

SCIENCE FICTION

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WE, THE MARAUDERS

FEATURE NOVEL

by Robert Silverberg

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**THE LOW AND
THE MIGHTY**
by Randall Garrett





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THE LOW and the MIGHTY

by Randall Garrett

illustrated by EMSH

Ban Banmyr was a good mechanic, and he liked his work—but having to deal with these stupid, ignorant Earthmen who had taken over Banmyr's world was more than an intelligent being could endure at times...

THE DAY that Ban Banmyr lost his temper and lipped off to an Earthman was not an unusual day, weatherwise. The blue-white sun of Velthyn lit the sky with a whitish glare, against which the thin, drifting clouds were almost invisible. By the Fahrenheit thermometer, which was set in the wall of his watchtower, Ban could see that it was a comfortable 134° outside.

Below his watchtower, like an orderly pile of twisted steel shavings, ran the highways of Earth City, the huge city which the invaders from the sky had built for themselves on Velthyn.

Along the ribbons of steel sped the small, fast land vehicles of the Earthmen. Ban watched them skimming around the broad sweeps of the curves

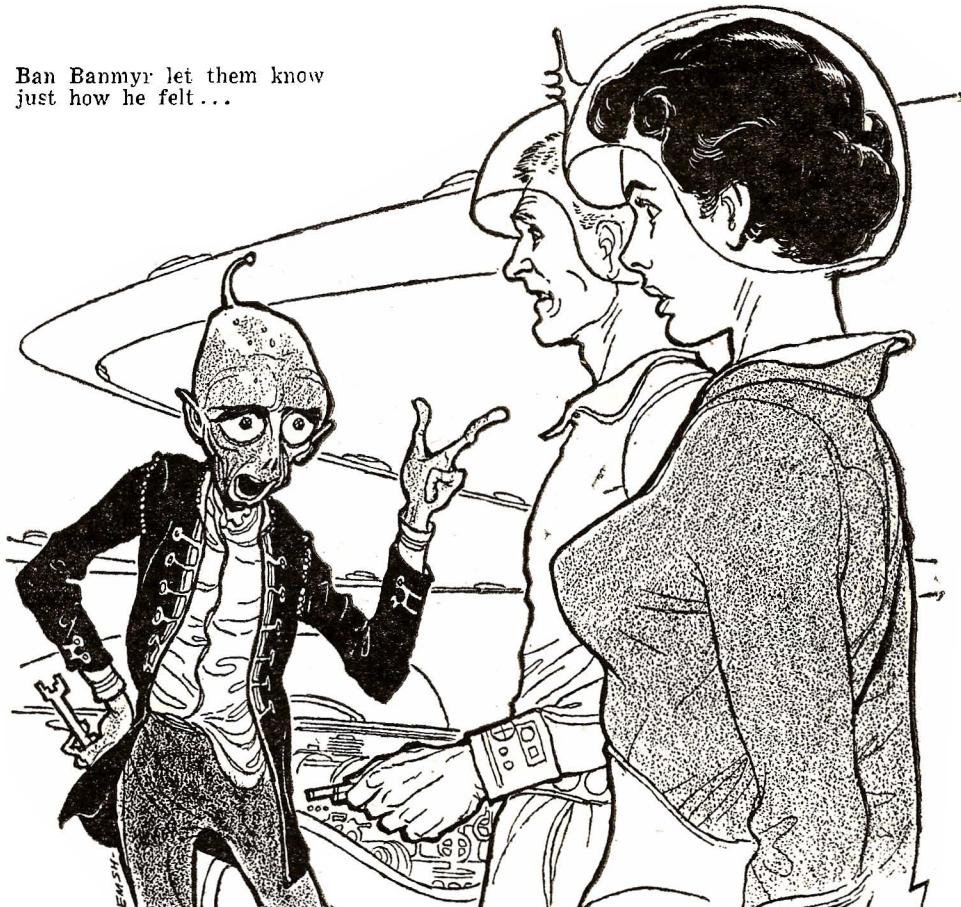
and wondered to himself: *How many today?*

It was the wrong thought to think. On his panel, a light flashed, winking brightly in the comparative dimness of the watchtower. Ban snarled a soft oath in Old Upper High Velth and looked rapidly over the highway in his sector. It didn't take him long to spot the vehicle. One of the Earthmen's cars was pulled off to one side, in Emergency Repair Port Seven.

