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FAIR and WARMER

By E. G. von Wald

Tensor gazed helplessly at the fine mist sifting down from a hazy, violet sky. "I told you I was having these spells."

"But Great Oxy," the administrator sputtered, "can't you control yourself?"

"I can't help it, Ruut," Tensor replied. "I just feel sort of funny and—and—"

Ruut's hyperimage was chewing on its illusory lip. "Well, you've got to stop it. Do you understand? There'll be a lot of lichens and things growing all over the Prime's beautiful landscapes if this keeps up."

The administrator's concern amused Tensor and, as his mood lightened, the drizzle abated and the sky became clear again.

"I'm sorry," he apologized sincerely. "But I just seem to be having trouble lately. Ever since the aliens came."

"Oh, come now, son," Ruut chortled with assumed heartiness. "That's elementary somatics. Just get a grip on yourself."

"Yes sir."

"Perhaps you've been working, or exerting yourself in some other foolish way. Maybe you're tired and should take something."

The long, scrawny citizen gazed disconsolately at the beautiful violet sky, his face relaxed and soleful. He sighed and murmured, "Frankly, Ruut, I just don't seem to give a damn anymore."

On the other side of the planet, Ruut gulped convulsively. His eyes bulged out with thoroughly uncivilized amazement.

"Get out of consciousness immediately," he ordered hoarsely. "Take a nego shot, if necessary. Take one anyway. We can't take chances." The administrator's hyperimage, with calculated angry expression, glared sternly into Tensor's mind. "Did you understand me?"

"Yes sir," Tensor murmured. A vague unpleasantness began stirring in his stomach as he contemplated Ruut's thought. The administrator was absolutely right. Civilization simply could not tolerate an unhappy, uncooperative citizen. The general satisfaction of all was so clearly the responsibility of each individual, and one careless man could ruin it for everybody. Very much as he had been doing.

Obediently he nodded. Concealing his embarrassment at the artificiality of the act, he permitted the hyperimage to watch while he administered the chemical.

"Good." Ruut became calm at once, now that he was certain he could command the situation. "I'll have the physician examine you before that wears off." He hesitated and said even more mildly. "I hope this is just a passing thing, Tensor. You know I'll do everything I can for you, even teleporting to your focus. But you're a weather sensitive, and that's a pretty common classification. And you know the Council."

Tensor indicated lazy assent. As the drug took hold, he slipped soothingly into unconsciousness, and the hyperimage flickered and vanished with his powers. His last emotion was one of a vague relief that he would not have to look at the low caste face of an administrator for a while.

Tensor's melancholia threatened to disturb the entire citizenry, and that was most uncivil! So—if these peculiar aliens caused him this distress, by provoking his intellectual curiosity, the remedy was for him to investigate them to his complete satisfaction.... Thus, in this manner, did Tensor get well—and did he learn a bit too....

He floated in his focus, idly and uninterestedly contemplating the deep violet far above. A few minutes before, he had been stirred to an elusive and incomprehensible wistfulness which had been, in some way, connected with the aliens. While waiting for the physician, he pondered the brief glimpse he had got of them before the Council clamped down its screen and privacy orders. Now, under the emotionless pseudoconsciousness of the nego, it seemed strange that he could have been interested in those futile and primitive beings. Practically nothing was known about them, because they could not communicate.

Tensor studied the question briefly. There was no answer available in the paucity of information, so he dismissed it without further interest. Insufficient data. Therefore, insoluble problem. Therefore, forget about it.

He continued to stare at the sky, unconsciously and vacantly waiting.

He felt the itch. It was a slight stimulation of his medulary region, indicating somebody's desire to communicate with him. That, however, was impossible at the moment. The only faculties of significance remaining in his neutral somatic state were those which were absolutely necessary for civilized life—levitation to avoid being disturbed by gravity, the focus for personal privacy, the construction of food. Communication was not one of those, so the itch would just have to remain. Tensor contemplated an eternity with the medulary itch without the slightest concern.

