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THE PRICE OF EGGS

By
RANDALL
GARRETT

ILLUSTRATED by SUMMERS

Royal babies were pretty important on Dynak, even if they did hatch out of eggs. So when Boccaccio di Vino mated with the Shannil, everyone held their breath. Especially di Vino. He might not have much more of it.

YOU'LL find things a lot different out here, Lieutenant," said Colonel Hastings as he eyed the newly-arrived officer in a manner which was intended to be detached, and which failed by a narrow margin to do quite that. He levelled his gaze.

Lieutenant Donald John Newhouse nodded his head just the slightest and said, "Yes, sir."

"I appreciate the fact that you have been specially trained for this work," the colonel went on, "and I appreciate that Sector Headquarters must think very highly of you to send you out on something like this. But it is my own personal opinion that it takes more than theoretical work to understand the situation on an alien planet that one has

never visited. You've got to live with it."

"Yes, sir," said Lieutenant Newhouse again. There was little else he could say; there was no point in arguing with the colonel. He was well aware that Colonel Hastings was angry because he had been unable to solve the problem that was facing him here on Dynak, and because Sector Headquarters had sent in a new man to do it—and a fresh-faced junior officer, at that. Logically, the colonel should have been angry with himself, not with Newhouse, but man does not function by logic alone.

Colonel Hastings toyed with a pink paperweight with one hand and scratched his button nose with the other, while his eyes remained steadily on



For the royal couple the future did not look bright.

Newhouse. "I also appreciate the fact that you . . ."

Newhouse listened respectfully to what the colonel had to say, mentally making a note to the effect that Colonel Hastings, on his own word, was a very appreciative man. He seemed to appreciate everything.

". . . And I assure you that you will have every bit of data which we have so far obtained at your disposal."

He paused, and Newhouse, sensing that he should make some reply, said: "Thank you, sir; that will be very helpful."

The colonel sighed. "Very well. Don't hesitate to call on me for anything, Lieutenant. And—uh—" He paused suddenly looking wistful, like a kicked collie.

"Yes, sir?" said Newhouse respectfully.

"—uh—I trust you will keep me informed—ah—for my own information."

"As much as possible, sir," said Newhouse, trying hard not to feel sorry for the colonel.

"Very well," Colonel Hastings said morosely. "Unless there are any questions, you may go."

Newhouse detected the hopeful note in the other man's voice and responded. "I really don't think I can ask

any intelligent questions until I've studied the problem thoroughly, sir."

The colonel looked gratified. "Very well. I appreciate your concern, Lieutenant. Thank you."

"Thank you, sir," Lieutenant Newhouse said saluting. Then he turned on his heel and left the office.

He moseyed over to the broad swath of green park that had been left as a relaxation spot when the base had been built. It wasn't crowded; there were only two or three men sitting on the benches, smoking and talking quietly. Newhouse found a bench to himself and sat down to mull things over.

There was nothing totally new in the situation here on Dynak. Newhouse, as a trouble-shooter knew that, even if Colonel Hastings didn't. Dynak was one of the many worlds which Man had decided not to colonize in spite of its inviting appearance. The biochemistry of the plants and animals was just a little too different to be compatible with Man, which meant that the planet would have to be wiped clean and started over in order to provide a suitable environment for human beings. And, aside

from the fact that such a step would mean destroying millions of species that would better be preserved for study, it would mean the death of the several million humanoid natives of the planet—something that Man had no desire to be responsible for.

Dynak Base was not a military establishment; the Space Force as a whole used only a minor part of its energies for military purposes. Most of its activities were scientific in nature. Nonetheless, any base such as this had to be fortified to a certain extent. There were tribes of humanoids in the immediate vicinity which were, like all such cultural units at that stage of development, intensely hostile to anything strange. Right now, the majority of them were warily friendly with the Earthmen, but there was no way of knowing how long that uneasy peace might last. Meanwhile, they were doing useful work—bringing in samples of various types of fauna and flora for the labs to work on.

It all sounded fine so far, Newhouse thought grumpily. But the catch lay in the word "humanoid." Any reasonably intelligent race was classified as "humanoid" if they were erect, bifurcate animals—a definition which covered a

multitude of variations. Most of them you wouldn't want to meet alone in a dark alley, and if you did, it would be a toss-up as to which of you would be the most frightened. Oddly-colored skins, three-eyed faces, and other *outré* features were not at all uncommon among them.

