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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CHASERS ***



THE CHASERS

By DANIEL F. GALOUYE

Illustrated by Harrington

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Civilizations must make sense somehow. But was this one the gaudy, impossible exception?

As the dust drifted clear of the ship's landing skids, at least two things became obvious:

One—although they had missed the city (if that's what it was) by miles, they had nevertheless managed to slam down near one of the numerous rural estates.

Two—the landscape would be crawling with Zaortian Fuzzy Tails for a long while to come. They were still pouring out of hatches sprung open by the crunching impact.

Kent Cassidy untangled himself from the control column and plucked one of the Fuzzy Tails from his neck. The creature scampered around until it found the ruptured hatch, then scurried through to join the squealing zoological exodus.

"There goes ten thousand credits' worth of cargo," groaned Gene Mason. His stout form was slumped in dejection before the view port.

Cassidy sniffed the refreshing air that was drifting into the ship. "Any idea where we are?"

"After the directional stabilizer blew, we made three blind jumps, all in the direction of Galactic Center. We could be *anywhere* between Zaort Seven and the Far Rim."

"Hey, look," said Cassidy.



From the hatchway, the sumptuous estate sprawled nearby, its many gabled manor closed off behind a high wire fence. Cassidy squinted, but failed to recognize the bold, flowing architectural style.

A small, bent figure clung to the wire netting of the fence. He was shouting at the ship, but his excited words were no match for the decompression hisses of the auxiliary drive.

"Humanoid?" Mason suggested.

"Human, I'd say." Cassidy gestured toward the gear locker. "Better break out the translator."

In baggy trousers and sagging blouse, the man raced back and forth behind the fence—the picture of frustrated anger. However, large, doleful eyes, complemented by a bald head and huge, pendulous ear lobes, belied his furious actions.

Presently the squeals of the Fuzzy Tails trailed off in the distance and the auxiliary drive quieted with a final sigh. And now the native's shouts rang out distinct and loud:

"Quick! From here get you! Shoo! Scram! Or out there I'll come and apart tear you!"

"It's English!" Mason exclaimed.

"Of a sort. Archaic, but understandable. And not at all friendly."

Mason scratched his blunt chin. "Guess we're not too far off the beaten star paths, eh?"

Cassidy could find no grounds for challenging this observation as they started down the ladder—not until he looked overhead and saw three suns shining in the same sky. As far as he knew, there were no settled trinary systems.

Beyond the fence the native, a wisp of a man was still fuming. "The hell away from here get! You I'm warning—no closer come!"

Mason displayed a half frown. "He's sure a sour cuss."

"You stay with the ship," said Cassidy. "I'll see what's fouling his tubes."

Before Cassidy reached the fence, his pet Fuzzy Tail came scampering from behind a bush. It clambered up his trousers and wrapped itself around his neck. This encouraged the speculation that perhaps the shipment of Tails could be bartered for repairs to the stabilizer—if there was a local space technology, and *if* they could corral the animals.

The native grew even more frenzied now as Cassidy drew up before him.

"Trespasser! Back get! *My* property this be! Scram! You I'll kill!"

The Fuzzy Tail uncoiled itself from around Cassidy's neck. Perching on his shoulder, it fussed back at the native in chirping, excited tones. It not only acted at times as though it owned Cassidy, but it also exercised a personal responsibility for his welfare.

"Quiet!" Cassidy snapped out.

It caught both the Fuzzy Tail and the old man by surprise. The animal bounded for cover while the native rocked back on his heels.

"Be you not just a—*little bit* afraid?" His eyebrows mounted the wrinkled expanse of his forehead.

The nearby hedge rustled and parted to let through a dark-haired girl whose tanned skin suggested accustomed exposure to the multiple sunlight. Wearing a belted tunic that lacked inches of reaching her knees, she confronted the old man calmly.



"It's all about what, Papa?" she asked, with a trace of an amused smile.

"Trespassers! On *our* property, Riva! The alarm sound! Scat! To the woods take! Or a dead duck you be!"

"Now, Papa," she chided. Then, through the fence, "Him you musn't mind. It's only his duty he's

attending to."

From the distance, Cassidy had suspected the man was of Terran descent. Now, with Riva in the picture, he was certain this world was stocked either by intent or accident with true humans.

"We're from Terra," he said.

She frowned. "Ter-ra?"

"Earth. The original world—"

Incomprehension flooded her even features. But her confusion was only temporary. "Let's play."