Abruptly the itch stopped and Curl was there, looking exhausted, as was the polite fashion, since teleporting oneself was commonly regarded as tiring.

"You've taken nego," the physician murmured aloud, half accusingly.

"Yes sir," Tensor replied, using similar sound patterns. "Ruut ordered me to."

"What in Oxy for?"

"He did not like my attitude."

The physician considered the information, and while he did so, Ruut popped into existence beside him, a most uncivilized look of worry on his face.

"How is he, Curl? What have you found out?"

"No need for excitement, my dear administrator," the physician replied evenly, politely avoiding comment on Ruut's crude, low caste self control. "I just got here. Thanks to your order to the young man to fill himself up with nego, he was unable to let me project a hyperimage."

"But the situation was dangerous. Did you examine him? Did he tell you what he said to me?"

Curl glanced at him, and then quickly sent probing thoughts at Tensor's mind and body. After a moment, he gave it up, shaking his head. "The nego won't let him communicate at all. I'll have to order him to administer an antidote to himself."

"No!" Ruut almost shouted. "It's dangerous." He rapidly gave an oral and somewhat horrified account of his earlier communication with Tensor.

"All right," the physician grudgingly admitted. "I'll try to do it superficially. But it's difficult. It's awfully hard to know what's going on in his body from just looking at it and listening to him talk."

He turned to Tensor. "How long have you been having these—er, spurious moods?"

"About six months."

"Are you having any other troubles?"

"No sir. It's just the simple things, like the weather, that seem to be affected."

"I see. Melancholia." Curl frowned thoughtfully. "These moods come unwillingly, is that it? And they don't go away entirely when you shift your endocrine balance?"

"I'm not so sure about that endocrine shift, sir," Tensor stated emotionlessly.

"You mean—" Curl stopped incredulously. He shook his head as he comprehended. "Great Iso Oxy!"

"What is it?" Ruut asked in a hushed voice.

"This is deeper than I thought, Ruut. You did very well to put him under nego. The man can't control his endocrine system properly."

"Well do something," Ruut demanded. "Don't just float there."

"All I can do," Curl said, raising his voice exactly one decibel to show his irritation, "is give advice. Obviously, in his condition, the man can't follow it."

Ruut gazed unhappily at his friend. He was in authority over Tensor, and therefore far inferior in native gifts. Now it seemed that Tensor was regressing in some obscure way to his own level, a tragic and uncivilized situation.

"This has happened before," Curl admitted. "But I can't quite remember when." He sighed resignedly. "I guess I'll have to teleport again. Somebody probably remembers."

He disappeared for a few minutes and returned again, face beaming despite the fatigue.

"Oh yes," he said cheerfully. "Now I know."

Tensor stared at him with uninterested eyes.

"The man is dying," Curl explained with satisfaction.

"Dying?" Ruut murmured incredulously. "But that's impossible unless the Council orders him to destroy himself. Why—why that would make him just like an animal."

"That's what it is," Curl insisted.

Ordinarily, Tensor would have been somewhat interested to know about this strange process that was taking place within his body, but the nego kept his mind dull and unconcerned. He did not even question for reasons.

Ruut, however, did, and the physician happily explained. "You just have never been concerned with these rare symptoms, my dear administrator. You see, actually we are animals in a sense. We don't die like them, but if we are not in a focus we could be killed through some accidental injury. The principal difference between us and the small animals that occasionally cause Prime

trouble with his landscaping is control. They have no control over their endocrine systems. We have."

"Of course," Ruut said. "I know that."

"Ah, but perhaps you don't know that our race at one time had no more control over our endocrine systems than those little animals.

"There are a lot of ways to account for the change, and it makes very fascinating discussion because it's absolutely unimportant. However, under such conditions, a human being would automatically reach a certain stable level of development. But then, after an incredibly short time, the essential chaos within its body due to lack of endocrine control causes it to deteriorate. Eventually it is no longer capable of sustaining life and it dies."

