

The Warriors



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Produced by calibre 0.6.40

The Warriors

The organ bank problem is basic to an understanding of this era, and of later eras on the colony worlds. It forms a background for the three tales of Gil the ARM, and for the society of Mount Lookitthat as detailed in A Gift From Earth.

Phssthpok the Pak was the second extraterrestrial to meet mankind. Though he had traveled all the way from the galactic core, he was hardly an alien; the Pak are related to humankind. Before his death he created the first of the protector-stage humans, from a Belt

miner named Jack Brennan.

There followed a Golden Age--a period of peace and contentment for Earth and Belt--that lasted for two hundred and fifty years. In particular, breakthroughs in alloplasty and regeneration ended the organ bank problem. Probably all of this was due to subtle interventions by the superintelligent being who now called himself the Brennan-monster. Brennan's story is chronicled in Protector.

Unfortunately Brennan was unable to anticipate the existence of the Kzinti...

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"I'M SURE THEY saw us coming," the Alien Technologies Officer persisted.

"Do you see that ring, sir?"

The silvery image of the enemy ship almost filled the viewer. It showed as a broad, wide ring encircling a cylindrical axis, like a mechanical pencil floating inside a platinum bracelet. A finned craft projected from the pointed end of the axial section. Angular letters ran down the axis, totally unlike the dots-and-commas of Kzinti script.

"Of course I see it," said the Captain.

"It was rotating when we first picked them up. It stopped when we got within

two hundred thousand miles, and it hasn't moved since."

The Captain flicked his tail back and forth, gently, thoughtfully, like a pink lash.

"You worry me," he commented.

"If they know we're here, why haven't they tried to get away? Are they so sure they can beat us?" He whirled to face the A-T Officer.

"Should we be running?"

"No, sir! I don't know why they're still here, but they can't have anything to be confident about. That's one of the most

primitive spacecraft I've ever seen." He moved his claw about on the screen, pointing as he talked.

"The outer shell is an iron alloy. The rotating ring is a method of simulating gravity by using centripetal force. So they don't have the gravity planer. In fact they're probably using a reaction drive."

The Captain's catlike ears went up.

"But we're lightyears from the nearest star!"

"They must have a better reaction drive than we ever developed. We had the gravity planer before we needed one that good."

There was a buzzing sound from the big control board.

"Enter," said the Captain.

The Weapons Officer fell up through the entrance hatch and came to attention.

"Sir, we, have all weapons trained on the enemy."

"Good." The Captain swung around.

"A-T, how sure are you that they aren't a threat to us?"

The A-T Officer bared sharply pointed teeth.

"I don't see how they could be, sir."

"Good. Weapons, keep all your guns ready to fire, but don't use them unless I give the order. I'll have the ears of the man who destroys that ship without orders. I want to take it intact."

"Yes, sir."

"Where's the Telepath?"

"He's on his way, sir. He was asleep."

"He's always asleep. Tell him to get his tail up here."

The Weapons Officer saluted, turned, and dropped through the exit hole.

"Captain?"

The A-T Officer was standing by the viewer, which now showed the ringed end of the alien ship. He pointed to the mirror-bright end of the axial cylinder.

"It looks like that end was designed to project light. That would make it a photon drive, sir."

The Captain considered.

"Could it be a signal device?"

"Urrrrr . . . Yes, sir."

"Then don't jump to conclusions."

Like a piece of toast, the Telepath popped up through the entrance hatch. He came to exaggerated attention. "Reporting as ordered, sir."

"You omitted to buzz for entrance."

"Sorry, sir." The lighted viewscreen caught the Telepath's eye and he padded over for a better look, forgetting that he was at attention. The A-T Officer winced, wishing he were somewhere else.

The Telepath's eyes were violet around the edges. His pink tail hung limp. As usual, he looked as if he were dying for lack of sleep. His fur was flattened along the side he slept on; he hadn't even

bothered to brush it. The effect was as far from the ideal of a Conquest Warrior as one can get and still be a member of the Kzinti species. The wonder was that the Captain had not yet murdered him.

He never would, of course. Telepaths were too rare, too valuable, and--understandably--too emotionally unstable. The Captain always kept his temper with the Telepath. At times like this it was the innocent bystander who stood to lose his rank or his ears at the clank of a falling molecule.

"That's an enemy ship we've tracked down," the Captain was saying.

"We'd like to get some information from

them. Would you read their minds for us?"