"Think of evil," he quoted aloud, "and evil will come."

He grabbed his bag of tools in one three-fingered hand and headed for the elevator. He punched the *down* button for Level Three and stood, frowning at the shining metal walls of the car as it dropped him to the highway.

Ban Banmyr let them know just how he felt...



It wasn't that Ban Banmyr didn't like his job—at least he didn't dislike the work itself. He found a satisfying fascination in the complex mechanics of the Earth-built machinery under the hoods of the small runabouts. No, there was nothing wrong with being an Emergency Repairman; it was a good job—if only he didn't have to deal with Earthmen!

Why had they come here, anyway? Why had they come drifting down in their great, shining ships to colonize a planet that was obviously unsuited to them?

"Unsuited", Ban decided, was an understatement of the first order. The climatic conditions of Velthyn were downright inimical to the pale, chunky, beady-eyed beings from space.

THE GREEN nickel-copper complex in Ban's blood could utilize the hard ultra-violet that poured down from the sky; Ban's blood could actually convert the radiation into useful energy. In addition, his great-balled eyes, with their tiny lens openings, were perfectly suited to focusing the softer U-V on the retina; and the great bony ridges over them kept them shadowed from the direct rays of the overhead sun.

But the Earthmen were forced to wear protective helmets that shielded them from the sun, and filtered through only the rays that were visible to their eyes. Their cars were domed, sealed, and air-conditioned to protect them from heat that was normally well above their own body temperature. Ob-

viously, Velthyn was no place for any sane Earthman.

And yet, by the Triple Moons, they had come and built a city! Why? The only answer Ban had ever figured out in all the years he had pondered it was that the Earthmen had a circuit loose somewhere in their brains.

The elevator stopped, and Ban stepped out. He walked over to the slideway marked: *For Personnel Only*, and headed for ERP-7.

Inside the car, waiting patiently, were two Earthmen.

Or... No. As he came closer, Ban could see that it was an Earthman and an Earthgirl. It was difficult to tell the sexes apart. Evidently, the Earth people themselves had trouble in distinguishing each other, for they had adopted an arbitrary hair code. The males cut their hair short, while the females permitted theirs to grow much longer. It had taken Ban a long time to understand even that much, since he, himself, had no hair at all.

Still, all things considered, Ban had to admit that there were definite similarities between his own race and that of the Earthmen. Besides the fact that both races had two arms and two legs, their facial muscles worked similarly. It was easy enough to read the expressions of an Earthman after a person became used to it. A smile was still a smile, a frown was still a frown.

The Earthman and Earthgirl were smiling as he came up.

Smiling they might be, but Ban Banmyr knew how to act around Earthmen. He touched his forehead and said: "What seems to be the trouble, Sir and Lady?"

The Earthman shrugged and spread his hands. "Who knows? It just quit on us. We managed to coast in here on our momentum; if the Emergency Repair Port had been any further down the highway, we'd have been stuck right in the traffic lane."

Ban smiled, but he had to force his face into it. "I shall check, then, Sir and Lady."

Earthmen were such blockheads! None of them seemed to know anything about their own machinery!

The girl smiled and blinked her eyes. "Do hurry, will you? We have an urgent appointment."

The blinking of an Earthman's eyes—or, rather, in this case, an Earthgirl's eyes—was always somewhat disconcerting to Ban Banmyr. The alien's eyes always looked upside down, because the bigger of the two lids was on top and slid down over the eyeball—instead of being at the bottom and sliding up, as any normal being's should do.

"I will do my best, Lady," Ban said, with studied obsequiousness.

HE CARRIED his case of tools back to the rear of the car and flipped open the engine cover with a practiced hand.

The power unit was a standard Eberhardt Magnetogravitic Supercharge Hypermotor, Model II. Ban Banmyr knew those motors backwards, forwards, and inside-out.

Now—what was wrong with the thing?

It didn't take him long to find out. The whole electron injection system had been blown out by an overload. There was only one way to overload—an Eberhardt—hit the accelerator pedal without putting the dissipator in neutral. And that took an incredible amount of stupidity, even for an Earthman.

Assuming his most pleasant smile, Ban went back to the canopy, touched his forehead again, and said; "I'm sorry, Sir and Lady, but I'll have to shut off the whole power section. The air conditioning." He let his voice trail off apologetically.

