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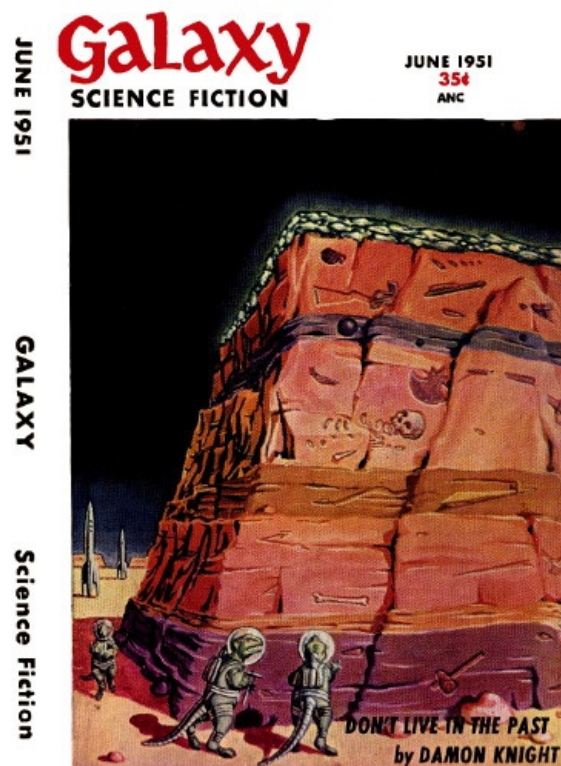
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HUNT THE HUNTER ***



HUNT the HUNTER

BY KRIS NEVILLE

Illustrated by ELIZABETH MacINTYRE

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**Of course using live bait is the best
way to lure dangerous alien animals ...
unless it turns out that you are the bait!**

"We're somewhat to the south, I think," Ri said, bending over the crude field map. "That ridge," he pointed, "on our left, is right here." He drew a finger down the map. "It was over here," he moved the finger, "over the ridge, north of here, that we sighted them."

Extrone asked, "Is there a pass?"

Ri looked up, studying the terrain. He moved his shoulders. "I don't know, but maybe they range this far. Maybe they're on this side of the ridge, too."

Delicately, Extrone raised a hand to his beard. "I'd hate to lose a day crossing the ridge," he said.

"Yes, sir," Ri said. Suddenly he threw back his head. "Listen!"

"Eh?" Extrone said.

"Hear it? That cough? I think that's one, from over there. Right up ahead of us."

Extrone raised his eyebrows.

This time, the coughing roar was more distant, but distinct.

"It is!" Ri said. "It's a farn beast, all right!"

Extrone smiled, almost pointed teeth showing through the beard. "I'm glad we won't have to cross the ridge."

Ri wiped his forehead on the back of his sleeve. "Yes, sir."

"We'll pitch camp right here, then," Extrone said. "We'll go after it tomorrow." He looked at the sky. "Have the bearers hurry."

"Yes, sir."

Ri moved away, his pulse gradually slowing. "You, there!" he called. "Pitch camp, here!"

He crossed to Mia, who, along with him, had been pressed into Extrone's party as guides. Once more, Ri addressed the bearers, "Be quick, now!" And to Mia, "God almighty, he was getting mad." He ran a hand under his collar. "It's a good thing that farn beast sounded off when it did. I'd hate to think of making him climb that ridge."

Mia glanced nervously over his shoulder. "It's that damned pilot's fault for setting us down on this side. I told him it was the other side. I told him so."

Ri shrugged hopelessly.

Mia said, "I don't think he even saw a blast area over here. I think he wanted to get us in trouble."

"There shouldn't be one. There shouldn't be a blast area on this side of the ridge, too."

"That's what I mean. The pilot don't like businessmen. He had it in for us."

Ri cleared his throat nervously. "Maybe you're right."

"It's the Hunting Club he don't like."

