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**LARRY
NIVEN**

The
Collected
Tales of
Gil "The Arm"
Hamilton

FLATLANDER



Flatlander

by Larry Niven

The most beautiful girl aboard turned out to have a husband with habits so solitary that I didn't know about him until the second week. He was about five feet four and middle-aged, but he wore a hellflare tattoo on his shoulder, which meant he'd been on Kzin during the war thirty years back, which meant he'd been trained to kill adult Kzinti with his bare hands, feet, elbows, knees, and whatnot. When we found out about each other, he very decently gave me a first warning, and broke my arm to prove he meant it.

The arm still ached a day later, and every other woman on the _Lensman_ was over two hundred years old. I drank alone. I stared glumly into the mirror behind the curving bar. The mirror stared glumly back.

"Hey. You from We Made It. What am I?"

He was two chairs down, and he was glaring. Without the beard he would have had a round, almost petulant face ... I think. The beard, short and black and carefully shaped, made him look like a cross between Zeus and an angry bulldog. The glare went with the beard. His square fingers wrapped a large drinking bulb in a death grip. A broad belly matched broad shoulders to make him look massive rather than fat.

Obviously he was talking to me. I asked, "What do you mean, what are you?"

"Where am I from?"

"Earth." It was obvious. The accent said Earth. So did the conservatively symmetrical beard. His breathing was unconsciously natural in the ship's standard atmosphere, and his build had been forged at one point zero gee.

"Then what am I?"

"A flatlander."

The glare heat increased. He'd obviously reached the bar way ahead of me. "A flatlander! Dammit, everywhere I go I'm a flatlander. Do you know how many hours I've spent in space?"

"No. Long enough to know how to use a drinking bulb."

"Funny. Very funny. Everywhere in human space a flatlander is a schnook who never gets above the atmosphere. Everywhere but Earth. If you're from Earth, you're a flatlander all your life. For the last fifty years I've been running about in human space, and what am I? A flatlander. Why?"

"Earthian is a clumsy term."

"What is WeMadeItian?" he demanded.

"I'm a crashlander. I wasn't born within fifty miles of Crashlanding City, but I'm a crashlander anyway."

That got a grin. I think. It was hard to tell with the beard. "Lucky you're not a pilot."

"I am. Was."

"You're kidding. They let a crashlander pilot a ship?"

"If he's good at it."

"I didn't mean to pique your ire, sir. May I introduce myself? My name's Elephant."

"Beowulf Shaeffer."

He bought me a drink. I bought him a drink. It turned out we both played gin, so we took fresh drinks to a card table...

* * * *

When I was a kid, I used to stand out at the edge of

Crashlanding Port watching the ships come in. I'd watch the mob of passengers leave the lock and move in a great clump toward customs, and I'd wonder why they seemed to have trouble navigating. A majority of the starborn would always walk in weaving lines, swaying and blinking teary eyes against the sun. I used to think it was because they came from different worlds with different gravities and different atmospheres beneath differently colored suns.

Later I learned different.

There are no windows in a passenger spacecraft. If there were, half the passengers would go insane; it takes an unusual mentality to watch the blind-spot appearance of hyperspace and still keep one's marbles. For passengers there is nothing to watch and nothing to do, and if you don't like reading sixteen hours a day, then you drink. It's best to drink in company. You get less lushed, knowing you have to keep up your side of a conversation. The ship's

doc has cured more hangovers than every other operation combined, right down to manicures and haircuts.

The ship grounded at Los Angeles two days after I met Elephant. He'd made a good drinking partner. We'd been fairly matched at cards, he with his sharp card sense, I with my usual luck. From the talking we'd done, we knew almost as much about each other as anyone knows about anyone. In a way I was sorry to see him leave.

"You've got my number?"

"Yah. But, like I said, I don't know just what I'll be doing." I was telling the truth. When I explore a civilized world, I like to make my own discoveries.

"Well, call me if you get a chance. I wish you'd change your mind. I'd like to show you Earth."

"I decline with thanks. Good-bye, Elephant. It's been fun."

Elephant waved and turned through the natives' door. I went on to face the smuggler baiters. The last drink was still with me, but I could cure that at the hotel. I never expected to see Elephant again.

* * * *

Nine days ago I'd been on Jinx. I'd been rich. And I'd been depressed.

The money and the depression had stemmed from the same source. The puppeteers, those three-legged, two-headed professional cowards and businessmen, had lured me into taking a new type of ship all the way to the galactic core, thirty thousand light-years away. The trip was for publicity purposes, to get research money to iron out the imperfections in the very ship I was riding.

I suppose I should have had more sense, but I never do, and the money was good. The trouble was that the Core had exploded by the time I got there. The Core stars had gone off in a chain reaction of novas

ten thousand years ago, and a wave of radiation was even then (and even now) sweeping toward known space.

In just over twenty thousand years we'll all be in deadly danger.

You're not worried? It didn't bother me much either. But every puppeteer in known space vanished overnight, heading for Finagle knows what other galaxy.

I was depressed. I missed the puppeteers and hated knowing I was responsible for their going. I had time and money and a black melancholia to work off. And I'd always wanted to see Earth.

* * * *

Earth smelled good. There was a used flavor to it, a breathed flavor, unlike anything I've ever known. It was the difference between spring water and distilled water. Somewhere in each breath I took were

molecules breathed by Dante, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Heinlein, Carter, and my own ancestors. Traces of past industries lingered in the air, sensed if not smelled: gasoline, coal fumes, tobacco and burnt cigarette filters, diesel fumes, ale breweries. I left the customs house with inflated lungs and a questing look.

I could have taken a transfer booth straight to the hotel. I decided to walk a little first.

Everyone on Earth had made the same decision.

The pedwalk held a crowd such as I had never imagined. They were all shapes and all colors, and they dressed in strange and eldritch ways. Shifting colors assaulted the eye and sent one reeling. On any world in human space, any world but one, you know immediately who the natives are. Wunderland? Asymmetric beards mark the nobility, and the common people are the ones who quickly step out of their way. We Made It? The pallor of our skins in

summer and winter; in spring and fall, the fact that we all race upstairs, above the buried cities and onto the blooming desert, eager to taste sunlight while the murderous winds are at rest. Jinx? The natives are short, wide, and strong; a sweet little old lady's handshake can crush steel. Even in the Belt, within the solar system, a Belter strip haircut adorns both men and women. But Earth -- !

No two looked alike. There were reds and blues and greens, yellows and oranges, plaids and stripes. I'm talking about hair, you understand, and skin. All my life I've used tannin-secretion pills for protection against ultraviolet, so that my skin color has varied from its normal pinkish-white (I'm an albino) to (under blue-white stars) tuxedo black. But I'd never known that other skin-dye pills existed. I stood rooted to the pedwalk, letting it carry me where it would, watching the incredible crowd swarm around me. They were all knees and elbows. Tomorrow I'd have bruises.

"Hey!"

The girl was four or five heads away, and short. I'd never have seen her if everyone else hadn't been short too. Flatlanders rarely top six feet. And there was this girl, her hair a topological explosion in swirling orange and silver, her face a faint, subtle green with space-black eyebrows and lipstick, waving something and shouting at me.

Waving my wallet.

I forced my way to her, until we were close enough to touch, until I could hear what she was saying above the crowd noise.

"Stupid! Where's your address? You don't even have a place for a stamp!"

"What?"

She looked startled. "Oh! You're an offworlder."

"Yah!" My voice would give out fast at this noise level.

"Well, look..." She shoved her way closer to me. "Look, you can't go around town with an offworlder's wallet. Next time someone picks your pocket he may not notice till you're gone."

"You picked my pocket?"

"Sure! Think I found it? Would I risk my precious hand under all those spike heels?"

"How if I call a cop?"

"Cop? Oh, a stoneface." She laughed merrily. "Learn or go under, man. There's no law against picking pockets. Look around you."

I looked around me, then looked back fast, afraid she'd disappear. Not only my cash but my Bank of Jinx draft for forty thousand stars was in that wallet. Everything I owned.

"See them all? Sixty-four million people in Los Angeles alone. Eighteen billion in the whole world. Suppose there was a law against picking pockets? How would you enforce it?" She deftly extracted the cash from my wallet and handed the wallet back. "Get yourself a new wallet, and fast. It'll have a place for your address and a window for a tenth-star stamp. Put your address in right away, and a stamp too. Then the next guy who takes it can pull out the money and drop your wallet in the nearest mailbox -- no sweat. Otherwise you lose your credit cards, your ident, everything." She stuffed two hundred-odd stars in cash between her breasts, flashing me a parting smile as she turned.

