

More Tales from the Draco Tavern



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MORE TALES FROM THE DRACO
TAVERN...

FOLK TALE

A lot of what comes out of Xenobiology these days is classified, and it Doesn't come out. The Graduate Studies Complex is in the Mojave Desert. It makes security easier.

Sireen Burke's smile and honest blue retina prints and the microcircuitry in her badge got her past the gate. I was ordered Out of the car. A soldier offered

me coffee and a bench in the shade of the guard post. Another searched my luggage.

He found a canteen, a sizable hunting knife in a locking sheath, and a microwave beamer. He became coldly polite. He didn't thaw much when I said that he could hold them for awhile.

I waited.

Presently Sireen came back for me. "I got you an interview with Dr. McPhee," she told me on the way up the drive. "Now it's your baby. He'll listen as long as you can keep his interest."

Graduate Studies looked like soap

bubbles: foamcrete sprayed over inflation frames. There was little of military flavor inside. More like a museum. The reception room was gigantic, with a variety of chairs and couches and swings and resting pits for aliens and humans: designs borrowed from the Draco Tavern without my permission.

The corridors were roomy too. Three chirpsithra passed us, eleven feet tall and walking comfortably upright. One may have known me, because she nodded. A dark glass sphere rolled through, nearly filling the corridor; and we had to step into what looked like a classroom to let it pass.

McPhee's office was closet-sized. He certainly didn't interview aliens here, at least not large aliens. Yet he was a mountainous man, six feet four and barrel-shaped and covered with black hair: shaggy brows, full beard, a black mat showing through the V of his blouse. He extended a huge hand across the small desk and said, "Rick Schumann? You're a long way from Siberia."

"I came for advice," I said, and then I recognized him. "B-beam McPhee?"

"Walter, but yes."

The Beta Beam satellite had never been used in war; but when I was seven years old, the Pentagon had arranged a

demonstration. They'd turned it loose on a Perseid meteor shower. Lines of light had filled the sky one summer night, a glorious display, the first time I'd ever been allowed up past midnight. The Beta Beam had shot down over a thousand rocks.

Newscasters had named Walter McPhee for the Beta Beam when he played offensive guard for Washburn University.

B-beam was twenty-two years older, and bigger than life, since I'd last seen him on a television set. There were scars around his right eye, and scarring distorted the lay of his beard. "I was at Washburn on an athletic scholarship," he

told me. "I switched to Xeno when the first chirpsithra ships landed. Got my doctorate six years ago. And I've never been in the Draco Tavern because it would have felt too much like goofing off, but I've started to wonder if that isn't a mistake. You get everything in there, don't you?"

I said it proudly. "Everything that lands on Earth visits the Draco Tavern."

"Folk too?"

"Yes. Not often. Four times in fifteen years. The first time, I thought they'd want to talk. After all, they came a long way-"

He shook his head vigorously. "They'd rather associate with other carnivores. I've talked with them, but it's damn clear they're not here to have fun. Talking to local study groups is a guest-host obligation. What do you know about them?"

"Just what I see. They come in groups, four to six. They'll talk to glig, and of course they get along with chirpsithra. Everything Docs. This latest group was thin as opposed to skeletal, though I've seen both-"

"They're skeletal just before they eat. They don't associate with aliens then, because it turns them mean. They only eat every six days or so, and of course

they're hungry when they hunt."

"You've seen hunts?"

"I'll show you films. Go on."

Better than I'd hoped. "I need to see those films. I've been invited on a hunt."

"Sheen told me."

I said, "This is my slack season. Two of the big interstellar ships took off Wednesday, and we don't expect another for a couple of weeks. Last night there were no aliens at all until-"

"This all happened last night?"

"Yeah. Maybe twenty hours ago. I told Sheen and Gail to go home, but they stayed anyway. The girls are grad students in Xeno, of course. Working in a bar that caters to alien species isn't a job for your average waitress. They stayed and talked with some other Xenos."

"We didn't hear what happened, but we saw it," Sheen said. "Five Folk came in."

"Anything special about them?"

She said, "They came in on all fours, with their heads tilted up to see. One alpha-male, three females and a beta-male, I think. The beta had a wound

along its left side, growing back. They were wearing the usual: translators built into earmuffs, and socks, with slits for the fingers on the forefeet. Their ears were closed tight against the background noise. They didn't try to talk till they'd reached a table and turned on the sound baffle."

I can't tell the Folk apart. They look a little like Siberian elkhounds, if you don't mind the head. The head is big. The eyes are below the jawline, and face forward. There's a nostril on top that closes tight or opens like a trumpet. They weigh about a hundred pounds. Their fingers are above the callus, and they curl up out of the way. Their fur is

black, sleek, with white markings in curly lines. We can't say their word for themselves; their voices are too high and too soft. We call them the Folk because their translators do.

I said, "They stood up and pulled themselves onto ottomans. I went to take their orders. They were talking in nearly supersonic squeaks, with their translators turned off. You had to strain to hear anything. One turned on his translator and ordered five glasses of milk, and a drink for myself if I would join them."

"Any idea why?"

"I was the closest thing to a meat eater?"

"Maybe. And maybe the local alpha-male thought they should get to know something about humans as opposed to grad students. Or-" McPhee grinned. "Had you eaten recently?"

"Yeah. Someone finally built a sushi place near the spaceport. I can't do my own cooking, I'd go nuts if I had to run an alien restaurant too-"

"Raw flesh. They smelled it on your breath."

Oh. "I poured their milk and a double Scotch and soda. I don't usually drink on the premises, but I figured Sheen or Gail could handle anything that came up."

"It was the usual," I said. "What's it like to be human. What's it like to be Folk. Trade items, what are they missing that could improve their life-styles. Eating habits. The big one did most of the talking. I remember saying that we have an ancestor who's supposed to have fed itself by running alongside an antelope while beating it on the head with a club till it fell over. And he told me that his ancestors traveled in clusters-he didn't say packs-and followed herds of plant-eaters to pull down the slow and the sick. Early biological engineering, he said."

McPhee looked worried. "Do the Folk expect you to outrun an antelope?"

"O'boy!" That was a terrible thought. "No, we talked about that too, how brains and civilization cost you other abilities. Smell, for humans. I got a feeling . . . he wanted to think we're carnivores unless we run out of live meat. I tried not to disillusion him, but I had to tell him about cooking, that we like the taste, that it kills parasites and softens vegetables and meat-"

"Why?"

"He asked. Jesus, B-beam, you don't lie to aliens, do you?"

He grinned. "I never have. I'm never sure what they want to hear."

"Well, I never lie to customers.-And he talked about the hunts, how little they test the Folk's animal abilities, how the whole species is getting soft . . . I guess he saw how curious I was. He invited me on a hunt. Five days from now."

"You've got a problem anyone in this building would kill for."

"Ri-ight. But what the hell do they expect of me?"

"Where Docs it take place? The Folk have an embassy not fifty miles from here."

"Yeah, and it's a hunting ground too, and I'll be out there next Wednesday, getting

my own meal. I may have been a little drunk. I did have the wit to ask if I could bring a companion."