The physician moved his hands in an awkward but eloquent gesture. "And that's all there is to it."

"Oh," Ruut murmured in an awed tone, not even comprehending the extent of the disease but trying to accept the staggering idea of natural death. "Can't you do anything for him?"

Curl turned his attention casually back to the sick man again. "Possibly. Dying, of course, is not a disease in itself, but merely a symptom of one." He shook his head. "I certainly wish I could examine him directly without getting involved in a major social crisis."

"Oh, Prime would be furious," Ruut warned.

"No doubt. Well—he said that this started six months ago. Now what could have happened six months ago?"

"The aliens," Ruut said flatly. "That's what caused it."

"Oh, come now, Ruut," Curl said amusedly. "Don't be superstitious. What connection could these—these aliens possibly have?"

"Well, that's when the Council clamped down on them. Something funny about the way they did that, too."

"Not at all funny," Curl told him in a superior tone of voice. "It is simply that the aliens appeared to be of a higher type of animal class without communication. Surely you wouldn't want to have anything to do with such contradictory beings."

"Of course not. But Tensor got sick right after he visited them."

"He went to visit them?" Curl was pensive a moment, and his eyes lighted up. "In that case, Ruut, there may be some connection after all."

Ruut nodded without speaking.

"Tensor," Curl said thoughtfully, "did you actually go to inspect the savages?"

"Yes sir."

"When?"

"Just before the Council stopped it."

"Uh huh. Did you have a reaction?"

Tensor considered. He recalled every detail of the fleeting impressions that had been his during the few brief moments of his presence near the peculiar organisms. The impressions were confused and mingled with sensations of teleport fatigue, but there was a definite and strange sentiment involved somewhere.

"Yer, sir," he said woodenly. "There seems to have been a reaction."

"Ha!" The physician glanced significantly at Ruut. "What kind of a reaction, Tensor? And how strong was it?"

"I do not recognize it, sir. But it was stronger than the ordinary ones."

Curl floated over close to him, peering intently up into the unconscious man's eyes. "Tell me the characteristics."

Tensor thought a moment and replied, "Chaotic in one sense. Specific in another."

"Speculative?" Curl's eyes were eager with interest.

"Yes sir. I believe that would define it best. It was a sort of wild and ungovernable desire to speculate on the origin of the aliens. A very singular experience," he added.

"I knew it!" Curl almost shouted. Then he quickly glanced about and composed himself stiffly. That was an embarrassing thing to do. In front of an administrator, too.

"Very well," he said. "That confirms my diagnosis. I shall report it to the Council and let them decide what to do."

"What is it?" Ruut asked.

"A very strange disease. Rare, too. I haven't had a case of it for centuries." He paused and shook his head. "Too bad. I don't recall a single recovery from it once it got a good start."

"It is—contagious?" Ruut asked timidly.

"Oh, not for you," Curl smiled. "It's called intellectual curiosity, and it requires somewhat more brain power than you have."

"Thank Oxy for that," Ruut breathed fervently. His eyes went back to the recumbent form of the diseased citizen.

"Yes. The Council will dearly love this." Curl said with satisfaction. "Most unusual. He'll have to be destroyed, of course."

"But can't you do anything for it?"

"Not likely. You see, it's the only appetite of which we are capable that can't be controlled by shifting endocrine balance. Ordinarily, our civilized manner of living prevents it from being aroused—that's the advantage of being civilized. Because, once the appetite shows up, it simply must be satisfied, or it's apt to do all sorts of poisonous things to you, as you can see. The trouble is, satisfying curiosity generally involves at least some work, and what civilized man is going to get himself involved with anything like that?"

"Insidious," Ruut whispered.

Curl turned away, but then hesitated and glanced back. "Still, since it concerns the aliens—" He frowned pensively. "There is a scheme we've never tried before that would probably cure him. I remember somebody mentioned it about eight hundred years ago, and we decided to try it out on the next case. Never did, though. Nobody was interested. It's sort of uncivilized, but I'll bring it up and see what the Council thinks."

