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Author: Jr. L. J. Stecher  
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AN ELEPHANT FOR THE PRINKIP \*\*\*



# **An Elephant For the Prinkip**

**BY L. J. STECHER, JR.**

**Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS**

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***A Delta class freighter can  
carry anything—maybe more  
than its skipper can bear!***

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A delta class freighter isn't pretty to look at, but it can be adapted to carry most anything, and occasionally even to carry it profitably. So when I saw one I didn't recognize sitting under the gantry at Helmholtz Spaceport, I hurried right over to Operations.

It looked as if I might be able to get my Gasha root off-planet before it started to spoil, after all.

It was the *Delta Crucis*, they told me. She was a tramp, and she hadn't yet been signed for a cargo. The skipper was listed as his own agent. They told me where they thought I could find him, so I drifted over to the Spaceport bar, and looked around.

I found my man quickly enough. He had the young-old look of a deep spacer. He wore a neat but threadbare blue uniform, with the four broad gold rings of command—rather tarnished—on each sleeve. He had a glass of rhal—a liquor that was too potent for my taste—in front of him at ten o'clock in the morning, and that wasn't a good sign. But he looked sober enough.

So I picked up a large schooner of beer at the bar and strolled over to his table in the far corner away from the window.

"Mind if I join you?" I asked casually. "I hate to drink alone."

He stared at me for a minute out of those pale-blue spacer's eyes of his, until I figured he thought he had me catalogued.

Then he motioned me to the chair across from his at the small table. We sat for a few minutes in silence, sizing each other up.

"That's a mighty nice looking freighter out there on pad seven," I said at last. "Yours?"

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He uncapped his glass, took a sip of rhal, snicked the cover back, and let the heady stuff evaporate in his mouth. He breathed in sharply in the approved manner, but he didn't even shudder. He just nodded slowly, once.

That appeared to pass the conversational ball back to me. "I might have a cargo for you, if you can handle it," I said. "I hear these Delta class ships can manage almost anything, but this is a rough one. The *Annabelle* is the only ship in the area built to take my stuff, and she's grounded with transposer troubles."

He cocked one sandy eyebrow at me. I interpreted this to be a request for the nature of my cargo, so I told him, and let him ponder about it for a while.

"Gasha root," he said at last, and nodded once. "I can handle it. That'll be easy, for *Delta Crucis*. Like you said, she can handle anything. Her last cargo was a live elephant."

We completed our deal without much trouble. He drove a hard bargain, but a fair one, and he had plenty of self-confidence. He signed a contingent-on-satisfactory-delivery contract, and that's unusual for a ship that's handling Gasha. Hadn't thought I'd be so lucky. Gasha is tricky stuff.

We went over to the Government office to complete the deal—customs arrangements, notarizations, posting bonds and so forth—but we finally signed the contract, all legal and binding. His name turned out to be Bart Hannah.

Then, by unspoken consent, we went back to the bar.

It was after noon, by that time, so I had a Scotch, and then I had another. I was so relieved to have found a ship for my cargo that I didn't even think about lunch.

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I got more and more mellow and talkative as time went by, but the skipper just sat there, breathing rhal. He didn't seem to change a bit.

Something had been bothering me, though, and I finally figured out what it was. So I stopped talking about my farming troubles, and asked Captain Hannah a direct question.

"You say you carried an *elephant*?" I asked. "A *live* elephant? In a *space ship*?"

He nodded. "It's an animal," he said. "A very large animal. From Earth."

"I know all about that," I said. "We're civilized here. We're not just a bunch of back-planet hicks, you know. We study all about the Home Planet at school. But why—and how—would anyone take an elephant into space?"

He stared at me for a while, then took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "I'll tell you," he said.

"After all, it's nothing to be really ashamed of." He pondered for a full minute. "It all started just a few standard months ago, on Condor—over in Sector Sixty-four W."

"Sixty-four W?" I broke in. "That's clear over on the other side of the Galaxy."

He looked at me for awhile, and then went on just as if I hadn't spoken.

"I'd been doing all right with *Delta Crucis*," he said, "and salting away plenty of cash, but I wasn't satisfied. It was mostly short-haul stuff—ten or twenty light years—and it was mostly run-of-the-mill loads. Fleeder jewels, kharran, morab fur—that sort of thing, you know. I was getting bored. They said a Delta class freighter could carry just about anything, and I wanted to prove it. So when I heard that a rich eccentric, one planet out, on Penguin, might have an interesting job for me, I flitted right over.