"And?" B-beam looked like he was about to spring across the desk into my lap.

"He said yes."

"That's my Nobel Prize calling," said B-beam. "Rick Schumann, will you accept me as your, ah, second?"

"Sure." I didn't have to think hard. Not only did he have the knowledge; he looked like he could strangle a grizzly bear; which might be what they expected of us.

The Folk had arrived aboard a chirpsithra liner, five years after the first chirp landing.

They'd leased a stretch of the Mojave. They'd prearranged the local weather and terrain, over strenuous objections from the Sierra Club, and seeded it with a hundred varieties of plants and a score of animals. Meanwhile they toured the world's national parks in a 727 with a redesigned interior. The media had been fascinated by the sleek black killing machines. They'd have given them even more coverage if the Folk had been more loquacious.

Three years of that, and then the public was barred from the Folk hunting

ground. IntraWorld Cable sued, citing the public's right-to-know. They lost. Certain guest species would leave Earth, and others would kill, to protect their privacy.

IntraWorld Cable would have killed to air this film.

The sunset colors were fading from the sky . . . still a Mojave desert sky, though the land was an alien meadow with patches of forest around it. Grass stood three feet tall in places, dark green verging on black. Alien trees grew bent, as if before a ferocious wind; but they bent in different directions.

Four creatures grazed near a stream.

None of the Folk were in view.

"The Folk don't give a damn about privacy," B-beam said. "It's pack thinking, maybe. They don't mind our inking pictures. I don't think they'd mind our broadcasting everything we've got, world wide. It was all the noisy news helicopters that bothered them. Once we realized that, we negotiated. Now there's one Xenobiology Department lifter and some cameras around the fences."

The creatures might have been a gazelle with ambitions to be a giraffe, but the mouth and eyes and horns gave them away.

Alien. The horns were big and gaudy,

intricately curved and intertwined, quite lovely and quite useless, for the tips pointed inward. The neck was long and slender. The mouth was like a shovel. The eyes, like Folk eyes, were below the jaw hinges; though they faced outward, as with most grazing beasts. The creatures couldn't look up. Didn't the Folk planet have birds of prey? Or heights from which something hungry might leap?

B-beam reclined almost sleepily in a folding chair too small for him. He said, "We call it a melk, a mock elk. Don't picture it evolving the usual way. Notice the horns? Melks were shaped by generations of planned breeding. Like a

show poodle. And the grass, we call it fat grass."

"Why? Hey-"

"Seen them?"

I'd glimpsed a shadow flowing among the trees. The melks had sensed something too. Their heads were up, tilted way up to let them see. A concealed nostril splayed like a small horn.

Three Folk stood upright from the grass, and screamed like steam whistles.

The melks scattered in all directions. Shadows flowed in the black grass. One

melk found two Folk suddenly before it, shrieking. The melk bellowed in despair, wheeled and made for the trees. Too slow. A deer could have moved much faster.

The camera zoomed to follow it.

Into the trees-and into contact with a black shadow. I glimpsed a forefoot/band slashing at the creature's vulnerable throat. Then the shadow was clinging to its back, and the melk tried to run from the forest with red blood spilling down its chest. The rest of the Folk converged on it.

They tore it apart.

They dragged it into the trees before they ate.

Part of me was horrified . . . but not so damn horrified as all that. Maybe I've been with aliens too long. Part of me watched, and noticed the strange configuration of the ribcage, the thickness and the familiar design of legs and knees, and the convenient way the skull split to expose brain when two Folk pulled the horns apart. The Folk left nothing but bone. They split the thick leg bones with their jaws, and gnawed the interiors. When they were finished they rolled the bones into a neat pile and departed at a waddle.

B-beam said, "That's why we don't give

these films to the news. Notice anything?"

"Too much. The one they picked, it wasn't just the smallest. The horns weren't right. Like one grew faster than the other."

"Right."

"None of the Folk were carrying anything or wearing anything. No knives, no clothes, not even those sock-gloves. What do they do in winter?"

"They still hunt naked. What else?"

"The rest drove it toward that one hidden in the woods."

"There's one designated killer. Once the prey's fate is sealed, the rest converge. There are other meat sources. Here-"

There was a turkey-sized bird with wonderful iridescent patterns on its small wings and enormous spreading tail. It flew, but not well. The Folk ran beneath it until it ran out of steam and had to come down into their waiting hands. The rest drew back for the leader to make the kill. B-beam said, "They killed four that day. Want to watch? It all went just about the same way."

"Show me."

I thought I might see. . . right. The third attempt, the bird was making for the

trees with the Folk just underneath. It might make it. Could the Folk handle trees? But the Folk broke off, far short of the trees. The bird fled to safety while they converged on another that had landed too soon, and frightened it into panicky circles.

Enough of that. I said, "B-beam, the Folk sent some stuff to the Draco Tavern by courier. Your gate Security has it now. I think I'd better get it back. A microwave beamer and a hunting knife and canteen, and it all looks like it came from Abercrombie and Fitch."

He stared at me, considering. "Did they. What do you think?"

"I think they're making allowances because I'm human."

He shook his head. "They make things easy for themselves. They cull the herds, but they kill the most difficult ones too. Anything that injures a Folk, dies. So okay, they've made things easy for us too. I doubt they're out to humiliate us. They didn't leave extra gear for your companion?"

An instructor led us in stretching exercises, isometrics, duck-waddles, sprints, and an hour of just running, for two hours each day. There was a spa and a masseur, and I needed them. I was blind with exhaustion after every session . . . yet I sensed that they were being

careful of me. The game was over if I injured myself.

B-beam put us on a starvation diet. "I want us thinking hungry, thinking like Folk. Besides, we can both stand to lose a few pounds."

I studied Folk physiology more closely than I would have stared at a customer. The pointed mouths show two down-pointing daggers in front, then a gap, then teeth that look like two conical canines fused together. They look vicious. The eyes face forward in deep sockets below the hinges of the jaw: white with brown irises, oddly human. Their fingers are short and thick, tipped with thick claws,

three to a forefoot, with the forward edge of the pad to serve as a thumb. Human hands are better, I think. But if the eyes had been placed like a wolf's, they couldn't have seen their hands while standing up, and they wouldn't be tool users.

My gear was delivered. I strung the canteen and the beamer and the sheath knife on a loop of line. I filled the canteen with water, changed my mind and replaced it with Gatorade, and left it all in a refrigerator.

I watched three more hunts. Once they hunted melk again. Once it was pigs. That wasn't very interesting. B-beam said, "Those were a gift. We mated pigs

to wild boars, raised them in bottles and turned them loose. The Folk were polite, but I don't think they like them much. They're too easy."

The last film must have been taken at night, light-amplified, for the moon was blazing like the sun. The prey had two enormous legs with too many joints, a smallish torso slung horizontally between the shoulders, and tiny fingers around a strange mouth. Again, it looked well fed. It was in the forest, eating into a hanging melon-sized fruit without bothering to pick it. I said, "That Doesn't look . . . right."