He nodded shortly, and evacuated to his own focus.

"Well, my boy," Ruut said to Tensor. "I'm going to miss you."

"There is no need to concern yourself over me, sir," Tensor replied unemotionally. "It does not bother me in the slightest."

Ruut knew that to be the truth, but it made him feel sad to think of such a highly civilized man as Tensor falling to a level that was even below an administrator. Abruptly, he caught himself and readjusted the endocrine balance in his own body to compensate for the character of his thought, and the moody spell passed.

He left, and Tensor continued to stare unconsciously at the brilliant, deep violet of the sky, noting without appreciation the jewel-like points of light that were the stars.

The nego had to be recomposed twice in his body before Curl returned, his long, unkempt, black beard floating gently around his ears.

"Tensor," he said gravely, "the Council has acted. It has been decided not to order you to destroy yourself immediately, because I managed to convince them that it would be interesting to try that old scheme I told you about. I hope you don't mind."

Naturally there was no reply from Tensor. In his emotionless state, he did not care one way or the other. He waited.

"At any rate," the physician continued, "what they did was order you to satisfy this curiosity that is causing all your trouble.

"The reason, of course, isn't that the Council is interested in your cure. But they do desire some coherent information about the aliens. And since it is unlikely that anyone will ever volunteer to take the trouble to investigate them on their own initiative, they felt your illness a satisfactory excuse for requiring you to make the investigation."

"Yes sir."

Curl sighed. It was monotonous, this trying to carry on a conversation with an unconscious man. However, it was his duty as a physician, and he had promised the Council. One thing he was sure of, though, and that was never again to get involved in teleporting himself about the planet like this on any account. He would send an assistant. Provided he could find one.

"The Council would like a report when you get back. Do you think you can control yourself if you know that you are going to investigate the aliens whether you like it or not?"

"I guess so, sir," Tensor replied without interest.

"Splendid. I'll return to my own focus and give you the privacy for administering the antidote."

Tensor waited. When the physician was gone, he constructed the chemical in the vein of his left wrist, and in less than a minute he felt the surging pleasure of his re-awakened faculties. He glanced doubtfully at the sky, but it remained clear.

Curl's hyperimage began forming in his mind. "Everything all right now?" the physician inquired genially.

"Perfect," replied Tensor contentedly. "This won't be so bad, even if it is useful work. Maybe I'm just a little peculiar."

"Ha, ha," Curl replied noncommittally.

"Oh, one thing further. What about the privacy screen set up around the aliens?"

"That was dropped months ago," Curl laughed. "Can you imagine the Council sustaining anything like that for long?"

"It doesn't require any effort."

"Yes, but it looks like it ought to, and you know how that affects a civilized man. You can go any time you like."

Tensor nodded and withdrew.

Abruptly, he was hovering over the delightful green-and-orange-streaked sands of the central landscape. This was one of Prime's favorites, and the network of drainage channels was the most effective on the planet. Tensor approved. It really was beautiful.

He gazed around, pleasurably appreciating the esthetic beauty of the colorful, arid scene.

Then he saw the aliens. That was astonishing, he thought. The aliens were known to have grouped on the other side of the planet, and he had intended to do some sightseeing on the way around. Now two of them were here. Most unpredictable. They were standing near the horizon, apparently examining one of the channels.

Tensor moved toward them slowly, sending futile probes for their minds and finding, as before, nothing but chaotic splashes. It was really unfortunate that they could not communicate.

He moved higher as he approached, for the better view it afforded. The aliens were animal, all right. A species similar to human beings but grotesquely primitive. He observed that the creatures had noticed him and were running madly across the surface toward a small, shiny structure.

The structure interested him. It looked very much as if it had been fabricated. He wondered how the savages could construct without being able to control, and watched them as they actually entered the thing.

