

There Is a Tide



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I

THEN, THE PLANET had no name. It circles a star which in 2830 lay beyond the fringe of known space, a distance of nearly forty light-years from Sol. The star is a G3, somewhat redder than Sol, somewhat smaller. The planet, swinging eighty million miles from its primary in a reasonably circular orbit, is a trifle cold for human tastes.

In the year 2830 one Louis Gridley Wu

happened to be passing. The emphasis on accident is intended. In a universe the size of ours almost anything that can happen, will. Take the coincidence of his meeting-

But we'll get to that.

Louis Wu was one hundred and eighty years old. As a regular user of boosterspice, he didn't show his years. If he didn't get bored first, or broke, he might reach a thousand.

"But," he sometimes told himself, "not if I have to put up with any more cocktail parties, or Bandersnatch hunts, or painted flatlanders swarming through an anarchy park too small for them by a

factor of ten. Not if I have to live through another one-night love affair or another twenty-year marriage or another twenty-minute wait for a transfer booth that blows its zap just as it's my turn. And people. Not if I have to live with people, day and night, all those endless centuries."

When he started to feel like that, he left. It had happened three times in his life, and now a fourth. Presumably, it would keep happening. In such a state of anomie, of acute anti-everything, he was no good to anyone, especially his friends, most especially himself. So he left. In a small but adequate spacecraft, his own, he left everything and everyone,

heading outward for the fringe of known space. He would not return until he was desperate for the sight of a human face, the sound of a human voice.

On the second trip he had gritted his teeth and waited until he was desperate for the sight of a Kzinti face.

That was a long trip, he remembered. And, because he had only been three and a half months in space on this fourth trip, and because his teeth still snapped together at the mere memory of a certain human voice ... because of these things, he added, "I think this time I'll wait till I'm desperate to see a Kdatlyno. Female, of course."

Few of his friends guessed the wear and tear these trips saved him. And them. He spent the months reading, while his library played orchestrated music. By now he was well clear of known space. Now he turned the ship ninety degrees, beginning a wide circular arc with Sol at its center.

He approached a certain G3 star. He dropped out of hyperdrive well clear of the singularity in hyperspace which surrounds any large mass. He accelerated into the system on his main thruster, sweeping the space ahead of him with the deep-radar. He was not looking for habitable planets. He was looking for Slaver stasis boxes.

If the pulse returned no echo, we would accelerate until he could shift to hyperdrive. The velocity would stay with him and he could use it to coast through the next system he tried, and the next, and the next. It saved fuel.

He had never found a Slaver stasis box. It did not stop him from looking.

As he passed through the system, the deep-radar showed him planets like pale ghosts, light gray circles on the white screen. The G3 sun was a wide gray disk, darkening almost to black at the center. The near-black was degenerate matter, compressed past the point where electron orbits collapse entirely.

He was well past the sun, and still accelerating when the screen showed a tiny black fleck.

"No system is perfect, of course," he muttered as he turned off the drive. He talked to himself a good deal out here where nobody could interrupt him.

"It usually saves fuel," he told himself a week later. By then he was out of the singularity, in clear space. He took the ship into hyperdrive, circled halfway round the system, and began decelerating. The velocity he'd built up during those first two weeks gradually left him. Somewhere near where he'd found a black speck in the deep-radar projection, he slowed to a stop.

Though he had never realized it until now, his system for saving fuel was based on the assumption that he would never find a Slaver box. But the fleck was there again, a black dot on the gray ghost of a planet. Louis Wu moved in.

The world looked something like Earth. It was nearly the same size, very much the same shape, somewhat the same color. There was no moon.

Louis used his telescope on the planet and whistled appreciatively. Shredded white cloud over misty blue ... faint continental outlines ... a hurricane whorl near the equator. The ice caps looked big, but there would be warm climate

near the equator. The air looked sweet and noncarcinogenic on the spectrograph. And nobody on it. Not a soul!

No next door neighbors. No voices. No faces.

"What the hell," he chortled.