It seemed like an altogether acceptable suggestion, Cassidy thought, eyeing the attractive girl. But he went on, "This is our ship and—"

"Ship?" Then she chased away her puzzlement with a sudden smile. "Some nice games I know."

There was no space technology on this planet, Cassidy decided. They'd be strictly on their own as far as repairing the directional stabilizer was concerned.

By this time Papa, his eyes focused afar, had exploded again. "Charge!" he roared. "After him! Wa-hoo! Away don't let him get!" He was gripping the fence and straining toward the field.

Cassidy turned and saw, in the distance, a skimmer vehicle floating along several feet off the ground. In full pursuit was a shouting youth who paused occasionally to seize a rock and hurl it at the craft.

The old man turned toward his daughter. "A good chase that be. Bet he wins."

"Not a chance." The girl frowned. "That be Nedal. Not so swift is he. Loses interest too quick, he does."

She surveyed Cassidy. "Be you a chaser?"

"No, but I could do with a couple of stiff shots."

This drew Papa's attention back to the matter at hand. "Trespassers! The road hit! Scat! Some dust kick up!"

"Quiet!" Cassidy shouted. "Will you listen a minute? I—"

Two loyal Fuzzy Tails came charging up to the fence and added their raucous chatter to Papa's screeching diatribe, which had continued unchecked despite Cassidy's loud, desperate plea.

In the next instant, though, it seemed that a dam had burst overhead. Materializing from nowhere, at least a ton of water poured down on the agile-tongued native, the two Fuzzy Tails, Riva and Cassidy himself, bringing an abrupt end to all the commotion.

The animals streaked for the safety of the bushes while Papa and the girl dived back through the hedge. Bedraggled, Cassidy headed for the ship, wondering what sort of meteorological quirk he had encountered.

"No, sir," he said some time later as he attacked the directional selector with pliers and a screwdriver, "I don't like the setup. I don't like it worth a damn."

Mason traced the power lead to the junction box beside the hatch. "Maybe they aren't *all* like that."

"In this sort of place, chances are that the first people you run into are typical. I'm afraid—"

"Say!" Mason interrupted, staring outside. "Look at this!"

Cassidy went over to the hatch and watched a dozen or so men sprinting across the field, their voices rising in excited waves. A lithe young woman was in full flight before them. But she was screaming in delight as she turned now and then to beckon them on. One overtook her and brought her down with a waist tackle. She rebounded to her feet, however, and took off again.

Two of the pursuers collided and sprawled on the ground. They sprang up and tore into each other. Unconcerned with the personal dispute, the chase struck off in a new direction, heading toward the ship as it paralleled one of the nearby fenced-in estates.

Behind the wire mesh, a burly young man came charging down the main steps of the manor and raced along with the others.

"That be the way!" he yelled encouragement. "Her go get! It's gaining you are! Hurry!"

He drew up in time to avoid crashing into the side fence, then stood there watching the chase recede in the distance.

Within a hundred feet of the ship, one of the men fell out of the group, panting. He squinted at the vessel, then crept forward, circling to the right. Within arm's reach, he walked back and forth alongside the hull, giving it a close inspection. Finally he paused and fumbled with his clothes.

Cassidy started. "Look what he's doing!"

"Against the side of the ship, too!" said Mason.

Hearing them, the native jerked his head up toward the hatch, then backed off for a better view.

"Stinkers!" he yelled, shaking his fist. "Out here come and fight! Take you both on I can!"

When they only gaped, he whirled and sped off to rejoin the chase.

"You see?" said Cassidy. "Now what do you think?"

"I think we'd better get that directional stabilizer working."

It took more than an hour to locate the trouble. "The rectifier circuit's shot," Cassidy said finally. "But maybe we can patch it up. Some of the amplifiers I suppose we can do without. But a hyper-oscillator we've got to have."

"Say, you're doing it too," said Mason.

"What?"

"Talking like the natives."

Cassidy looked up. "Guess it's something that grows on you. Well, what do we do now?"

"Maybe the natives can help us."

"If they don't even know where they're from, they probably left their volts and amps behind too. But that's only an assumption."

"In that case," Mason said with a sigh, "there's only one thing left to do—take Riva up on her invitation to, ah, play."

"Funny," Cassidy grunted, heading for the hatch.

"I was only joking."

"I'm not. If we can get in that house, we'll know for sure whether or not they've developed electronic devices."