And then, incredibly, it rose from the ferrous sands and dashed off toward the east, a faint, disgustingly moist vapor trailing out behind it.

Quickly Tensor moved up parallel to it, while he speculated on what it meant. Apparently the savages were in full control of it. For a moment he thought it might be an alien focus, but dismissed the idea. If it were a focus, there would be no purpose in moving it spatially.

Feeling more curious, he projected himself inside and was immediately delighted, despite its obvious mechanical character. It was metallic and smooth and there were numerous incomprehensible devices piled up against the walls of the tiny, circular room. Seated at a panel, their backs toward him, the two creatures were busily manipulating little spots of brilliant color, and one was creating a weird but soft cacophony with its mouth.

Tensor was amused as well as interested. He listened, and managed to decipher a pattern to the speech, even though only confused scatterings of intelligence came from the chaotic minds. He again observed the astonishing similarity of appearance between the aliens and human beings.

From a small orifice in the panel, a reply issued; cold and rasping in tonal quality.

"Control to Scout Three. Roger on the presumed alien. Lieutenant. I knew that civilian with you would get you into trouble."

"Well, it wasn't exactly the fault of—"

"Enough. Bear away from the base until certain you are not being followed."

While one of them played with the moving color spots on the panel, the other twisted a knob, and all segments of the outside became successively visible in a viewer.

"Scout Three to Control. Nothing in sight."

"Very well. The orders are to stay there until dark, after which you may return."

"But that's two hundred hours away," the other savage hissed. "We don't have enough oxygen."

"You'll just have to work it out somehow," the panel replied coldly. "We can't endanger the whole military base for one useless civilian biologist."

This was a fascinating exchange to Tensor, as he puzzled out the curious relationships and their

purposes. He floated near the ceiling, listening, face set in civilized impassivity.

One of the creatures grumbled, leaned back and swung around in its chair. It jerked erect when it saw the man at the ceiling.



Tensor smiled at the poor, dumb creature and was rewarded by a disgustingly loud noise from its mouth and a mad rush back to the panel. The other had seen him, too, and was staring wide-eyed at him. Tensor moved closer to observe, but the one who had seen him first continued shouting shrill, ear-splitting noises at its companion, who seemed to be trying unsuccessfully to obey. Petulantly, Tensor disintegrated the noisy one and also some ugly cables that led from the panel to the wall. That improved the esthetic situation immeasurably, he felt.

There was a quick sucking of breath from the remaining savage as it looked wildly about for a moment, as if searching for its vanished companion, and then stared at the place where the cables had been.

"Well—" It made a hopeless gesture with its shoulders and slumped back into its chair. "That does it. No pilot. No radio. Damn. Even the Leader would have trouble with this situation." It looked uneasily at Tensor, and remained perfectly, cautiously still.

"What do you call yourselves?" Tensor asked without difficulty, using sound patterns similar to what they had employed.

"You speak English!" the creature blurted out in amazement, and Tensor felt rather irritated by its crude facial expression. He made a small adjustment, however, bringing his own somatic state into a closer harmony with that of the creature, and the desired level of contented appreciation rose.

"Are—are you a native?" it asked hesitantly.

"Yes," Tensor replied.

It gazed at him with half closed, calculating eyes, starting at the head, running slowly to his feet and back again.

"You look human," it muttered.

"Naturally," Tensor replied cheerfully. The appreciation was growing subtly now, and he found that the creature's mouth interested him. It was a strikingly lovely shade of red—always Tensor's favorite color. And although there was a heavy and awkward sheath of artificial fabric about the alien, he observed with a rising fascination that the bulging of the thoracic sheathing indicated that it was female.

Tensor became uncomfortably aware that he had better be careful of his induced somatic sympathy.

After a moment of speculative silence, he said, "You haven't told me what you savages consider yourselves."

"Don't call me a savage, you naked beast," she snapped back.

