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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ROUGH BEAST \*\*\*

## *ROUGH BEAST*

The most dangerous, utterly vicious carnivorous animal the Galactics knew had escaped ... to Earth! Because contact with Earth was forbidden, they knew little of Earth ... which led to certain false conclusions. ***BY ROGER DEE***



Illustrated by Barbereis

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■ The field of the experimental Telethink station in the Florida Keys caught the fleeing Morid's attention just as its stolen Federation lifeboat plunged into the outer reaches of nightside atmosphere.

The Morid reacted with the instant decision of a harried wolf stumbling upon a dark cave that offers not only sanctuary but a lost lamb for supper as well. With the pursuing Federation ship hot on its taloned heels, the Morid zeroed on the Telethink signals—fuzzy and incomprehensibly alien to its viciously direct mentality, but indicating life and therefore food—and aimed straight for their source.

The lifeboat crashed headlong in the mangroves fringing Dutchman's Key, perhaps ten miles west of the Oversea Highway and less than two from the Telethink station. The Morid emerged in snarling haste, anticipating the powerplant's explosion by a matter of seconds, and vanished like a magenta-furred juggernaut into the moonlit riot of vegetation that crowded back from the mangroved strip of beach. The Morid considered it a success.

The lifeboat went up in a cataclysmic roar and flare of bluish light that brought Vann, the Telethink operator on duty, out of his goldberg helmet with a prickly conviction of runaway range missiles. It all but blinded and deafened Ellis, his partner, who was cruising with a portable Telethink in the station launch through a low-lying maze of islands a quarter of a mile from Dutchman's Key.

Their joint consternation was lost on the Morid because both at the moment were outside its avid reach. The teeming welter of life on Dutchman's Key was not. The Morid headed inland, sensing abundant quarry to satisfy the ravaging hunger that drove it and, that craving satisfied, to offer ample scope to its joy of killing.

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The Morid's escape left Xaxtol, Federation ship's commander, in a dilemma bordering upon the insoluble.

It would have been bad enough to lose so rare a specimen even on a barren world, but to have one so voracious at large upon one so teeming—as the primitive Telethink signals demonstrated—with previously unsuspected intelligence was unthinkable.

This, at the outset, was Xaxtol's problem:

Forbidden by strictest Galactic injunction, he could not make planetfall and interfere with a previously unscouted primitive culture. Contrariwise, neither could civilized ethic condone his abandoning such an unsuspecting culture to the bloody mercies of a Morid without every effort to correct his blunder.

Hanging in stationary orbit in order to keep a fixed relation to the Morid's landing site, the Federation commander debated earnestly with his staff until a sudden quickening of the barbarous Telethink net made action imperative.

Two of the autochthons were isolated on a small island with the Morid. Unwarned, they were doomed.

So he grouped his staff about him—sitting, crouching, coiling or hovering, as individual necessity demanded—and as one entity put the whole into rapport with the all-but-meaningless signals that funneled up from the Telethink station in the Florida Keys.

And, in doing so, roused a consternation as great as his own and infinitely more immediate.

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The flash brought Vann away from the Telethink console and out of the quonset station to stare shakenly across the tangle of mangroved islands to the west. Weyman came out a moment later, on the run, when the teeth-jarring blast of the explosion woke him. They stood together on the moon-bright sand and Vann relayed in four words the total of his information.

"It fell over there," Vann said.

A pale pinkish cloud of smoke and steam rose and drifted phosphorescently toward a noncommittal moon.

"Second key out," Weyman said. "That would be Dutchman's, where the hermit lives."

Vann nodded, drawing minimal reassurance from the fact that there had been no mushroom. "It shouldn't be atomic."

The Gulf breeze was steady out of the west, freighted with its perpetual salt-and-mangrove smell.

"The Geigers will tell us soon enough," Weyman said. "Not that it'll help us, with Ellis out in the launch."