"Thanks," I called. Yes I did. I was still bewildered, but she'd obviously stayed to help me. She could just as easily have kept wallet and all.

"No charge," she called back, and was gone.

I stopped off at the first transfer booth I saw, dropped

a half-star in the coin slot and dialed Elephant.

* * * *

The vestibule was intimidating.

I'd expected a vestibule. Why put a transfer booth inside your own home, where any burglar can get in just by dialing your number? Anyone who can afford the lease on a private transfer booth can also afford a vestibule with a locked door and an intercom switch.

There was a vestibule, but it was the size of a living room, furnished with massage chairs and an autovendor. There was an intercom, but it was a flat vidphone, three hundred years old, restored at perhaps a hundred times its original cost. There was a locked door; it was a double door of what looked like polished brass, with two enormous carved handles, and it stood fifteen feet high.

I'd suspected Elephant was well off, but this was too much. It occurred to me that I'd never seen him

completely sober, that I had in fact turned down his offer of guide, that a simple morning-after treatment might have wiped me from his memory. Shouldn't I just go away? I had wanted to explore Earth on my own.

But I didn't know the rules!

I stepped out of the booth and glimpsed the back wall. It was all picture window, with nothing outside -- just fleecy blue sky. How peculiar, I thought, and stepped closer. And closer.

Elephant lived halfway up a cliff. A sheer mile-high cliff.

The phone rang.

On the third ear-jarring ring I answered, mainly to stop the noise. A supercilious voice asked, "Is somebody out there?"

"I'm afraid not," I said. "Does someone named

Elephant live here?"

"I'll see, sir," said the voice. The screen had not lit, but I had the feeling someone had seen me quite clearly.

Seconds crawled by. I was half minded to jump back in the transfer booth and dial at random. But only half; that was the trouble. Then the screen lit, and it was Elephant. "Bey! You changed your mind!"

"Yah. You didn't tell me you were rich"

"You didn't ask."

"Well, no, of course not."

"How do you expect to learn things if you don't ask? Don't answer that. Hang on, I'll be right down. You did change your mind? You'll let me show you Earth?"

"Yes I will. I'm scared to go out there alone."

"Why? Don't answer. Tell me in person." He hung up.

Seconds later the big bronze doors swung back with a bone-shaking boom. They just barely got out of Elephant's way. He pulled me inside, giving me no time to gape, shoved a drink in my hand, and asked why I was afraid to go outside.

I told him about the pickpocket, and he laughed. He told me about the time he tried to go outside during a We Made It summer, and I laughed, though I've heard of outworlders being blown away and to Hades doing the same thing. Amazingly, we were off again. It was just like it had been on the ship, even to the end of Elephant's anecdote. "They called me a silly flatlander, of course."

"I've been thinking about that," I said.

"About what?"

"You said you'd give a lot to do something

completely original, so the next time someone called you a flatlander, you could back him into a corner and force him to listen to your story. You said it several times."

"I didn't say just that. But I would like to have some story to tell, something like your neutron star episode. If only to tell myself. The silly offworlder wouldn't know, but I'd know."

I nodded. I'd talked about the neutron star episode over gin cards -- a habit I've developed for distracting my opponent -- and Elephant had been suitably impressed.

"I've thought of a couple of things you could do," I said.

"Spill."

"One. Visit the puppeteer home world. Nobody's been there, but everyone knows there is one, and everyone knows how difficult it is to find. You could

be the first."

"Great." He mused a moment. "Great! And the puppeteers wouldn't stop me because they're gone. Where is the puppeteer home world?"

"I don't know."

"What's your second idea?"

"Ask the Outsiders."

"Huh?"

"There's not a system in the galaxy that the Outsiders don't know all about. We don't know how far the puppeteer empire extended, though it was way beyond known space, but we do know about the Outsiders. They know the galaxy like the palm of their -- uh ... And they trade for information; it's just about the only business they do. Ask them what's the most unusual world they know of within reach."

Elephant was nodding gently. There was a glazed look in his eyes. I had not been sure he was serious about seeking some unique achievement. He was.

"The problem is," I said, "that an Outsider's idea of what is unique may not -- " I stopped, because Elephant was up and half running to a triphone.

I wasn't sorry. It gave me an opportunity to gape in private.

I've been in bigger homes than Elephant's. Much bigger. I grew up in one. But I've never seen a room that soothed the eye as Elephant's living room did. It was more than a living room; it was an optical illusion, the opposite of those jittering black-and-white images they show in lectures on how we see. These clinical children of Op Art give the illusion of motion, but Elephant's living room gave the illusion of stillness. A physicist would have loved the soundproofing. Some interior decorator had become famous for his work here, if he hadn't been famous

already, in which case he had become rich. How could tall, thin Beowulf Shaeffer fit a chair designed to the measure of short, wide Elephant? Yet I was bonelessly limp, blissfully relaxed, using only the muscles that held a double-walled glass of an odd-tasting, strangely refreshing soft drink called Tzlotz Beer.

A glass which would not empty. Somewhere in the crystal was a tiny transfer motor connected to the bar, but the bent light in the crystal hid it. Another optical illusion, and one that must have tricked good men into acute alcoholism. I'd have to watch that.

Elephant returned. He walked as if he massed tons, as if any Kzin foolish enough to stand in his path would have a short, wide hole in him. "All done," he said. "Don Cramer'll find the nearest Outsider ship and make my pitch for me. We should hear in a couple of days."

"Okay," said I, and asked him about the cliff. It

turned out that we were in the Rocky Mountains, and that he owned every square inch of the nearly vertical cliff face. Why? I remembered Earth's eighteen billion and wondered if they'd otherwise have surrounded him up, down, and sideways.

Suddenly Elephant remembered that someone named Dianna must be home by now. I followed him into the transfer booth, watched him dial eleven digits, and waited in a much smaller vestibule while Elephant used the more conventional intercom. Dianna seemed dubious about letting him in until he roared that he had a guest and she should stop fooling around.

Dianna was a small, pretty woman with skin the deep, uniform red of a Martian sky and hair like flowing quicksilver. Her irises had the same polished-silver luster. She hadn't wanted to let us in because we were both wearing our own skins, but she never mentioned it again once we were inside.

Elephant introduced me to Dianna and instantly told her he'd acted to contact the Outsiders.

"What's an Outsider?" she asked.

Elephant gestured with both hands, looked confused, turned helplessly toward me.

"They're hard to describe," I said. "Think of a cat-o'-nine-tails with a big thick handle."

"They live on cold worlds," said Elephant.

"Small, cold, airless worlds like Nereid. They pay rent to use Nereid as a base, don't they Elephant? And they travel over most of the galaxy in big unpressurized ships with fusion drives and no hyperdrives."

"They sell information. They can tell me about the world I want to find, the most unusual planet in known space."

"They spend most of their time tracking starseeds."

Dianna broke in. "Why?"

Elephant looked at me. I looked at Elephant.

"Say!" Elephant exclaimed. "Why don't we get a fourth for bridge?"

Dianna looked thoughtful. Then she focused her silver eyes on me, examined me from head to foot, and nodded gently to herself. "Sharrol Janss. I'll call her."

While she was phoning, Elephant told me, "That's a good thought. Sharrol's got a tendency toward hero worship. She's a computer analyst at Donovan's Brains Inc. You'll like her."

"Good," I said, wondering if we were still talking about a bridge game. It struck me that I was building up a debt to Elephant. "Elephant, when you contact the Outsiders, I'd like to come along."

"Oh? Why?"

"You'll need a pilot. And I've dealt with Outsiders before."

"Okay, it's a deal."

The intercom rang from the vestibule. Dianna went to the door and came back with our fourth for bridge. "Sharrol, you know Elephant. This is Beowulf Shaeffer, from We Made It. Bey, this is -- "

"You!" I said.

"You!" she said.

She was the pickpocket.

* * * *

My vacation lasted just four days.

I hadn't known how long it would last, though I did know how it would end. Consequently I threw

myself into it body and soul. If there was a dull moment anywhere in those four days, I slept through it, and at that I didn't get enough sleep. Elephant seemed to feel the same way. He was living life to the hilt; he must have suspected, as I did, that the Outsiders would not consider danger a factor in choosing his planet. By their own ethics they were bound not to. The days of Elephant's life might be running short. Buried in those four days were incidents that made me wonder why Elephant was looking for a weird world. Surely Earth was the weirdest of all.