The man looked at his companion.

"Turn your suit on, sweet; It's hotter than blazes out there. We might as well get out and stretch our legs if the air conditioner is shut off."

She nodded. "How long will it take?" she asked Ban.

Ban thought about it for a few seconds, converting the Velthynina time units into those of the Earthmen. "At least two hours, Lady."

She glanced at the man. "We'll never make it, then; you'd better call in for us."

The man made a phone call on his car's communicator, then the two of them climbed out of the vehicle. They wore air-conditioned suits, with the transparent helmets that partially covered their heads, leaving their faces bare, protected only by the curtain of chilling air that swept down from the forepiece of the helmets themselves. Although transparent to ordinary light, the helmets reflected ultraviolet, which made them look mirrorlike to Ban's eyes.

Ban shivered a little at the blast of cold air that was released from the vehicle's interior when the canopy opened. He stood back, well away from the Earthpeople, to avoid the chill that came from them.

The Earthman reached inside and shut off the entire power system. Then, turning toward Ban, he said: "All set now, my man; you may go to work."

Ban bowed wordlessly and went around to the rear of the car again.

All right, my man; you may go to work. My man!

It was remarks like that which made Ban's blood boil.

BAN BANMYR'S race, the Velthyna, was an old race and a wise one. Their recorded history had begun in the dim past, twelve thousand years before. The philosophies of the Ancients were studied by every school-

child on Velthyn; the names and deeds of the Great Lords could be recited, at least in brief, by any adult; quotations from the ancient scholars were on every man's tongue, spicing his conversation with the *bon mots* of the ages.

Velthyn's philosophers had long ago reasoned that the planet must be round; that it revolved on its axis, and that the center of the system was the blue-white sun. When the Earthmen had come, none of their information had surprised anyone; and the intruders' place of origin—another planet of another sun—was accepted as a logical extrapolation of what was already known.

True, the Earthmen had a flair for gadgetry; but beyond that they were no wiser than the Velthyna. Indeed, in many ways, they were sadly lacking in knowledge. They couldn't be expected to know the details of Velthynina history, of course, but they didn't seem to know much more than the broad outlines of their own history—a history which only went back some seven thousand years. It seemed that only certain of their scholars were interested in such things; the others didn't care.

What right had such a group of untaught children to claim superiority over the Velthyna of Velthyn?

Ban twisted savagely on one of the nuts that held down the microfilter unit, and the nut shattered in the wrench. The washover of radiation had crystallized the metal.

He had been bending over the motor; now he straightened abruptly, angry at the shattered bit of metal stuck in his wrench. He felt a sudden chill of icy air wash down his back. He gasped and spun around.

The Earthman had been standing directly behind him, watching the repair job with interest. When Ban Banmyr spun, the Earthman stepped back a bit.

"Trouble?" he asked blandly.

"That's a pretty complicated bit of machinery, isn't it? I guess it must have taken you a long time to learn how to repair it."

Ban suppressed a shudder. "Yes, Sir, it did," he said, forcing a smile.

"What's the trouble?" the girl asked. "Why did that nut break?" Her voice and eyes were filled with naive interest.

"The metal has become recrystallized, Lady," Ban explained. "It's become brittle and lost its tensile strength."

"Oh," said the girl. "I see."

Ban was quite sure that she didn't see anything of the kind.

"I'll have to get a replacement part, Sir and Lady," he said. "I'll be back as soon as possible."

He took the slideway back to the base of the watchtower and then the elevator.

He asked himself the question again: *What right had the Earthmen to claim superiority over the Velthyna?*

And the answer came at once: *Power!*

They had power such as no Great Lord of Velthyn had ever had, nor ever thought existed. It was a power of a different kind, but more potent for all of that.

THE GREAT LORDS ruled by the power of the Great God; to disobey a Great Lord was to disobey the Great God—at least in theory. Actually, the Great Lords ruled because they had always ruled; accepting their rule had become a racial habit. Velthyn had been stabilized into eighty-four principalities long millenia ago, each ruled, by its Great Lord. There had been, and always would be, fights and squabbles over territory; but these were minor. Such squabbles never affected the peasant much, except when his lands were despoiled because they had become the scene of one of the battles

between two mercenary armies of the Great Lords.