They looked at each other in sudden shock of joint realization.

"The launch," Vann said. "Ellis is out there with the portable Telethink rig. We were working out field-strength ratios for personal equipment—"

They dived for the quonset together. Vann, smaller and more agile than the deliberate Weyman, reached the Telethink first.

"Nothing but the regular standby carrier from Washington," Vann said. "Ellis may have been directly under the thing when it struck. He was working toward Dutchman's Key, hoping for a glimpse of the hermit."

"Maybe he wasn't wearing the Telethink when the blast came," Weyman said. Then, with characteristic practicality: "Better image Washington about this while we're waiting for Ellis to report in. Can't use the net radio—we'd start a panic."

Vann settled himself at the console.

"I'll try. That is, if I can get across anything beyond the sort of subliminal rot we've been trading lately."

He signaled for contact and felt the Washington operator's answering surge of subconscious resentment at being disturbed. With the closing of the net the now-familiar giddiness of partial rapport came on him, together with the oppressive sense of bodily sharing.

There was a sudden trickle of saliva in his mouth and he resisted the desire to spit.

"Washington is having a midnight snack," Vann said. "Rotted sardines and Limburger, I think."

He made correction when the Washington operator radiated indignation. "Goose liver and dill pickles, then, but you wouldn't guess it. Salt tastes like brass filings."

Weyman said shortly, "Get on with it. You can clown later."

Vann visualized the flare of explosion and winced at the panicky hammer-and-sickled surmise that came back to him.

"How would I know?" he said aloud. "We have a man out—"

He recalled the inherent limitation of phonetics then and fell back upon imagery, picturing Ellis' launch heading toward an island luridly lighted by the blast. For effect he added, on the key's minuscule beach, a totally imaginary shack of driftwood, complete with bearded hermit.

He knew immediately when authority arrived at the other end of the net. There was a mental backwash of conversation that told him his orders even before the Washington operator set himself for their relay.

"They want an eyewitness account from Ellis," he told Weyman. "As if—"

Ellis broke into the net at that moment, radiating a hazy image—he was still partially blinded from the glare of the blast—of a lowering key overhung by a dwindling pall of pinkish smoke. In the foreground of lagoon and mangroves stood a stilted shack not unlike the one Vann had pictured, but without the hermit.

Instead, the rickety elevation of thatched porch was a blot of sable darkness relieved only by a pair of slanted yellow eyes gleaming close to the floor.

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Climactically, Xaxtol entered the net then with an impact of total information that was more than the human psyche, conditioned to serialized thinking by years of phonetic communication, could bear.

The Washington operator screamed and tore off his helmet, requiring restraint until he could compose himself enough to relay his message.

Ellis, in his launch, fainted dead away and ran the boat headlong aground on the beach of Dutchman's Key.

Vann reeled in his chair, teetering between shock and lunacy, until Weyman caught him and slid the Telethink from his head. It was minutes before Vann could speak; when he did, it was with a macabre flippancy that Weyman found more convincing than any dramatics.

"It's come," Vann said. "There's an interstellar ship out there with a thousand-odd crew that would give Dali himself nightmares."

Weyman had to shake him forcibly before he could continue.

"They're sorry they can't put down and help us," Vann said. "Galactic regulations, it seems. But they feel they should warn us that they've let some sort of bloodthirsty jungle monster—a specimen they were freighting to an interplanetary zoo—escape in a lifeboat. It's loose down here."

"Dutchman's Key," Weyman breathed. "What kind of brute could live through a blast like *that?*"

"It left the lifeboat before the power plant blew," Vann said. "They're tracking its aura now. It's intelligent to a degree—about on par with ourselves, I gather—and it's big. It's the largest and most vicious life form they've met in kilo-years of startrading."

He frowned over a concept unsuited to words. "Longer than thousands. Their culture goes back so far that the term doesn't register."