"Yes, sir." The Telepath's voice showed his instant misery, but he knew better than to protest. He left the screen and sank into a chair. Slowly his ears folded into tight knots, his pupils contracted, and his ratlike tail went limp as flannel.

The world of the eleventh sense pushed in on him.

He caught the Captain's thought: "...sloppy civilian get of a sthondat..." and frantically tuned it out. He hated the Captain's mind. He found other minds aboard ship, isolated and blanked them out one by one. Now there were none

left. There was only unconsciousness and chaos.

Chaos was not empty. Something was thinking strange and disturbing thoughts.

The Telepath forced himself to listen.

Steve Weaver floated bonelessly near a wall of the radio room. He was blond, blue-eyed, and big, and he could often be seen as he was now, relaxed but completely motionless, as if there were some very good reason why he shouldn't even blink. A streamer of smoke drifted from his left hand and crossed the room to bury itself in the air vent.

"That's that," Ann Harrison said wearily.

She flicked four switches in the bank of radio controls. At each click a small light went out.

"You can't get them?"

"Right. I'll bet they don't even have a radio." Ann released her chair net and stretched out into a five-pointed star.

"I've left the receiver on, with the volume up, in case they try to get us later. Man, that feels good!" Abruptly she curled into a tight ball. She had been crouched at the communications bank for more than an hour. Ann might have been Steve's twin; she was almost as tall as he was, had the same color hair and eyes, and the flat muscles of

conscientious exercise showed beneath her blue falling jumper as she flexed.

Steve snapped his cigarette butt at the air conditioner, moving only his fingers.

"Okay. What have they got?"

Ann looked startled.

"I don't know."

"Think of it as a puzzle. They don't have a radio. How might they talk to each other? How can we check on our guesses? We assume they're trying to reach us, of course."

"Yes, of course."

"Think about it, Ann. Get Tim thinking about it, too." Jim Davis was her husband that year, and the ship's doctor full time.

"You're the girl most likely to succeed. Have a smog stick?"

"Please."

Steve pushed his cigarette ration across the room. "Take a few. I've got to go."

The depleted package came whizzing back. "Thanks," said Ann.

"Let me know if anything happens, will you? Or if you think of anything."

"I will. And fear not, Steve, something's bound to turn up. They must be trying just as hard as we are."

Every compartment in the personnel ring opened into the narrow doughnut-shaped hall which ran round the ring's forward rim. Steve pushed himself into the hall, jockeyed to contact the floor, and pushed. From there it was easy going. The floor curved up to meet him, and he proceeded down the hall like a swimming frog. Of the twelve men and woman on the Angel's Pencil, Steve was best at this; for Steve was a Belter, and the others were all flatlanders, Earthborn.

Ann probably wouldn't think of anything,

he guessed. It wasn't that she wasn't intelligent. She didn't have the curiosity, the sheer love of solving puzzles. Only he and Jim Davis--

He was going too fast, and not concentrating. He almost crashed into Sue Bhang as she appeared below the curve of the ceiling.

They managed to stop themselves against the walls. "Hi, jaywalker," said Sue.

"Hi, Sue. Where you headed?"

"Radio room. You?"

"I thought I'd check the drive systems again. Not that we're likely to need the

drive, but it can't hurt to be certain."

"You'd go twitchy without something to do, wouldn't you?" She cocked her head to one side, as always when she had questions.

"Steve, when are you going to rotate us again? I can't seem to get used to falling."

But she looked like she'd been born falling, he thought. Her small, slender form was meant for flying; gravity should never have touched her.

"When I'm sure we won't need the drive. We might as well stay ready 'til then. Besides, I'm hoping you'll change back

to a skirt."

She laughed, pleased.

"Then you can turn it off. I'm not changing, and we won't be moving. Abel says the other ship did two hundred gee when it matched courses with us. How many can the Angel's Pencil do?"

Steve looked awed.

"Just point zero five. And I was thinking of chasing them! Well, maybe we can be the ones to open communications. I just came from the radio room, by the way. Ann can't get anything."

"Too bad."

"We'll just have to wait."

"Steve, you're always so impatient. Do Belters always move at a run? Come here." She took a handhold and pulled him over to one of the thick windows which lined the forward side of the corridor.

"There they are," she said, pointing out.

The star was both duller and larger than those around it. Among points which glowed arc-lamp blue-white with the Doppler shift, the alien ship showed as a dull red disk.

"I looked at it through the telescope," said Steve. "There are lumps and ridges

all over it. And there's a circle of green dots and commas painted on one side. Looked like writing."