Dynak was different. The humanoids were near human. The brown-yellow pigment in their skins wasn't melanin, and it was another pigment that gave them the intensely blue-violet eyes coloring; they had different kinds of glands inside, arranged differently; they were almost entirely hairless, except for soft patches of down on the top of the head; and they averaged about four feet seven in height. Not human, no. Definitely not *homo sapiens*.

But they certainly *looked* human. And, to top the whole thing off, the females were, to an Earthman's eyes, as pretty as little dolls. Except that dolls are normally not built so enticingly.

They weren't *all* beautiful, true, but there were enough beauties to tempt the weary Earthman. And those who weren't weary were even more tempted.

Their body chemistries were incompatible, of course; off-

spring from such a union were impossible. But the union itself was certainly possible.

Even so, there hadn't been too much trouble. For one thing, there were plenty of human women on Dynak Base; for another, the semi-savage tribes which occupied the territory around Dynak Base had a rather *laissez faire* attitude, and a female's over-friendliness, even with alien giants from the sky, wasn't frowned upon. And, for a third, the savage women usually didn't come up to the standards of a fastidious Earthman, as far as general cleanliness was concerned.

But the women of the semi-barbaric city-state of Oassi, a hundred miles to the north, were a different matter entirely. Newhouse had never actually seen any of the native females, but the trimensional, full color, motion recordings had been graphic enough.

Newhouse could understand perfectly well why Boccaccio di Vino had managed to get himself into the jam he was in.

A man in civilian clothing had been approaching the bench Newhouse was seated on, but the lieutenant didn't pay much attention until the man stopped by the bench

and said: "Lieutenant Newhouse?"

Newhouse started to rise. "Yes?"

"Sit down, Lieutenant," the other said, sitting down beside Newhouse. He was a lean, elderly man, with graying hair and a long-jawed, bony face that managed to show a strong sense of humor in spite of its saturnine construction. "I'm Bruce MacAuliffe; Colonel Hastings said you wanted to talk to me."

Newhouse swallowed. "Well, yes, sir; I did. But you didn't have to—"

MacAuliffe raised a hand. "That's all right. Hastings has his own way of doing things. There's no point in raising a fuss. And besides, I imagine you want to get things started. Something has to be done about di Vino."

MacAuliffe was the head of the Diplomatic Section on Dynak, and an outstanding expert on anthropology and xenology; Newhouse felt flattered that the man had taken the trouble to seek him out.

"Something has to be done, all right," Newhouse agreed, "but I'm not quite sure what at this point. In spite of the reports, I still don't have the whole picture."

MacAuliffe lifted a thin eye brow. "No? I thought my

reports were comprehensive enough." But there was a definite twinkle in his eyes.

Newhouse grinned. "Hastings thinks the job can't be done till I've spent six months here because it's impossible to learn from reports; you think I can hop off immediately and get di Vino out of this jam, because everything can be learned from reports. It's a rough life we lead."

The diplomat grinned back. "Just what is it you want to know, Lieutenant?"

Newhouse then scratched thoughtfully at the area just behind his right ear. "Details, mostly, I guess. You and di Vino and the others went to Oassi to square away the details of this contract with the local government, and di Vino managed to get himself married. All as plain as my Aunt Millie's face. But I don't quite get a picture of Boccaccio di Vino the man nor of the personalities of the women involved."

MacAuliffe said: "I see. Well, di Vino himself is a very personable young man; good conversationalist and a fine diplomat—for a young man. He shows promise of getting somewhere in the field."

"Won't this caper sort of put a black mark on his record?"

MacAuliffe rubbed his long, thin nose sadly. "I'm afraid it will, yes. Shame, too. Mr. di Vino acted with the impetuosity of youth, and it'll probably follow him well into his old age."

"By then," said Newhouse, "he'll be bragging about it."

"Probably. He's just the type, though, who's a push-over for a set-up like that; pretty faces and figures go to his head. He and the Shannil, for instance, were . . ."

Newhouse listened while MacAuliffe talked.