"I've got my box. I'll just spend the rest of my vacation here. No men. No women. No children." He frowned and rubbed the fringe of hair along his jaw. "Am I being hasty? Maybe I should knock."

But he scanned the radio bands and got nothing. Any civilized planet radiates

like a small star in the radio range. Moreover, here was no sign of civilization, even from a hundred miles up.

"Great! Okay, first I'll get that old stasis box... He was sure it was that. Nothing but stars and stasis boxes were dense enough to show black in the reflection of a hyperwave, pulse.

He followed the image around the bulge of the planet. It seemed the planet had a moon after all. The moon was twelve hundred miles up, and it was ten feet across.

"Now why," he wondered aloud, "would the Slavers have put it in orbit? It's too

easy to find. They were in a war, for Finagle's sake! And why would it stay here?"

The little moon was still a couple of thousand miles away, invisible to the naked eye. The scope showed it clearly enough. A silver sphere ten feet through, with no marks on it.

"A billion and a half years it's been there," said Louis to himself, said he. "And if you believe that, you'll believe anything. Something would have knocked it down. Dust, a meteor, the solar wind. Tnuctip soldiers. A magnetic storm. Nah." He ran his fingers through straight black hair grown too long. "It must have drifted in from somewhere

else. Recently. Wha--"

Another ship, small and conical, had appeared behind the silvery sphere. Its hull was green, with darker green markings.

II

"Damn," said Louis. He didn't recognize the make. It was no human ship. "Well, it could be worse. They could have been people." He used the comm laser.

The other ship braked to a stop. In

courtesy, so did Louis.

"Would you believe it?" he demanded of himself. "Three years total time I've spent looking for stasis boxes. I finally find one, and now something else wants it too!"

The bright blue spark of another laser glowed in the tip of the alien cone. Louis listened to the autopilot-computer chuckling to itself as it tried to untangle the signals in an unknown laser beam. At least they did use lasers, not telepathy or tentacle-waving or rapid changes in skin color.

A face appeared on Louis's screen.

It was not the first alien he had seen. This, like some others, had a recognizable head: a cluster of sense organs grouped around a mouth, with room for a brain. Trinocular vision, he noted; the eyes set deep in sockets, well protected, but restricted in range of vision. Triangular mouth, too, with yellow, serrated bone knives showing their edges behind three gristle lips.

Definitely, this was an unknown species.

"Boy, are you ugly," Louis refrained from saying. The alien's translator might be working by now.

His own autopilot finished translating the alien's first message. It said, "Go

away. This object belongs to me."

"Remarkable," Louis sent back.

"Are you a Slaver?" The being did not in the least resemble a Slaver, and the Slavers had been extinct for eons.

"That word was not translated," said the alien. "I reached the artifact before you did. I will fight to keep it."

Louis scratched at his chin, at two week's growth of bristly beard. His ship had very little to fight with. Even the fusion plant which powered the thruster was designed with safety in mind. A laser battle, fought with comm lasers turned to maximum, would be a mere

endurance test; and he'd lose, for the alien ship had more mass to absorb more heat. He had no weapons per se. Presumably the alien did.

But the stasis box was a big one.

The Tnuctipun-Slaver war had wiped out most of the intelligent species of the galaxy, a billion and a half years ago. Countless minor battles must have occurred before a Slaver-developed final weapon was used. Often the Slavers, losing a battle, had stored valuables in a stasis box, and hidden it against the day they would again be of use. No time passed inside a closed stasis box. Alien meat a billion and a half years old had emerged still fresh

from its hiding place. Weapons and tools showed no trace of rust. Once a stasis box had disgorged a small, tarsierlike sentient being, still alive. That former slave had lived a strange life before the aging process claimed her, the last of her species.

Slaver stasis boxes were beyond value. It was known that the Tnuctipun, at least, had known the secret of direct conversion of matter. Perhaps their enemies had too. Someday, in a stasis box somewhere outside known space, such a device would be found. Then fusion power would be as obsolete as internal combustion.

And this, a sphere ten feet in diameter, must be the largest stasis box ever found.