Halfway across the field, they were almost run down by the laughing girl and her retinue of galloping suitors, if that's what they were. She was a well-proportioned blonde whose wind-frothed tresses suggested a nymph in flight.

At the fence, they were confronted by Riva, who smiled up at Cassidy and said, "You I was just going to come and get. Ready to play yet you are?"

He looked away and cleared his throat. "Not quite, Riva. We'd like to visit your house."

"It's some interesting games I know. Enjoying them you'd surely be." Her smile, revealing even teeth that contrasted ruddy cheeks, was as persistent as her intent on playing.

Staring at the girl, Cassidy wrestled with a pang of wistful envy over the Olympian life he had witnessed thus far on this world. Maybe they were all irresponsible and childlike. But was that bad?

Mason pointed in alarm toward the meadow in front of the next estate. An ominous-looking, furry thing, supported on six or eight spindly legs, was racing across their field of vision.

"Hurt you he won't," the girl assured them, noticing their apprehension. "Nothing to be afraid of there is."

"*What* is it?" Cassidy was still trying to determine whether it was an overgrown spider or a dry-land octopus.

"Look!" Mason exclaimed. "It's on a leash!"

And Cassidy noticed the thong that extended from the creature to the human who was running along behind it.

"To Wolruf he belongs," the girl explained. "One of them I can get for you too—if you want."

Her slender hand reached out through the fence and tugged at Cassidy's sleeve. "To chase me wouldn't you like?" she asked, pouting.

Glancing behind her, Cassidy spotted the girl's father bearing down on them in a sprint that was nothing short of phenomenal for his age. He began shouting with the last few strides and was in full lung when he hurled himself at the fence. "Git! Out! Away! I'll—"

Riva moved back and glanced overhead and Papa, seeing some hidden significance in her gesture, lowered his voice.

"You I'll tear into and apart I'll rip!" he went on in a menacing whisper. "Your limbs I'll scatter like—"

"Papa, it's not afraid of you they are."

"They're *not*?" He was disappointed.

"The house they want to come in and see."

He began working up a rage again, but caught himself and looked up into his daughter's face.

"Mean you—*my* house they want to see?"

When she nodded Papa seized the lowest strand of wire and lifted the fence high enough for Cassidy and Mason to crawl under. "Why, arranged it can be, I think."

Its architectural prominences rendered shadowless in the tri-solar light, the manor was even more imposing close at hand. Of stone construction, it flaunted millwork and beams whose rich carvings would have been welcome on any mansion in the known Galaxy.

Mounting the steps, Mason observed, "Nice little layout they've got here."

Riva moved closer to Cassidy. "Inside is cozy," she said behind a coy smile. "Play we can *really* in there."

Papa had been at the door for some time, fumbling with the lock. In a burst of impatience, he drew off and gave it a solid kick. Then he went back and tried rattling the handle. After a while there was a click and it swung open.

Cassidy followed him into a blaze of iridescent color and unfamiliar form. The huge, circular room was like a vast diorama and it was impossible to tell exactly where the solid objects blended in with the jumbled geometric pattern of the wall.

He walked across a carpet of undulant fibers that reached well above his ankles. And he tripped across a padded, Z-shaped slab that protruded from the wall but slithered into a U and retracted as soon as it received the burden of his weight.

Laughing, Riva helped him up and he paused for a closer visual inspection of his outlandish surroundings. Objects of weird shapes and unguessable purposes hung from the ceiling, some changing form and size as he watched. Scattered about were articles of furniture (he guessed) that resembled giant starfish supported at their centers and extremities by coiled springs. Only, each arm was shaped like a trough that ran into the bowl-like central depression of the piece.

A gleeful scream sounded behind them and Papa went tearing by. With a running leap, he landed on an arm of one of the starfish. Its supporting spring contracted under the weight, then catapulted him ceilingward. When he came down again, it was on an arm of another starfish, then another.

The fourth collapsed, depositing him on the floor, and its spring went twanging across the room. Struggling to his feet, he staggered into something resembling a clothes tree, knocked it over and sprawled beside it.

He roared with delight as he snapped the stem of the thing across his knee and hurled the pieces at the ceiling. They scored direct hits on one of the bulky objects suspended overhead and it came crashing down with a twinkling roar amid a shower of sparks.

"Yow-ee!" he exuberated. "So much fun I never had!"

Riva helped him up. "Papa, it's control yourself you must. The last time—remember?"

