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Feature Novelet

THE CHILDREN OF THON

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Dirrul had been told that the key to the mystery of Thon lay in the special meanings that these people had for the terms they used. And that it would be fatal to employ his own meanings for Thonian words — as he discovered!



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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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Valler had the right approach to the problem, but . . .



THE MONSTER OR-- THE MONSTER?

by Eando Binder

(illustrated by Milton Luros)

“WELL, ANDREW VAL-
LER! *Enjoying* your
study of interplanetary
specimens?”

Feeding the animals, Valler turned in surprise. His biological research-camp was isolated, deep in the hills, by Earth security-regulations. He worked alone, without assistants, and visitors seldom came. Most people didn't like this particular work, dealing with monsters of many worlds.

“Hello, I didn't expect company—” Valler choked off, staring around; there was no one in sight. Valler stood a moment frowning, then shrugged. He was a man of snap judgments. There was no one there; ergo, no one had spoken. Period.

Valler went back to feeding the animals, taking his usual delight in holding the food beyond their reach and letting them slaver and whine for it, while he goaded them with a blunt iron bar.

“Yes, you heard a voice, Andrew Valler,” came again. “Don't ignore me; that is rude you know.”

Valler dropped his goad. This time there was no mistake. It had been 'as clear as a bell in his ears. . . no, not in his ears. In his mind.

Telepathy. But who—?

Valler stiffened as he slowly looked around at the dozen cages in open air, holding specimens of native animal-life from a dozen different worlds.

The question suddenly came out chillingly different.

What had spoken to him, by telepathy?

Valler had thought, up till now, that he was studying only animal-life, comparable in low brain capacity to earthly mammals. His skin crawled; now it was obvious that one of the planetary creatures was intelligent.

But which one?

"Yes, which one of us?" rang in cold, clear telepathic tones, tinged with that other unique trait of intelligent life—sarcasm. "We all look alike to you—that is, unhuman. Which one is I, Erko Kajj?"

Valler gripped his gun, peering at each cage closely. Yet how could he tell, visually? They all looked monstrous to human eyes. Scaly, simian, piscine, winged, furred, fanged—each appeared to be a dumb brute in outward form.

Obviously reading his thoughts, the voice again slid into his mind. "Not one of us looks manlike or brainy. Which one is I, Erko Kajj? Which one?"

Valler was bending his head, like a person trying to determine where a voice came from. Perhaps. . .

"It won't work," informed Erko Kajj immediately. "Your ears can judge the direction of sound, but a mind cannot orientate telepathic impulses."

It was true; the telepathic voice seemed to come from everywhere—and nowhere. It had no more "direction" than any thought stealing into the mind. Valler grunted.

Clothes! It was a mark of all intellectual races. . .

"Not a stitch on me," bubbled Erko Kajj, gleefully. "When I was captured by your hunters, on my world, I was sleeping after a swim."

"What world?" shot back Valler quickly, speaking aloud, knowing his thought would carry along.

"Clever, aren't you? Thought I'd answer innocently, not seeing the trap. All your specimens being from different worlds, you would then know which I was. Come, Earthling, that was childish. You are dealing with a brain equal to yours; try something else."

Valler whipped out his gun. "Simple," he snapped, grinning. "You forget one thing. I can't pick *you* out, but if I must, I can kill all twelve animals, and that would include Mr. Erko Kajj. Laugh *that* off."

"Frankly," came back calmly, "it's your only chance. Within an hour, I will figure out the lock-mechanism to my cage, and open it with telekinetic force. I will be free to kill you. Yes, your only chance to kill me is by slaughtering all the specimens. You'll never *pick* me out, stupid."

VALLER put back his gun, seething. That did it, the insult, the sneer in the tone. That unsufferable self-assurance. "Killing would be too easy for you," Valler growled. "I'll beat you the better way, in a battle of wits."

"Perhaps I tricked you into taking that attitude, to save myself from immediate death."

"I know you did," spat Valler. "But that's going to make it all the sweeter, getting you the hard way, making you eat your words. So I'm too dumb to pin you down, eh? We'll see!"

"Yes, we will see," agreed the unknown enemy. "Well? Which one am I, braggart? Which one?"

Which one? Which one? Which one?

It gonged in Valler's head in the following minutes, as he brooded silently, rejecting useless ideas. Then he jumped up and ran into his cabin-workshop for biological research. Smiling crookedly, he wheeled out an instrument.

"Know what this is, my friend?" he said, addressing himself to the twelve

cages and animals in general. "The fluororadarscope. Takes X-ray shots of the insides of animals, shows them on the screen, by radar-focus. All I do now is examine each of the critters for one certain internal organ."

"The *brain!*" came back, and Valler laughed; for the first time, Erko Kajj's tone was not mocking, not self-assured.

"Scared?" said Valler gloatingly. "The brain, of course, is a dead giveaway. It's almost always more convoluted and *larger* in any intelligent being, in proportion to body size. Try and get out of that corner, chum."

There was no answer.

Valler dismissed them quickly, one after another, with the X-ray probe. Tiny brains in huge hulks, most of them. He laughed at the peanut brain in the miniature horse-sized saurian from Io. And the fist-sized cranium of the great green lion-bear from Hyperion.

Then he saw the huge brain on the screen, almost human size.

Valler strode to the cage labeled—*Furred Tortoise, Titan*. In its hard-shelled body of mere goat-size, covered with incongruous silky hair, you would least expect intelligence. But its leonine head, out of all proportion to its body, held a cunning big brain of human capacity. And Valler thought he could see now, close up, how its lidded eyes held age-old wisdom.

"Any last words, Erko Kajj?" said Valler grindingly, as he used the iron

goad to whack it several times, making it cringe back.

Silence.

"Scared dumb, eh?" mocked Valler savagely, extracting revenge for his aching nerves. "Thought you were smart, superior. Thought you could play cat-and-mouse with me, driving me wild before you finally broke loose and got me. But your big brain still only amounts to a half-witted Earthman, see? Goodbye, Erko Kajj of Titan."

Valler's gun barked. He pumped the whole magazine of atomic bullets into the hairy turtle. Reptilian to the core, it made no sound as it slumped, kicked, and lay still.

Valler turned—and shrieked.

A silent form stood behind him, out of its opened cage. It knocked the empty gun from his hands, seized him in its claws.

"But you *can't* be Erko Kajj," whispered Valler. "You only have a brain the size of a peanut... I saw it... I saw it..."

"You had the right idea," and the telepathic voice of Erko Kajj was near to pity, "but you forgot one thing about your own dinosaurs, that they had a second brain at the base of the spine. That one, you see, is my *real* brain."

Valler looked into the small cold eyes of the miniature Ioan dinosaur and saw death.