"I too will fight to keep the artifacts" said Louis. "But consider this. Our species has met once, and will meet again regardless of who takes the artifact now. We can be friends or enemies. Why should we risk this relationship by killing?"

The alien sense-cluster gave away nothing. "What do you propose?"

"A game of chance, with the risks even on both sides. Do you play games of chance?"

"Emphatically yes. The process of living

is a game of chance. To avoid chance is insanity."

"That it is. Hmmm." Louis regarded the alien head that seemed to be all triangles. He saw it abruptly whip around, flick, to face straight backward, and snap back in the same instant. The sight did something to the pit of his stomach.

"Did you speak?" the alien asked.

"No. Won't you break your neck that way?"

"Your question is interesting. Later we must discuss anatomy. I have a proposal."

"Fine."

"We shall land on the world below us. We will meet between our ships. I will do you the courtesy of emerging first. Can you bring your translator?"

He could connect the computer with his suit radio. "Yes."

"We will meet between our ships and play some simple game, familiar to neither of us, depending solely on chance. Agreed?"

"Provisionally. What game?"

The image on the screen rippled with diagonal lines. Something interfering

with the signal? It cleared quickly. "There is a mathematics game," said the alien. Our mathematics will certainly be similar."

"True." Though Louis had heard of some decidedly peculiar twists in alien mathematics.

"The game involves a screee--" Some word that the autopilot couldn't translate. The alien raised a threeclawed hand, holding a lens-shaped object. The alien's mutually opposed fingers turned it so that Louis could see the different markings on each side. "This is a screee. You and I will throw it upward six times each. I will choose one of the symbols, you will choose the other. If my symbol

falls looking upward more often than yours, the artifact is mine. The risks are even."

The image rippled, then cleared.

"Agreed," said Louis. He was a bit disappointed in the simplicity of the game.

"We shall both accelerate away from the artifact. Will you follow me down?"

"I will," said Louis.

The image disappeared.

Louis Wu scratched at a week's growth of beard. What a way to greet an alien ambassador! In the worlds of men Louis Wu dressed impeccably; but out here he felt free to look like death warmed over, all the time.

But how was a Trinoc supposed to know that he should have shaved? No, that wasn't the problem.

Was he fool or genius?

He had friends, many of them, with habits like his own. Two had disappeared decades ago; he no longer

remembered their names. He remembered only that each had gone hunting stasis boxes in this direction and that each had neglected to come back.

Had they met alien ships?

There were any number of other explanations. Half a year or more spent alone in a single ship was a good way to find out whether you liked yourself. If you decided you didn't, there was no point in returning to the worlds of men.

But there were aliens out here. Armed. One rested in orbit five hundred miles ahead of his ship, with a valuable artifact halfway between.

Still, gambling was safer than fighting. Louis Wu waited for the alien's next move.

That move was to drop like a rock. The alien ship must have used at least twenty gees of push. After a moment of shock, Louis followed under the same acceleration, protected by his cabin gravity. Was the alien testing his maneuverability?

Possibly not. He seemed contemptuous of tricks. Louis, trailing the alien at a goodly distance, was now much closer to the silver sphere. Suppose he just turned ship, ran for the artifact, strapped it to his hull and kept running?

Actually, that wouldn't work. He'd have to slow to reach the sphere the alien wouldn't have to slow to attack. Twenty gees was close to his ship's limit.

Running might not be a bad idea, though. What guarantee had he of the alien's good faith? What if the alien "cheated"?

That risk could be minimized. His pressure suit had sensors to monitor his body functions. Louis set the autopilot to blow the fusion plant if his heart stopped. He rigged a signal button on his suit to blow the plant manually.

The alien ship burned bright orange as it hit air. It fell free and then slowed suddenly, a mile over the ocean.

"Showoff," Louis muttered and prepared to imitate the maneuver.

The conical ship showed no exhaust. Its drive must be either a reactionless drive, like his own, or a kzin-style induced-gravity drive. Both were neat and clean, silent, safe to bystanders and highly advanced.

Islands were scattered across the ocean. The alien circled, chose one at seeming random and landed like a feather along a bare shoreline.