But he only shook her off and went bounding through an archway. His hectic progress through the house was punctuated by sounds of crashing destruction.

"Honestly," Riva said, spreading her hands, "what to do with him I don't know."

Cassidy continued staring in the direction the old man had gone. "He's wrecking the place!"

"That he is," she admitted sighing. "And such a nice joint it be, too."

"He's just plain nuts!" said Mason.

Riva smiled. "But it's *so* much fun he has."

Cassidy moved away to get a better view of a silvery gray screen set in the wall and flanked by twin rows of dials and knobs.

"You got stereovision, Riva?" he asked.

Mason went over and twisted several of the controls until a soft light began suffusing the screen.

"Ster-eo-what?" the girl asked.

"Video, television—pictures with sound."

Her face brightened. "Pictures we got—sounds too. Right in that little window."

Just then Papa, uninhibited as ever, came storming back into the room with a lusty "Ya-hoo!" He lost his footing and crashed against the screen. Sparks shot out and the picture that was beginning to take shape faded into obscurity.

"It that settles, Papa!" Riva said, exasperated. "Outside I'm going and for what happens to you I'm not responsible!"

At the door, she paused and smiled at Cassidy. "It'll have to be out there that we play, but no less fun will we have. Put on my best cavorting clothes I'm going to."

Mason turned the knobs again, but produced nothing more than the smell of burning insulation and a few snickers from Papa.

"At least," Cassidy observed, "they evidently do know something about electronics. All we have to

do now is run down one of the technicians and we might get the parts we need for the stabilizer."

Outside Mason dropped down on the steps and sat with his shoulders slumping. "Damnedest thing I've ever seen," he mumbled.

Cassidy paced to the edge of the porch and stared out over the field. A monstrous skimmer craft appeared in the distance, floating over toward what seemed to be a pile of trash in front of one of the estates. Twin beams of crimson light darted from the nose of the vehicle and played over the mound. In seconds, the heap had melted away and the skimmer floated on.

Wolruf was still walking his octopus-spider pet. There were now two packs of youths out chasing girls. And another skimmer car was having no difficulty surviving the stone-throwing assault of not one, but two dedicated pursuers. Outside of that, Cassidy noted, things appeared quite normal.

Mason slapped his thighs and rose. "You go see if Riva knows how we can contact the authorities. I'm going back and stay with the ship."

Cassidy watched him crawl under the fence, then went around the side of the house. When he caught sight of the girl, she was just disappearing into a smaller structure that might have been a guest house or garage.

Following, he knocked on the door and called out her name anxiously.

"To play are you ready?" There was an eager note in her voice as it came through the panel. "In come on. It's all set I'll be in a jiffy."

He turned the knob, stepped half into the room, lurched back outside and slammed the door behind him. "*Riva!*"

The door started to open, then closed again as the girl laughed. "Oh, all right. Funny you be. It's to play you want, don't you?"

He assured her that he did and added, "But there's something we have to talk about now, Riva."

"Talk, talk, talk. And it gets you where? Only wastes time, it does."

A moment later the door opened and she stood there smiling, with legs apart and hands on her hips. But he hardly had time to react to the skiminess of her halter and skirt.

"Now," she urged as she sprang up on her toes and kissed him full on the lips, "like a chaser make! To the races we're off!"

With that, she whirled and went streaking through the next room.

He surveyed his surroundings. It was an ordinary bedroom with conventional furnishings—perhaps a bit crude even for a culture without any space technology. But, then, it didn't seem uncharacteristic, considering the circumstances.

Recognizing the contrast between this guest house and the manor, he frowned as he started off in search of the girl. A worrisome suspicion dogged his thoughts—there had to be sense to Riva and her father and this sumptuous estate, natives who made sport of chasing skimmer craft and voluptuous women when they weren't otherwise indiscreetly occupied. But what?

In the kitchen, he discovered Riva's shapely leg protruding from behind a cabinet. He suspected the exposure was not as accidental as she wanted him to believe. He was certain of that when, as he seized her ankle, she crawled out laughing.

Now she stood before him, unsmiling and impatient, and her slender arms reached out for his shoulders.

"Riva, this is serious!" He forced her hands down again. "I'm in trouble. I need help."

"It's to help you I've been trying all along."

"I've got to get in touch with the authorities—your government."

She looked blank.

He simplified it, "Your leaders."

"Oh, it's easy that is. There be Aline and Clio and Leah and—but that Leah! It's the cake she takes! Thirty chasers she led on the best drag-out of all. Two whole days it lasted!"