I remember when we threw in the bridge hands and decided to go out for dinner. This was more complicated than it sounds. Elephant hadn't had a chance to change to flatlander styles, and neither of us was fit to be seen in public. Dianna had cosmetics for us.

I succumbed to an odd impulse. I dressed as an albino.

They were body paints, not pills. When I finished applying them, there in the full-length mirror was my younger self. Blood-red irises, snow-white hair, white skin with a tinge of pink: the teen-ager who had disappeared ages ago, when I was old enough to use tannin pills. I found my mind wandering far back across the decades, to the days when I was a flatlander myself, my feet firmly beneath the ground, my head never higher than seven feet above the desert sands.... They found me there before the mirror and pronounced me fit to be seen in public.

I remember that evening when Dianna told me she had known Elephant forever. "I was the one who named him Elephant," she bragged.

"It's a nickname?"

"Sure," said Sharrol. "His real name is Gregory Pelton."

"O-o-oh." Suddenly all came clear. Gregory Pelton is known among the stars. It is rumored that he owns

the thirty-light-year-wide rough sphere called _human space_, that he earns his income by renting it out. It is rumored that General Products -- the all-embracing puppeteer company, now defunct for lack of puppeteers -- is a front for Gregory Pelton. It's a fact that his great-to-the-eighth grandmother invented the transfer booth and that he is rich, rich, rich.

I asked, "Why Elephant? Why that particular nickname?"

Dianna and Sharrol looked demurely at the tablecloth.

Elephant said, "Use your imagination, Bey."

"On what? What's an elephant, some kind of animal?"

Three faces registered annoyance. I'd missed a joke.

"Tomorrow," said Elephant, "we'll show you the Zoo."

* * * *

There are seven transfer booths in the Zoo of Earth. That'll tell you how big it is. But you're wrong; you've forgotten the two hundred taxis on permanent duty. They're there because the booths are too far apart for walking.

We stared down at dusty, compact animals smaller than starseeds or bandersnatchi but bigger than anything else I'd ever seen. Elephant said, "See?"

"Yah," I said, because the animals showed a compactness and a plodding invulnerability very like Elephant's. And then I found myself watching one of the animals in a muddy pool. It was using a hollow tentacle over its mouth to spray water on its back. I stared at that tentacle ... and stared...

"Hey, look!" Sharrol called, pointing. "Bey's ears are turning red!"

I didn't forgive her till two that morning.

* * * *

And I remember reaching over Sharrol to get a tabac stick and seeing her purse lying on her other things. I said, "How if I picked your pocket now?"

Orange and silver lips parted in a lazy smile. "I'm not wearing a pocket."

"Would it be in good taste to sneak the money out of your purse?"

"Only if you could hide it on you."

I found a small flat purse with four hundred stars in it and stuck it in my mouth.

She made me go through with it. Ever make love to a woman with a purse in your mouth? Unforgettable. Don't try it if you've got asthma.

I remember Sharrol. I remember smooth, warm blue skin, silver eyes with a wealth of expression, orange-

and-silver hair in a swirling abstract pattern that nothing could mess up. It always sprang back. Her laugh was silver, too, when I gently extracted two handfuls of hair and tied them in a hard double knot, and when I gibbered and jumped up and down at the sight of her hair slowly untying itself like Medusa's locks. And her voice was a silver croon.

* * * *

I remember the freeways.

They were the first thing that showed coming in on Earth. If we'd landed at night, it would have been the lighted cities; but of course we came in on the day side. Why else would a world have three spaceports? There were the freeways and autostradas and autobahns, strung in an all-enclosing net across the faces of the continents.

From a few miles up, you still can't see the breaks. But they're there, where girders and pavement have collapsed. Only two superhighways are still kept in

good repair. They are both on the same continent: the Pennsylvania Turnpike and the Santa Monica Freeway. The rest of the network is broken chaos.

It seems there are people who collect old groundcars and race them. Some are actually renovated machines, fifty to ninety percent replaced; others are handmade reproductions. On a perfectly flat surface they'll do fifty to ninety miles per hour.

I laughed when Elephant told me about them, but actually seeing them was different.

The rodders began to appear about dawn. They gathered around one end of the Santa Monica Freeway, the end that used to join the San Diego Freeway. This end is a maze of fallen spaghetti, great curving loops of prestressed concrete that have lost their strength over the years and sagged to the ground. But you can still use the top loop to reach the starting line. We watched from above, hovering in a cab as the groundcars moved into line.

"Their dues cost more than the cars," said Elephant. "I used to drive one myself. You'd turn white as snow if I told you how much it costs to keep this stretch of freeway in repair."

"How much?"

He told me. I turned white as snow.

They were off. I was still wondering what kick they got driving an obsolete machine on flat concrete when they could be up here with us. They were off, weaving slightly, weaving more than slightly, foolishly moving at different speeds, coming perilously close to each other before sheering off -- and I began to realize things.

Those automobiles had no radar.

They were being steered with a cabin wheel geared directly to four ground wheels. A mistake in steering and they'd crash into each other or into the concrete curbs. They were steered and stopped by muscle

power, but whether they could turn or stop depended on how hard four rubber balloons could grip smooth concrete. If the tires loosed their grip, Newton's First Law would take over; the fragile metal mass would continue moving in a straight line until stopped by a concrete curb or another groundcar.

"A man could get killed in one of those."

"Not to worry," said Elephant. "Nobody does, usually."

"Usually?"

The race ended twenty minutes later at another tangle of fallen concrete. I was wet through. We landed and met some of the racers. One of them, a thin guy with tangled, glossy green hair and a bony white face with a widely grinning scarlet mouth, offered me a ride. I declined with thanks, backing slowly away and wishing for a weapon. This joker was obviously dangerously insane.

* * * *

I remember flatlander food, the best in known space, and an odd, mildly alcoholic drink called Taittinger Comtes de Champagne '59. I remember invading an outworlder bar, where the four of us talked shop with a girl rock-miner whose inch-wide auburn crest of hair fell clear to the small of her back. I remember flying cross-country with a lift belt and seeing nothing but city enclosing widely separated patches of food-growing land. I remember a submerged hotel off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland and a dolphin embassy off Italy, where a mixed group of dolphins and flatlanders seemed to be solving the general problem of sentient beings without hands (there are many, and we'll probably find more). It seemed more a coffee-break discussion than true business.

* * * *

We were about to break up for bed on the evening of the fourth day when the tridphone rang. Don Cramer

had found an Outsider.

I said, disbelieving, "You're leaving _right now_?"

"Sure!" said Elephant. "Here, take one of these pills. You won't feel sleepy till we're on our way."

A deal is a deal, and I owed Elephant plenty. I took the pill. We kissed Sharrol and Dianna good-bye, Dianna standing on a chair to reach me, Sharrol climbing me like a beanpole and wrapping her legs around my waist. I was a foot and a half taller than either of them.

Calcutta Base was in daylight. Elephant and I took the transfer booth there, to find that the _STinfinity_ had been shipped ahead of us.

Her full name was _Slower Than Infinity_. She had been built into a General Products No. 2 hull, a three-hundred-foot spindle with a wasp-waist constriction near the tail. I was relieved. I had been afraid Elephant might own a flashy, vulnerable

dude's yacht. The two-man control room looked pretty small for a lifiesystem until I noticed the bubble extension folded into the nose. The rest of the hull held a one-gee fusion drive and fuel tank, a hyperspace motor, a gravity drag and belly-landing gear, all clearly visible through the hull, which had been left transparent.

She held fuel, food, and air. She must have been ready for days. We took off twenty minutes after arriving.

Using the fusion drive in Earth's atmosphere would have gotten us into the organ banks, in pieces. Flatlander laws are strict about air pollution. A robot rocket with huge wings lifted us to orbit, using air compressed nearly to degenerate matter as a propellant. We took off from there.

Now there was plenty of time for sleep. It took us a week at one gee just to get far enough out of the solar system's gravity well to use the hyperdrive.

Somewhere in that time I removed my false coloring (it had been false; I'd continued to take tannin-secretion pills against Earth's sunlight), and Elephant turned his skin back to light tan and his beard and hair back to black. For four days he'd been Zeus, with marble skin, a metal-gold beard, and glowing molten-gold eyes. It had fitted him so perfectly that I hardly noticed the change.