B-beam said, "No, it didn't evolve

alongside the Folk. Different planet. Gligsfith(cick)tcharl maybe. We call them stilts."

It was faster than hell and could jump too, but the Folk were spread out and they were always in front of it. They kept it running in a circle until it stepped wrong and lost its balance.

One Folk zipped toward it. The stilt tumbled with its legs folded and stood up immediately, but it still took too long. The designated killer wrapped itself around one leg; its jaws closed on the ankle. The stilt kicked at its assailant, a dozen kicks in a dozen seconds. Then the bone snapped and the rest of the Folk moved in.

"Do you suppose they'll wear translators when they hunt with us?"

"I'd guess they won't. I know some Folk words and I've been boning up. And I've got a horde of students looking for anything on Folk eating habits. I've got a suspicion . . . Rick, why are we doing this?"

"We ought to get to know them."

"Why? What have we seen that makes them worth knowing?"

I was hungry and I ached everywhere. I had to think before I answered. "Oh. . . enough. Eating habits aside, the Folk

aren't totally asocial. They're here. and they aren't xenophobes . . . B-beam, suppose they don't have anything to teach us? They're still part of a galactic civilization, and we want to be out there with them. I just want humanity to look good."

"Look good . . . yeah. I did wonder why you didn't even hesitate. Have you ever been hunting?"

"No. You? "

"Yeah, my uncles used to take me deer hunting. Have you ever killed anything? Hired out as a butcher, for instance?"

NO."

And I waited to say, Sure, I can kill an animal no sweat. Hell I promised! But he didn't ask, he only looked.

I never did mention my other fear. For all I know, it never occurred to anyone else that B-beam and I might be the prey.

Intelligent beings, if gullible. Armed, but with inadequate weapons. Betrayed, and thus enraged, likely to fight back. The Folk eat Earthborn meat. Surely we would make more interesting prey than the boar-pigs!

But it was plain crazy. The chirpsithra enforced laws against murder. If humans were to disappear within the Mojave hunting park, the Folk might be barred

from the chirp liners. They wouldn't dare.

The Folk came for us at dawn. We rode in the Xenobiology lifter. We left the air ducts wide open. The smell of five Folk behind us was rich and strange: not quite an animal smell, but something else, and not entirely pleasant. If the Folk noticed our scent, they didn't seem to mind.

B-beam seemed amazingly relaxed. At one point he told me casually, "We're in danger of missing a point. We're here to have fun. The Folk don't know we've been sweating and moaning, and they won't. You're being honored, Rick. Have fun."

At midmorning we landed and walked toward a fence.

It was human-built, posted with signs in half a dozen languages. NO ENTRY. DANGER.! B-beam took us through the gate. Then the Folk waited. B-beam exchanged yelps with them, then told me. "You're expected to lead."

"Me? Why?"

"Surprise. You're the designated killer."

"Me?" It seemed silly . . . but it was their hunt. I lied off "What are we hunting?"

"You make that decision too."

Well inside the fence, we crossed what seemed a meandering dune, varying from five to eight meters high, curving out of sight to left and right. Outside the dune was desert. Inside, meadow.

A stream poured out of the dune. Further away and much lower, its returning loop flowed back into the dune. The dune hid pumps. It might hide defenses.

The green-black grass wasn't thin like grass; it was a succulent, like three-foot-tall fingers of spineless cactus, nice to the touch. Fat grass. Sawgrass would have been a real problem. We wore nothing but swim suits (we'd argued about even that) and the items strung on a line across my shoulders.

Any of the Folk, or B-beam himself, would have made a better killer than one middle-aged bartender.

Of course! had the beamer, and it would kill; but it wouldn't kill fast. Anything large would be hurt and angry long before it fell over.

All five Folk dropped silently to their bellies. I hadn't seen anything, so I stayed upright, but I was walking carefully. Naked humans might not spook the prey anyway. They'd be alert for Folk.

B-beam's eyes tried to see everywhere at once. He whispered, "I got my report

on Folk eating habits."

"Well?"

"They drink water and milk. They've never been seen eating. They don't buy food-"

"Pets?"

"-Or pets, or livestock. I thought of that-"

"Missing Persons reports?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Rick! No, this is the only way they eat. It's not a hunt so much as a formal dinner party. The rules of etiquette are likely to be rigid."

Rigid, hell. I'd watched them tearing live animals apart.

Water gurgled ahead. The artificial stream ran everywhere. "I never wondered about the canteen," I said. "Why a canteen?"

B-beam yelped softly. A Folk squeaked back. Yelp, and squeak, and B-beam tried to suppress a laugh. "You must have talked about drinking wine with meals."

"I did. Is there supposed to be wine in this thing?"

B-beam grinned. Then lost the grin. "The canteen isn't for the hunt, it's for

afterward. What about the knife and beamer?"

"Oh, come on, the Folk gave me . . . ub." Butterflies began breeding in my stomach. Humans cook their food. Sushi and Sashimi and Beef Tartar are exceptions. I'd said so, that night. "The beamer's for cooking. if I use it to kill the prey . . . we'll be disgraced?"

"I'm not sure I want to come right out and ask. Let's see . . ."

The high-pitched squeaking went on for some time. B-beam was trying to skirt the edges of the subject. The butterflies in my belly were turning carnivorous. Presently he whispered, "Yup. Knife

too. Your teeth and nails are visibly inadequate for carving."

"Oh, Lord."

"The later you back out, the worse it'll be. Do it now if-"

Two melks were grazing beyond a rise of ground. I touched B-beam's shoulder and we sank to our bellies.

The melks were really too big. They'd weigh about what I did: a hundred and eighty pounds. I'd be better off chasing a bird. Better yet, a boar-pig.

Then again, these were meat animals, born to lose. And we'd need four or five

birds for this crowd. I'd be totally winded long before we finished. B-beam's exercise program had given me a good grasp of my limits . . . not to mention a raging hunger.

The purpose of this game was to make humans-me-look good.

Wasn't it? Anyway, there wasn't a bird or a pig in sight.

We crept through the fat grass until we had a clear view. That top heavy array of horns would make a handle. If I could get hold of the horns, I could break the melk's long, slender neck.

The thought made me queasy.

"The smaller one," I whispered. B-beam nodded. He yelped softly, and got answers. The Folk flowed away through the fat grass. I crept toward the melks on hands and toes.

Three Folk stood up and shrieked.

The melks shrieked too, and tried to escape. Two more Folk stood up in front of the smaller one. I stayed down, scrambling through the grass stalks, trying to get ahead of it.

It came straight at me. And now I must murder you.

I lunged to the attack. It spun about. A hoof caught my thigh and I grunted in

pain. The melk leapt away, then froze as B-beam dashed in front of it waving his arms. I threw myself at its neck. It wheeled and the cage of horns slammed into me and knocked me on my ass. It ran over me and away.

I was curled around my belly, trying to remember how to breathe. B-beam helped me to my feet. It was the last place I wanted to be. "Are you all right?"