"I wish to God I'd never heard of a farn beast," Ri said. "At least, then, I wouldn't be one of his guides. Why didn't he hire somebody else?"

Mia looked at his companion. He spat. "What hurts most, he pays us for it. I could buy half this planet, and he makes me his guide—at less than I pay my secretary."

"Well, anyway, we won't have to cross that ridge."

"Hey, you!" Extrone called.

The two of them turned immediately.

"You two scout ahead," Extrone said. "See if you can pick up some tracks."

"Yes, sir," Ri said, and instantly the two of them readjusted their shoulder straps and started off.

Shortly they were inside of the scrub forest, safe from sight. "Let's wait here," Mia said.

"No, we better go on. He may have sent a spy in."

They pushed on, being careful to blaze the trees, because they were not professional guides.

"We don't want to get too near," Ri said after toiling through the forest for many minutes. "Without guns, we don't want to get near enough for the farn beast to charge us."

They stopped. The forest was dense, the vines clinging.

"He'll want the bearers to hack a path for him," Mia said. "But we go it alone. Damn him."

Ri twisted his mouth into a sour frown. He wiped at his forehead. "Hot. By God, it's hot. I didn't think it was this hot, the first time we were here."

Mia said, "The first time, *we* weren't guides. We didn't notice it so much then."

They fought a few yards more into the forest.

Then it ended. Or, rather, there was a wide gap. Before them lay a blast area, unmistakable. The grass was beginning to grow again, but the tree stumps were roasted from the rocket breath.

"This isn't ours!" Ri said. "This looks like it was made nearly a year ago!"

Mia's eyes narrowed. "The military from Xnile?"

"No," Ri said. "They don't have any rockets this small. And I don't think there's another cargo rocket on this planet outside of the one we leased from the Club. Except the one *he* brought."

"The ones who discovered the farn beasts in the first place?" Mia asked. "You think it's their blast?"

"So?" Ri said. "But who are they?"

It was Mia's turn to shrug. "Whoever they were, they couldn't have been hunters. They'd have kept the secret better."

"We didn't do so damned well."

"We didn't have a chance," Mia objected. "Everybody and his brother had heard the rumor that farn beasts were somewhere around here. It wasn't our fault Extrone found out."

"I wish we hadn't shot our guide, then. I wish he was here instead of us."

Mia shook perspiration out of his eyes. "We should have shot our pilot, too. That was our mistake. The pilot must have been the one who told Extrone we'd hunted this area."

"I didn't think a Club pilot would do that."

"After Extrone said he'd hunt farn beasts, even if it meant going to the alien system? Listen, you don't know.... Wait a minute."

There was perspiration on Ri's upper lip.

"I didn't tell Extrone, if that's what you're thinking," Mia said.

Ri's mouth twisted. "I didn't say you did."

"Listen," Mia said in a hoarse whisper. "I just thought. Listen. To hell with how he found out. Here's the point. Maybe he'll shoot us, too, when the hunt's over."

Ri licked his lips. "No. He wouldn't do that. We're not—not just anybody. He couldn't kill us like that. Not even *him*. And besides, why would he want to do that? It wouldn't do any good to shoot us. Too many people already know about the farn beasts. You said that yourself."

Mia said, "I hope you're right." They stood side by side, studying the blast area in silence. Finally, Mia said, "We better be getting back."

"What'll we tell him?"

"That we saw tracks. What else can we tell him?"

They turned back along their trail, stumbling over vines.

"It gets hotter at sunset," Ri said nervously.

"The breeze dies down."

"It's screwy. I didn't think farn beasts had this wide a range. There must be a lot of them, to be on both sides of the ridge like this."

"There may be a pass," Mia said, pushing a vine away.

Ri wrinkled his brow, panting. "I guess that's it. If there were a lot of them, we'd have heard something before we did. But even so, it's damned funny, when you think about it."

Mia looked up at the darkening sky. "We better hurry," he said.