Hyperdrive -- and a long, slow three weeks. We took turns hovering over the mass indicator, though at first-quantum hyperdrive speeds we'd have seen a mass at least twelve hours before it became dangerous. I think I was the only man who knew there was a second quantum, a puppeteer secret. The Outsider ship was near the edge of known space, well beyond Tau Ceti.

"It was the only one around," Elephant had said. "Number fourteen."

"Fourteen? That's the same ship I dealt with before."

"Oh? Good. That should help."

Days later he asked, "How'd it happen?"

"The usual way. Number fourteen was on the other side of known space then, and she sent out an offer of information exchange. I was almost to Wunderland, and I caught the offer. When I dropped my passengers, I went back."

"Did they have anything worth while?"

"Yah. They'd found the _Lazy Eight II_."

The _Lazy Eight II_ had been one of the old slowboats, a circular flying wing taking colonists to Jinx. Something had gone wrong before turnover, and the ship had continued on, carrying fifty passengers in suspended animation and a crew of four, presumed dead. With a ramscoop to feed hydrogen to her fusion drive, she could accelerate forever. She was five hundred years on her way.

"I remember," said Elephant. "They couldn't reach her."

"No. But we'll know where to find her when the state of the art gets that good." Which wouldn't be soon, I thought. A hyperdrive ship would not only have to reach her but would have to carry fuel to match her speed. Her speed was barely less than a photon's, and she was more than five hundred light-years away, seventeen times the diameter of known space.

"Did you have any problems?"

"Their translator is pretty good. But we'll have to be careful, Elephant. The thing about buying information is that you don't know what you're getting until you've got it. They couldn't just offer to sell me the present position of the _Lazy Eight II_. We'd have tracked their course by telescope until we saw the light of a fusion drive and gotten the information free."

The time came when only a small green dot glowed in the center of the mass indicator. A star would have shown as a line; no star would have shown no dot. I dropped out of hyperspace and set the deep-radar to hunt out the Outsider.

The Outsider found us first.

Somewhere in the cylindrical metal pod near her center of mass, perhaps occupying it completely, was the reactionless drive. It was common knowledge that that drive was for sale and that the cost was a full trillion stars. Though nobody, and no nation now extant, could afford to pay it, the price was not exorbitant. In two or three minutes, while we were still searching, that drive had dropped the Outsider ship from above point nine lights to zero relative and pulled it alongside the _STinfinity_.

One moment, nothing but stars. The next, the Outsider ship was alongside.

She was mostly empty space. I knew her population

was the size of a small city, but she was much bigger because more strung out. There was the minuscule-seeming drive capsule, and there, on a pole two and a half miles long, was a light source. The rest of the ship was metal ribbons, winding in and out, swooping giddily around themselves and each other, until the ends of each tangled ribbon stopped meandering and joined the drive capsule. There were around a thousand such ribbons, and each was the width of a wide city pedwalk.

"Like a Christmas tree decoration," said Elephant.
"What now, Bey?"

"They'll use the ship radio."

A few minutes of waiting, and here came a bunch of Outsiders. They looked like black cat-o'-nine-tails with grossly swollen handles. In the handles were their brains and invisible sense organs; in the whip ends, the clusters of motile root-tentacles, were gas pistols. Six of them braked to a stop outside the

airlock.

The radio spoke. "Welcome to Ship Fourteen. Please step outside for conveyance to our office. Take nothing on the outsides of your pressure suits."

Elephant asked, "Do we?"

I said, "Sure. The Outsiders are nothing if not honorable."

We went out. The six Outsiders offered us a tentacle each, and away we went across open space. Not fast. The thrust from the gas pistols was very low, irritatingly weak. But the Outsiders themselves were weak; an hour in the gravity of Earth's moon would have killed them.

They maneuvered us through the tangled clutter of silver ribbons, landing us on a ramp next to the looming convex wall of the drive capsule.

It wasn't quite like being lost in a giant bowl of

noodles. The rigid ribbons were too far apart for that. Far above us was the light source, about as small and intense and yellowish-white as Earth's sun seen from a moon of Neptune. Shining down through the interstellar vacuum, it cast a network of sharp black shadows across all the thousand looping strands that made up the city.

Along every light-shadow borderline were the Outsiders. Just as their plantlike ancestors had done billions of years ago on some unknown world near the galactic core, the Outsiders were absorbing life-energy. Their branched tails lay in shadow, their heads in sunlight, while thermoelectricity charged their biochemical batteries. Some had root-tentacles dipped in shallow food-dishes; the trace elements which kept them alive and growing were in suspension in liquid helium.

We stepped carefully around them, using our headlamps at lowest intensity, following one of the Outsiders toward a door in the wall ahead.

The enclosure was dark until the door closed behind us. Then the light came on. It was sourceless, the color of normal sunlight, and it illuminated a cubicle that was bare and square. The only furnishing was a transparent hemisphere with an Outsider resting inside. Presumably the hemisphere filtered out excess light going in.

"Welcome," said the room. Whatever the Outsider had said was not sonic in nature. "The air is breathable. Take off your helmets, suits, shoes, girdles and whatnot." It was an excellent translator, with a good grasp of idiom and a pleasant baritone voice.

"Thanks," said Elephant, and we did.

"Which of you is Gregory Pelton?"

"Gronk."

The wall was not confused. "According to your agent, you want to know how to reach that planet

which is most unusual inside or within five lightyears of the sixty-light-year-wide region you call known space. Is this correct?"

"Yes."

"We must know if you plan to go there or to send agents there. Also, do you plan a landing, a near orbit, or a distant orbit?"

"Landing."

"Are we to guard against danger to your life?"

"No." Elephant's voice was a little dry. The Outsider ship was an intimidating place.

"What kind of ship would you use?"

"The one outside."

"Do you plan colonization? Mining? Growth of food plants?"

"I plan only one visit."

"We have selected a world for you. The price will be one million stars."

"That's high," said Elephant. I whistled under my breath. It was; and it wouldn't get lower. The Outsiders never dickered.

"Sold," said Elephant.

The translator gave us a triplet set of coordinates some twenty-four light-years from Earth along galactic north. "The star you are looking for is a protosun with one planet a billion and a half miles distant. The system is moving at a point eight lights toward -- " He gave a vector direction. It seemed the protosun was drawing a shallow chord through known space; it would never approach human space.

"No good," said Elephant. "No hyperdrive ship can go that fast in real space."

"You could hitch a ride," said the translator, "with us. Moor your ship to our drive capsule."

"That'll work," said Elephant. He was getting more and more uneasy; his eyes seemed to be searching the walls for the source of the voice. He would not look at the Outsider business agent in the vacuum chamber.

"Our ferry fee will be one million stars."

Elephant sputtered.

"Just a sec," I said. "I may have information to sell you."

There was a long pause. Elephant looked at me in surprise.

"You are Beowulf Shaeffer?"

"Yah. You remember me?"

"We find you in our records. Beowulf Shaeffer, we have information for you, already paid. The former regional president of General Products on Jinx wishes you to contact him. I have a transfer-booth number."

"That's late news," I said. "The puppeteers are gone. Anyway, why would that two-headed sharpie want to see me?"

"I do not have that information. I do know that not all puppeteers have left this region. Will you accept the transfer-booth number?"

"Sure."

I wrote down the eight digits as they came. A moment later Elephant was yelling just as if he were a tridee set turned on in the middle of a program. " --hell is going on here?"

"Sorry about that," said the translator.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I couldn't hear anything! Did that mon -- Did the Outsider have private business with you?"

"Sort of. I'll tell you later."

The translator said, "Beowulf Shaeffer, we do not buy information. We sell information and use the proceeds to buy territory and food soil."

"You may need this information," I argued. "I'm the only man within reach who knows it."

"What of other races?"

The puppeteers might have told them, but it was worth taking a chance. "You're about to leave known space. If you don't deal with me, you may not get this information in time."

"What price do you set on this item?"

"You set the price. You've got more experience at putting values on information, and you're honorable."

"We may not be able to afford an honest price."

"The price may not exceed our ferry fee."

"Done. Speak."

I told him of the Core explosion and how I'd come to find out about it. He made me go into detail on what I'd seen: the bright patch of supernovae spreading out as my ship caught up with ancient light-waves, until all the bright multicolored ball of the Core was ablaze with supernovae. "You wouldn't have known this until you got there, and then it would have been too late. You don't use faster-than-light drives."

