see?”

The city still stood out in glorious splendour of many colours. Tubes of energy seemed to waft them from place to place with the greatest of ease. For the sake of conviction, a fusion bomb was exploded in a specially designed container and no raise of temperature permeated, no particle escaped, no excess energy endangered even the tiniest.

Though General Thompson was permitted tests by Earth’s scientists for conviction’s sake, it took no team of brilliant scientists with all of their devices and books and computers and inferences to know and to see and to experience what the General knew. And biology? A single branch of human knowledge sitting as a gnat to an elephant compared to the Sluk’s various achievements, and still the General had not seen the base of the iceberg.

Yet for all of this, the Sluks were dreadfully lopsided, having perused life and its meaning and philosophy and its goal, and soul and its independences with a fanatic passion, leaving aside the golden vessel that had grown and nurtured the spirit from the start.

Now it was the vessel that the Sluk’s urgently needed. Was General Thompson convinced?

“As I understand the arrangements,” said Thompson at last to Pacer Re, “we’re to provide biological assistance: knowledge, skills, geneticists, biologists, complete laboratories, production people—in return for the location of the Earth-like planet?”

“That’s correct,” Pacer Re whispered. Surrounding him all about the stone room were those who, like himself, dressed in grey, or black, or sandy red robes, each according to station.

“Suppose we find the planet ourselves?”

“We assure you, General. You won’t.”

“All right,” Thompson nodded. “It sounds fair. But mass? Your request calls upon us to produce items that will cost unthinkably huge mass—our people, Terrans, must work a lifetime simply to repay that mass-cost.”

“We’ll take responsibility for shipment of materials, General.”

Tinker’s discerning vision caught the General’s hand; he could almost hear Thompson’s mind: *“What a boon for Earth! Sluk ships!”*

And Pacer Re, as though no hidden conflict had surfaced, announced, “Spaceships that were constructed thousands of years ago. Different principles. No mass-cost.” Then his yellow-brown gourd-like head riffled as he leaned forward. “I’m sorry,” he explained most gently, “I’m truly sorry, General Thompson. That knowledge is not, and will not be given out. It would only create frustration, animosity, and anxiety between us.”

“But you’ve permitted many Sluks to ship out with us as indentureds, or gladiators. Why, if you have such command of space?” It was both a question and an accusation.

Pacer Re’s head fibrillated more rapidly. “In time, perhaps, yes. Meanwhile you and I must talk only trade, General. The gladiators, the indentureds? We had to know of your culture, General, just as your creation of Tinker, here, was to learn of ours. But again, in time, perhaps, yes.”

“But such ships! They presuppose the final end to our costly space programmes! It could free millions upon millions from virtual economic slavery, could open up the universe——” Thompson pleaded.

“I am—truly—sorry—General. Tinker Bikiss assures me that you are honourable. We’ve therefore dealt honestly with you, but what you’ve seen and what we’ve explained are not to be open knowledge for many of your generations. They must not be.” Pacer Re looked sadly about the room. “Yes! We’ve sent out valued members to



mingle with Terrans, just as you did Tinker. Intent? Same as yours. To study, to learn. Especially to find common grounds, fairly.

“And yes! Terrans will receive our technology one day, all of it. Tinker will guarantee—rather, he will be the guaranty of that—though he but guesses as to how

In one final burst, the General’s raised voice demanded, “The ships will not pass on Earth, you must—”

“No.” Pacer Re shook his excited head in the Terran negative. “All of our ships will be disguised as Terran, and will apparently be manned by Terrans.”

After that General Thompson’s features might have come from cold chiselled marble as smoothly polished as were the stoneways inside Sluk passageways. Few would have understood why his natural good humour had departed him, or why his attitude toward life had suddenly become overly serious, or why his features never stayed bright again.

Some men achieve such a state of unhappy mind after long and great physical trials, or after surviving the torments of some hell, or the rejection of long and beloved friendships. General Thompson, instinctively an idealist in his fight for bettering humanity, had seen the solution to Terra’s big sore, and would not be permitted to apply same. So, saddened beyond describable words, he looked into Pacer Re’s tiny black eyes and said, “All right. I suppose you’ll want us to ship all of our people off of Astair as part of the trade package?”

“No.”

“What! After what we’ve done? You’ll need room, yourselves.”

“Not so,” Pacer Re whispered. “As to the Terran army and your General Estion—it is nothing. He might have hurt his own people, but not through us.

“We’ve gained—we’ve learned your psychology. Jakon Wy—a friend—a former friend of Tinker Bikiss, for example, lived among Terrans under stress as a gladiator, and so have others.

“We *are* an ancient race, General Thompson, and even these bodies we’ve temporarily clothed ourselves in—these animals that you call Sluks—well, had we chosen, your Terran army and all of your costly supplies might have disappeared overnight, and“

“I’ll concede your strength, but I fail to understand why you’ll permit us Astair?”

“That will probably always puzzle you, General. I’m sorry.”

XXXI

They chose a new and delightful homesite, a place of beauty filled with mountain peaks that seemed to hold up the sky, snowcapped and browned and furred at the dress line with green-purple trees, and the mountains bottomed with rushing, cool, clear waters and pleasant grasses and flowers of many hues.

Tinker gazed fondly at the curve of her, her long golden hair, the deep blue of her round and innocent eyes, and he loved every firm centimetre of her, as he touched the softness of her skin that he knew could abruptly harden to near Lacerta hide, should the need arise.

She laughed a sound that carried over their new valley and echoed from friendly canyons, and Tinker’s laughter followed, echo to echo, man to woman.

Hand in hand they climbed the barren trail, letting the yellowish sun bathe their bare skins, and the cool, sweet scented breezes clothe them.

Pacer Re strode beside them, still green-leafed, gourd-headed, a waddling figure when compared against the two lithesome Terran androids.

“It is a Trojan Horse amidst my species,” banded Tinker, almost seriously. “Terrans did not expect their knowledge to produce more bodies like mine.”

Pacer Re could not laugh aloud, but Tinker recognized the meaning of his soft whisper. “No, friend, Tinker. Not Trojan Horses. You and your mate’s laughter stand out everywhere, making some shudder, some shrink, some into new fellowships—and the abnormal swiftness—it identifies you for what you are—androids—manufactured beings—created in the image of a Terran from their biology.”



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® At the summit, where Pacer Returned to leave them, they all looked down into the next fold where the path wound crooked, ending suddenly before a stone chamber built lately into a stern cliffside.

The first synthetic body, Tinker's mate, had rolled from the assembly line within a year of the new agreement.

Hand in hand Tinker paused to answer Pacer Re, saying "Jakon knows my meaning. Not the athlete's body, nor the urge to nervous laughter—the Sluk's mind."

She responded, pressing herself close to him with free, clean arms, and they kissed, drinking deeply of one another Tinker, and his mate-pair, Jakon Wy.