When it came over the hastily established camp, the rocket was low, obviously looking for a landing site. It was a military craft, from the outpost on the near moon, and forward, near the nose, there was the blazoned emblem of the Ninth Fleet. The rocket roared directly over Extrone's tent, turned slowly, spouting fuel expensively, and settled into the scrub forest, turning the vegetation beneath it sere by its blasts.

Extrone sat on an upholstered stool before his tent and spat disgustedly and combed his beard with his blunt fingers.

Shortly, from the direction of the rocket, a group of four high-ranking officers came out of the forest, heading toward him. They were spruce, the officers, with military discipline holding their waists in and knees almost stiff.

"What in hell do you want?" Extrone asked.

They stopped a respectful distance away. "Sir...." one began.

"Haven't I told you gentlemen that rockets frighten the game?" Extrone demanded, ominously not raising his voice.

"Sir," the lead officer said, "it's another alien ship. It was sighted a few hours ago, off this very planet, sir."

Extrone's face looked much too innocent. "How did it get there, gentlemen? Why wasn't it destroyed?"

"We lost it again, sir. Temporarily, sir."

"So?" Extrone mocked.

"We thought you ought to return to a safer planet, sir. Until we could locate and destroy it."

Extrone stared at them for a space. Then, indifferently, he turned away, in the direction of a resting bearer. "You!" he said. "Hey! Bring me a drink!" He faced the officers again. He smiled maliciously. "I'm staying here."

The lead officer licked his firm lower lip. "But, sir...."

Extrone toyed with his beard. "About a year ago, gentlemen, there was an alien ship around here then, wasn't there? And you destroyed it, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir. When we located it, sir."

"You'll destroy this one, too," Extrone said.

"We have a tight patrol, sir. It can't slip through. But it might try a long range bombardment, sir."

Extrone said, "To begin with, they probably don't even know I'm here. And they probably couldn't hit this area if they did know. And you can't afford to let them get a shot at me, anyway."

"That's why we'd like you to return to an inner planet, sir."

Extrone plucked at his right ear lobe, half closing his eyes. "You'll lose a fleet before you'll dare let anything happen to me, gentlemen. I'm quite safe here, I think."

The bearer brought Extrone his drink.

"Get off," Extrone said quietly to the four officers.

Again they turned reluctantly. This time, he did not call them back. Instead, with amusement, he watched until they disappeared into the tangle of forest.

Dusk was falling. The takeoff blast of the rocket illuminated the area, casting weird shadows on the gently swaying grasses; there was a hot breath of dry air and the rocket dwindled toward the stars.

Extrone stood up lazily, stretching. He tossed the empty glass away, listened for it to shatter. He reached out, parted the heavy flap to his tent.

"Sir?" Ri said, hurrying toward him in the gathering darkness.

"Eh?" Extrone said, turning, startled. "Oh, you. Well?"

"We ... located signs of the farn beast, sir. To the east."

Extrone nodded. After a moment he said, "You killed one, I believe, on *your* trip?"

Ri shifted. "Yes, sir."

Extrone held back the flap of the tent. "Won't you come in?" he asked without any politeness whatever.

Ri obeyed the order.

The inside of the tent was luxurious. The bed was of bulky feathers, costly of transport space, the sleep curtains of silken gauze. The floor, heavy, portable tile blocks, not the hollow kind, were neatly and smoothly inset into the ground. Hanging from the center, to the left of the slender, hand-carved center pole, was a chain of crystals. They tinkled lightly when Extrone dropped the flap. The light was electric from a portable dynamo. Extrone flipped it on. He crossed to the bed, sat down.

"You were, I believe, the first ever to kill a farn beast?" he said.

"I... No, sir. There must have been previous hunters, sir."

Extrone narrowed his eyes. "I see by your eyes that you are envious—that is the word, isn't it?—of

my tent."

Ri looked away from his face.