I wheezed, "Hoof. Stomach."

"Can you move?"

"Nooo! Minute. Try again."

My breath came back. I walked around in a circle. The Folk were watching me. I straightened up. I jogged. Not good, but I could move. I took off the loop of line that held canteen and beamer and knife, and handed them to B-beam. "Hold these."

"I'm afraid they may be the mark of the leader."

"Bullshit. Folk don't carry anything. Hold 'em so I can fight." I wanted to be rid of the beamer. It was too tempting.

We'd alerted the prey in this area. I took us along the edge of the forest, where the fat grass thinned out and it was easier to move. We saw nothing for almost an

hour.

I saw no birds, no stilts, no boar-pigs. What I finally did see was four more melks drinking from the stream. It was a situation very like the first I'd seen on film.

I'd already proved that a melk was more than my equal. My last second qualms had slowed me not at all. I'd been beaten because my teeth and claws were inadequate; because I was not a wolf; not a lion, not a Folk.

I crouched below the level of the fat grass, studying them. The Folk studied me. B-beam was at my side, whispering, "We're in no hurry. We've got hours yet.

Do you think you can handle a boar-pig?"

"If I could find one I might catch it. But how do I kill it? With my teeth?"

The Folk watched. What did they expect of me?

Suddenly I knew.

"Tell them I'll be in the woods." I pointed. "Just in there. Pick a melk and run it toward me." I turned and moved into the woods, low to the ground. When I looked back everyone was gone.

These trees had to be from the Folk world. They bent to an invisible

hurricane. They bent in various directions, because the Mojave wasn't giving them the right signals. The trunks had a teardrop-shaped cross section for low wind resistance. Maybe the Folk world was tidally locked, with a wind that came always from one direction .

I dared not go too far for what I needed. The leafs' tops of the trees were just in reach, and I plunged my hands in and felt around. The trunk was straight and solid; the branches were no thicker than my big toe, and all leaves. I tried to rip a branch loose anyway. It was too strong, and I didn't have the leverage.

Through the bent trunks I watched melks scattering in panic. But one dashed back

and forth, and found black death popping up wherever it looked. There was fallen stuff on the ground, but no fallen branches. To my right, a glimpse of white- The melk was running toward the wood.

I ran deeper among the trees. White: bones in a neat pile. Melk bones. I swept a band through to scatter them. Damn! The leg bones had all been split. What now?

The skull was split too, hanging together by the intertwined horns. I stamped on the horns. They shattered. I picked up a massive half-skull with hail a meter of broken horn for a handle.

The melk veered just short of the woods. I sprinted in pursuit. Beyond, B-beam half-stood, his eyes horrified. He shouted, "Rick! No!"

I didn't have time for him. The melk raced away, and nothing popping up in its face was going to stop it now. I was gaining . . . it was fast-too damn fast . . . I swung the skull at a flashing hoof, and connected. Again. Throwing it off, slowing it just enough. The half-skull and part-horn made a good bludgeon. I smacked a knee and it wheeled in rage and caught me across the face and chest with its horns.

I dropped on my back. I got in one grazing blow across the neck as it was

turning away, and then it was running and I rolled to my feet and chased it again. There was a feathery feel to my run. My lungs and legs thought I was dying. But the melk shook its head as it ran, and I caught up far enough to swing at its hooves.

This time it didn't turn to attack. Running with something whacking at its feet, it just gradually lost ground. I delivered a two-handed blow to the base of its neck. Swung again and lost my balance and tumbled, caught the roll on my shoulder, had to go back for the skull. Then I ran, floating, recovering lost ground, and suddenly realized that the grass was stirring all around me. I was surrounded

by the black shadows of the Folk.

I caught up.

A swing at the head only got the horns. I hammered at the neck, just behind the head. It tumbled, and tried to get to its feet, and I beat it until it fell over. I used the skull like an ax . . . murdering it . . . and suddenly black bodies flowed out of the fat grass and tore at the melk. B-beam got a good grip on the horns and snapped the neck.

I sat down.

He handed me the line: knife, beamer, canteen. He was almost as winded as I was. He whispered, "Damn fool, you

weren't-"

"Wrong." I didn't have breath for more. I drank from my canteen, paused to gasp, drank again. Then I turned the beamer on a meaty thigh. The Folk must have been waiting for me to make my choice. They now attacked the forequarters.

I crouched, panting, holding the beamer on the meat until it sizzled, until it smoked, until the smell of it told my belly it was ready.

The heaving of my chest had eased. I handed the knife to B-beam. "Carve us some of that. Eat as much as you can. Courtesy to our hosts."

He did. He gave me a chunk that I needed both hands to hold. It was too hot; I had to juggle it. B-beam said, "You used a weapon."

"I used a club," I said. I bit into the meat. Ecstasy! The famine was over. I hadn't cooked it enough, and so what? I swallowed enough to clear my mouth and said, "Humans don't use teeth and claws. The Folk know that. They wanted to see us in action. My evolution includes a club."

THE
MARAUDER

GREEN

I was tending bar alone that night. The chirpsithra interstellar liner had left Earth four days earlier, taking most of my customers. The Draco Tavern was nearly empty.

The man at the bar was drinking gin and tonic. Two glig-grey and compact beings, wearing furs in three tones of green-were at a table with a chirpsithra guide. They drank vodka and consommé, no ice, no flavorings. Four farsilshree had their bulky, heavy environment tanks crowded around a bigger table. They smoked smoldering yellow paste through tubes. Every so often I got them another

jar of paste.

The man was talkative. I got the idea he was trying to interview the bartender and owner of Earth's foremost multi-species tavern.

"Hey, not me," he protested. "I'm not a reporter. I'm Greg Noyes, with the Scientific American television show."

"Didn't I see you trying to interview the glig, earlier tonight?"

"Guilty. We're doing a show on the formation of life on Earth. I thought maybe I could check a few things. The gligstith(click)optok-" He said that slowly, but got it right. "-have their own

little empire out there, don't they? Earthlike worlds, a couple of hundred. They must know quite a lot about how a world forms an oxygenating atmosphere." He was careful with those polysyllabic words. Not quite sober, then.

"That Doesn't mean they want to waste an evening lecturing the natives."

He nodded. "They didn't know anyway. Architects on vacation. They got me talking about my home life. I don't know how they managed that." He pushed his drink away. "I'd better switch to espresso. Why would a thing that shape be interested in my sex life? And they kept asking me about territorial

imperatives-" He stopped, then turned to see what I was staring at.

Three chirpsithra were just coming in. One was in a floating couch with life support equipment attached.

"I thought they all looked alike," he said.

I said, "I've had chirpsithra in here for close to thirty years, but I can't tell them apart. They're all perfect physical specimens, after all, by their own standards. I never saw one like that."

I gave him his espresso, then put three sparkers on a tray and went to the chirpsithra table.