Louis followed him down. There was a bad moment while he waited for some unimaginable weapon to fire from the grounded ship, to tear him flaming from

the sky while his attention was distracted by landing Procedures. But he landed without a jar, several hundred yards from the alien cone.

"An explosion will destroy both our ships if I am harmed," he told the alien via signal beam.

"Our species seem to think alike. I will now descend."

Louis watched him appear near the nose of the ship, in a wide circular airlock. He watched the alien drift gently to the sand. Then he clamped his helmet down and entered the airlock.

Had he made the right decision?

Gambling was safer than war. More fun, too. Best of all, it gave him better odds.

"But I'd hate to go home without that box," he thought. In nearly two hundred years of life, he had never done anything as important as finding a stasis box. He had made no discoveries, won no elective offices, overthrown no governments. This was his big chance.

"Even odds," he said, and turned on the intercom as he descended.

His muscles and semicircular canals registered about a gee. A hundred feet away waves slid hissing up onto pure white sand. The waves were green and huge, perfect for riding; the beach a

definite beer party beach.

Later, perhaps he would ride those waves to shore on his belly, if the air checked out and the water was free of predators. He hadn't had time to give the planet a thorough checkup.

Sand tugged at his boots as he went to meet the alien.

The alien was five feet tall. He had looked much taller descending from his ship, but that was because he was mostly leg. More than three feet of skinny leg, a torso like a beer barrel, and no neck. Impossible that his neckless neck should be so supple. But the chrome yellow skin fell in thick rolls around the bottom

of his head, hiding anatomical details.

His suit was transparent, a roughly alien-shaped balloon, constricted at the shoulder, above and below the complicated elbow joint, at the wrist, at hip and knee. Air jets showed at wrist and ankle. Tools hung in loops at the chest. A back pack hung from the neck, under the suit. Louis noted all these tools with trepidation; any one of them could be a weapon.

"I expected that you would be taller," said the alien.

"A laser screen doesn't tell much, does it? I think my translator may have mixed up right and left, too. Do you have the

coin?"

"The screee?" The alien produced it.

"Shall there be no preliminary talk? My name is screee."

"My machine can't translate that. Or pronounce it. My name is Louis. Has your species met others besides mine?"

"Yes, two. But I am not an expert in that field of knowledge."

"Nor am I. Let's leave the politenesses to the experts. We're here to gamble."

"Choose your symbol," said the alien, and handed him the coin.

Louis looked it over. It was a lens of platinum or something similar, sharp-edged, with the three-clawed hand of his new gambling partner stamped on one side and a planet, with heavy ice caps outlined, decorating the other. Maybe they weren't ice caps, but continents.

He held the coin as if trying to choose. Stalling. Those gas jets seemed to be attitude jets, but maybe not. Suppose he won? Would he win only the chance to be murdered?

But they'd both die if his heart stopped. No alien could have guessed what kind of weapon would render him helpless without killing him.

"I choose the planet. You flip first."

The alien tossed the coin in the direction of Louis's ship. Louis' eyes followed it down, and he took two steps to retrieve it. The alien stood beside him when he rose.

"Hand," he said.

"My turn." He was one down. He tossed the coin. As it spun gleaming, he saw for the first time that the alien ship was gone.

"What gives?" he demanded.

"There's no need for us to die," said the alien. It held something that had hung in

a loop from its chest.

"This is a weapon, but both will die if I use it. Please do not try to reach your ship."

Louis touched the button that would blow his power plant.

"My ship lifted when you turned your head to follow the screee. By now my ship is beyond range of any possible explosion you can bring to bear. There is no need for us to die, provided you do not try to reach your ship."

"Wrong. I can leave your ship without a pilot." He left his hand where it was. Rather than be cheated by an alien in a

gambling game--

"The pilot is still on board, with the astrogator and the screee. I am only the communications officer. Why did you assume I was alone?"

Louis sighed and let his arm fall. "Because I'm stupid," he said bitterly. "Because you used the singular pronoun, or my computer did. Because I thought you were a gambler."