"We knew from the puppeteers that the Core had exploded. They were not able to go into detail because they had not seen it for themselves."

"Oh. Ah, well. I think the explosion must have started at the back side of the Core from here. Otherwise it would have seemed to go much more slowly."

"Many thanks. We will waive your ferry fee. Now, there is one more item. Gregory Pelton, for an additional two hundred thousand stars we will tell you exactly what is peculiar about the planet you intend to visit."

"Can I find out for myself?"

"It is likely."

"Then I will."

Silence followed. The Outsider hadn't expected that. I said, "I'm curious. Your galaxy is rapidly becoming a death trap. What will you do now?"

"That information will cost you -- "

"Forget it."

Outside, Elephant said, "Thanks."

"Forget it. I wonder what they will do."

"Maybe they can shield themselves against the radiation."

"Maybe. But they won't have any starseeds to follow."

"Do they need them?"

Finagle only knew. The starseeds followed a highly rigid migratory mating-pattern out from the Core of the galaxy and into the arms, almost to the rim, before turning back down to the Core. They were doomed. As they returned to the Core, the expanding wave of radiation from the multiple novae would snuff out the species one by one. What would the Outsiders do without them? What the hell did they do with them? Why did they follow them? Did

they need starseeds? Did starseeds need Outsiders? The Outsiders would answer these and related questions for one trillion stars apiece. Personal questions cost high with the Outsiders.

A crew was already bringing the _STinfinity_ into dock. We watched from the ramp, with crewmen sunbathing about our feet. We weren't worried. The way the Outsiders handled it, our invulnerable hull might have been made of spun sugar and sunbeams. When a spiderweb of thin strands fastened the _STinfinity_ to the wall of the drive capsule, the voice of the translator spoke in our ears and invited us to step aboard. We jumped a few hundred feet upward through the trace of artificial gravity, climbed into the airlock, and got out of our suits.

"Thanks again," said Elephant.

"Forget it again," I said magnanimously. "I owe you plenty. You've been putting me up as a house guest on the most expensive world in known space, acting

as my guide where the cost of labor is -- "

"Okay okay okay. But you saved me a million stars, and don't you forget it." He whopped me on the shoulder and hurried into the control room to set up a million-star credit base for the next Outsider ship that came by.

"I won't," I called at his retreating back, and wondered what the hell I meant by that.

Much later I wondered about something else. Had Elephant planned to take me to "his" world? Or did he think to go it alone, to be the first to see it and not one of the first two? After the Outsider episode it was already too late. He couldn't throw me off the ship then.

I wished I'd thought of it in time. I never wanted to be a batman. My stake in this was to gently, tactfully keep Elephant from killing himself if it became necessary. For all his vast self-confidence, vast riches, vast generosity, and vast bulk, he was still

only a flatlander, and thus a little bit helpless.

* * * *

We were in the expansion bubble when it happened. The bubble had inflatable seats and an inflatable table, and was there for exercising and killing time, but it also supplied a fine view; the surface was perfectly transparent.

Otherwise we would have missed it.

There was no pressure against the seat of the pants, no crawling sensation in the pit of the stomach, no feel of motion. But Elephant, who was talking about a Jinxian frail he'd picked up in a Chicago bar, stopped just as she was getting ready to tear the place apart because some suicidal idiot had insulted her.

Somebody heavy was sitting down on the universe.

He came down slowly, like a fat man cautiously letting his weight down on a beach ball. From inside

the bubble it looked like all the stars and nebulae around us were squeezing themselves together. The Outsiders on the ribbons outside never moved; but Elephant said something profane, and I steeled myself to look up.

The stars overhead were blue-white and blazing. Around us they were squashed together; below, they were turning red and winking out, one by one. It had taken us a week to get out of the solar system, but the Outsider ship could have done it in five hours.

The radio spoke. "Sirs, our crewmen will remove your ship from ours, after which you will be on your own. It has been a pleasure to do business with you."

A swarm of Outsider crewmen hauled us through the maze of basking ramps and left us. Presently the Outsider ship vanished like a pricked soap-bubble, gone off on its own business.

In the strange starlight Elephant let out a long, shaky sigh. Some people can't take aliens. They don't find

puppeteers graceful and beautiful; they find them horrifying, wrong. They see Kzinti as slaving carnivores whose only love is fighting, which is the truth; but they don't see the rigid code of honor, or the self-control which allows a Kzinti ambassador to ride a human-city pedwalk without slashing out with his claws at the impertinent stabbing knees and elbows. Elephant was one of these people.

He said, "Okay," in amazed relief. They were actually gone. "I'll take the first watch, Bey."

He did not say, "Those bastards would take your heart as collateral on a tenth-star loan." He didn't see them as that close to human.

"Fine," I said, and went into the control bubble. The Fast Protosun was a week away. I'd been in a suit for hours, and there was a shower in the extension bubble.

* * * *

If Elephant's weakness was aliens, mine was relativity.

The trip through hyperspace was routine. I could take the sight of the two small windows turning into blind spots, becoming areas of nothing, which seemed to draw together the objects around them. So could Elephant; he'd done some flying, though he preferred the comfort of a luxury liner. But even the best pilot occasionally has to drop back into the normal universe to get his bearings and to assure his subconscious that the stars are still there.

And each time it was changed, squashed flat. The crowded blue stars were all ahead; the sparse, dim red stars were all behind. Four hundred years ago men and women had lived for years with such a view of the universe, but it hadn't happened since the invention of hyperdrive. I'd never seen the universe look like this. It bothered me.

"No, it doesn't bug me," said Elephant when I

mentioned it. We were a day out from our destination. "To me, stars are stars. But I have been worried about something. Bey, you said the Outsiders are honorable."

"They are. They've got to be. They have to be so far above suspicion that any species they deal with will remember their unimpeachable ethics a century later. You can see that, can't you? Outsiders don't show up more often than that."

"Um. Okay. Why did they try to screw that extra two hundred kilostars out of me?"

"Uh -- "

"See, the goddam problem is, what if it was a fair price? What if we need to know what's funny about the Fast Protosun?"

"You're right. Knowing the Outsiders, it's probably information we can use. All right, we'll nose around a little before we land. We'd have done that anyway,

but now we'll do it better."

* * * *

What was peculiar about the Fast Protosun?

Around lunchtime on the seventh ship's day, a short green line in the sphere of the mass indicator began to extend itself. It was wide and fuzzy, just what you'd expect of a protosun. I let it reach almost to the surface of the sphere before I dropped us into normal space.

The squashed universe looked in the windows, but ahead of us was a circular darkening and blurring of the vivid blue-white stars. In the center of the circle was a dull red glow.

"Let's go into the extension bubble," said Elephant.

"Let's not."

"We'll get a better view in there." He turned the dial

that would make the bubble transparent. Naturally we kept it opaque in hyperspace.

"Repeat, let's not. Think about it, Elephant. What sense does it make to use an impermeable hull, then spend most of our time outside it? Until we know what's here, we ought to retract the bubble."

He nodded his shaggy head and touched the board again. Chugging noises announced that air and water were being pulled out of the bubble. Elephant moved to a window.

"Ever see a protosun?"

"No," I said. "I don't think there are any in human space."

"That could be the peculiarity."

"It could. One thing it isn't is the speed of the thing. Outsiders spend all their time moving faster than this."

"But planets don't. Neither do stars. Bey, maybe this thing came from outside the galaxy. That would make it unusual."

It was time we made a list. I found a pad and solemnly noted speed of star, nature of star, and possible extragalactic origin of star.

"I've found our planet," said Elephant.

"Whereabouts?"

"Almost on the other side of the protosun. We can get there faster in hyperspace."

The planet was still invisibly small where Elephant brought us out. The protosun looked about the same.

A protosun is the foetus of a star: a thin mass of gas and dust, brought together by slow eddies in interstellar magnetic fields or by the presence of a trojan point in some loose cluster of stars, which is collapsing and contracting due to gravity. I'd found

material on protosuns in the ship's library, but it was all astronomical data; nobody had ever been near one for a close look. In theory the Fast Protosun must be fairly well along in its evolution, since it was glowing at the center.

"There it is," said Elephant. "Two days away at one gee."

"Good. We can do our instrument checks on the way. Strap down."

With the fusion motor pushing us smoothly along, Elephant went back to the scope, and I started checking the other instruments. One thing stood out like a beacon.