A Great Lord could order a man killed, and he was killed. A Great Lord's word was law, because if his word were disobeyed the offender would be punished. And the offender was punished because the Great Lord's word was law. It was as simple as that.

But since he had come to work in Earth City, Ban Banmyr had begun to realize that the Earthmen had a better answer.

If one disobeyed a Great Lord, the Great Lord ordered his soldiers to kill the disobedient one. But if one offended an Earthman, no orders were given. The Earthman simply drew the little weapon at his belt and pulled the trigger; that was all.

Again Ban shuddered—and this time it was not from a blast of cold air.

When he stepped into the watchroom at the top of the tower, Ban automatically glanced at the warning board. How many other disabled cars would there be?

Surprisingly, there were none. Ban was grateful for that; he had become known lately as a man whose luck was bad, because of the numbers of breakdowns in his sector. The other ER men had been chiding him about it for the last Period.

He walked into the Replacement Stockroom and picked out a new microfilter unit, complete with new nuts and bolts. Then he returned to the elevator and headed down again, the unit cradled lovingly under his arm.

Except for the ever-present threat of instant death, Ban Banmyr really liked his job. Like many others of his race, Ban had come to one magnificent Earth City because of the lure of money—which, in its own way, represented power. If a wealthy man played his cards right, he was in no danger from a Great Lord.

The Earthmen had built their vast metropolis right in the middle of the Nahtufar Desert. It was useless, unwanted land, so none of the Great Lords had objected; and now, with the City already built, it was too late for them to object. If all the Great Lords had banded together, the combined might of their mercenaries would still mean nothing to the Earthmen.

Individuals could get in, though. The Earthmen needed workers, since they were too haughty—and too ignorant—to do work themselves. They needed men like Ban Banmyr, men who were smart enough to learn Earth's technology and greedy enough to put up with abuse from the aliens for the sake of a relatively astronomical paycheck.

But to work for the Earthmen was ignominious in the extreme; at least a Great Lord had wisdom and a deep knowledge of important things, while the Earthmen were stupid in the extreme.

WHEN HE returned to the car, Ban Banmyr saw that the Earthman and the girl were bending over the open motor housing. He closed his eyes for a moment, sending up a prayer to the Great God that they hadn't poked around inside and wrecked something; the motor was in bad enough shape as it was.

They hadn't touched it as far as Ban could see; they'd just been looking. They stepped back as Ben approached. Then, without warning, the girl pointed a finger.

"What does that little gadget do?"

"Lady!" Almost automatically, Ban's own hand reached out, grabbed the Earthgirl's arm, and jerked her hand away from the meson condenser.

Then he realized what he had done.

Without looking to see whether the man's hand was near the pistol grip at his belt, Ban bowed very low. There was a cold perspiration on his brow. "I

beg mercy, Lady and Sir. But if I had allowed the Lady to touch the terminals, she would have died instantly."

There was a momentary silence; then the Earthman said: "You have our pardon and our thanks. Proceed with your work."

Ban thanked them properly and went back to work.

THE NEXT two hours were absolute misery for Ban Banmyr. As it approached noon, the sun blazed down with ever-increasing warmth, and Ban, bent over the complex workings of the autocar had to mop his brow frequently with his handkerchief to keep from dripping perspiration into the mechanism.

But the heat was only a minor disturbance. The two Earthpeople were constantly underfoot—if that term can be applied to beings who were taller and heavier than Ban Banmyr. He would reach for a tool and find that one or the other had somehow managed to interpose themselves between Ban and the tool kit. Just about every other time he turned around, he bumped into one or the other of them.

Between the external heat of the sun and the internal heat of anger, Ban Banmyr of Velthyn had just about reached the boiling point. Or, rather, he had passed it and was holding the explosion in by pressure of sheer will-power.

Mentally, he was cursing the complexity of the hypermotor itself. If the damned thing weren't so complicated, he could have fixed it long before now and gotten back to his watchtower, away from these meddling aliens.

He had long ago realized that the mechanism of the Model II was a lot more complicated than it had to be. There were three components that could be replaced by one; and several of the wiring circuits were superflu-

ous, if they were properly worked around.

By the time the second hour had rolled around, Ban was so furious and so miserable that he was ready to try anything to get this job over with, get rid of the two Earthpeople, and go back to the relative peace and quiet of his watchtower. He had had to put up with Earthmen before, but none like this!