"Perhaps I'm envious of your reputation as a hunter. You see, I have never killed a farn beast. In fact, I haven't *seen* a farn beast."

Ri glanced nervously around the tent, his sharp eyes avoiding Extrone's glittering ones. "Few people have seen them, sir."

"Oh?" Extrone questioned mildly. "I wouldn't say that. I understand that the aliens hunt them quite extensively ... on some of their planets."

"I meant in our system, sir."

"Of course you did," Extrone said, lazily tracing the crease of his sleeve with his forefinger. "I imagine these are the only farn beasts in our system."

Ri waited uneasily, not answering.

"Yes," Extrone said, "I imagine they are. It would have been a shame if you had killed the last one. Don't you think so?"

Ri's hands worried the sides of his outer garment. "Yes, sir. It would have been."

Extrone pursed his lips. "It wouldn't have been very considerate of you to—But, still, you gained valuable experience. I'm glad you agreed to come along as my guide."

"It was an honor, sir."

Extrone's lip twisted in wry amusement. "If I had waited until it was safe for me to hunt on an alien planet, I would not have been able to find such an illustrious guide."

"... I'm flattered, sir."

"Of course," Extrone said. "But you should have spoken to me about it, when you discovered the farn beast in our own system."

"I realize that, sir. That is, I had intended at the first opportunity, sir...."

"Of course," Extrone said dryly. "Like all of my subjects," he waved his hand in a broad gesture, "the highest as well as the lowest slave, know me and love me. I know your intentions were the best."

Ri squirmed, his face pale. "We do indeed love you, sir."

Extrone bent forward. "*Know* me and love me."

"Yes, sir. *Know* you and love you, sir," Ri said.

"Get out!" Extrone said.

"It's frightening," Ri said, "to be that close to him."

Mia nodded.

The two of them, beneath the leaf-swollen branches of the gnarled tree, were seated on their sleeping bags. The moon was clear and cold and bright in a cloudless sky; a small moon, smooth-surfaced, except for a central mountain ridge that bisected it into almost twin hemispheres.

"To think of him. As flesh and blood. Not like the—well; that—what we've read about."

Mia glanced suspiciously around him at the shadows. "You begin to understand a lot of things, after seeing him."

Ri picked nervously at the cover of his sleeping bag.

"It makes you think," Mia added. He twitched. "I'm afraid. I'm afraid he'll.... Listen, we'll talk. When we get back to civilization. You, me, the bearers. About him. He can't let that happen. He'll kill us first."

Ri looked up at the moon, shivering. "No. We have friends. We have influence. He couldn't just like that—"

"He could say it was an accident."

"No," Ri said stubbornly.

"He can say anything," Mia insisted. "He can make people believe anything. Whatever he says. There's no way to check on it."

"It's getting cold," Ri said.

"Listen," Mia pleaded.

"No," Ri said. "Even if we tried to tell them, they wouldn't listen. Everybody would *know* we were lying. Everything they've come to believe would tell them we were lying. Everything they've read, every picture they've seen. They wouldn't believe us. *He* knows that."

"Listen," Mia repeated intently. "This is important. Right now he couldn't afford to let us talk. Not right now. Because the Army is not against him. Some officers were here, just before we came

back. A bearer overheard them talking. They don't *want* to overthrow him!"

Ri's teeth, suddenly, were chattering.

"That's another lie," Mia continued. "That he protects the people from the Army. That's a lie. I don't believe they were *ever* plotting against him. Not even at first. I think they *helped* him, don't you see?"

Ri whined nervously.

"It's like this," Mia said. "I see it like this. The Army *put* him in power when the people were in rebellion against military rule."

Ri swallowed. "We couldn't make the people believe that."

"No?" Mia challenged. "Couldn't we? Not today, but what about tomorrow? You'll see. Because I think the Army is getting ready to invade the alien system!"

"The people won't support them," Ri answered woodenly.