The cultural level of the city-state of Oassi was similar in many ways to that of Egypt in the fifteenth century B.C., or that of pre-classical Athens or Sparta. It differed strongly, however, in that it was essentially a matriarchy. Since the natives of Dynak were oviparous, the women were freed from the temporary disability that child-bearing brought to viviparous species. In the more savage tribes, the females suckled the young and cared for them from hatching until they were old enough to fend for themselves; in Oassi, however, most of the care of the young had been handed over to the males while the females ran the state. The fighters were of

both sexes, carefully segregated into male and female battalions, but the top officers were all females.

Dynak Base had been built well away from Oassi; one of the strict rules of Earth was that no indigenous culture should be subjugated or influenced any more than necessary. Before any contact was made, a study of the more savage tribes had to be made.

Nonetheless, rumors had come out of the jungle that a strange group of aliens had built a fortress near the banks of the Ngong River, and the people of Oassi were aware of the presence of the Earthmen long before any contact had been made by the Earthmen themselves.

Eventually, diplomatic relations between the Earthmen and the Oassi people had been established simply because the Oassi army had sent an expeditionary force to find out the intentions of the strangers. There had been no actual fighting; the female general in charge of the troops had decided that it would be futile to attack Dynak Base and had asked, instead, for a parley.

The upshot of the whole incident was a decision to send a diplomatic party to Oassi itself. And Boccaccio di Vino

had been a member of that party.

The trouble was that, at that time, di Vino and the others didn't know a great deal about the customs and mores of the Oassi. More exactly, di Vino didn't know that just holding hands with an Oassi girl was tantamount to a formal engagement. And di Vino hadn't just stopped with holding hands. After the party had been in the city sixty-three days, di Vino found himself legally married to Oanella, the daughter of the Shann and Shanni of Oassi, and heir to the throne. When the old Shanni died, Oanella would become Shanni, and di Vino, as her consort, would become Shann whether he liked it or not.

It might sound like a good position to be in, and, in a human society, it could have been just fine. But Oassi was not a human city, and di Vino wanted desperately to get out and go back to Dynak Base—even farther away, if possible.

Oassi had a pleasant little law regarding the crown princess and the Shanni. If no fertile eggs were laid within the first two hundred days of marriage, it was the duty of the royal personage to get herself another husband. But since

monogamy was strictly enforced, and since no one, not even the Shanni, could remarry while the spouse remained alive, the only way out for her highness was the obvious one. Consequently, Boccaccio di Vino had found himself facing death.

"The big trouble," said MacAuliffe, "is that the young Shannil seems to be actually proud of di Vino; her 'giant' is something for the lesser nobles to envy." His face darkened. "She'll probably miss him very much."

"We can't let them kill him," Newhouse said flatly.

"I hope not," MacAuliffe said, "but, outside of storming their city, I don't see how we can get him out of the citadel."

"I'll think of a way," Newhouse said grimly. "I'm going into the city with the next food convoy."

"Sometimes," said Master Sergeant Pemberton in a low voice, "I think this whole thing is a waste of time." He turned the wheel of the car a trifle to avoid a tree, then twisted it back to avoid another.

Newhouse stuck a cigarette in his mouth, fired it. "What? You mean, taking di Vino food? He might get pretty hungry."

"I didn't mean that, Lieutenant; I wouldn't want to let him starve. But driving in all this chow every so often, over a hundred miles of jungle, isn't my idea of an efficient way to run an outfit."

"What would you do, if it were your job to decide policy?" Newhouse asked, genuinely curious.

"Just what the colonel's doing now," Pemberton said. "I realize it's the only sensible way. But there are times when I wish we could just walk in there, pull out our guns, and tell them to hand him over or else."

"Sure," said Newhouse, "but who'd raise *gakgaks* for us then? You want to raise a whole herd and milk 'em yourself?"

"My mother didn't raise her little Willie to be a herdsman for alien critters," the sergeant said virtuously. "Besides, I wouldn't know how, and I'm not anxious to learn. Those things smell worse than a herd of sick hogs."

"Same thing I'd say," Newhouse agreed. "But Earth would scream so loud they could be heard in Messier 31 if their only supply of anti-cancer serum were to be cut off, or even reduced. And if you know of any way to get it except from *gakgak* milk,

a grateful galaxy will prostrate itself at your feet."

"I'd feel pretty silly if they did," said Pemberton, wrenching the wheel around to avoid another tree. "But it's a hell of a note that Dr. Chung had to find the stuff in *gagak* milk at all. Why couldn't he have been sensible and found it in tree leaves or something? Then we wouldn't have to stay on good terms with a bunch of high-handed female dictators."