He had badly underestimated the amount of time it would take to complete the repairs; there were two other parts ruined which he hadn't noticed, and he'd had to go back to the tower to get both of them. Add to that the fact that the Earthpeople themselves, being always in the way, had added a minute here and a minute there in delay.

The chewing gum incident was the one which made Ban Banmyr finally explode.

He had finally decided to work around the bad places—redesign the motor on the spot and get the job over with. It took him fifteen minutes more to get the machine in working condition after that—in place of the hour-and-a-half working time that would have been required to finish if he'd repaired the motor the way it was originally designed.

Then he stood up, mopping his bony supraorbital ridges with an already-soaking kerchief.

"Are you through?" asked the Earthman.

Ban nodded, not trusting himself to speak aloud.

The Earthgirl said: "Wonderful!" She turned to the man. "He took much longer than he said he would, but that isn't his fault. Give him something, George."

The Earthman nodded and reached into a pocket of his air-conditioned suit. His hand came out with a pack-

age of that Earth concoction known as chewing gum.

"Have a stick, Repairman," said the Earthman.

BAN STARED at him for a long moment. The gum was chewed by the Earthmen and then spat out after all the carbohydrates had been extracted—Ban Banmyr knew that. But one of the things that the Earthpeople didn't seem to understand was that there were physiological differences between Earthmen and the Velthyna.

In the first place, because of their higher body temperature, the Velthyna's mouths melted the gum into a sticky mess. In the second place, it tasted terrible to the Velthyna. Ban usually accepted gum when it was given to him, but only to swallow it rapidly. There was a certain amount of usable nourishment in the stuff, but no pleasure.

To Ban, the offer was the final insult. "I don't want any gum," he said steadily.

"Oh, don't be shy," said the girl, smiling. "Go on. Take it."

Ban was never quite sure what he said during the next minute or so, but it went something like this: "I don't want any of that foul stuff! I don't want your thanks! I don't want anything from you stupid barbarians! I..."

"Why are you angry?" asked the girl calmly.

He told her. He told her how she had gotten in his way; how he hated her superciliousness; how stupid the Earthmen were to have designed a machine so complicated; how he had redesigned it, how he...

And then, quite suddenly, he realized what he had said. Without even stopping to think about it, he spun on his heel and began running. Just as he turned, he saw the Earthman's

hand flash toward the holster at his belt.

Ban Banmyr took a flying leap and landed on the slideway, flat on his belly. He rolled over and caught one flashing glimpse of the Earthman speaking into the microphone at his wrist. Ban knew that he was getting replies from someone else through the earpieces on his helmet.

The rolling spin, plus the velocity of the sidewalk had carried him near the edge of the roadway. Fifty feet below was the next level, the south-bound level.

Something hummed near his ear. He recognized the sound as that of the beam which came from an Earthman's pistol.

He grabbed the edge of the roadway and swung himself over. Below him was fifty feet of empty space—more than that if he missed the roadway below. Instead of dropping, he swung himself under the girders that supported the road, a webwork of super-strong metal that braced the roadway above.

For a second or two, he was frantic. Where could he go? What could he do next? He had to get out of the city, cross the desert, and get back to his own people. And then?

THEN HE heard voices from above. Evidently the Earthman and the Earthgirl were looking over the edge.

"George! He dropped! He let go! He killed himself!"

"I don't see him," said the Earthman.

The Earthgirl's voice was tense. "If he missed the next level down, he dropped over a thousand feet. We couldn't see him down there in the glare of this sun!"

"Damn!" said the Earthman. "Damn! I should have shot first and asked Central later!"

The girl said something else, but

Ban didn't catch it. The pair were evidently walking away from the edge of the upper roadway.

They thought he was dead!

They wouldn't think so very long, of course. As soon as they got a report from those below, they'd know what he had done. He had to move fast.

He began crawling along the girder, keeping his eyes on it rather than on the traffic-filled roadway fifty feet beneath.

At last he came to a vertical brace. There weren't very many of them; the Earthmen's engineering methods eliminated all but the most necessary of bracing.

Ban Banmyr looked down. There was no sign of anyone watching for him. Directly below was one of the Emergency Repair Ports. Number Forty-Six. And there was a disabled car in it!