"Elephant. Have you noticed in me a tendency to use profanity for emphasis?"

"Not really. Why?"

"It's goddam radioactive out there."

"Could you be a little more specific, sir?"

"Our suit shields would break down in three days. The extension bubble would go in twenty hours."

"Okay, add it to your list. Any idea what's causing it?"

"Not one." I made a note on my list, then went back to work. We were in no danger; the GP hull would protect us from anything but impact with something big.

"No asteroid belts," said Elephant. "Meteor density zero, as far as I can tell. No other planets."

"The interstellar gas may clean away anything small, at these speeds."

"One thing's for sure, Bey. I've got my money's worth. This is a damn funny system."

"Yah. Well, we missed lunch. Shall we get dinner?"

"Philistine."

Elephant ate fast. He was back at the telescope before I was ready for coffee. Watching him move, I was again reminded of a juggernaut; but he'd never shown as much determination when I knew him on Earth. If a hungry Kzin had been standing between him and the telescope, he'd have left footprints in fur.

But the only thing that could get in his way out here was me.

"Can't get a close look at the planet," said Elephant, "but it looks polished."

"Like a billiard ball?"

"Just that. I don't see any sign of an atmosphere."

"How about blast craters?"

"Nothing."

"They should be there."

"This system's pretty clean of meteors."

"But the space around us shouldn't be. And at these speeds -- "

"Uh huh. That better go on your list."

I wrote it down.

We slept on the disaster couches. In front of me were the yellow lights of the control panel; the stars glowed red through one side window, blue through the other. I stayed awake for a long time, staring through the forward window into the red darkness of the protosun. The window was opaque, but I saw the dark red blur clearly in my imagination.

The radiation held steady all through the next day. I did some more thorough checking, using temperature readings and deep-radar on both sun and planet. Everywhere I looked was a new anomaly.

"This star definitely shouldn't be glowing yet. It's too spread out; the gas should be too thin for fusion."

"Is it hot enough to glow?"

"Sure. But it shouldn't be."

"Maybe the theories on protosuns are wrong."

"Then they're way wrong."

"Put it on your list."

And, an hour later:

"Elephant."

"_Another_ peculiarity?"

"Yah."

From under shaggy brows, Elephant's eyes plainly told me he was getting sick of peculiarities.

"According to the deep-radar shadow, this planet doesn't have any lithosphere. It's worn right down to what ought to be the magma but isn't because it's so cold out here."

"Write it down. How many entries have you got?"

"Nine."

"Is any one of them worth paying two hundred kilostars to know about beforehand?"

"The radiation, maybe, if we didn't have a GP hull."

"But," said Elephant, glaring out at the huge, dark disk, "they knew we had a GP hull. Bey, can anything get through a General Products hull?"

"Light, like a laser beam. Gravity, like tides crushing you into the nose of a ship when you get too close to a neutron star. Impact won't harm the hull, but it'll kill what's inside."

"Maybe the planet's inhabited. The more I think about it, the more sure I am it came from outside. Nothing in the galaxy could have given it this velocity. It's diving through the plane of the galaxy; it wouldn't have to push in from the rim."

"Okay. What do we do if someone shoots a laser at us?"

"We perish, I think. I had reflective paint spread around the cabin, except for the windows, but the rest of the hull is transparent."

"We can still get into hyperspace from here. And for the next twenty hours. Afterwards we'll be too close to the planet."

I went right to sleep that night, being pretty tired despite the lack of exercise. Hours later I slowly realized that I was being examined. I could see it through my closed eyelids; I could feel the heat of the vast red glare, the size of the angry eye, the awful power of the mind behind it. I tried to struggle away,

smacked my hand on something, and woke with a shock.

I lay there in the red darkness. The edge of the protosun peeked through a window. I could feel its hostile glare.

I said, "Elephant."

"Mngl?"

"Nothing." Morning would be soon enough.

* * * *

Morning.

"Elephant, would you do me a favor?"

"Sure. You want Dianna? My right arm? Shave off my beard?"

"I'll keep Sharrol, thanks. Put on your suit, will you?"

"Sure, that makes sense. We aren't nearly uncomfortable enough, just because we closed off the bubble."

"Right. And because I'm a dedicated masochist, I'm going to put my suit on this instant. Now, I hate to enjoy myself alone..."

"You got the wind up?"

"A little. Just enough."

"Anything for a friend. You go first."

There was just room to get our suits on one at a time. If the inner airlock door hadn't been open, there wouldn't have been that. We tried leaving our helmets thrown back, but they got in our way against the crash couches. So we taped them to the window in front of us.

I felt better that way, but Elephant clearly thought I'd flipped. "You sure you wouldn't rather eat with your

helmet on?"

"I hate suit food syrup. We can reach our helmets if we get a puncture."

"_What puncture?_ We're in a _General Products hull_!"

"I keep remembering that the Outsiders knew that."

"We've been through that."

"Let's go through it again. Assume they thought we might be killed anyway if we weren't prepared. Then what?"

"Gronk."

"Either they expected us to go out in suits and get killed, or they know of something that can reach through a General Products hull."

"Or both. In which case the suits do us no good at

all. Bey, do you know how long it's been since a General Products hull failed?"

"I've never heard of it happening at all."

"It never has. The puppeteers offer an enormous guarantee in case one does. Something in the tens of millions if someone dies as a result."

"You're dead right. I've been stupid. Go ahead and take off your suit."

Elephant turned to look at me. "And you?"

"I'll keep mine on. Do you believe in hunches?"

"No."

"Neither do I. Except just this once."

Elephant shrugged his shaggy eyebrows and went back to his telescope. By then we were six hours out from the nameless planet, and decelerating.

"I think I've found an asteroid crater," he said presently.

"Let's see." I had a look. "Yah, I think you're right. But it's damn near disappeared."

He took the telescope back. "It's round enough. Almost has to be a crater. Bey, why should it be so eroded?"

"It must be the interstellar dust. If it is, then that's why there's no atmosphere or lithosphere. But I can't see the dust being that thick, even at these speeds."

"Put it -- "

"Yah." I reached for my list.

"If we find one more anomaly, I'll scream."

* * * *

Half an hour later we found life.

By then we were close enough to use the gravity drag to slow us. The beautiful thing about a gravity drag is that it uses very little power. It converts a ship's momentum relative to the nearest powerful mass into heat, and all you have to do is get rid of the heat. Since the _STinfinity_'s hull would pass only various ranges of radiation corresponding to what the puppeteers' varied customers considered visible light, the shipbuilders had run a great big radiator fin out from the gravity drag. It glowed dull red behind us. And the fusion drive was off. There was no white fusion flame to hurt visibility.

Elephant had the scope at highest magnification. At first, as I peered into the eyepiece, I couldn't see what he was talking about. There was a dull white plain, all the same color except for a few blobs of blue. The blobs wouldn't have stood out except for the uniformity of the surface around them.

Then one of them moved. Very slowly, but it was moving.

"Right," I said. "Let me run a temperature check."

The surface temperature in that region was about right for helium II. And on the rest of the planet as well; the protosun wasn't putting out much energy, though it was very gung ho on radiation.

"I don't think they match any species I know."

"I can't tell," said Elephant. He had the telescope and the library screen going at the same time, with a Sirius VIII blob on the library screen. "There are twenty different species of helium life in this book, and they all look exactly alike."

"Not quite. They must have a vacuum-proof integument. And you'd notice those granules in the --
"

"I treasure my ignorance on this subject, Bey. Anyway, we aren't going to find any species we know on this world. Even a stage-tree seed would explode the moment it hit."

I let the subject die.

Once again Elephant ran the scope over "his" planet, this time looking for the blobby life-forms. They were fairly big for helium II life but not abnormally so. Lots of cold worlds develop life using the peculiar properties of helium II; but because it hasn't much use for complexity, it usually stays in the amoeba stage.

There was one peculiarity, which I duly noted. Every animal was on the back side of the planet with relation to the planet's course through the galaxy. They weren't afraid of protosun sunlight, but they seemed to fear interstellar dust.

"You promised to scream."

"It's not odd enough. I'll wait."

* * * *

Two hours passed.

The red glow of the radiator fin became more pronounced. So did the dull uniformity of the planetary surface. The planet was a disk now beyond the front window; if you watched it for a while you could see it grow. Turning ship to face the planet had made no difference to the gravity drag.

"Cue Ball," said Elephant.