"*Think*. If he tells them to, they will. They trust him."

Ri looked around at the shadows.

"That explains a lot of things," Mia said. "I think the Army's been preparing for this for a long time. From the first, maybe. That's why Extrone cut off our trade with the aliens. Partly to keep them from learning that he was getting ready to invade them, but more to keep them from exposing *him* to the people. The aliens wouldn't be fooled like we were, so easy."

"No!" Ri snapped. "It was to keep the natural economic balance."

"You know that's not right."

Ri lay down on his bed roll. "Don't talk about it. It's not good to talk like this. I don't even want to listen."

"When the invasion starts, he'll have to command *all* their loyalties. To keep them from revolt again. They'd be ready to believe us, then. He'll have a hard enough time without people running around trying to tell the truth."

"You're wrong. He's not like that. I know you're wrong."

Mia smiled twistedly. "How many has he already killed? How can we even guess?"

Ri swallowed sickly.

"Remember our guide? To keep our hunting territory a secret?"

Ri shuddered. "That's different. Don't you see? This is not at all like that."

With morning came birds' songs, came dew, came breakfast smells. The air was sweet with cooking and it was nostalgic, childhoodlike, uncontaminated.

And Extrone stepped out of the tent, fully dressed, surly, letting the flap slap loudly behind him. He stretched hungrily and stared around the camp, his eyes still vacant-mean with sleep.

"Breakfast!" he shouted, and two bearers came running with a folding table and chair. Behind them, a third bearer, carrying a tray of various foods; and yet behind him, a fourth, with a steaming pitcher and a drinking mug.

Extrone ate hugely, with none of the delicacy sometimes affected in his conversational gestures. When he had finished, he washed his mouth with water and spat on the ground.

"Lin!" he said.

His personal bearer came loping toward him.

"Have you read that manual I gave you?"

Lin nodded. "Yes."

Extrone pushed the table away. He smacked his lips wetly. "Very ludicrous, Lin. Have you noticed that I have two businessmen for guides? It occurred to me when I got up. They would have spat on me, twenty years ago, damn them."

Lin waited.

"Now I can spit on them, which pleases me."

"The farn beasts are dangerous, sir," Lin said.

"Eh? Oh, yes. Those. What did the manual say about them?"

"I believe they're carnivorous, sir."

"An alien manual. That's ludicrous, too. That we have the only information on our newly discovered fauna from an alien manual—and, of course, two businessmen."

"They have very long, sharp fangs, and, when enraged, are capable of tearing a man—"

"An alien?" Extrone corrected.

"There's not enough difference between us to matter, sir. Of tearing an alien to pieces, sir."

Extrone laughed harshly. "It's 'sir' whenever you contradict me?"

Lin's face remained impassive. "I guess it seems that way. Sir."

"Damned few people would dare go as far as you do," Extrone said. "But you're afraid of me, too, in your own way, aren't you?"

Lin shrugged. "Maybe."

"I can see you are. Even my wives are. I wonder if anyone can know how wonderful it feels to have people *all* afraid of you."

"The farn beasts, according to the manual...."

"You are very insistent on one subject."

"... It's the only thing I know anything about. The farn beast, as I was saying, sir, is the particular enemy of men. Or if you like, of aliens. Sir."

"All right," Extrone said, annoyed. "I'll be careful."

In the distance, a farn beast coughed.

Instantly alert, Extrone said, "Get the bearers! Have some of them cut a path through that damn thicket! And tell those two businessmen to get the hell over here!"

Lin smiled, his eyes suddenly afire with the excitement of the hunt.

Four hours later, they were well into the scrub forest. Extrone walked leisurely, well back of the cutters, who hacked away, methodically, at the vines and branches which might impede his forward progress. Their sharp, awkward knives snickered rhythmically to the rasp of their heavy breathing.

Occasionally, Extrone halted, motioned for his water carrier, and drank deeply of the icy water to allay the heat of the forest, a heat made oppressive by the press of foliage against the outside air.