"No," said Newhouse, "probably not. But we'd probably have to stay on good terms with the savages around the base so they'd go out and gather leaves for us. What's the difference?"

"The difference," Pemberton said triumphantly, "is that we wouldn't have to worry about the care and feeding of our boy, di Vino."

"Um," said Newhouse, realizing when he'd been beaten.

Pemberton glanced in his rear view mirror. "They having trouble back there? No, I guess not; they just slowed down a little."

Newhouse swiveled his head around and peered at the second car, which was following them. Like their own, it floated a foot off the ground on its antigravs as it moved through

the jungle. It didn't seem to be having any trouble.

"There's another thing, Lieutenant," Pemberton said. "I don't like the idea of carrying a dame along. Not that she's any trouble, but she might get hurt. This isn't exactly the cornfields of Iowa, you know."

"I think Captain Smith can take care of herself," Newhouse said. "She's a pretty tough gal."

"I'd rather have her on my side than against me, that's for sure," the sergeant admitted, "but my protective instincts always rise when I see a woman out in the wilds like this. Even if she is an officer."

Newhouse started to answer, but there was a pounding on the roof of the car. Pemberton slowed, rolled down the window, stuck out his head, and said something in a language Newhouse didn't understand.

Ksitka, a hunter from one of the tribes near Dynak Base, jabbered something back in the same tongue. Pemberton pulled his head back in.

"He says he smells trouble. There's a group of those lizard-like carnivores up ahead—two or three, he says. We'll have to go around 'em; I don't want to get tangled up with those babies." He turned the

wheel, and the car angled to the right. "Can't go to the left," he explained. "There's a cliff there that we couldn't make."

For a long minute, he was silent. Then: "And that's another thing, Lieutenant; we have to keep these cars close to the ground. If we could fly 'em, we'd have been to Oassi hours ago. But no, just because we're not to reveal our strength to the natives, we have to go creeping along like snails. Why, when I . . ."

Newhouse folded his arms across his chest and closed his eyes. Sergeant Pemberton was a compulsive griper, but his droning voice made a nice lullaby.

When they hove into sight of the city gates of Oassi, Pemberton shook the lieutenant. "We're here, sir. Their scouts spotted us twenty miles back, and the guard of honor is lined up, waiting for us."

Newhouse shoved himself into a more upright position and looked out at the pygmy-sized natives lined up in gorgeous array, in brightly-colored kilts and feathers. They looked, Newhouse opined, like a cross between a regiment of Scottish Highlanders and a group of Zulu warriors in full battle array. Each man

had a longbow and a quiver of arrows slung across the back of his shoulders, and each was carrying a seven-foot, metal-tipped spear in his right hand.

"Very impressive," said Newhouse. "Okay, Sergeant; let's get our own show on the road."

Both men got out of the car and marched solemnly back to the second car. Ksitka slid off the top of the car and marched back with them, looking very proud and haughty in his resplendent Earth-designed uniform, which was even gaudier than those of the Oassi forces.

At the door of the rear car, they paused. Newhouse opened it, and all three bowed low as Captain Virginia Smith emerged.

She was not in uniform, as the other spacemen were; she wore an array of robes and jewels that would have looked pretentious at a British Coronation. She was a tall woman; a full six feet in height; broad in proportion, she was a thirty-six year old career officer who could look both commanding and matronly.

Ksitka, who had been carefully coached in his role, ran around behind her and lifted the train of her robes

so that they would not drag the ground. Then the four of them marched solemnly up to the honor guard, Newhouse and Pemberton in the lead, with Captain Smith and Ksitka trailing behind, leaving the cars in charge of the driver of the second vehicle.

The Oassi guard, trying very hard not to look impressed, closed ranks and marched to the city gates with them. Newhouse had already noticed the effect that had been produced, however. The Oassi could see that Virginia Smith was obviously a woman, and a very powerful one at that. Thus, she commanded a respect that mere males could not have hoped for.

At the gate, the procession was met by a trio of Oassi females whose dress, impressive though it was, couldn't even compare with that of Captain Smith. Even little Ksitka's uniform was flashier.