Two were exactly like any other chirpsithra: eleven feet tall, dressed in pouched belts and their own salmon-colored exoskeletons, and very much at their ease. The chirps claim to have settled the entire galaxy long ago—meaning the useful planets, the tidally locked oxygen worlds that happen to circle close around cool red-dwarf suns—and they act like the reigning queens of wherever they happen to be. But the two seemed to defer to the third. She was a foot shorter than they were. Her exoskeleton was as clearly artificial as dentures: alloplastic bone worn on the outside. Tubes ran under the edges from the equipment in her floating couch. Her skin between the plates was more gray

than red. Her head turned slowly as I came up. She studied me, bright-eyed with interest.

I asked, "Sparkers?" as if chirpsithra ever ordered anything else.

One of the others said, "Yes. Serve the ethanol mix of your choice to yourself and the other native. Will you join us?"

I waved Noyes over, and he came at the jump. He pulled up one of the high chairs I keep around to put a human face on a level with a chirpsithra's. I went for another espresso and a Scotch and soda and (catching a soft imperative hoot from the farsilshree) a jar of yellow paste. When I returned they were deep in

conversation.

"Rick Schumann," Noyes cried, "meet Ftaxanthir and Hrofilliss and Chorrikt. Chorrikt tells me she's nearly two billion years old!"

I heard the doubt beneath his delight. The chirpsithra could be the greatest liars in the universe, and how would we ever know? Earth didn't even have interstellar probes when the chirps came.

Chorrikt spoke slowly, in a throaty whisper, but her translator box was standard: voice a little flat, pronunciation perfect. "I have circled the galaxy numberless times, and taped the

tales of my travels for funds to feed my wanderlust. Much of my life has been spent at the edge of lightspeed, under relativistic time-compression. So you see, I am not nearly so old as all that."

I pulled up another high chair. "You must have seen wonders beyond counting," I said. Thinking: My God, a short chirpsithra! Maybe it's true. She's a different color, too, and her fingers are shorter. Maybe the species has actually changed since she was born!

She nodded slowly. "Life never bores. Always there is change. In the time I have been gone, Saturn's ring has been pulled into separate rings, making it even more magnificent. What can have

done that? Tides from the moons? And Earth has changed beyond recognition."

Noyes spilled a little of his coffee. "You were here? When?"

"Earth's air was methane and ammonia and oxides of nitrogen and carbon. The natives had sent messages across interstellar space . . . directing them toward yellow suns, of course, but one of our ships passed through a beam, and so we established contact. We had to wear life support," she rattled on, while Noyes and I sat with our jaws hanging, "and the gear was less comfortable than. Our spaceport was a floating platform, because quakes were frequent and

violent. But it was worth it. Their cities-
"

Noyes said, "Just a minute. Cities? We've never dug up any trace of, of nonhuman cities!"

Chorriks looked at him. "After seven hundred and eighty million years, I should think not. Besides, they lived in the offshore shallows in an ocean that was already mildly salty. If the quakes spared them, their tools and their cities still deteriorated rapidly. Their lives were short too, but their memories were inherited. Death and change were accepted facts for them, more than for most intelligent species. Their works of philosophy gained great currency among

my people, and spread to other species too."

Noyes wrestled with his instinct for tact and good manners, and won. "How? How could anything have evolved that far? The Earth didn't even have an oxygen atmosphere! Life was just getting started, there weren't even trilobites!"

"They had evolved for as long as you have," Chorrikst said with composure. "Life began on Earth one and a half billion years ago. There were organic chemicals in abundance, from passage of lightning through the reducing atmosphere. Intelligence evolved, and presently built an impressive

civilization. They lived slowly, of course. Their biochemistry was less energetic. Communication was difficult. They were not stupid, only slow. I visited Earth three times, and each time they had made more progress."

Almost against his will, Noyes asked, "What did they look like?"

"Small and soft and fragile, much more so than yourselves. I cannot say they were pretty, but I grew to like them. I would toast them according to your customs," she said. "They wrought beauty in their cities and beauty in their philosophies, and their works are in our libraries still. They will not be forgotten."

She touched her sparker, and so did her younger companions. Current flowed between her two claws, through her nervous system. She said,

"Sssss . . ."

I raised my glass, and nudged Noyes with my elbow. We drank to our predecessors. Noyes lowered his cup and asked, "What happened to them?"

"They sensed worldwide disaster coming," Chorrikt said, "and they prepared; but they thought it would be quakes. They built cities to float on the ocean surface, and lived in the undersides. They never noticed the green

scum growing in certain tidal pools. By the time they knew the danger, the green scum was everywhere. It used photosynthesis to turn carbon dioxide into oxygen, and the raw oxygen killed whatever it touched, leaving fertilizer to feed the green scum.

"The world was dying when we learned of the problem. What could we do against a photosynthesis-using scum growing beneath a yellow white star? There was nothing in chirpsithra libraries that would help. We tried, of course, but we were unable to stop it. The sky had turned an admittedly lovely transparent blue, and the tide pools were green, and the offshore cities were

crumbling before we gave up the fight. There was an attempt to transplant some of the natives to a suitable world, but biorhythm upset ruined their mating habits. I have not been back since, until now."

The depressing silence was broken by Chorrikt herself. "Well, the Earth is greatly changed, and of course your own evolution began with the green plague. I have heard tales of humanity from my companions. Would you tell me something of your lives?"

And we spoke of humankind, but I couldn't seem to find much enthusiasm for it. The anaerobic life that survived the advent of photosynthesis includes

gangrene and botulism and not much else. I wondered what Chorrikt would find when next she came, and whether she would have reason to toast our memory.

WAR MOVIE

Ten, twenty years ago my first thought would have been, Great-looking woman! Tough-looking too. If I make a pass it had better be polite. She was in her late twenties, tall, blond, healthy-looking, with a squarish jaw. She didn't look like the type to be fazed by anything; but she

had stopped, stunned, just inside the door. Her first time here, I thought. Anyway, I'd have remembered her.

But after eighteen years tending bar in the Draco Tavern, my first thought is generally, Human. Great! I won't have to dig out any of the exotic stuff While she was still reacting to the sight of half a dozen oddly shaped sapients indulging each its own peculiar vice, I moved down the bar to the far right, where I keep the alcoholic beverages. I thought she'd take one of the bar stools.

Nope. She looked about her, considering her choices-which didn't include empty tables; there was a fair crowd in tonight-then moved to join the lone qarasht. And

I was already starting to worry as I left the bar to take her order.

In the Draco it's considered normal to strike up conversations with other customers. But the qarasht wasn't acting like it wanted company. The bulk of thick fur, pale blue striped with black in narrow curves, had waddled in three hours ago. It was on its third quart-sized mug of Demerara Sours, and its sense cluster had been retracted for all of that time, leaving it deaf and blind, lost in its own thoughts.

It must have felt the vibration when the woman sat down. Its sense cluster and stalk rose out of the fur like a python

rising from a bed of moss. A snake with no mouth: just two big wide-set black bubbles for eyes and an ear like a pink blossom set between them, and a tuft of fine hairs along the stalk to serve for smell and taste, and a brilliant ruby crest on top. Its translator box said, quite clearly, "Drink, not talk. My last day."