Ranging out, on both sides of the central body, the two businessmen fought independently against the wild growth, each scouting the flanks for farn beasts, and ahead, beyond the cutters, Lin flittered among the tree trunks, sometimes far, sometimes near.

Extrone carried the only weapon, slung easily over his shoulder, a powerful blast rifle, capable of piercing medium armor in sustained fire. To his rear, the water carrier was trailed by a man bearing a folding stool, and behind him, a man carrying the heavy, high-powered two-way communication set.

Once Extrone unslung his blast rifle and triggered a burst at a tiny, arboreal mammal, which, upon the impact, shattered asunder, to Extrone's satisfied chuckle, in a burst of blood and fur.

When the sun stood high and heat exhaustion made the near-naked bearers slump, Extrone permitted a rest. While waiting for the march to resume, he sat on the stool with his back against an ancient tree and patted, reflectively, the blast rifle, lying across his legs.

"For you, sir," the communications man said, interrupting his reverie.

"Damn," Extrone muttered. His face twisted in anger. "It better be important." He took the head-set and mike and nodded to the bearer. The bearer twiddled the dials.

"Extrone. Eh?... Oh, you got their ship. Well, why in hell bother me?... All right, so they found out I was here. You got them, didn't you?"

"Blasted them right out of space," the voice crackled excitedly. "Right in the middle of a radio broadcast, sir."

"I don't want to listen to your gabbling when I'm hunting!" Extrone tore off the head-set and handed it to the bearer. "If they call back, find out what they want, first. I don't want to be bothered unless it's important."

"Yes, sir."

Extrone squinted up at the sun; his eyes crinkled under the glare, and perspiration stood in little droplets on the back of his hands.

Lin, returning to the column, threaded his way among reclining bearers. He stopped before Extrone and tossed his hair out of his eyes. "I located a spoor," he said, suppressed eagerness in his voice. "About a quarter ahead. It looks fresh."

Extrone's eyes lit with passion.

Lin's face was red with heat and grimy with sweat. "There were two, I think."

"Two?" Extrone grinned, petting the rifle. "You and I better go forward and look at the spoor."

Lin said, "We ought to take protection, if you're going, too."

Extrone laughed. "This is enough." He gestured with the rifle and stood up.

"I wish you had let me bring a gun along, sir," Lin said.

"One is enough in *my* camp."

The two of them went forward, alone, into the forest. Extrone moved agilely through the tangle, following Lin closely. When they came to the tracks, heavily pressed into drying mud around a small watering hole, Extrone nodded his head in satisfaction.

"This way," Lin said, pointing, and once more the two of them started off.

They went a good distance through the forest, Extrone becoming more alert with each additional foot. Finally, Lin stopped him with a restraining hand. "They may be quite a way ahead. Hadn't we ought to bring up the column?"

The farn beast, somewhere beyond a ragged clump of bushes, coughed. Extrone clenched the blast rifle convulsively.

The farn beast coughed again, more distant this time.

"They're moving away," Lin said.

"Damn!" Extrone said.

"It's a good thing the wind's right, or they'd be coming back, and fast, too."

"Eh?" Extrone said.

"They charge on scent, sight, or sound. I understand they will track down a man for as long as a day."

"Wait," Extrone said, combing his beard. "Wait a minute."

"Yes?"

"Look," Extrone said. "If that's the case, why do we bother tracking them? Why not make them come to us?"

"They're too unpredictable. It wouldn't be safe. I'd rather have surprise on our side."

"You don't seem to see what I mean," Extrone said. "*We* won't be the—ah—the bait."

"Oh?"

"Let's get back to the column."

"Extrone wants to see you," Lin said.

Ri twisted at the grass shoot, broke it off, worried and unhappy. "What's he want to see *me* for?"

"I don't know," Lin said curtly.