The Velthyna who was working on it was named Dorst something-or-other; Ban knew him only slightly. The Earthman who owned the vehicle was nowhere in sight. Good!

Ban considered. It was difficult in the extreme to tell one Earthman from another; evidence showed that the Earthmen had just as much trouble in telling one Velthyna from another. And, in the uniform of the Emergency Repair Service, all the Repairmen looked alike, anyway. It was worth the chance.

Carefully, he worked his way down the cross-braces on the vertical strut, being careful to keep the steel vertical between himself and Dorst whatever-his-name-was.

His plan was simple. He'd walk over to Dorst in a friendly fashion and ask his advice about some delicate operation on a motor. Then, when Dorst wasn't looking, Ban would crown him with a wrench and hide the unconscious man somewhere in the watch-

tower. After that, he'd simply take Dorst's place for a few hours while the hunt for Ban Banmyr himself cooled down. Then he'd head for the Outer Gate and the desert.

When he had climbed down to the pavement below, Ban straightened his uniform and sauntered casually towards the repair port as though he'd come down by elevator and sidewalk.

It looked almost too easy.

It was.

As he approached the car, an Earthman rose suddenly from where he had been hidden within the vehicle, and with one smooth motion, he drew his weapon and fired the beam straight into Ban's face.

THE GREAT LORD of Gwonath, Subdistrict of Velthyn, looked out of his palace window at the smoothly-running automatic factory in the distance.

Twenty years! he thought. *Twenty years.*

Had it really been that long? In some ways, it seemed only a few weeks since he had become a Great Lord; in other ways, it seemed centuries.

There was a chime at his elbow. Without turning, he said: "Come in."

An aide stepped in and the Great Lord turned from the window.

"Yes?"

"Your Greatness," said the aide, "the Noble K'torn Peshq, the Ambassador from Vega, is here."

The Great Lord nodded. "Send the Ambassador in."

The Vegan Ambassador was a short, barrel-shaped humanoid with blue-black skin and small, jet-black eyes. He bowed ceremonially to the Great Lord. "I am happy," he said, "that Your Greatness has seen fit to receive me."

"The pleasure is mine, Ambassa-

dor," the Great Lord replied. "Sit down, Noble K'torn; we no longer stand on ceremony here."

The Vegan nodded and sat. "I'm glad to hear that. We are—ah—somewhat abrupt and blunt in our ways, we Vegans. Other races are more flowery, but we prefer bluntness if possible."

The Great Lord smiled reminiscently. "Twenty years ago, it wouldn't have been possible for you to be blunt to a Great Lord. But things have changed since the coming of the Earthmen."

The Ambassador nodded. "We have found it so on Vega III," he agreed. "We resist change, but the Earthmen know how to handle such situations. They have methods of picking key men and putting them in positions of power."

The Great Lord seated himself behind his desk and picked up a paper-weight. It was a chromed Bryson wrench. "Yes, they have their methods. Twenty years ago, I, Ban Banmyr, was a common mechanic, working for them. I didn't realize at the time that their whole city was nothing but a training and testing ground. I didn't know that I was working on antiquated machines that hadn't been used on Earth for centuries; to me, they were quite up-to-date. In fact, they were far beyond our crude technology as it was twenty years ago."

The Vegan raised a double-thumbed hand. "I know: if it is anything like the trick they pulled on us, I'll wager that they wanted you to figure out your own improvements."

Great Lord Ban Banmyr nodded. "That was it, exactly. Of course, when I was—ah—apprehended in the act, I became frightened and ran, but they soon traced me down because of the uniform I wore—it had a tracer built into it."

"They had to beam me down with a stun gun before they could make me

sit still long enough to listen to what they had to say."

The Vegan Ambassador chuckled in a deep baritone. "It sounds as though your troubles were similar to ours; a stagnation caused by too much interest in our own past glories and a high opinion of our own wisdom because we confused knowledge with wisdom."

The Great Lord nodded slowly. "There is a definite similarity. I suppose that's why the Earthmen suggest-

ed that our planets should work together."

"I dare say that's it," said the Ambassador. "Clever and wonderful people, these Earthmen." Then he picked up the attache case at his side. "But enough of this, Your Greatness. As you are now the elected ruler of Velthyn, it is to you that I must present our proposals. Let's get down to business."

"Let's," said Ban Banmyr, the Great Lord of all Velthyn.