She didn't take the hint. "You're going home? Where?"

"Home to the organ banks. I am shishishorupf-" A word the box didn't translate.

"What's it mean?"

"Your kind has bankruptcy laws that let

you start over. My kind lets me start over as a dozen others. Organ banks." The alien picked up its mug; the fur parted below its sense cluster stalk, to receive half a pint of Demerara Sour.

She looked around a little queasily, and found me at her shoulder. With some relief she said, "Never mind, I'll come to the bar," and started to stand up.

The qarasht put a hand on her wrist. The eight skeletal fingers looked like two chicken feet wired together; but a qarasht's hand is stronger than it looks. "Sit," said the alien. "Barmonitor, get her one of these. Human, why do you not fight wars?"

"What?"

"You used to fight wars."

"Well," she said, "sure."

"We could have been fourth-level wealthy," the qarasht said, and slammed its mug to the table. "You would still be a single isolated species had we not come. In what fashion have you repaid our generosity?"

The woman was speechless; I wasn't. "Excuse me, but it wasn't the qarashteel who made first contact with Earth. It was the chirpsithra."

"We paid them."

"What? Why?"

"Our ship Far-Stretching Sense Cluster passed through So! system while making a documentary. It confuses some species that we can make very long entertainments, and sell them to billions of customers who will spend years watching them, and reap profits that allow us to travel hundreds of light-years and spend decades working on such a project. But we are very long-lived, you know. Partly because we are able to keep the organ banks full," the qarasht said with some savagery, and it drank again. Its sense-cluster was weaving a little.

"We found dramatic activity on your

world," it said. "All over your world, it seemed. Machines hurled against each other. Explosives. Machines built to fly, other machines to hurl them from the sky. Humans in the machines, dying. Machines blowing great holes in populated cities. It fuddles the mind, to think what such a spectacle would have cost to make ourselves! We went into orbit, and we recorded it all as best we could.

Three years of it. When we were sure it was over, we returned home and sold it."

The woman swallowed. She said to me, "I think I need that drink.

Join us?"

I made two of the giant Demerara Sours and took them back. As I pulled up a chair the qarasht was saying, "If we had stopped then we would still be moderately wealthy. Our recording instruments were not the best, of course. Worse, we could not get close enough to the surface for real detail. Our atmosphere probes shivered and shook and so did the pictures. Ours was a low-budget operation. But the ending was superb! Two cities half-destroyed by thermonuclear explosions! Our recordings sold well enough, but we would have been mad not to try for more.

"We invested all of our profits in equipment. We borrowed all we could. Do you understand that the nearest full-service spaceport to So! system is sixteen-squared light years distant? We had to finance a chirpsithra diplomatic expedition in order to get Local Group approval and transport for what we needed . . . and because we needed intermediaries. Chirps are very good at negotiating, and we are not. We did not tell them what we really wanted, of course."

The woman's words sounded like curses. "Why negotiate? You were doing fine as Peeping Toms. Even when people saw your ships, nobody believed

them. I expect they're saucer-shaped?"

Foo fighters, I thought, while the alien said, "We needed more than the small atmospheric probes. We needed to mount hologram cameras. For that we had to travel all over the Earth, especially the cities. Such instruments are nearly invisible. We spray them across a flat surface, high up on your glass-slab-style towers, for instance. And we needed access to your libraries, to get some insight into why you do these things."

The lady drank. I remembered that there had been qarasteel everywhere the chirpsithra envoys went, twenty-four years ago when the big interstellar ships

arrived; and I took a long pull from my Sour.

"It all looked so easy," the qarash mourned. "We had left instruments on your moon. The recordings couldn't be sold, of course, because your world's rotation permits only fragmentary glimpses. But your machines were becoming better, more destructive! We thanked our luck that you had not destroyed yourselves before we could return. We studied the recordings, to guess where the next war would occur, but there was no discernable pattern. The largest land mass, we thought-"

True enough, the chirps and their

qarashteel entourage had been very visible all over Asia and Europe. Those cameras on the Moon must have picked up activity in Poland and Korea and Vietnam and Afghanistan and Iran and Israel and Cuba and, and. . . bastards. "So you set up your cameras in a tearing hurry," I guessed, "and then you waited."

"We waited and waited. We have waited for thirty years.. . for twenty-four of your own years, and we have nothing to show for it but a riot here, a parade there, an attack on a children's vehicle . . . robbery of a bank . . . a thousand people smashing automobiles or an embassy building . . . rumors of war, of peace, some shouting in your councils.

How can we sell any of this? On Earth my people need life support to the tune of six thousand dollars a day. I and my associates are shishishorupf now, and I must return home to tell them."

The lady looked ready to start her own war. I said, to calm her down, "We make war movies too. We've been doing it for over a hundred years. They sell fine."

Her answer was an intense whisper. "I never liked war movies. And that was us!"

"Sure, who else-"

The qarasht slammed its mug down. "Why have you not fought a war?"

She broke the brief pause. "We would have been ashamed."

"Ashamed?"

"In front of you. Aliens. We've seen twenty alien species on Earth since that first chirp expedition, and none of them seem to fight wars. The, uh, qarasht don't fight wars, do they?"

The alien's sense cluster snapped down into its fur, then slowly emerged again. "Certainly we do not!"

"Well, think how it would look!"

"But for you it is natural!"

"Not really," I said. "People have real trouble learning to kill. It's not built into us. Anyway, we don't have quite so much to fight over these days. The whole world's getting rich on the widgetry the chirps and the thtopar have been selling us. Long-lived, too, on glig medicines. We've all got more to lose." I flinched, because the alien's sense cluster was stretched across the table, staring at us in horror.

"A lot of our restless types are out mining the asteroids," the woman said.

"And, hey," I said, "remember when Egypt and Saudi Arabia were talking war in the UN? And all the aliens moved out of both countries, even the glig

doctors with their geriatrics consulting office. The sheiks didn't like that one damn bit. And when the Soviets-

"Our doing, all our own doing," the alien mourned. Its sense cluster pulled itself down and disappeared into the fur, leaving just the ruby crest showing. The alien lifted its mug and drank, blind.

The woman took my wrist and pulled me over to the bar. "What do we do now?" she hissed in my ear.

I shrugged. "Sounds like the emergency's over."

"But we can't just let it go, can we? You don't really think we've given up war, do

you? But if we knew these damn aliens were waiting to make movies of us, maybe we would! Shouldn't we call the newspapers, or at least the Secret Service?"

"I don't think so."

"Somebody has to know!"

"Think it through," I said. "One particular qarash company may be defunct, but those cameras are still there, all over the world, and so are the mobile units. Some alien receiving company is going to own them. What if they offer. . . say Iran, or the Soviet Union, one-tenth of one percent of the gross profits on a war movie?"

She paled. I pushed my mug into her hands and she gulped hard at it.

Shakily she asked, "Why didn't the qarasht think of that?"

"Maybe they don't think enough like men. Maybe if we just leave it alone, they never will. But we sure don't want any human entrepreneurs making suggestions. Let it drop, lady. Let it drop."