Ksitka himself was in absolute ecstasy, in spite of the fact that his face was as stony and expressionless as an Easter Island idol's. His tribe had been looked down on and sneered at by the city-dwellers since time immemorial. And now, he, Ksitka the Hunter, was superior to the Oassi. It was a good feeling, and Ksitka was revelling in it.

The three Oassi bowed low as the Earthmen approached, and one of them said: "Her Splendor, the Shanni, awaits you at the citadel. May I inquire as to the rank of our honored guest?"

Newhouse had studied the Oassi language, and, although his accent was a bit heavy, he was perfectly lucid. "This is Her Supremacy, the Captain," he said with dignity.

"Kepteen?" the Oassi woman repeated. "An exalted rank, no doubt."

"No doubt at all," Newhouse agreed rather ambiguously. "She has come to pay her respects to her sister, the Shanni."

That made Captain Smith's rank perfectly clear; as a "sister", she was obviously the equal of the Shanni.

"Come this way," the officer said. "Transportation has been provided. I am afraid, however, that we must apologize to Her Supremacy for the inadequacy of the sedan chair we provided; we were not prepared for the visit of so exalted a personage."

"I will speak to Her Supremacy," Newhouse said. He turned to Captain Smith. "They want to apologize because they haven't got a sedan chair fancy enough for you,"

he said in English. "They're really impressed."

"I thought that's what the gal said," replied the captain, keeping her face haughty. "I can understand the language better than I can speak it. What should I say?"

"Anything you like; you're doing fine. Say something to me, and look as condescending as possible."

"Very well," she said, complying, "convey my compliments and tell them they can all go stick their noses in their ears and blow their brains out."

"Thank you," said Newhouse, bowing low. "I'll tell them, but it may lose something in translation."

He turned to the officer and reverted to Oassi. "Her Supremacy understands your lack of proper transportation perfectly, and she will convey her apologies to the Shanni for this unexpected visit. Her Supremacy realizes that you are not at all to blame for not providing a sedan chair suitable for her rank, and she has therefore graciously condescended to wait until a chair of suitable dignity is provided for the remainder of the way."

"Her Supremacy is most gracious," said the diminutive officer, gazing up at the tower-

ing captain in awe. "There will be as little delay as possible."

She turned and barked orders at a squad of husky males standing nearby, and they turned and trotted off at high speed. It was nearly fifteen minutes before they returned, during which time the Earthmen and the Oassi tried to outdo each other in displaying nothing but stolid patience.

The "chair of suitable dignity" was quite something. It was painted a rust red and decorated with gold leaf and polished but uncut gems. It took a dozen of the little aliens, six on either side, to hoist the thing off the ground and carry it after Captain Smith had climbed in. She was obviously a little cramped in a conveyance built for someone two-thirds her size, but she bore it with dignified hauteur. Ksitka, looking very superior, trotted along beside the sedan chair; he was big for a Dynakian, standing a good three inches taller than the city-dwellers.

Newhouse and Pemberton had climbed into the less brightly decorated chairs that they'd provided, and were carried along behind the captain as the procession wound its

way through the streets of the city toward the citadel.

A runner had been sent on ahead to warn the Shanni that an unexpected guest was coming, and she and her rather diminutive consort were on the top step of the citadel, flanked by another batch of guardsmen when the guests arrived. Her daughter, the Shannil, and her consort, Boccaccio di Vino, were nowhere to be seen.

That's partial confirmation, at least, Newhouse thought wryly. The jungle tribesmen who had occasion to trade in the city had brought word back that the Shannil feared that her new husband might take it in his head to return to his own people—a crime which, like suicide, might not be punishable when successful, but to try and fail was a criminal offense in Oassi. Evidently the citadel guards were making sure that lover-boy didn't go over the hill.

Not that he'd ever been allowed much freedom. The royal family had kept a wary eye on him ever since the wedding; the old Shanni seemed to have a hunch that di Vino hadn't realized he was a bridegroom until it was too late, and she had seemed to sense right away that he was

not too keen on the idea of staying.

As arranged, it was Sergeant Pemberton who performed all the amenities and introductions between Her Supremacy, the Captain, and Her Splendor, the Shanni. In the first place, his Oassish was better, and, in the second, Newhouse wanted to observe the expressions on the faces of the Shanni and the Shann.