"I beg your pardon," he murmured politely. "Merely a semantic difficulty. I'm sure. I assume that you consider yourselves human beings, then. Where do you come from?"

"Earth—the third planet."

"I see. And you used mechanical devices such as this little metal egg to get here. Most curious." Tensor contemplated the thought with great interest, for obviously they used mechanical skill to compensate for lack of direct control. An exceedingly poor substitute, of course; but it explained everything he wanted to know.

"Are there many of you natives?" she asked him cautiously.

"Not like there used to be," Tensor admitted. "But still quite a few—though not so many we get on each other's nerves."

"How many in round numbers?"

That was a silly question, Tensor thought. Nevertheless he told her, "Oh, I suppose about thirty or a hundred. We haven't counted for centuries. Nobody's interested."

She appeared to be deeply absorbed in thought, gazing at him in an almost detached fashion. Finally she said. "Your civilization is based on the mind, isn't it? You do things with an act of will instead of with your hands."

"Naturally. That is the essential mark of civilization. At least," he added politely, "from our point of view."

"Are you—telepathic?"

"Only with other telepaths," he said simply.

"Then how did you learn my language?"

"Oh, after you talk it a bit. I can see certain relationships. But the mental pictures are so discontinuous and nonspecific that it takes a little time before the pattern emerges."

"That means you don't actually know what I am thinking?"

"Correct. You have the potential, but you don't have the control necessary to permit it."

A small, satisfied smile curved about her lips.

Tensor found it oddly disconcerting. Despite the ugly sheathing, there was something about her that was quite pleasant.

He began to feel that she was even beautiful, and as he disintegrated the sheath in order to appreciate her better, he realized that it was undoubtedly the strange endocrine balance he had created in himself that was responsible for the attitude. Because there was nothing particularly well-designed about her. She looked unprepossessingly like a civilized woman, except a good deal fatter in places, which hardly helped matters from an abstract point of view.

Tensor could only assume that his point of view was becoming less abstract.

He observed that, upon his disintegrating the sheath, the noise was there again, issuing rapidly from her mouth, and lacking in detailed semantic significance. It was very curious, he thought, watching the rapid rise and fall of her pink-tipped breasts. He could not determine whether the signal indicated terror or fury.

She solved the problem for him by grasping a small metal object from the rack beside her and throwing it at him. He deflected it to the floor as it left her hand.

"What," he asked politely, "is disturbing you so?" He liked the angry sparkle of her eyes.

"You," she snapped. "Keep away from me."

"I don't understand," he replied, moving closer and reaching out his hand to obtain a tactile sensation of her lovely hair texture. The woman compressed her red lips firmly and stood there, uneasily watching him out of the corner of her eyes as he gently stroked her head.

"Do all females of your race look nice like you?"

She nodded cautiously and said, "More or less."

"Very curious."

A sly expression came to her eyes then and she smiled radiantly. "Look," she said, "would you do me a favor?"

"Of course," Tensor murmured with unaccustomed eagerness. This was a very interesting experience, even though he was constantly having to reinforce and add to the chemical shift in his body in order to hold down the possibility of fatigue. He could not recall ever before

permitting such an unusual somatic state.

She gestured guilelessly toward the panel. "Would you help me repair my radio?"

"Radio?" Tensor echoed vacantly, gazing at the place indicated.

"Yes. I—er, have to report to my superiors that I may not be able to return, even tonight." Again she smiled dazzlingly and with devastating effect on Tensor.

"I'd be glad to," he said agreeably. "But I don't know anything about mechanical things. Couldn't you just tell me where your superiors are and let me teleport there? I'd let them know and come right back."

"Oh no," she replied quickly. She frowned a little wistfully. "No," she repeated, "they wouldn't like that. They never like anything easy. And besides—" again the smile "—I might not be here when you return, you know!"

"Oh?" Tensor said, puzzled that she knew that he might be concerned over her absence. Possibly she had some power of direct communication after all.