THE REAL THING

If the IRS could see me now! Flying a

light-sail craft, single-handed, two million miles out from a bluish-white dwarf star. Fiddling frantically with the shrouds, guided less by the instruments than by the thrust against my web hammock and the ripples in the tremendous, near-weightless mirror sail. Glancing into the sun without blinking, then at the stars without being night-blind, dipping near the sun without being fried; all due to the quick-adjusting goggles and temp-controlled skin-tight pressure suit the chirpsithra had given me.

This entire trip was deductible, of course. The Draco Tavern had made me a good deal of money over the years, but

I never could have paid for an interstellar voyage otherwise. As the owner of the Draco Tavern, Earth's only multi-species bar, I was quite legitimately touring the stars to find new products for my alien customers.

Would Internal Revenue object to my actually enjoying myself?

I couldn't make myself care. The trip out on the chirpsithra liner: that alone was something I'd remember the rest of my life. This too, if I lived. Best not to distract myself with memories.

Hroyd System was clustered tightly around its small, hot sun. Space was thick with asteroids and planets and

other sailing ships. Every so often some massive piece of space junk bombed the sun, or a storm would bubble up from beneath the photosphere, and my boat would surge under the pressure of the flare. I had to fiddle constantly with the shrouds.

The pointer was aimed at black space. Where was that damned spaceport? Huge and massive it had seemed, too big to lose, when I spun out my frail silver sail and launched . . . how long ago? The clock told me: twenty hours, though it didn't feel that long.

The spaceport was coin-shaped, spun for varying gravities. Maybe I was trying to see it edge-on? I tilted the sail to lose

some velocity. The fat sun expanded. My mind felt the heat. If my suit failed, it would fail all at once, and I wouldn't have long to curse my recklessness. Or-Even chirpsithra-supplied equipment wouldn't help me if I fell into the sun.

I looked outward in time to see a silver coin pass over me. Good enough. Tilt the sail forward, pick up some speed . . . pull my orbit outward, slow down, don't move the sail too fast or it'll fold up! Wait a bit, then tilt the sail to spill the light; drop a bit, wait again . . . watch a black coin slide across the sun. Tilt to slow, tilt again to catch up. It was another two hours before I could pull into the spaceport's shadow, fold the sail

and let a tractor beam pull me in.

My legs were shaky as I descended the escalator to Level 6.

There was Earth gravity on 6, minus a few percent, and also a multispecies restaurant bar. I was too tired to wonder about the domed boxes I saw on some of the tables. I wobbled over to a table, turned on the privacy bubble and tapped tee tee hatch nex ool, carefully. That code was my life. A wrong character could broil me, freeze me, flatten me, or have me drinking liquid methane or breathing prussic acid.

An Earthlike environment formed around me. I peeled off my equipment and sank

into a web, sighing with relief. I still ached everywhere. What I really needed was sleep. But it had been glorious!

A warbling whistle caused me to look up. My translator said, "Sir or madam, what can I bring you?"

The bartender was a small, spindly Hroydan, and his environment suit glowed at dull red heat. I said, "Something alcoholic."

"Alcohol? What is your physiological type?"

"Tee tee hatch nex ool."

"Ah. May I recommend something? A

liqueur, Opal Fire."

Considering the probable distance to the nearest gin-and-tonic . "Fine. What proof is it?" I heard his translator skip a word, and amplified: "What percent ethyl alcohol?"

"Thirty-four, with no other metabolic poisons."

About seventy proof? "Over water ice, please."

He brought a clear glass bottle. The fluid within did indeed glitter like an opal. Its beauty was the first thing I noticed. Then, the taste, slightly tart, with an overtone that can't be described in any

human language. A crackling aftertaste, and a fire spreading through my nervous system. I said, "That's wonderful! What about side effects?"

"There are additives to compensate: thiamin and the like. You will feel no ugly aftereffects," the Hroydan assured me.

"They'd love it on Earth. Mmm . . . what's it cost?"

"Quite cheap. Twenty-nine chirp notes per flagon. Transport costs would be up to the chirpsithra. But I'm sure Chignthil Interstellar would sell specs for manufacture."

"This could pay for my whole trip." I jotted the names: chirp characters for Opal Fire and Chignthil Interstellar. The stuff was still dancing through my nervous system. I drank again, so it could dance on my taste buds too.

To hell with sleep; I was ready for another new experience. "These boxes-I see them on all the tables. What are they?"

"Full-sensory entertainment devices. Cost is six chirp notes for use." He tapped keys and a list appeared: titles, I assumed, in alien script. "If you can't read this, there is voice translation."

I dithered. Tempting; dangerous. But a

couple of these might be worth taking back. Some of my customers can't use anything I stock; they pay only cover charges. "How versatile is it? Your customers seem to have a lot of different sense organs. Hey, would this thing actually give me alien senses?"

The bartender signaled negative. "The device acts on your central nervous system; I assume you have one? There at the top? Ah, good. It feeds you a story skeleton, but your own imagination puts you in context and fills in the background details. You live a programmed story, but largely in terms familiar to you. Mental damage is almost unheard of."

"Will I know it's only an entertainment?"

"You might know from the advertisements. Shall I show you?" The Hroydan raised the metal dome on a many-jointed arm and poised it over my head. I felt the heat emanating from him. "Perhaps you would like to walk through an active volcano?" He tapped two buttons with a black metal claw, and everything changed.

The Vollek merchant pulled the helmet away from my head. He had small, delicate-looking arms, and a stance like a tyrannosaur: torso horizontal, swung from the hips. A feathery down covered him, signaling his origin as a flightless bird. "How did you like it?"

"Give me a minute." I looked about me. Afternoon sunlight spilled across the tables, illuminating alien shapes. The Draco Tavern was filling up. it was time I got back to tending bar. It had been nearly empty (I remembered) when I agreed to try this stunt.

I said, "That business at the end-?"

"We end all of the programs that way when we sell to Level Four civilizations. It prevents disorientation."

"Good idea." Whatever the reason, I didn't feel at all confused. Still, it was a hell of an experience. "I couldn't tell it from the real thing."

"The advertisement would have alerted an experienced user."

"You're actually manufacturing these things on Earth?"

"Guatemala has agreed to license us. The climate is so nice there. And so I can lower the price per unit to three thousand dollars each." "Sell me two," I said. It'd be a few years before they paid for themselves. Maybe someday I really would have enough money to ride the chirpsithra liners . . . if I didn't get hooked myself on these full-sensory machines. "Now, about Opal Fire. I can't believe it's really that good-"

"I travel for Chingthil Interstellar too. I

have sample bottles."

"Let's try it."

LIMITS

I never would have heard them if the sound system hadn't gone on the fritz. And if it hadn't been one of those frantically busy nights, maybe I could have done something about it .

But one of the big chirpsithra passenger ships was due to leave Mount Ford Spaceport in two days. The chirpsithra

trading empire occupies most of the galaxy, and Sol system is nowhere near its heart. A horde of passengers had come early in fear of being marooned. The Draco Tavern was jammed.