"How long have we been waiting to meet them? Five hundred thousand years? Well, there they are. Relax. They won't go away." Sue gazed out the window, her whole attention on the dull red circle, her gleaming jet hair floating out around her head.

"The first aliens. I wonder what they'll be like."

"It's anyone's guess. They must be pretty strong to take punishment like that, unless they have some kind of acceleration shield, but free fall doesn't

bother them either. That ship isn't designed to spin." He was staring intently out at the stars, his big form characteristically motionless, his expression somber. Abruptly he said, "Sue, I'm worried."

"About what?"

"Suppose they're hostile?"

"Hostile?" She tasted the unfamiliar word, decided she didn't like it.

"After all, we know nothing about them. Suppose they want to fight? We'd--"

She gasped. Steve flinched before the horror in her face.

"What-what put that idea in your head?"

"I'm sorry I shocked you, Sue."

"Oh, don't worry about that, but why? Did--shh."

Jim Davis had come into view. The Angel's Pencil had left Earth when he was twenty-seven; now he was a slightly paunchy thirty-eight. the oldest man on board, an amiable man with abnormally long, delicate fingers. His grandfather, with the same hands, had been a world-famous surgeon. Nowadays surgery was normally done by autodocs, and the arachnodactyls were to Davis merely an affliction. He bounced by, walking on magnetic sandals, looking like a

comedian as he bobbed about the magnetic plates.

"Hi, group," he called as he went by.

"Hello, Jim." Sue's voice was strained. She waited until he was out of sight before she spoke again.

Hoarsely she whispered, "Did you fight in the Belt?" She didn't really believe it; it was merely the worst thing she could think of.

Vehemently Steve snapped, "No!" Then, reluctantly, he added, "But it did happen occasionally." Quickly he tried to explain.

"The trouble was that all the doctors, including the psychists, were at the big bases, like Ceres. It was the only way they could help the people who needed them--be where the miners could find them. But all the danger was out in the rocks.

"You noticed a habit of mine once. I never make gestures. All Belters have that trait. It's because on a small mining ship you could hit something waving your arms around. Something like the airlock button."

"Sometimes it's almost eerie. You don't move for minutes at a time."

"There's always tension out in the rocks.

Sometimes a miner would see too much danger and boredom and frustration, too much cramping inside and too much room outside, and he wouldn't get to a psychist in time. He'd pick a fight in a bar. I saw it happen once. The guy was using his hands like mallets."

Steve had been looking far into the past. Now he turned back to Sue. She looked white and sick, like a novice nurse standing up to her first really bad case. His ears began to turn red.

"Sorry," he said miserably.

She felt like running; she was as embarrassed as he was. Instead she said, and tried to mean it, "It doesn't matter.

So you think the people in the other ship might want to, uh, make war?"

He nodded.

"Did you have history-of-Earth courses?"

He smiled ruefully.

"No, I couldn't qualify. Sometimes I wonder how many people do."

"About one in twelve."

"That's not many."

"People in general have trouble assimilating the facts of life about their

ancestors. You probably know that there used to be wars before--hmmm--three hundred years ago, but do you know what a war is? Can you visualize one? Can you see a fusion electric point deliberately built to explode in the middle of the city? Do you know what a concentration camp is? A limited action? You probably think murder ended with war. Well, it didn't. The last murder occurred in twenty-one something, just a hundred and sixty years ago.

"Anyone who says human nature can't be changed is out of his head. To make it stick, he's got to define human nature--and he can't. Three things gave us our present peaceful civilization, and each

one was a technological change." Sue's voice had taken on a dry, remote lecture-hall tone, like the voice on a teacher tape.

"One was the development of psychiatry beyond the alchemist stage. Another was the full development of land for food production. The third was the Fertility Restriction Laws and the annual contraceptive shots. They gave us room to breathe. Maybe Belt mining and the stellar colonies had something to do with it too; they gave us an inanimate enemy. Even the historians argue about that one.

"Here's the delicate point I'm trying to nail down." Sue rapped on the window.

"Look at that spacecraft. It has enough power to move it around like a mail missile and enough fuel to move it up to our point eight light-right?"

"Right."

"--with plenty of power left for maneuvering. It's a better ship than ours. If they've had time to learn how to build a ship like that, they've had time to build up their own versions of psychiatry, modern food production, contraception, economic theory, everything they need to abolish war. See?"

Steve had to smile at her earnestness.