"I gambled that you would not see my ship take off, that you would be distracted by the coin, that you could see only from the front of your head. The risks seemed better than one-half."

Louis nodded. It all seemed clear.

"There was also the chance that you had lured me down to destroy me." The computer was still translating into the first person singular. "I have lost at least one exploring ship that flew in this direction."

"Not guilty. So have we." A thought struck him and he said, "Prove that you hold a weapon."

The alien obliged. No beam showed, but sand exploded to Louis's left, with a vicious crack! and a flash the color of lightning. The alien held something that made holes.

So much for that. Louis bent and picked up the coin. "As long as we're here, shall we finish the game?"

"To what purpose?"

"To see who would have won. Doesn't your species gamble for pleasure?"

"To what purpose? We gamble for survival."

"Then Finagle take your whole breed!" he snarled and flung himself to the sand. His chance for glory was gone, tricked away from him. There is a tide that governs men's affairs... and there went the ebb, carrying statues to Louis Wu, history books naming Louis Wu, jetsam

on the tide.

"Your attitude is puzzling. One gambles only when gambling is necessary."

"Nuts."

"My translator will not translate that comment."

"Do you know what that artifact is?"

"I know of the species who built that artifact. They traveled far."

"We've never found a stasis box that big. It must be a vault of some kind."

"It is thought that that species used a

single weapon to end their war and all its participants."

The two looked at each other. Possibly each was thinking the same thing. What a disaster, if any but my own species should take this ultimate weapon!

But that was anthropomorphic thinking. Louis knew that a Kzin would have been saying: Now I can conquer the universe, as is my right.

"Finagle take my luck!" said Louis Wu between his teeth. "Why did you have to show at the same time I did?"

"That was not entirely chance. My instruments found your craft as you

backed into the system. To reach the vicinity of the artifact in time, it was necessary to use thrust that damaged my ship and killed one of my crew. I earned possession of the artifact."

"By cheating, damn you!" Louis stood up...

And something meshed between his brain and his semicircular canals.

IV

One gravity.

The density of a planet's atmosphere depended on its gravity, and on its moon. A big moon would skim away most of the atmosphere, over the billions of years of a world's evolution. A moonless world the size and mass of Earth should have unbreathable air, impossibly dense, worse than Venus.

But this planet had no moon. Except--

The alien said something, a startled ejaculation that the computer refused to translate.

"Secree! Where did the water go?"

Louis looked. What he saw puzzled him only a moment. The ocean had receded,

slipped imperceptibly away, until what showed now was half a mile of level, slickly shining sea bottom.

"Where did the water go? I do not understand."

"I do."

"Where did it go? Without a moon, there can be no tides. Tides are not this quick in any case. Explain, please."

"It'd be easier if we use the telescope in my ship."

"In your ship there may be weapons."

"Now pay attention," said Louis. "Your

ship is very close to total destruction. Nothing can save your crew but the comm laser in my ship."

The alien dithered, then capitulated. "If you have weapons, you would have used them earlier. You cannot stop my ship now. Let us enter your ship. Remember that I hold my weapon."

The alien stood beside him in the small cabin, his mouth working disturbingly around the serrated edges of his teeth as Louis activated the scope and screen. Shortly a starfield appeared. So did a conical spacecraft, painted green with darker green markings. Along the bottom of the screen was the blur of thick atmosphere.

"You see? The artifact must be nearly to the horizon. It moves fast."

"That fact is obvious even to low intelligence."

"Yah. Is it obvious to you that this world must have a massive satellite?"

"But it does not, unless the satellite is invisible."

"Not invisible. Just too small to notice. But then, it must be very dense."

The alien didn't answer.

"Why did we assume the sphere was a

Slaver stasis box? Its shape was wrong; its size was wrong. But it was shiny, like the surface of a stasis field, and spherical, like an artifact. Planets are spheres too, but gravity wouldn't ordinarily pull something ten feet wide into a sphere. Either it would have to be very fluid, or it would have to be very dense. Do you understand me?"

"No."