"Ellis," Weyman said. "Tell him to sheer off. Tell him to keep away from that island."

Vann clapped on the Telethink helmet and felt real panic when he found the net vacant except for a near-hysterical Washington operator.

"Aliens are off the air," he said. "But I can't feel Ellis."

"Maybe he isn't wearing his Telethink. I'll try his launch radio."

He had the microphone in his hand when Vann said, "They got the message in Washington, and they're petrified. I asked for a copter to pick up Ellis—and the hermit, if they can reach them before this *thing* does—but they're thinking along different lines. They're sending a squadron of jet bombers with nonatomic HE to make sure the beast doesn't escape to the mainland and devastate the countryside."

Weyman said incredulously, "They'll blow the key to bits. What about Ellis and the hermit?"

"Ellis is to evacuate him if possible. They're giving us twenty minutes before the jets come. After that—"

He didn't have to finish.

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At midnight old Charlie Trask was wading knee-deep in the eastside grass flats of his private lagoon, methodically netting shrimp that darted to the ooze-clouded area stirred up by his ragged wading shoes. An empty gunny sack hung across one shoulder, ready for the coon oysters he would pick from mangrove roots on his way back to his shack.

In his dour and antisocial way, Charlie was content. He had nearly enough shrimp for boiling and for bait, with the prospect of coon oyster stew in the offing. He had tobacco for his pipe and cartridges for his single-shot .22 rifle and a batch of potent homebrew ready for the bottling.

What more could a man want?

The blast and glare of the Morid's landing on the western fringe of his key jarred Charlie from his mellow mood like a clear-sky thunderbolt. The concussion rattled what teeth remained to him and brought a distant squall from his cat, a scarred and cynical old tom named Max, at the shack.

*Damn rockets*, was Charlie's instant thought. *Fool around till they blow us all to hell.*

The rosy phosphorescence drifting up from the mangroves a quarter of a mile away colored his resentment with alarm. A blast like that could start a fire, burn across the key and gut his shack.

Grumbling at the interruption of his midnight foray, Charlie crimped the lid tight on his shrimp bucket and stalked back along the lagoon toward his shack. The coon oysters would have to wait.

Five minutes later he reached his personal castle, perched on precarious piling in a gap hewn from the mangroves. The moon made it, to Charlie, a thing of black-and-silver beauty, with Max's yellow

eyes gleaming from the porch floor like wicked, welcoming beacons.

Still muttering, Charlie waded out of the shallow-water ooze and stumped in squishing shoes up the ladder to his shack. The shrimp bucket he hung on a wall peg out of Max's calculating reach. He found his pipe in the kitchen and loaded and lighted it, deliberately because the capacity for haste was not in him. His homebrew crock bubbled seductively and he took time out to raise the grimy toweling that covered it and sniff appreciatively.

"Ready to cap by the time I come back and get the shrimp graded," he told Max.

He changed his dripping brogans for a pair of snake-proof boots and took down his .22 rifle from its pegs, not because he really imagined that anyone might have lived through such a blast but because strangers—them radio fellows two keys east, for instance—might take it into their heads to come prying around.

He was halfway across the key when the drone of Ellis' launch entering his lagoon justified his suspicions.

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Charlie's investigation was soon over.

A dying plume of steam rising from a circle of battered mangroves told him that no danger of fire impended, and he turned back in relief. It did not occur to him that the pilot of his hypothetical rocket might be lying desperately injured in the shallow water, at the mercy of sharks and crocodiles. If it had, he would not have moved to help. Any fool who got himself into such a spot, in Charlie's rude philosophy, could get himself out.

The drone of the launch's engine was loud when he reached his shack. The boat, handled by a pilot grotesque in what Charlie took at first for a diver's helmet, was heading directly for his landing at an unsafe speed.

"Serve him right if he shoals on a oyster bed and rips his bottom," Charlie said.