"Sure, Sue, it makes sense. But that guy in the bar came from our culture, and he was hostile enough. If we can't understand how he thinks, how can we guess about the mind of something whose very chemical makeup we can't guess at yet?"

"It's sentient. It builds tools."

"Right."

"And if Jim hears you talking like this, your be in psychiatry treatment."

"That's the best argument you've given me," Steve grinned, and stroked her under the ear with two fingertips. He felt her go suddenly stiff, saw the pain in her

face; and at the same time his own pain struck, a real tiger of a headache, as if his brain were trying to swell beyond his skull.

"I've got them, sir," the Telepath said blurrily.

"Ask me anything."

The Captain hurried, knowing that the Telepath couldn't stand this for long.

"How do they power their ship?"

"It's a light-pressure drive powered by incomplete hydrogen fusion. They use an electromagnetic ramscoop to get their own hydrogen from space."

"Clever... Can they get away from us?"

"No. Their drive is on idle, ready to go, but it won't help them. It's pitifully weak."

"What kind of weapons do they have?"

The Telepath remained silent for a long time. The others waited patiently for his answer. There was sound in the control dome, but it was the kind of sound one learns not to hear: the whine of heavy current, the muted purr of voices from below, the strange sound like continuously ripping cloth which came from the gravity motors.

"None at all, sir." The Kzin's voice

became clearer; his hypnotic relaxation was broken by muscle twitches. He twisted as if in a nightmare.

"Nothing aboard ship, not even a knife or a club. Wait, they've got cooking knives. But that's all they use them for. They don't fight."

"They don't fight?"

"No, sir. They don't expect us to fight, either. The idea has occurred to three of them, and each has dismissed it from his mind."

"But why?" the Captain asked, knowing the question was irrelevant, unable to hold it back.

"I don't know, sir. It's a science they use, or a religion. I don't understand," the Telepath whimpered.

"I don't understand at all."

Which must be tough on him, the Captain thought Completely alien thoughts...

"What are they doing now?"

"Waiting for us to talk to them. They tried to talk to us, and they think we must be trying just as hard."

"But why?--never mind, it's not important. Can they be killed by heat?"

"Yes, sir."

"Break contact."

The Telepath shook his head violently. He looked like he'd been in a washing machine. The Captain touched a sensitized surface and bellowed, "Weapons Officer!"

"Here."

"Use the inductors on the enemy ship."

"But, sir! They're so slow! What if the alien attacks?"

"Don't argue with me, you--" Snarling, the Captain delivered an impassioned monologue on the virtues of unquestioning obedience. When he

switched off, the Alien Technologies Officer was back at the viewer and the Telepath had gone to sleep.

The Captain purred happily, wishing that they were all this easy.

When the occupants had been killed by heat he would take the ship. He could tell everything he needed to know about their planet by examining their life-support system. He could locate it by tracing the ship's trajectory. Probably they hadn't even taken evasive action!

If they came from a Kzin-like world it would become a Kzin world. And he, as Conquest Leader, would command one percent of its wealth for the rest of his

life! Truly, the future looked rich. No longer would he be called by his profession. He would bear a name...

"Incidental information," said A-T Officer.

"The ship was generating one and twelve sixty-fourth gee before it stopped rotating."

"Little heavy," the Captain mused.

"Might be too much air, but it should be easy to Kzinform it. A-T, we find the strangest life forms. Remember the Chunquen?"

"Both sexes were sentient. They fought

constantly."

"And that funny religion on Altair One. They thought they could travel in time."

"Yes sir. When we landed the infantry they were all gone."

"They must have all committed suicide with disintegrators. But why? They knew we only wanted slaves. And I'm still trying to figure out how they got rid of the disintegrators afterward."

"Some beings," said the A-T Officer, "will do anything to keep their beliefs."

Eleven years beyond Pluto, eight years from her destination, the fourth colony

ship to We Made It fell between the stars. Before her the stars were green-white and blue-white, blazing points against nascent black. Behind they were sparse, dying red embers. To the sides the constellations were strangely flattened. The universe was shorter than it had been.

For awhile Jim Davis was very busy. Everyone, including himself, had a throbbing blinding headache. To each patient Dr. Davis handed a tiny pink pill from the dispenser slot of the huge autodoc which covered the back wall of the infirmary. They milled outside the door waiting for the pills to take effect, looking like a fullfledged mob in the

narrow corridor; and then someone thought it would be a good idea to go to the lounge, and everyone followed him. It was an unusually silent mob. Nobody felt like talking while the pain was with them. Even the sound of magnetic sandals was lost in the plastic pile rug.