The Shann was an elderly male who looked—naturally—rather henpecked. He didn't say much; he just stood there and smiled half-heartedly as the Shanni chatted in friendly fashion with her "sister," Captain Virginia Smith, through the fluent interpretation of Pemberton. They might have been any ruling family of Earth welcoming another chief executive.

Pemberton, of course, was giving the impression that Captain Smith was the ruler of the alien fortress that was situated a hundred miles away, on the banks of the Ngang River. The people of Oassi hadn't been informed of the true origin of the Earthmen, nor would they be; as far as Oassi was concerned, they came from a "far land," and knew a little something about magic, but they weren't dangerous, they just had to be

watched, like any other non-Oassi group. And, after all, Oassi had a much larger army and the magicians and priests of Oassi had magic, too, didn't they? *Sure* they did.

And Earth, the capital of the United Commonwealth of Planets, not only liked the way things stood, but demanded that they be kept that way. Any civilization which appeared to be capable of lifting itself by its own bootstraps should do so; at this stage of the game, Man should not interfere. Of course, their very presence on the planet had already, changed, somewhat, the course of Oassi's history, but that couldn't be helped; nothing can be observed without affecting it.

The Shanni of Oassi appeared to be pleasantly impressed with Captain Smith, just as Newhouse had figured. She had certainly not been impressed by human males, which was perfectly understandable. What would Haroun al Rashid have said if some other country had sent a delegation of women to Baghdad?

Oh, the Shanni had been perfectly happy to agree to a treaty to furnish *gakgak* milk for good, honest gold (well, maybe not *too* honest; it was the product of an atomic con-

verter), but that was just business. Gold is fine stuff, even if a lowly male brings it.

But when it came to statesmanship, that was a different matter. The Shanni seemed obviously more at home with Captain Smith, even if the conversation did have to be filtered through Sergeant Pemberton.

After a minute or two, the Shanni turned to a nearby officer and gave her a slight nod. The whole guard unit wheeled about in precision array and everyone marched into the citadel: a half dozen guards in the lead, followed by the Shanni and Shann, and Captain Smith; Pemberton and Newhouse followed them, and behind the two officers came the rest of the guardsmen. And last, but foremost, came the carriers bearing the precious bundles of Earth-type food.

The banquet that night was a sumptuous, but somewhat lopsided affair, Newhouse thought. The Oassi stuffed themselves like pigs, and the four Earth people ate nothing. The Shanni already understood that her guests, for some mysterious reason, could not partake of Oassi food.

Boccaccio di Vino and his wife, the Shannil, had made

their appearance, and di Vino, still a diplomat, put on an excellent face, but there was worry in his eyes.

Newhouse wanted to pump some information out of him, but he didn't dare address him in English, for fear that the Shanni might suspect a plot was being fomented at her banquet table, right under her nose. But that was just the reason why he had told Captain Smith not even to speak the few words of Oassish that she did know.

He smiled at her and said: "Captain, I'm going to be talking to our friend, the bridegroom, but pretend I'm addressing you. I'm not going to mention your name," he went on, knowing that di Vino was listening, "because they'd recognize the words. Captain, say something in a questioning tone. Something fairly long."

"Fine," she said, "because I do have a question to ask. How long do you think we'll have to be here before we can get our diplomat out?"

"I don't know. That's why I want to ask some questions." Then he turned to the Shanni and smiled. "Her Superemacy wishes to inquire as to the health of the royal family, if that is not forbidden by rules

of etiquette." He knew perfectly well that it wasn't.

"Not at all," said the Shanni, in her rather high, brittle voice. "Our family is quite well. All sound in body and mind. Although—" A small smile came to her face, and something shone in her eyes. "—we await fertile eggs."

"I see." He turned to Captain Smith, but his words were obviously meant for di Vino. "Don't speak to Smith until I've spoken to you in Oassish. What I want to know is, how many unfertile clutches of eggs has your wife produced so far, and how long is the production cycle?"

Captain Smith nodded. "Tell me, what am I supposed to do?"

"Just look at the Shanni and smile, then smile *very* benignly on the Shanni."

While that was going on, Newhouse turned pleasantly to di Vino. "And how are you and your wife, Your Eminence?"

"Quite well, thank you," said di Vino suavely. "We expect to have a family before long, you know."

"Indeed? I hope your attempts will be successful."