I was fishing under the counter when the noises started. I jumped. Two voices alternated: a monotonal twittering, and a bone-vibrating sound like a tremendous door endlessly opening on rusty hinges.

The Draco Tavern used to make the Tower of Babel sound like a monolog, in the years before I got this sound system worked out. Picture it: thirty or forty creatures of a dozen species including human, all talking at once at every pitch and volume, and all of their

translating widgets bellowing too! Some species, like the sruvinthish, don't talk with sound, but they also don't notice the continual skreeking from their spiracles. Others sing. They call it singing, and they say it's a religious rite, so how can I stop them?

Selective damping is the key, and a staff of technicians to keep the system in order. I can afford it. I charge high anyway, for the variety of stuff I have to keep for anything that might wander in. But sometimes the damping system fails.

I found what I needed—a double-walled cannister I'd never needed before, holding stuff I'd been calling green

kryptonite-and delivered glowing green pebbles to four aliens in globular environment tanks. They were at four different tables, sharing conversation with four other species. I'd never seen a rosyfln before. Rippling in the murky fluid within the transparent globe, the dorsal fin was triangular, rose-colored, fragile as gossamer, and ran from nose to tail of a body that looked like a flattened slug.

Out among the tables there was near-silence, except within the bubbles of sound that surrounded each table. It wasn't a total breakdown, then. But when I went back behind the bar the noise was still there.

I tried to ignore it. I certainly wasn't going to try to fix the sound system, not with fifty-odd customers and ten distinct species demanding my attention. I set out consommé and vodka for four glig, and thimble sized flasks of chilled fluid with an ammonia base, for a dozen chrome yellow bugs each the size of a fifth of Haig Pinch. And the dialog continued: high twittering against grating metallic bass. What got on my nerves was the way the sounds seemed always on the verge of making sense!

Finally I just switched on the translator. It might be less irritating if I heard it in English.

I heard: "-noticed how often they speak

of limits?"

"Limits? I don't understand you."

"Lightspeed limit. Theoretical strengths of metals, of crystals, of alloys. Smallest and largest masses at which an unseen body may be a neutron star. Maximum time and cost to complete a research project. Surface to-volume relationship for maximum size of a creature of given design-

"But every sapient race learns these things!"

"We find limits, of course. But with humans, the limits are what they seek first."

So they were talking about the natives, about us. Aliens often do. Their insights might be fascinating, but it gets boring fast. I let it buzz in my ear while I fished out another dozen flasks of ammonia mixture and set them on Gail's tray along with two Stingers. She went off to deliver them to the little yellow bugs, now parked in a horseshoe pattern on the rim of their table, talking animatedly to two human sociologists.

"It is a way of thinking," one of the voices said. "They set enormously complex limits on each other. Whole professions, called judge and lawyer, devote their lives to determining which human has violated which limit where.

Another profession alters the limits arbitrarily."

"It Docs not sound entertaining."

"But all are forced to play the game. You must have noticed: the limits they find in the universe and the limits they set on each other bear the same name: law."

I had established that the twitterer was the one doing most of the talking. Fine. Now who were they? Two voices belonging to two radically different species.

"The interstellar community knows all of these limits in different forms."

"Do we know them all? Goedel's Principle sets a limit to the perfectability of mathematical systems. What species would have sought such a thing? Mine would not."

"Nor mine, I suppose. Still-"

"Humans push their limits. It is their first approach to any problem. When they learn where the limits lie, therein missing information until the limit breaks. When they break a limit, they look for the limit behind that."

"I wonder . . ."

I thought I had them spotted. Only one of the tables for two was occupied, by a

chirpsithra and a startled-looking woman. My suspects were a cluster of three: one of the rosyfins, and two compact, squarish customers wearing garish designs on their exoskeletal shells. The shelled creatures had been smoking tobacco cigars under exhaust hoods. One seemed to be asleep. The other waved stubby arms as it talked.

I heard: "I have a thought. My savage ancestors used to die when they reached a certain age. When we could no longer breed, evolution was finished with us. There is a biological self-destruct built into us."

"It is the same with humans. But my own people never die unless killed. We

fission. Our memories go far, far back."

"Though we differ in this, the result is the same. At some point in the dim past we learned that we could postpone our deaths. We never developed a civilization until individuals could live long enough to attain wisdom. The fundamental limit was lifted from our shells before we set out to expand into the world, and then the universe. Is this not true with most of the space-traveling peoples? The Pfarth species choose death only when they grow bored. Chirpsithra were long-lived before they reached the stars, and the gligstith(cick)optok went even further, with their fascination with heredity-

tailoring-"

"Does it surprise you, that intelligent beings strive to extend their lives?"

"Surprise? No. But humans still face a limit on their life-spans. The death limit has immense influence on their poetry. They may think differently from the rest of us in other ways. They may find truths we would not even seek."

An untranslated metal-on-metal scraping. Laughter? "You speculate irresponsibly. Has their unique approach taught them anything we know not?"

"How can I know? I have only been on this world three local years. Their

libraries are large, their retrieval systems poor. But there is Goedel's Principle; and Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle is a limit to what one can discover at the quantum level"

Pause. "We must see if another species has duplicated that one. Meanwhile, perhaps I should speak to another visitor."

"Incomprehension. Query?"

"Do you remember that I spoke of a certain gligstith(cick)optok merchant?"

"I remember."

"You know their skill with water-world

biology. This one comes to Earth with a technique for maintaining and restoring the early-maturity state in humans. The treatment is complex, but with enough customers the cost would drop, or so the merchant says. I must persuade it not to make the offer."

"Affirmative! Removing the death-limit would drastically affect human psychology!"

One of the shelled beings was getting up. The voices chopped off as I rounded the bar and headed for my chosen table, with no clear idea what I would say. I stepped into the bubble of sound around two shelled beings and a rosyfin, and said, "Forgive the interruption, sapient-

"

"You have joined a wake," said the tank's translator widget.

The shelled being said, "My mate had chosen death. He wanted one last smoke in company." It bent and lifted its dead companion in its arms and headed for the door.

The rosyfin was leaving too, rolling his spherical fishbowl toward the door. I realized that its own voice hadn't penetrated the murky fluid around it. No chittering, no bone-shivering bass. I had the wrong table.

I looked around, and there were still no

other candidates. Yet somebody here had casually condemned mankind-me!-to age and die.

Now what? I might have been hearing several voices. They all sound alike coming from a new species; and some aliens never interrupt each other.

The little yellow bugs? But they were with humans.

Shells? My voices had mentioned shells . . . but too many aliens have exoskeletons. Okay, a chirpsithra would have spoken by now; they're garrulous. Scratch any table that includes a chirp. Or a rosyfin. Or those srivinthish: I'd have heard the skreek of their breathing.

Or the huge gray being who seemed to be singing. That left.. . half a dozen tables, and I couldn't interrupt that many.

Could they have left while I was distracted?

I hot-footed it back to the bar, and listened, and heard nothing. And my spinning brain could find only limits.