"It's just those cables that you destroyed over the panel," she told him in a softly cajoling voice. "I have some spares in the locker, and if you would help me replace them, it would be fine."

Tensor floated over and peered into the stumps, examining the composition and structure. He nodded and reconstructed them instantly.

She was obviously delighted and said, "I wondered if you could do that. May I use the radio now?"

Tensor stared at the whiteness of her teeth contrasting pleasingly with the redness of her lips. "Go right ahead," he murmured. He decided he had better leave soon.

He watched as the brilliant spots of color glowed and shifted. She spoke and the panel issued its response. "Control to Scout Three. What happened there a while ago?"

"This is urgent," she said. "Is the Captain there?"

After a noisy hesitation, the panel replied. "This is Commander Carson. What's up out there?"

"Listen carefully," she said. "I have an alien with me on the ship. He's already learned English perfectly. He is only slightly telepathic, so far as I am concerned, but he has great telekinetic powers."

"We were afraid of that. Is he dangerous?"

"Well—he killed Lieutenant Anderson. Completely annihilated her with a simple act of will." She glanced at the bewildered expression on Tensor's face, and favored him with a quick little smile. "He is extremely powerful. He would be a very good friend."

Tensor broke in asking, "What is all this talk now? I do not understand the purpose of it."

"Don't you worry," she murmured softly, reaching up and patting him on the knee. "Just have patience."

The panel rasped at them. "I see. Do you know if there are many of them?"

"He told me it was between thirty and a hundred, but nobody knows for sure. Presumably they don't have very much communication with each other."

"Ah," rasped the panel in a satisfied tone. "Just a minute. I'll get a directive from the Captain for you."

Tensor nodded slightly as he said, "Oh, I see. That is your Council you are talking to."

"Uh huh," she replied, dodging the hand that sought her hair again. She smiled coyly. "Now just wait. I want to hear what my superiors say." She pushed at him playfully, her smile growing strained as she desperately tried to kill time.

Tensor was amused. Yes, he decided, it was time to go. He was not at all sure that he wanted to go, but he felt that it was wise. He had never in his life engaged in such lengthy and violent exercise and was alarmed at the thought of the fatigue pains he would have when he restored his balance to a civilized neutral again.

The panel rasped noisily at them.

"Captain Jonas," it said, speaking in a different accent this time. "There's a war going on and we can't take any chances on how the aliens will feel about it. We have a fix on you and I'm sending a flight of homing missiles. Nuclear warheads."

She stiffened as she heard the sentence, her red lips drawn back from tightly clenched teeth. In a faint voice, she said, "I—I guess there isn't much I can do about it, is there?"

"Can you keep him there and busy so that he won't notice the missiles coming?"

She gave a short, brittle laugh. "Yes sir. I feel fairly sure I can keep him interested for—" she

glanced speculatively at Tensor "—a half hour at least. Probably much longer."

"It'll only be fifteen minutes," the panel rasped. "We'll deal with the others as we find them. You will be decorated for this service, even though you are only a civilian. Posthumously, of course."

The panel was silent.

"Oh sure," she said in a deadly quiet voice. "I'm glad to be appreciated."

Tensor was puzzled. The conversation did not appear to make a great deal of sense to him. He hovered over the panel and gazed at it curiously.

"Just another superior," she told him. "It seems that practically everybody is my superior or was." She sighed and looked down at herself, wistfully thinking that it was a shame to have to waste all the carefully nurtured loveliness that she knew she was.

She looked up at Tensor, who had lost interest in the panel and was busily examining the outside in a viewscope.

"Come here, big boy," she said quickly. When he turned to face her, she added, "keep your attention over here."

With an agreeable smile, he floated to her and, in obedience to her directions, lifted her into his arms. She put her lips to his, her hands gently caressing his cheek.