"The Prinkip of Penguin wasn't just rich. He was *rich* rich. Penguin has almost twice the diameter of this planet, but it's light enough to have about the same surface gravity. To give you an idea, its two biggest bodies of water are about the size of the Atlantic Ocean, back on the Earth you've studied so much about. On Penguin they call them lakes. And the Prinkip owns the whole planet—free and clear. I should be so lucky with *Delta Crucis*.

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"The Prinkip is a little skinny man, but that doesn't keep him from having a large-size hobby to go with his large-size planet. The Prinkip collects animals—one from each planet in his sector. He had a zoo with nearly three hundred monsters in it—always a sample of the largest kind from whatever planet it came from.

"He showed me around. It was the damndest sight you ever saw. He had one animal called a pflleeg. It was almost two hundred feet long; it walked around on two legs and sang like a bird. He had another one that had two hundred and thirty-four legs on a side. I counted them. It had four sides. Didn't care which one was up. He had animals under glass that didn't breathe at all. He had one animal under a microscope that was about a thousandth of an inch long, but he told me that it was the biggest one on Fartolp. He had a big satellite stuck up overhead in a one-revolution-a-day orbit for animals that needed light gravity. He had thirty-seven more beasts in that. All in all, he had one animal from every planet in Sector Sixty-four W that had life. He figured that he needed just one more animal to complete his collection. He wanted a sample of a creature from the Home Planet; one live and healthy sample of Earth's biggest animal. And he wanted to know if I could ship it to him.

"Well, I didn't give the matter too much thought. After all, I said to myself, if somebody had managed a three hundred ton monster almost two hundred feet long, I ought to be able to manage a little bitty elephant. So I said yes, and I gave him a contingent-on-satisfactory-delivery contract, for one adult specimen of Earth's largest animal, male or female, in good condition.

"It wasn't until about that time that the Prinkip told me how that biggest monster had been shipped. It had arrived in a cardboard box, wrapped in cotton. It seems that pflleeg eggs weigh just a little under three ounces. Well, I'd been done but I still figured I could make delivery."

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He lapsed into silence for a moment, thinking deeply. "Did you know that there are two kinds of elephants on Earth, the African and the Indian, and that they aren't exactly the same size?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Our schools don't go that far," I said.

He nodded. "Neither do ours. So I immediately bought an Indian elephant. They're the kind, back on the Home planet, that you can find tame and easy to handle. They're also the wrong kind. The only reason I didn't head right back with it is that I was having trouble figuring out how to carry it in the *Crucis*. Even an Indian elephant weighs about six tons. At least, mine did. In itself, that's not a very big load, but the trip back would take a good many months of subjective time, and of course elephants eat on subjective time. And how they eat! The food I carried would weigh the same as the elephant.

"I wondered how elephants would like weightlessness, so I took my Indian elephant up on a little jaunt around Earth's satellite. The Moon, they call it. Elephants don't like weightlessness at all." He paused, and signaled the bartender for another drink. "I hope you never have to clean up after a space-sick elephant," he said darkly.

"That meant that I'd have to put spin on the *Crucis* for the entire trip back to Penguin. It's hard enough to try to navigate in hyperspace with spin on your ship, but that wasn't the worst of it. An elephant is a tremendous amount of off-center load for a ship with a large fraction of a one-gee spin on it. Too much load even to think about handling. Even though I couldn't come up with an answer, right off hand, I went ahead and turned in my Indian elephant on an African model. Beulah was her name, and she was a husky girl. She weighed in at just a little more than eight tons."

I waved my whisky glass at Captain Hannah. "But I don't see your problem," I said. "If you put the elephant on one side and his food on the other, there wouldn't be any off-balanced load, would there?"

"Not until the food was eaten, anyway," said the skipper witheringly, and I subsided with a fresh drink.

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"Beulah was kind of cute, for all of her tonnage," said the skipper. "She had two enormous tusks, and a pair of ears like wings, and a nose that was longer than her tail. But she was mighty friendly, after she got to know me. She'd pick me up and carry me around, if I asked her to. And she'd eat right out of my hand. She turned out to be even tamer than the Indian elephant. All I had to do was figure out how to carry her.

"For a starter, I figured like you said, to have Beulah on one side of the cargo compartment, and her chow on the other. Then I calculated to have my own supplies on the other two sides of the space, so that I could move them away from her as her food stocks got smaller, and hold the balance that way. That wasn't enough, of course, so I built a couple of water tanks on the opposite side of the ring from Beulah.