Steve saw Fun Davis behind him.

"Hey, Doc," he called soffly.

"How long before the pain stops?"

"Mine's gone away. You got your pills a little after I did, right?"

"Right. Thanks, Doc."

They didn't take pain well, these people. They were too unused to it.

In single file they walked or floated into the lounge. Low-pitched conversations started. People took couches, using the sticky plastic strips on their falling jumpers. Others stood or floated near walls. The lounge was big enough to hold them all in comfort.

Steve wriggled near the ceiling, trying to pull on his sandals.

"I hope they don't try that again," he heard Sue say. "It hurt."

"Try what?" Someone Steve didn't recognize, half-listening as he was.

"Whatever they tried. Telepathy, perhaps."

"No. I don't believe in telepathy. Could they have set up ultrasonic vibrations in the walls?"

Steve had his sandals on. He left the magnets turned off.

"...a cold beer. Do you realize we'll never taste beer again?" Jim Davis' voice.

"I miss waterskiing." Ann Harrison sounded wistful. "The feel of a pusher unit shoving into the small of your back, the water beating against your feet, the sun..."

Steve pushed himself toward them.

"Taboo subject," he called.

"We're on it anyway," Jim boomed cheerfully.

"Unless you'd rather talk about the alien, which everyone else is doing. I'd rather drop it for the moment. What's your greatest regret at leaving Earth?"

"Only that I didn't stay long enough to really see it."

"Oh, of course." Jim suddenly remembered the drinking bulb in his hand. He drank from it, hospitably passed it to Steve.

"This waiting makes me restless," said Steve.

"What are they likely to try next? Shake the ship in Morse code?"

Jim smiled.

"Maybe they won't try anything next. They may give up and leave."

"Oh, I hope not!

" said Ann.

"Would that be so bad?"

Steve had a start. What was Jim thinking?

"Of course!" Ann protested.

"We've got to find out what they're like and think of what they can teach us, Jim!"

When conversation got controversial it was good manners to change the subject.

"Say," said Steve, "I happened to notice the wall was warm when I pushed off. Is that good or bad?"

"That's funny. It should be cold, if anything," said Jim.

"There's nothing out there but starlight. Except--" A most peculiar expression flitted across his face. He drew his feet

up and touched the magnetic soles with his fingertips.

"Eeeee! Jim! Jim!"

Steve tried to whirl around and got nowhere. That was Sue! He switched on his shoes, thumped to the floor, and went to help.

Sue was surrounded by bewildered people. They split to let Jim Davis through, and he tried to lead her out of the lounge. He looked frightened. Sue was moaning and thrashing, paying no attention to his efforts.

Steve pushed through to her.

"All the metal is heating up," Davis shouted.

"We've got to get her hearing aid out.

"Infirmary," Sue shouted.

Four of them took Sue down the hall to the infirmary. She was still crying and struggling feebly when they got her in, but Jim was there ahead of them with a spray hypo. He used it and she went to sleep.

The four watched anxiously as Jim went to work. The autodoc would have taken precious time for diagnosis. Jim operated by hand. He was able to do a fast job, for the tiny instrument was

buried just below the skin behind her ear. Still, the scalpel must have burned his fingers before he was done. Steve could feel the growing warmth against the soles of his feet.

Did the aliens know what they were doing?

Did it matter? The ship was being attacked. His ship.

Steve slipped into the corridor and ran for the control room. Running on magnetic soles, he looked like a terrified penguin, but he moved fast. He knew he might be making a terrible mistake; the aliens might be trying desperately to reach the Angel's Pencil, he would never

know. They had to be stopped before everyone was roasted.

The shoes burned his feet. He whimpered with the pain, but otherwise ignored it. The air burned in his mouth and throat. Even his teeth were hot.

He had to wrap his shirt around his hands to open the control-room door. The pain in his feet was unbearable; he tore off his sandals and swam to the control board. He kept his shirt over his hands to work the controls. A twist of a large white knob turned the drive on full, and he slipped into the pilot seat before the gentle light pressure could build up.

He turned to the rear-view telescope. It

was aimed at the solar system, for the drive could be used for messages at this distance. He set it for short range and began to turn the ship.

The enemy ship glowed in the high infrared.

"It will take longer to heat the crew-carrying section," reported the Alien Technologies Officer.

"They'll have temperature control there."