As if on cue, the boat swerved sharply. Its pilot came half erect, arms flung wide in a convulsive gesture. The engine roared wildly; the boat heeled, slamming its occupant against the right gunwale, and blasted straight for Charlie's shack.

Miraculously, it missed the shack's piling and lunged half its length upon the sand. The engine-roar died instantly. The pilot was thrown headlong overside, goldberg helmet flying off in mid-arc, to lie stunned at the foot of Charlie's ladder.

Callously, Charlie stepped over Ellis' twitching form and stumped up the ladder to his shack. Max, who had taken to the porch rafters at the crash of the launch, came meowing gingerly down to meet him.

"It's all right," Charlie told him. "Just some fool that don't know how to handle a boat."

He leaned his rifle against the wall and brought a split-bamboo chair from the kitchen. He was not too late; the bucket, when he took it from its peg, still slithered satisfactorily with live shrimp.

The squawking of the launch radio roused Ellis. He groaned and sat up, dazed and disoriented by the combined shock of Xaxtol's telepathic bombshell and his own rude landing, just as Weyman gave up his attempt at radio contact. In the silence that fell, Ellis would have fainted again except for the chilling knowledge that he was unarmed and afoot on the same key with a man-eating alien monster that might make its appearance at any moment.

He collected wits and breath to stave off the black pall of shock that still threatened.

"Come down from there and help me push the launch off," he called up to Charlie Trask. "We've got to get off this key. Fast!"

Charlie separated a menu-sized shrimp from his bucket.

"You grounded her," he said sourly. "Push her off yourself."

"Listen," Ellis said desperately. "That blast was a ship from space, from another star. A wild animal escaped from it, something worse than you ever dreamed of. We've got to get out of here before it finds us."

Charlie grunted and chose another shrimp.

The Morid, as Xaxtol had pictured it, rose vividly in Ellis' memory, fanged and shaggy and insatiably voracious, a magenta-furred ursine embodiment of blood-lust made the worst by its near-human intelligence.

He described it in dogged haste, his eyes frozen to the tangle of inland underbrush behind the shack.

"No such varmint in these kays," old Charlie said.

The launch radio blared again in Weyman's voice, speaking urgently of jet bombers and deadlines. A glance at his watch brought Ellis up from the sand in galvanic resolution.

"In twelve minutes," he said grimly, "a squadron of planes will pinpoint this key and blast it out of the water. I'm not going to be eaten alive or blown to bits arguing with you. If I can't push the launch off alone, I'll swim."

He scooped up his fallen Telethink helmet and ran for the launch. At the fourth step his foot caught in the iron-hard stump of a mangrove root that had been chopped off inches above the sand and he fell heavily. Pain blinded him; his right ankle lanced with fire and went numb.

He fought to rise and fell again when the ankle collapsed under him.

"Hell," he said, just before blackness claimed him for the second time. "I've broken my leg!"

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His twelve minutes had dwindled to seven when Ellis roused. He tried to stand, his twisted ankle momentarily forgotten, and gave it up when the mangroves spun dizzily before his eyes. He couldn't afford to pass out again.

He made one last-ditch bid for help.

"My leg's broken," he yelled up at old Charlie Trask. "Get down here and lend a hand!"

Charlie glowered and said nothing.

Max bounded down the ladder, tail stiffly erect and scarred ears cocked at the underbrush in baleful

curiosity.

"The thing is coming this way," Ellis called. "Your cat scents it. Will you let us all be killed?"

Charlie Trask graded another shrimp.

Swearing bitterly, Ellis caught up his Telethink helmet and slid it over his head. He found the net in a welter of confusion. Washington demanded further information; Vann, at the station, was calling him frantically. His own scramble for help-images only added to the mental babel.

On the Federation ship, confusion was nearly as rampant.

Xaxtol's dilemma still held: he could not make planetfall—time was too short for aid now, in any case—but neither could he, with clear Galactic conscience, desert the harried primitives below while hope remained.