"As you know, not much can be done about moving water around in a space ship—it's got its own cooling chores to perform—but every little bit helped. Finally, I jockeyed the master computer and the auxiliary computer down and ran them on tracks, so I could slide them around to compensate for Beulah's appetite. Some lead slugs brought the auxiliary's weight up equal to the master's, and they also brought my total load up to the absolute maximum that I could carry.

"It was almost enough. But a miss is as good as a mile, for a space ship. I was stuck, and there didn't seem to be a thing I could do about it. Even if I could have carried more weight it wouldn't have helped. Any more mass in the cargo compartment would have thrown the c.g. too far aft." He beckoned for more rhal.

"So what did you do?" I prompted. "You did say that you carried the elephant, didn't you?"

"Sure. Like I said, a Delta class freighter can do almost anything. Beulah gave me the answer herself. If you've ever lived with an elephant, one thing becomes clear mighty fast. They're a mighty efficient machine for converting fodder into elephant droppings. So I made a bin on the opposite side of the compartment from Beulah, and let her gradually fill it while she ate me out of balance. The weight of the—what's a nice word for it?—was just enough to let me keep the whole setup in dynamic balance."

"Compost heap?" I suggested dreamily, picturing the arrangement in my mind. There was poetry in it. Or was it poetic justice that I had in mind?

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"That's it," said Captain Hannah. "Compost heap. Well, I started the journey with the ship full and Beulah and the compost heap empty. I finished pretty much the other way around. I suppose it sounds easy, but it wasn't.

"I started off with Beulah chained down in the middle of the compartment, and everything stacked around her. She didn't want me to leave when I went up to the bridge to take off, and hollered as piteously as you can imagine. But I couldn't have a nurse for her—mahout, they call them. I couldn't spare the weight. Or the salary, for that matter. She was chained down, so she couldn't move around and upset the balance.

"After chemical take off, we slid into parking orbit as sweet as you please. I hurried down to shift the load around. I didn't want to stay weightless any longer than I had to, because I remembered that sick Indian elephant—and Beulah outweighed him by almost two tons, and had a larger stomach to match. Of course, the Indian elephant had gone into orbit on a full belly, and I hadn't let Beulah have a bite to eat for hours. It made a difference, let me tell you.

"Beulah made trouble in her own way, though. As soon as I got within reach, she grabbed me with that long nose of hers, and wouldn't let go. She didn't hurt me or anything like that; she just wanted company in her misery. I couldn't coax her with food. The very thought of food made her shudder.

"I couldn't reach her chains to cut her loose, and I couldn't reach the radio to call for help. If it hadn't been for the Ionosphere Guard, I might have starved to death. I'd hired the parking orbit for twelve hours, and when I was still in it after that time, Port Control started to holler. I could hear them on my loud speaker, but I couldn't answer them. So the Ionosphere Guard finally sent up a small craft with a lieutenant and a three-man crew in it to see what was wrong.

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"Those sailors were good. They didn't even look surprised; they just went to work as if they handled elephants in space every day. They drove four lines through the ring bolts I'd welded in the spin-deck, cast Beulah loose and hauled her over to her new spot as neat as you please.

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"Then, no nonsense, the lieutenant ordered Beulah to let loose of me. She did, too.

"After that they left, stopping for just one drink of my good bourbon. I didn't drink rhal then.

"I wirelessed Port Control my penalty fees and another twelve hour's hire in the orbit, and started shifting the load. I was working on an empty stomach, and Beulah still didn't feel hungry, so she didn't remind me that I hadn't eaten. I almost collapsed before I got the job done.

"Then I put spin on, which made Beulah comfortable at last, and tried to juggle the ship into a hyper-trajectory, still without stopping for food or sleep. It didn't take long before Beulah started squalling for supper. After I fed her I had to adjust balance all over again. By that time I was pushing my new twelve-hour limit, and I didn't give much of a damn any more. I just counted to ten and pushed the button. Then I turned in and slept until Beulah started squalling for breakfast. I ignored her until I ate about three squares in a row, then I fed her and adjusted balance. After that I checked my trajectory.

"It was the best I've ever made in twenty-four years of jumping. It was beautiful.

"So I turned back in again and slept until Beulah woke me for lunch. I didn't know it at the time, but Beulah was eating for two. That possibility probably should have occurred to me earlier, what with the name 'Beulah', but you can't think of everything, and there I was, the first man to go into hyperspace with an elephant. Anyway, it didn't even worry me, even when I found out about it. I checked the contract. Everything seemed to be well covered. And according to my book on elephants, Beulah should still be only a potential mother when we reached Penguin. As a matter of fact, the whole idea made me feel just a little bit proud. Like a father, you know?