"That's all right. When you think they should all be dead, wake up the Telepath and have him check." The Captain continued to brush his fur, killing time.

"You know, if they hadn't been so completely helpless I wouldn't have tried this slow method. I'd have cut the ring free of the motor section first. Maybe I should have done that anyway. Safer."

The A-T Officer wanted all the credit he could get. "Sir, they couldn't have any big weapons. There isn't room. With a reaction drive, the motor and the fuel tanks take up most of the available space."

The other ship began to turn away from its tormentor. Its drive end glowed red.

"They're trying to get away," the Captain said, as the glowing end swung toward

them.

"Are you sure they can't?"

"Yes sir. That light drive won't take them anywhere."

The Captain purred thoughtfully.

"What would happen if the light hit our ship?"

"Just a bright light, I think. The lens is flat, so it must be emitting a very wide beam. They'd need a parabolic reflector to be dangerous. Unless--" His ears went straight up.

"Unless what?" The Captain spoke

softly, demandingly.

"A laser. But that's all right, sir. They don't have any weapons."

The Captain sprang at the control board.

"Stupid!" he spat.

"They don't know weapons from sthondat blood. Weapons Officer! How could a telepath find out what they don't know? WEAPONS OFFICER!"

"Here, sir."

"Burn--"

An awful light shone in the control

dome. The Captain burst into flame, then blew out as the air left through a glowing split in the dome.

Steve was lying on his back. The ship was spinning again, pressing him into what felt like his own bunk.

He opened his eyes.

Jim Davis crossed the room and stood over him. "You awake?"

Steve sat bolt upright, his eyes wide.

"Easy." Jim's gray eyes were concerned.

Steve blinked up at him.

"What happened?" he asked, and discovered how hoarse he was.

Jim sat down in one of the chairs.

"You tell me. We tried to get to the control room when the ship started moving. Why didn't you ring the strap-down? You turned off the drive just as Ann came through the door. Then you fainted."

"How about the other ship?" Steve tried to repress the urgency in his voice, and couldn't.

"Some of the others are over there now, examining the wreckage." Steve felt his heart stop.

"I guess I was afraid from the start that alien ship was dangerous. I'm more psychist than emdee, and I qualified for history class, so maybe I know more than is good for me about human nature. Too much to think that beings with space travel will automatically be peaceful. I tried to think so, but they aren't. They've got things any self-respecting human being would be ashamed to have nightmares about. Bomb missiles, fusion bombs, lasers, that induction projector they used on us. And antimissiles. You know what that means? They've got enemies like themselves, Steve. Maybe nearby."

"So I killed them." The room seemed to

swoop around him, but his voice came out miraculously steady.

"You saved the ship."

"It was an accident. I was trying to get us away."

"No, you weren't." Davis' accusation was as casual as if he were describing the chemical makeup of urea. "That ship was four hundred miles away. You would have had to sight on it with a telescope to hit it. You knew what you were doing, too, because you turned off the drive as soon as you'd burned through the ship."

Steve's back muscles would no longer

support him. He flopped back to horizontal.

"All right, you know," he told the ceiling.

"Do the others?"

"I doubt it. Thinking in self-defense is too far outside their experience.. I think Sue's guessed."

"Oooo."

"If she has, she's taking it well," Davis said briskly. "Better than most of them will, when they find out the universe is full of warriors. This is the end of the world, Steve."

"What?"

"I'm being theatrical. But it is. Three hundred years of the peaceful life for everyone. They'll call it the Golden Age. No starvation, no war, no physical sickness other than senescence, no permanent mental sickness at all, even by our rigid standards. When someone over fourteen tries to use his fist on someone else we say he's sick, and we cure him. And now it's over. Peace isn't a stable condition, not for us. Maybe not for anything that lives."

"Can I see the ship from here?"

"Yes. It's just behind us."

Steve rolled out of bed, went to the window.

Someone had steered the ships much closer together. The Kzinti ship was a huge red sphere with ugly projections scattered at seeming random over the hull. The beam had sliced it into two unequal halves, sliced it like an ax through an egg. Steve watched, unable to turn aside, as the big half rotated to show its honeycombed interior.

"In a little while," said Jim, "the men will be coming back. They'll be frightened. Someone will probably insist that we arm ourselves against the next attacks, using weapons from the other ship. I'll have to agree with him.

"Maybe they'll think I'm sick myself. Maybe I am. But it's the kind of sickness we'll need." Jim looked desperately unhappy.

"We're going to become an armed society. And of course we'll have to warn the Earth.