"No, Riva! Not *that* kind of leader. I mean—well, someone who gets things done. The kind who gets behind things and—"

"That be Leanc. Behind those floating cars he's getting all the time. And how he can throw so many rocks I'll never know!"

He mussed his hair in frustration, then composed himself. "How do I get to the city?"

"That crowded place with all the big houses?" When he nodded, she went on, "It's never been there I have. *Now* we play?"

He drew in a hopeless breath. "All right. Now we play. You go hide."

She radiated a warm eagerness as she initiated the game all over again with a kiss and then went sprinting toward the front of the house. He watched her disappear through the next room, then went out the nearest door, heading for the fence and his ship beyond. It had required no small degree of restraint not to go racing off after her.

At the corner of the manor he was bowled over by a shouting Papa who was in full flight as he shot out around a hedge, heading for the guest house.

"All your fault it is!" he cried, recovering his balance and plunging on. "You it be who caused this! that I'll remember!"

Cassidy sat up, arms resting on his updrawn knees, and stared after the old man.

"Ow! Riva! Ouch!" Papa clutched his rear as he neared the cottage. "Help! Oh, my aching back!"

Cassidy found Mason frozen in the shadow of the ship, fascinated by another girl chase that was in progress nearby.

The swirl of action swerved toward him and Mason tensed, shifting from one foot to the other. With the wind pressing her clothes in revealing tightness about her, the flaxen-haired sprite swept past and he lunged for her.

"Mason!" Cassidy shouted.

"Seemed like a good idea," Mason explained, checking himself. "Wonder what it takes to get in on that chase."

Cassidy forced a fetching thought of Riva out of his mind. "What we ought to be wondering is how soon we can blast off."

"But if we get spaceborne before the stabilizer's working, we'll only be floundering around again."

Cassidy started for the ladder. "There's one thing we *can* do—patch up the hatches and jump over to another spot on this planet. Maybe we'll find somebody who's normal, at least."

But Mason caught his arm and pointed toward Riva's estate where a skimmer car was now parked on the side of the manor opposite the guest house.

"Anybody who can drive one of those things," he suggested, "must know something about the city and how to get there. Maybe he'll even give us a lift."

Mason circled the skimmer craft. "It's a fine piece of workmanship," he said in admiration.

"I'll say," Cassidy agreed. "If we can find out where that was made, I'm sure we'll—"

His vision was suddenly cut off by a pair of hands that came around his head from behind and clamped themselves over his eyes. If he had any doubt as to the identity of their owner, it was soon cleared up by a soft voice next to his ear:

"Not right this is. It's chasing *me* you're supposed to be."

"Riva," he said, facing her, "we'd like to meet the person who came here in that skimmer."

"Excuses, excuses," she complained. "Always something more important than a chase it is."

"Take us to the driver of that thing," Mason prompted. "We—"

But he tensed and stared up in alarm toward the field. Cassidy followed his gaze to the skimmer vehicle that had earlier reduced a pile of trash to nothing. The craft was just now floating up to their ship.

Its two beams of sizzling red light swept over the hull from stem to stern, again and again—until there was nothing left of their ship but incandescent molten metal.

Mason displayed a sickened, then resigned expression, thrust his hands in his pockets and shuffled off toward the field.

"Getting in on one of those chases I think I'll be," he said.

But he paused outside the fence, turned to say something, then lurched back. "Cassidy! Watch out! There's one of those things!"

The spider-octopus came into view from around the rear of the manor and crawled leisurely toward the guest house. Its body, covered with a multitude of eyes and an unkempt mat of fuzz, was like a coal-black knob perched atop hairy stilts.

Evidently, Cassidy guessed as he dived behind a hedge and pulled the girl with him, the thing had gotten away from its master, for it was trailing its leash in the dust.

"It's hurt you he won't," Riva assured, quite puzzled over his apprehension. "He belongs to—"

But Cassidy clamped a hand over her mouth.

The thing reached the guest house and made a queer noise in front of the door.

Papa came outside on the double.

The spider-octopus picked up the other end of the thong and clamped its braceletlike device around the old man's wrist.

Grinning, Papa pulled toward the gate, straining at the leash.

Eventually, Cassidy was aware of Riva's smiling, inquisitive face in front of his.

"Play?" she invited.

And, glancing back at the charred remains of his ship, he didn't see why not.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CHASERS ***

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