"I don't know how your equipment works. My deepradar uses a hyperwave pulse to find stasis boxes. When something stops a hyperwave pulse, it's either a stasis box, or it's something denser than degenerate matter, the matter inside a normal star. And this object is

dense enough to cause tides."

A tiny silver bead had drifted into view ahead of the cone. Telescopic foreshortening seemed to bring it right alongside the ship. Louis reached to scratch at his beard and was stopped by his faceplate.

"I believe I understand you. But how could it happen?"

"That's guesswork. Well?"

"Call my ship. They would be killed. We must save them!"

"I had to be sure you wouldn't stop me."
Louis Wu went to work. Presently a light

glowed; the computer had found the alien ship with its comm laser.

He spoke without preliminaries. "You must leave the spherical object immediately. It is not an artifact. It is ten feet of nearly solid neutronium, probably torn loose from a neutron star."

There was no answer, of course. The alien stood behind him but did not speak. Probably his own ship's computer could not have handled the double translation. But the alien was making one two-armed gesture, over and over.

The green cone swung sharply around, broadside to the telescope.

"Good, they're firing lateral," said Louis to himself. "Maybe they can do a hyperbolic past it." He raised his voice. "Use all the power available. You must pull away."

The two objects seemed to be pulling apart. Louis suspected that that was illusion, for the two objects were almost in line-of-sight. "Don't let the small mass fool you," he said, unnecessarily now. "Computer, what's the mass of a ten-foot neutronium sphere?--Around two times ten to the minus six times the mass of this world, which is pretty tiny, but if you get too close... Computer, what's the surface gravity?--I don't believe it."

The two objects seemed to be pulling

together again. Damn, thought Louis. If they hadn't come along, that'd be me.

He kept talking. It wouldn't matter now, except to relieve his own tension. "My computer says ten million gravities at the surface. That may be off. Newton's formula for gravity. Can you hear me?"

"They are too close," said the alien. "By now it is too late to save their lives." It was happening as he spoke. The ship began to crumble a fraction of a second before impact. Impact looked no more dangerous than a cannonball striking the wall of a fort. The tiny silver bead simply swept through the side of the ship. But the ship closed instantly, all in

a moment, like tinsel paper in a strong man's fist. Closed into a bead glowing yellow with heat. A tiny sphere ten feet through or a bit more.

"I mourn," said the alien.

"Now I get it," said Louis. "I wondered what was fouling our laser messages. That chunk of neutronium was right between our ships, bending the light beams."

"Why was this trap set for us?" cried the alien. "Have we enemies so powerful that they can play with such masses?"

A touch of paranoia? Louis wondered. Maybe the whole species had it. "Just a

touch of coincidence. A smashed neutron star."

For a time the alien did not speak. The telescope, for want of a better target, remained focused on the bead. Its glow had died.

The alien said, "My pressure suit will not keep me alive long."

"We'll make a run for it. I can reach Margrave in a couple of weeks. If you can hold out that long, we'll set up a tailored environment box to hold you until we think of something better. It only takes a couple of hours to set one up. I'll call ahead."

The alien's triple gaze converged on him. "Can you send messages faster than light?"

"Sure."

"You have knowledge worth trading for. I'll come with you."

"Thanks a whole lot." Louis Wu started punching buttons. "Margrave. Civilization. People. Faces. Voices. Bah." The ship leapt upward, ripping atmosphere apart. Cabin, gravity wavered a little, then settled down.

"Well," he told himself. "I can always come back."

"You will return here?"

"I think so," he decided.

"I hope you will be armed."

"What? More paranoia?"

"Your species is insufficiently suspicious," said the alien. "I wonder that you have survived. Consider this neutronium object as a defense. Its mass pulls anything that touches it into smooth and reflective spherical surface. Should any vehicle approach this world, its crew would find this object quickly. They would assume it is an artifact. What other assumption could they make? They would draw alongside for a closer

examination."

"True enough, but that planet's empty.
Nobody to defend."

"Perhaps."

The planet was dwindling below. Louis
Wu swung his ship toward deep space.