"What with having to shift weights after every meal, and Beulah setting the schedule for meals, I was kept mighty busy. My self-winding wristwatch overwound itself and stopped, in spite of the advertisements about it, and I didn't find out for almost two weeks, subjective, that Beulah's stomach ran fast. What's more, I think she knew it. Because when I finally woke up to what was going on, and started to run her schedule by the clock, she didn't fuss a bit. Beulah's a clever girl.

"I was so worn out when we finally reached Penguin that I just slid into orbit, kept spin on, laid out a couple of extra meals for Beulah and slept the clock around. The Prinkip was mighty mad about it when I finally turned on my radio, but I told him I had my cargo ready for delivery and where did he want me to put it? So he calmed down and gave me the coordinates.

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"Of course, I had to take off the spin and shift Beulah back to the landing deck, and there wasn't any Ionosphere Guard around to help me if I got into any kind of trouble. So I was mighty careful. I put the chains on Beulah again, and then set up trip ropes so I could cut her loose without getting inside of reach of that nose of hers. Then I ran lines back to the first set of ring bolts, so I could drag her back, weightless, without any trouble. Beulah looked a little unhappy, but didn't make any fuss about it all. I started to take spin off, giving the orders to the angle jets through the computer right down in the cargo compartment, so the old girl wouldn't worry about where I was.

"Beulah didn't squall as her weight came off this time. She just reached down and tripped loose

the chains around her ankles. Did I tell you that she was mighty clever?"

I nodded.

"Well, she started around that spin deck after me. I punched into the computer the maximum order for spin reduction, and started around the spin deck to keep away from her. Beulah grabbed hold of the computer with her nose—for support, I guess—when she got over there. She yanked the whole thing clear off the deck, breaking its cable. *Crucis* lurched once.

"And I ended up in the compost heap.

"With Beulah way off center, and with that last wild burst from the jets before they cut off, the ship was gyrating in a way that made *my* stomach uneasy. It didn't seem to bother Beulah, though. She just wanted to be near me. I got out of there fast, and went up onto the bridge.

"The main computer was out, of course. I couldn't interrogate the auxiliary computer remotely, so I had to fly that wobbling ship to a stop by the seat of my pants. I did it, too.

"Then I went back to the cargo compartment and hauled Beulah into the center. She didn't make any more trouble—she was sorry for what she had done.

"The coordinates the Prinkip had given me looked almighty close to a big pond that I didn't recall having seen before, but I was too busy making a landing with minimum fuel to ask him about it. I finally fought her down safely with one leg of my tripod actually in the pond, and clouds of steam rising up around *Delta Crucis*. I call it a pond. But on a normal-size planet it would be a good big lake.

"Anyway, I had made it safely to Penguin, and my elephant was alive and healthy. I congratulated Beulah when I untied her, and then I took her outside to meet the Prinkip. I think I was a little proud of myself, and of Beulah, and of *Delta Crucis*, too."

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I was so stirred by hearing about this successful conclusion of Captain Hannah's mission that I shook his hand warmly and ordered a round of drinks for everyone in the room. Fortunately, it was not very crowded at the time.

"That's not quite the end of the story," said the skipper. "You see, the Prinkip had built the pond to keep Beulah in. He had somehow gotten the idea that I was bringing him a whale."

I looked blank.

"An Earth mammal. It lives in the oceans, and runs to maybe seventy or eighty tons."

I sat down slowly, and then made a sudden dive for my contract for the use of the *Delta Crucis*.

The skipper nodded. "I had a contingent contract with the Prinkip, too," he said, "and I hadn't delivered. I still haven't figured out how to make delivery of a whale, but I will some day.

"And if you're looking for that part of our contract where you agree to store any residual cargo I may be carrying, it's all legal and binding. Until I get back from hauling your Gasha root, you'll have to care for one adult female African elephant. But I'm sure you'll get to like Beulah as much as I have. She's a mighty clever elephant."

I called the waiter over and ordered a beaker of rhiial.

"But you're lucky at that," said Hannah. "Check subparagraph f of paragraph 74 of our contract: Incidental accrual. When Beulah has her baby, the little tyke will be all yours."

Now I know why Captain Hannah drinks rhiial in the morning.

So do I.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK AN ELEPHANT FOR THE PRINKIP \*\*\*

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