It was a shock. Tensor let out his pent-up breath explosively and ran his tongue over his lips, tasting the mixture of saliva and lipstick. What should have been moderately repulsive to him had been transformed by the chemical sympathy in his veins into something quite overwhelming. His eyes were bright and eager.

"It's a dirty trick and I feel like a jerk," she whispered sadly to him. "But what else can I do?"

"I beg your pardon?" Tensor murmured happily. "I do not understand you."

"Oh well," she breathed softly, smiling a crooked little smile. "Neither one of us will ever know when it happens. A pity to spoil it so soon, though."

In his unaccustomed confusion, Tensor could not follow her thought, but he could grasp the immediate situation. He grinned and nuzzled her affectionately, and decided to stay a while longer.

Curl was floating languorously in his comfortable focus, eyes half closed and glazed, mouth droolingly limp and hands carelessly askew. He formed his hyperimage to appear erect and neat—and with a politely interested expression—while he idly contemplated the telepathic picture being projected into his own mind.

"I see you've recovered," he said. "Splendid."

"Yes, but what an ordeal," Tensor replied. His image took on the appearance of a relieved smile. "If it ever happens again—I don't know."

"It was that bad?" Curl showed suitable lazy civilized sympathy. "I was afraid. All that teleporting of yourself and things."

"It took me almost ten minutes to recover from it," Tensor said grimly.

"Tsk tsk. That's a lot of lactic acid to locate and destroy. But the Council will appreciate it, even if Prime did complain, poor fellow."

"Well, I promised to investigate and I'm a man of my thought. Of course, the curiosity vanished as soon as I got into actual communication with one of them."

"They communicate?" Curl permitted his image to appear mildly astonished, which was the only civilized thing to do. "Tell me about it."

"It's crude, but in some things successful," Tensor explained. "The alien I contacted was a female, for instance. When I adjusted for relative somatic sympathy so that I could stand the poor, uncivilized creature, I naturally acquired the full appetites of a male animal and this female seemed to understand some of my thoughts very well."

"You simply can't imagine the violent somatic compulsions one encounters under such a balance."

"Horrible," agreed Curl. "But I understand, my boy. I once fathered a child—must have been at least a couple of thousand years ago. Purely out of scientific interest, of course, and never again." The physician paused and added, "Matter of fact, it's quite likely that you're that child. Can't ever tell about these things, you know."

Tensor nodded in polite agreement and continued with his own story. "It wasn't at all bad while it was going on, because I was pretty well anesthetized from body chemicals. But the hangover was terrific."

"Yes, no doubt." Curl appeared to consider a moment before asking. "What about this uncivilized hubbub the Prime raised that caused the council to order him to destroy himself?"

"Oh, that. Well, just as I was about to leave, this primitive I was with coaxed me into playing an interesting but remarkably violent sport with her. And about the same time, it appears that her superiors, for some unknown reason, decided to destroy her. It seems that the aliens' Council doesn't let them take care of it themselves."

"Uh, huh. How did they accomplish it?"

"They used some nuclear breakdown devices, which I imagine serve their primitive society quite well. The devices have appetites built into them for a certain kind of target so they will know where to go.

"But when I agreed to play this game, I naturally set up a privacy focus, so the ship we were in just didn't exist for the nuclear devices. They kept on looking, though, and finally found a lot of similar ships back at the alien's main camp. Made an awful mess out of one of the Prime's favorite landscapes, I understand."

"Well," Curl replied engagingly, "Prime should have had better self-control. I don't blame the Council a bit, and it does fix things up rather nicely." His image smiled into Tensor's mind and then hesitated as he saw the concern there. "Doesn't it?"

"Uh, yes. All except for the alien female that insists on staying with me, now, since none of her people is left on the planet. I told her two or three times to go ahead and destroy herself if she wanted; but she just rumples up my hair, grins at me and says she already has." He looked worriedly at Curl.

"Well, that's just one of those things, I guess," Curl murmured philosophically. Sensing a local distraction approaching Tensor at that moment, he politely withdrew from the other man's mind.

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