Ri got to his feet. One of his hands reached out, plucked nervously at Lin's bare forearm. "Look," he whispered. "You know him. I have—a little money. If you were able to ... if he wants," Ri gulped, "to *do* anything to me—I'd pay you, if you could...."

"You better come along," Lin said, turning.

Ri rubbed his hands along his thighs; he sighed, a tiny sound, ineffectual. He followed Lin beyond an outcropping of shale to where Extrone was seated, petting his rifle.

Extrone nodded genially. "The farn beast hunter, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

Extrone drummed his fingers on the stock of the blast rifle. "Tell me what they look like," he said suddenly.

"Well, sir, they're ... uh...."

"Pretty frightening?"

"No, sir.... Well, in a way, sir."

"But *you* weren't afraid of them, were you?"

"No, sir. No, because...."

Extrone was smiling innocently. "Good. I want you to do something for me."

"I ... I..." Ri glanced nervously at Lin out of the tail of his eye. Lin's face was impassive.

"Of *course* you will," Extrone said genially. "Get me a rope, Lin. A good, long, strong rope."

"What are you going to do?" Ri asked, terrified.

"Why, I'm going to tie the rope around your waist and stake you out as bait."

"No!"

"Oh, come now. When the farn beast hears you scream—you *can* scream, by the way?"

Ri swallowed.

"We could find a way to make you."

There was perspiration trickling down Ri's forehead, a single drop, creeping toward his nose.

"You'll be safe," Extrone said, studying his face with amusement. "I'll shoot the animal before it reaches you."

Ri gulped for air. "But ... if there should be more than one?"

Extrone shrugged.

"I—Look, sir. Listen to me." Ri's lips were bloodless and his hands were trembling. "It's not me you want to do this to. It's Mia, sir. *He* killed a farn beast before *I* did, sir. And last night—last night, he—"

"He what?" Extrone demanded, leaning forward intently.

Ri breathed with a gurgling sound. "He said he ought to kill you, sir. That's what he said. I heard him, sir. He said he ought to kill you. He's the one you ought to use for bait. Then if there was an accident, sir, it wouldn't matter, because he said he ought to kill you. I wouldn't...."

Extrone said, "Which one is he?"

"That one. Right over there."

"The one with his back to me?"

"Yes, sir. That's him. That's him, sir."

Extrone aimed carefully and fired, full charge, then lowered the rifle and said, "Here comes Lin with the rope, I see."

Ri was greenish. "You ... you...."

Extrone turned to Lin. "Tie one end around his waist."

"Wait," Ri begged, fighting off the rope with his hands. "You don't want to use me, sir. Not after I told you.... Please, sir. If anything should happen to me.... Please, sir. Don't do it."

"Tie it," Extrone ordered.

"No, sir. Please. Oh, *please* don't, sir."

"Tie it," Extrone said inexorably.

Lin bent with the rope; his face was colorless.

They were at the watering hole—Extrone, Lin, two bearers, and Ri.

Since the hole was drying, the left, partially exposed bank was steep toward the muddy water. Upon it was green, new grass, tender-tuffed, half mashed in places by heavy animal treads. It was there that they staked him out, tying the free end of the rope tightly around the base of a scaling tree.

"You will scream," Extrone instructed. With his rifle, he pointed across the water hole. "The farn beast will come from this direction, I imagine."

Ri was almost slobbering in fear.

"Let me hear you scream," Extrone said.

Ri moaned weakly.

"You'll have to do better than that." Extrone inclined his head toward a bearer, who used something Ri couldn't see.



Ri screamed.

"See that you keep it up that way," Extrone said. "That's the way I want you to sound." He turned toward Lin. "We can climb this tree, I think."

Slowly, aided by the bearers, the two men climbed the tree, bark peeling away from under their rough boots. Ri watched them hopelessly.

Once at the crotch, Extrone settled down, holding the rifle at alert. Lin moved to the left, out on the main branch, rested in a smaller crotch.