"No good. It's been used. Beta Lyrae I."

"Cannonball Express then."

"Elephant, what are you doing here?"

He turned, startled. "What do you mean?"

"Look, you know by now I'm with you all the way. But I do wonder. You spent a million stars getting here, and you'd have spent two if you had to. You could be home in the Rockies with Dianna or hovering near Beta Lyrae, which is unusual enough and better scenery than this snowball. You could be

sampling oddball drugs in Crashlanding or looking for Mist Demons on Plateau. Why here?"

"Because it is there."

"What the blazes is that supposed to mean?"

"Bey, once upon a time there was a guy named Miller. Six years ago he took a ramscoop-fusion drive ship and put a hyperdrive in it and set out for the edge of the universe, figuring he could get his hydrogen from space and use the fusion plant to power his hyperdrive. He's probably still going. He'll be going forever unless he hits something. Why?"

"A psychiatrist I'm not."

"He wants to be remembered. When you're dead a hundred years, what will you be remembered for?"

"I'll be the idiot who rode with Gregory Pelton, who spent two months and more than a million stars to set his ship down on a totally worthless planet."

"Gronk. All right, what about abstract knowledge? This star will be out of known space in ten years. Our only chance to explore it is right now. What -- "

There was an almost silent breeze of air, and a strangling pressure in my larynx, and a stabbing pain in my ears, simultaneously. I heard the bare beginning of an alarm, but I was already reaching for my helmet. I clamped it down hard, spun the collar, and gave vent to an enormous belch at the same time as the wind went shrieking from my lungs.

There was no way to realize what was happening -- and no time. But vacuum was around us, and air was spraying into my suit, frigid air. Iron spikes were being driven through my ears, but I was going to live. My lungs held a ghastly emptiness, but I would live. I turned to Elephant.

The fear of death was naked in his face. He had his helmet down, but he was having trouble with the collar. I had to force his hands away to get it fastened

right. His helmet misted over, then cleared; he was getting air. Had it come in time to save his life?

I was alive. The pain was leaving my ears, and I was breathing: inhale, pause, inhale, as the pressure rose to normal.

I'd seen what had happened. Now I had time to think it through, to remember it, to play it back.

What had happened was insane.

The hull had turned to dust. Just that. All at once and nothing first, the ship's outside had disintegrated and blown away on a whispering breath of breathing-air. I'd seen it.

And sure enough, the hull was gone. Only the innards of the ship remained. Before me, the lighted control board. A little below that, the manhole to the packed bubble, and the bubble package itself. Above the board, the half-disk of the mystery planet, and stars. To the left, stars. To the right, Elephant,

looking dazed and scared, and beyond him, stars. Behind me, the airlock, the kitchen storage-block and dial board, a glimpse of the landing legs and glowing radiator fin, and stars. The `_STinfinity_` was a skeleton.

Elephant shook his head, then turned on his suit radio. I heard the magnified click in my helmet.

We looked at each other, waiting. But there was nothing to say. Except, `_Elephant, look! We don't have a hull no more! Isn't that remarkable?_`

I sighed, turned to the control board and began nursing the fusion drive to life. From what I could see of the ship, nothing seemed to be floating away. Whatever had been fixed to the hull must also have been fixed to other things.

"What are you doing, Bey?"

"Getting us out of here. Uh, you can scream now."

"Why? I mean, why leave?"

He'd flipped. Flatlanders are basically unstable. I got the drive pushing us at low power, turned off the gravity drag, and turned to face him. "Look, Elephant. No hull." I swept an arm around me. "None."

"But what's left of the ship is still mine?"

"Uh, yah. Sure."

"I want to land. Can you talk me out of it?"

He was serious. Completely so. "The landing legs are intact," he went on. "Our suits can keep out the radiation for three days. We could land and take off in twelve hours."

"We probably could."

"And we spent going on two months getting here."

"Right."

"I'd feel like an idiot getting this close and then turning for home. Wouldn't you?"

"I would, except for one thing. And that one thing says you're landing this ship over my unconscious body."

"All right, the hull turned to dust and blew away. What does that mean? It means we've got a faulty hull, and I'm going to sue the hind legs off General Products when we get back. But do you know what caused it?"

"No."

"So why do you assume it's some kind of threat?"

"Tell you what I'll do," I said. I turned the ship until it was tail down to Cannonball Express. "Now. We'll be there in three hours if you insist on landing. It's your ship, just as you say. But I'm going to try to talk

you out of it."

"That's fair."

"Have you had space-pilot training?"

"Naturally."

"Did it include a history of errors course?"

"I don't think so. We got a little history of the state of the art."

"That's something. You remember that they started out with chemical fuels and that the first ship to the asteroids was built in orbit around Earth's moon?"

"Uh huh."

"This you may not have heard. There were three men in that ship, and when they were launched, it was in an orbit that took them just slightly inside the moon's orbit, then out again and away. About thirty

hours after launching, the men noticed that all their ports were turning opaque. A concentration of dust in their path was putting little meteor pits all through the quartz. Two of the men wanted to continue on, using instruments to finish their mission. But the third man was in command. They used their rockets and stopped themselves dead.

"Remember, materials weren't as durable in those days, and nothing they were using had been well tested. The men stopped their ship in the orbit of the moon, which by then was 230,000 miles behind them, and called base to say they'd aborted the mission."

"You remember this pretty well. How come?"

"They drilled these stories into us again and again. Everything they tried to teach us was illustrated with something from history. It stuck."

"Go on."

"They called base and told them about their windows fogging up. Somebody decided it was dust, and someone else suddenly realized they'd launched the ship through one of the moon's trojan points."

Elephant laughed, then coughed. "Wish I hadn't breathed so much vacuum. I gather you're leading up to something?"

"If the ship hadn't stopped, it would have been wrecked. The dust would have torn it apart. The moral of this story is, anything you don't understand is dangerous until you do understand it."

"Sounds paranoid."

"Maybe it does, to a flatlander. You come from a planet so kind to you, so seemingly adapted to you, that you think the whole universe is your oyster. You might remember my neutron star story. I'd have been killed if I hadn't understood that tidal effect in time."

"So you would. So you think flatlanders are all

fools?"

"No, Elephant. Just not paranoid enough. And I refuse to apologize."

"Who asked you?"

"I'll land with you if you can tell me what made our hull turn to dust."

Elephant crossed his arms and glared forward. I shut up and waited.

By and by he said, "Can we get home?"

"I don't know. The hyperdrive motor will work, and we can use the gravity drag to slow us down to something like normal. Physically we should be able to do it."

"Okay. Let's go. But I'll tell you this, Bey. If I were alone, I'd go down, and damn the hull."

So we turned tail and ran, under protest from Elephant. In four hours we were far enough from Cannonball Express's gravity well to enter hyperspace.

I turned on the hyperdrive, gasped, and turned it off just as fast as I could. We sat there shaking, and Elephant said, "We can inflate the bubble."

"But can we get in?"

"It doesn't have an airlock."

We worked it, though. There was a pressure-control dial in the cabin, and we set it for zero; the electromagnetic field that folded the bubble would now inflate it without pressure. We went inside, pressurized it, and took off our helmets.

"We're out of the radiation field," said Elephant. "I looked."

"Good." You can go pretty far in even a couple of

seconds of hyperdrive. "Now, there's one thing I've got to know. Can you take that again?"

Elephant shuddered. "Can you?"

"I think so. I can do all the navigating if I have to."

"Anything you can take, I can take."

"Can you take it and stay sane?"

"Yes."

"Then we can trade off. But if you change your mind, let me know that instant. A lot of good men have left their marbles in the Blind Spot, and all they had were a couple of windows."

"I believe you. Indeed I do, sir. How do we work it?"

"We'll have to chart a course through the least dense part of space. The nearest inhabited world is Kzin. I

hate to risk asking help from the Kzinti, but we may have to."

"Tell you what, Bey. Let's at least try to reach Jinx. I want to use that number of yours to give the puppeteers hell."

"Sure. We can always turn off to something closer."

I spent an hour or so working out a course. When I'd finished, I was pretty sure we could navigate it without either of us having to leave the bubble more than once every twenty-four hours to look at the mass indicator. We threw fingers for who got the first watch, and I lost.

We put on our suits and depressurized the bubble. As I crawled through the manhole, I saw Elephant opaquing the bubble wall.

I squeezed into the crash couch, all alone among the stars. They were blue ahead and red behind when I finished turning the ship. I couldn't find the protosun.