Ellis' predicament forced Xaxtol to decision; he could only follow the Morid's aura and relay its progress.

It could not be helped that the relayed image was blurred of definition and weirdly askew; the Morid's visual and auditory range differed so sharply from either human or Galactic that even over the ship's wonderfully selective telecommunicator little of the Morid's immediate surroundings came through clearly. Its aura arrived with a burning intensity that turned Xaxtol and his group faint with empathetic horror, but the fact that the Morid had just made its first kill obliterated all detail for the moment beyond a shocking welter of blood and torn flesh.

Ellis fared a little better under the second telepathic blast than under the first—he managed to snatch off his Telethink helmet just in time.

"The thing just killed something out there," he yelled at Charlie Trask. "It's coming this way. Are you going to sit there and—"

Charlie graded his last edible shrimp, took up his bucket and went inside. The leisurely clinking of homebrew bottles drifted after him, clear and musical on the still, hot air.

Ellis looked at his watch and considered prayer. He had three minutes left.

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When the Morid came, Ellis was sitting dumbly on the sand, nursing his broken ankle and considering with a shock-detached part of his mind a fragmentary line of some long-forgotten schooldays poem.

*What rough beast is this ...* the rest eluded him.

The underbrush beyond the shack rustled and the Morid's ravening image sprang to Ellis' mind with a clarity that shook his three net-participants to the core—one of them past endurance.

Vann, in the station, said "*Dear God,*" and braced himself for the end. In Washington, the operator fainted and had to be dragged from his console.

Aboard the Federation ship, Xaxtol radiated a shaken "Enough!" and tentacled a stud that sent his craft flashing on its way through subspace.

At Charlie Trask's shack, Max bounded across the clearing and into the brush. There followed a riot of squalling and screaming that brought Charlie out of his shack on the run. Ellis sat numbly, beyond shock, waiting for the worst.

Unaccountably, the worst was delayed.

Charlie came back, clutching a protesting Max by the scruff of the neck, and threw down something at Ellis' feet. Something small and limp and magenta-furred, smeared with greenish blood and very, very dead.

"There's your varmint," said Charlie.

With one minute remaining before the promised bombers roared over, Ellis, with a frozen clarity he had not dreamed he possessed, radiated a final message before he fainted again.

"Call off the jets," he said, in effect. "It's over. The beast is dead. The hermit's cat killed it."

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An hour later at the station, his ankle bandaged and his third cup of coffee in hand, Ellis could review it all with some coherence.

"We didn't consider the business of relative size," he said. "Neither did our Galactic friends. Apparently they're small, and so are all the species they've met with before. Maybe we're something unique in the universe, after all. And maybe it's a good thing they didn't land and learn how unique."

"It figures," Weyman said. "Washington let it out on the air that DF stations made a fix on the spaceship before it jumped off. It measured only twenty-two feet."

Vann said wonderingly, "And there were hundreds of them aboard. Gentlemen, we are Brobdingnagians in a universe of Lilliputians."

"I've been trying," Ellis said irrelevantly, "to recall a poem I read once in school. I've forgotten the author and all the verse but one line. It goes—"

"*What rough beast is this,*" Vann quoted. "You were thinking about it hard enough when the debacle in the brush took place. The image you radiated was rough enough—it shocked the pants off us."

"And off the Galactics," Weyman said. "The shoe is on the other foot now, I think."

He went to the quonset door and looked out and up, listening. "Jets. The Washington brass on its way to cross-examine us."

"The other foot?" Vann said. "Don't be cryptic, man. Whose foot?"

"Theirs," Ellis said. "Don't you see? One of these days we'll be going out there to make our own place in the galaxy. With our size and disposition, how do you think we'll seem to those gentle little people?"

Vann whistled in belated understanding.

"Rough," he said.





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Punctuation and hyphenation have been normalized.

Minor typographical errors have been corrected.

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