Looking down, Extrone said, "Scream!" Then, to Lin, "You feel the excitement? It's always in the air like this at a hunt."

"I feel it," Lin said.

Extrone chuckled. "You were with me on Meizque?"

"Yes."

"That was something, that time." He ran his hand along the stock of the weapon.

The sun headed west, veiling itself with trees; a large insect circled Extrone's head. He slapped at it, angry. The forest was quiet, underlined by an occasional piping call, something like a whistle. Ri's screams were shrill, echoing away, shiveringly. Lin sat quiet, hunched.

Extrone's eyes narrowed, and he began to pet the gun stock with quick, jerky movements. Lin licked his lips, keeping his eyes on Extrone's face. The sun seemed stuck in the sky, and the heat squeezed against them, sucking at their breath like a vacuum. The insect went away. Still, endless, hopeless, monotonous, Ri screamed.

A farn beast coughed, far in the matted forest.

Extrone laughed nervously. "He must have heard."

"We're lucky to rouse one so fast," Lin said.

Extrone dug his boot cleats into the tree, braced himself. "I like this. There's more excitement in waiting like this than in anything I know."

Lin nodded.

"The waiting, itself, is a lot. The suspense. It's not only the killing that matters."

"It's not *only* the killing," Lin echoed.

"You understand?" Extrone said. "How it is to wait, knowing in just a minute something is going to come out of the forest, and you're going to kill it?"

"I know," Lin said.

"But it's not only the killing. It's the waiting, too."

The farn beast coughed again; nearer.

"It's a different one," Lin said.

"How do you know?"

"Hear the lower pitch, the more of a roar?"

"Hey!" Extrone shouted. "You, down there. There are two coming. Now let's hear you really scream!"

Ri, below, whimpered childishly and began to retreat toward the tether tree, his eyes wide.

"There's a lot of satisfaction in fooling them, too," Extrone said. "Making them come to your bait, where you can get at them." He opened his right hand. "Choose your ground, set your trap. Bait it." He snapped his hand into a fist, held the fist up before his eyes, imprisoning the idea. "Spring the trap when the quarry is inside. Clever. That makes the waiting more interesting. Waiting to see if they really will come to your bait."

Lin shifted, staring toward the forest.

"I've always liked to hunt," Extrone said. "More than anything else, I think."

Lin spat toward the ground. "People should hunt because they have to. For food. For safety."

"No," Extrone argued. "People should hunt for the love of hunting."

"Killing?"

"Hunting," Extrone repeated harshly.

The farn beast coughed. Another answered. They were very near, and there was a noise of crackling underbrush.

"He's good bait," Extrone said. "He's fat enough and he knows how to scream good."

Ri had stopped screaming; he was huddled against the tree, fearfully eying the forest across from the watering hole.

Extrone began to tremble with excitement. "Here they come!"

The forest sprang apart. Extrone bent forward, the gun still across his lap.

The farn beast, its tiny eyes red with hate, stepped out on the bank, swinging its head wildly, its nostrils flaring in anger. It coughed. Its mate appeared beside it. Their tails thrashed against the scrubs behind them, rattling leaves.



"Shoot!" Lin hissed. "For God's sake, shoot!"

"Wait," Extrone said. "Let's see what they do." He had not moved the rifle. He was tense, bent

forward, his eyes slitted, his breath beginning to sound like an asthmatic pump.

The lead farn beast sighted Ri. It lowered its head.

"Look!" Extrone cried excitedly. "Here it comes!"

Ri began to scream again.

Still Extrone did not lift his blast rifle. He was laughing. Lin waited, frozen, his eyes staring at the farn beast in fascination.

The farn beast plunged into the water, which was shallow, and, throwing a sheet of it to either side, headed across toward Ri.

"Watch! Watch!" Extrone cried gleefully.

And then the aliens sprang their trap.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HUNT THE HUNTER ***

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