More than half the view was empty space. I found myself looking thoughtfully at the airlock. It was behind and to the left, a metal oblong standing alone at the edge of the deck, with both doors tightly closed. The inner door had slammed when the pressure dropped, and now the airlock mechanisms guarded the pressure inside against the vacuum outside in both directions. Nobody inside to use the air, but how do you explain that to a pressure sensor?

I was procrastinating. The ship was aimed; I clenched my teeth and sent the ship into hyperspace.

The Blind Spot, they call it. It fits.

There are ways to find the blind spot in your eye. Close one eye, put two dots on a piece of paper, and bring the paper toward you, focusing on one of the dots. If you hold the paper just right, the other dot will suddenly vanish.

Let a ship enter hyperspace with the windows transparent, and the windows will seem to vanish. So

will the space enclosing them. Objects on either side stretch and draw closer together to fill the missing space. If you look long enough, the Blind Spot starts to spread; the walls and the things against the walls draw even closer to the missing space, until they are engulfed.

It's all in your mind, they tell me. So?

I turned the key, and half my view was Blind Spot. The control board stretched and flowed. The mass-indicator sphere tried to wrap itself around me. I reached for it, and my hands were distorted too. With considerable effort I put them back at my sides and got a grip on myself.

There was one fuzzy green line in the plastic distortion that had been a mass indicator. It was behind and to the side. The ship could fly itself until Elephant's turn came. I jumbled my way to the manhole and crawled through.

* * * *

Hyperspace was only half the problem.

It was a big problem. Every twenty-four hours one of us had to go out there, see if there were any dangerous masses around, drop back to normal space to take a fix and adjust course. I found myself getting unbearably tense during the few hours before each turn. So did Elephant. At these times we didn't dare talk to each other.

On my third trip I had the bad sense to look up -- and went more than blind. Looking up, there was nothing at all in my field of vision, nothing but the Blind Spot.

It was more than blindness. A blind man, a man whose eyes have lost their function, at least remembers what things looked like. A man whose optic brain-center has been damaged doesn't. I could remember what I'd come out here for -- to find out if there were masses near enough to harm us -- but I couldn't remember how to do it. I touched a curved

glass surface and knew that this was the machine that would tell me, if only I knew its secret.

Eventually my neck got sore, so I moved my head. That brought my eyes back into existence.

When we got the bubble pressurized, Elephant said, "Where were you? You've been gone half an hour."

"And lucky at that. When you go out there, don't look up."

"Oh."

That was the other half of the problem. Elephant and I had stopped communicating. He was not interested in saying anything, and he was not interested in anything I had to say.

It took me a good week to figure out why. Then I braced him with it.

"Elephant, there's a word missing from our

language."

He looked up from the reading screen. If there hadn't been a reading screen in the bubble, I don't think we'd have made it. "More than one word," he said. "Things have been pretty silent."

"One word. You're so afraid of using that word, you're afraid to talk at all."

"So tell me."

"Coward."

Elephant wrinkled his brows, then snapped off the screen. "All right, Bey, we'll talk about it. First of all, you said it, I didn't. Right?"

"Right. Have you been thinking it?"

"No. I've been thinking euphemisms, like 'overcautious' and 'reluctance to risk bodily harm.' But since we're on the subject, why were you so

eager to turn back?"

"I was scared." I let that word soak into him, then went on. "The people who trained me made certain that I'd be scared in certain situations. With all due respect, Elephant, I've had more training for space than you have. I think your wanting to land was the result of ignorance."

Elephant sighed. "I think it would have been safe to land. You don't. We're not going to get anywhere arguing about it, are we?"

We weren't. One of us was right, one wrong. And if I was wrong, then a pretty good friendship had gone out the airlock.

It was a silent trip.

We came out of hyperspace near the two Sirius suns. But that wasn't the end of it, because we still faced a universe squashed by relativity. It took us almost two weeks to brake ourselves. The gravity drag's radiator

fin glowed orange-white for most of that time. I have no idea how many times we circled round through hyperspace for another run through the system.

Finally we were moving in on Jinx with the fusion drive.

I broke a silence of hours. "Now what, Elephant?"

"As soon as we get in range, I'm going to call that number of yours."

"Then?"

"Drop you off at Sirius Mater with enough money to get you home. I'd take it kindly if you'd use my house as your own until I come back from Cannonball Express. I'll buy a ship here and go back."

"You don't want me along."

"With all due respect, Bey, I don't. I'm going to land.

Wouldn't you feel like a damn fool if you died then?"

"I've spent about three months in a small extension-bubble because of that silly planet. If you conquered it alone, I would feel like a damn fool."

Elephant looked excruciatingly unhappy. He started to speak, caught his breath --

If ever I picked the right time to shut a man up, that was it.

"Hold it. Let's call the puppeteers first. Plenty of time to decide."

Elephant nodded. In a moment he'd have told me he didn't want me along because I was overcautious. Instead, he picked up the ship phone.

* * * *

Jinx was a banded Easter egg ahead of us. To the side was Binary, the primary to which Jinx is a

moon. We should be close enough to talk ... and the puppeteers' transfer-booth number would also be their phone number.

Elephant dialed.

A sweet contralto voice answered. There was no picture, but I could tell: no woman's voice is quite that good. The puppeteer said, "Eight eight three two six seven seven oh."

"My General Products hull just failed." Elephant was wasting no time at all.

"I beg your pardon?"

"My name is Gregory Pelton. Twelve years ago I bought a No. 2 hull from General Products. A month and a half ago it failed. We've spent the intervening time limping home. May I speak to a puppeteer?"

The screen came on. Two flat, brainless heads looked out at us. "This is quite serious," said the

puppeteer. "Naturally we will pay the indemnity in full. Would you mind detailing the circumstances?"

Elephant didn't mind at all. He was quite vehement. It was a pleasure to listen to him. The puppeteer's silly expressions never wavered, but he was blinking rapidly when Elephant finished.

"I see," he said. "Our apologies are insufficient, of course, but you will understand that it was a natural mistake. We did not think that antimatter was available anywhere in the galaxy, especially in such quantity."

It was as if he'd screamed. I could hear that word echoing from side to side in my skull.

Elephant's booming voice was curiously soft. "Antimatter?"

"Of course. We have no excuse, of course, but you should have realized it at once. Interstellar gas of normal matter had polished the planet's surface with

minuscule explosions, had raised the temperature of the protosun beyond any rational estimate, and was causing a truly incredible radiation hazard. Did you not even wonder about these things? You knew that the system was from beyond the galaxy. Humans are supposed to be highly curious, are they not?"

"The hull," said Elephant.

"A General Products hull is an artificially generated molecule with interatomic bonds artificially strengthened by a small power plant. The strengthened molecular bonds are proof against any kind of impact, and heat into the hundreds of thousands of degrees. But when enough of the atoms had been obliterated by antimatter explosions, the molecule naturally fell apart."

Elephant nodded. I wondered if his voice was gone for good.

"When may we expect you to collect your indemnity? I gather no human was killed; this is

fortunate, since our funds are low -- "

Elephant turned off the phone. He gulped once or twice, then turned to look me in the eye. I think it took all his strength; and if I'd waited for him to speak, I don't know what he would have said.

"I gloat," I said. "I gloat. I was right, you were wrong. If we'd landed on your forsaken planet, we'd have gone up in pure light. At this time it gives me great pleasure to say, I Told You So."

He smiled weakly. "You told me so."

"Oh, I did, I did. Time after time I said, Don't Go Near That Haunted Planet! It's Worth Yore Life And Yore Soul, I said. There Have Been Signs In The Heavens, I said, To Warn Us From This Place -- "

"All right, don't overdo it, you bastard. You were dead right all the way. Let's leave it at that."

"Okay. But there's one thing I want you to

remember."

"If you don't understand it, it's dangerous."

"That's the one thing I want you to remember besides I Told You So."

* * * *

And that should have ended it.

But it doesn't. Elephant's going back. He's got a little flag with a UN insignia, about two feet by two feet, with spring wires to make it look like it's flapping in the breeze, and a solid rocket in the handle so it'll go straight when the flag is furled. He's going to drop it in the antimatter planet from a great height, as great as I can talk him into.

It should make quite a bang.

And I'm going along. I've got a solidly mounted tridee camera and a contract with the biggest

broadcasting company in known space. _This_ time
I've got a reason for going!