"We all do," said the Shanni in a smooth voice. Looking at her, Newhouse could see why, in spite of her alienness,

she had been the cause of di Vино's troubles.

There was a momentary silence around the room.

Then di Vино looked at Smith and said casually: "I don't know who you are, Lieutenant, but if you can get me out of this mess, you can have my right arm. To answer your question, my—uh—wife produces an egg every sixty-five days or thereabouts. The fertilization has to take place about twenty days before the cycle is completed. Since I've been here, she's produced two. If the next one isn't fertile, I'll end up in the family mausoleum, accompanied by much lamentation." He paused and smiled at Captain Smith expectantly.

Smith smiled back. "I have a question, if you two don't mind. If that's the case, it seems to me that these people could have a child every sixty-five days. They'd have overrun the planet centuries ago."

"No," di Vино said. "Even the cycles have cycles—or epicycles, maybe. The females produce three or four, stop for about four years before another cycle comes on. I just happened to catch this girl at the wrong time; otherwise, I wouldn't be married now."

"I see," said the captain. She smiled pleasantly.

Before di Vино could say anything in answer, the Shanni's voice cut in—rather sharply, Newhouse thought. "Are you a relative of the Kapteen, my dear?" she asked di Vино.

"No, Your Splendor," said di Vино.

"Well, in Oassi, well-bred princes don't speak to visiting ladies to whom they are not related. And remember, my dear, you're an Oassi now."

"I beg forgiveness, your Splendor," di Vино said humbly.

That put somewhat of a chill on the whole dinner party. Conversation from that point on was utterly innocuous and utterly boring.

Newhouse only got one more small piece of information. The Shanni's consort, the Shann, had made a remark about having "produced his three eggs," and further conversation elicited the information that each Shanni or Shannil was supposed to have three children by her consort. Newhouse marked it down in his mental files for later use when he formed a plan.

When the meal was finally finished, the visitors were taken to their quarters in a wing of the citadel reserved for visitors, well away from

the wing reserved for the Shanni and Shann.

The citadel itself was built strongly, with the thick walls of a fortress, and the heavy silverwood doors—white as limed oak and hard as teak—were capable of being barred from either side. Although the Earthmen were not locked in, there was an “honor” guard in the hall outside, and Newhouse had no doubt that any idea he might have of roaming about the citadel would be politely but firmly vetoed.

The apartment that had been assigned to them was hardly comfortable by modern Terrestrial standards, though a medieval English baron would probably have been cozy enough.

“Looks like a jail, sir,” said Sergeant Pemberton as he surveyed the room.

“It is,” said Newhouse. “I’m afraid that freedom of the grounds isn’t on our agenda.” He walked over to the door that connected his and the sergeant’s room with the one next to it.

“Come in, Lieutenant,” said Virginia Smith.

Newhouse pushed open the heavy door. “I’m going to take a flit about the citadel, Captain,” he said. “Would you and the sergeant whip up

something to eat? I shouldn’t be gone long.”

“All right. But watch yourself. My Supremacy might be a little hard put to explain what you were doing if you got caught.”

“Don’t worry; I’m supposed to get an Earthman out of a jam, not get another one in. You want to give me that harness?”

“Sure. Close the door and give me two minutes.”

Newhouse did as he’d been asked. Captain Smith had been wearing an antigrav harness under her robes. Since none of the three was obviously carrying a sword, axe, or spear, it had been assumed that they were unarmed, except, perhaps for a small dagger or the like, which was perfectly permissible. But the Oassi had no idea what the term “minaturization” meant. Newhouse, Pemberton, and Smith were all armed to the teeth.

Even so, an antigravity unit required extra clothing to cover it; the uniforms of Pemberton and Newhouse were a little too close-fitting to hide it completely.

Captain Smith was better than her word. Less than two minutes later, she opened the door and handed Newhouse the harness. The lieutenant

put it on and walked over to the narrow, slitlike window that looked out on the courtyard.

Dynak was a moonless planet, and, at this time of year, the stars that might have shone in the night sky were obscured by the black blanket of a nearby dark nebula, a great dustcloud that shrouded most of the sky.

Except for the flickering torches in the courtyard below and the glow of candlelight from the windows of the citadel, the walls of the citadel were in utter darkness. Certainly the guards forty feet below couldn't see a man crawling along the walls, and they probably wouldn't believe their eyes if they did.

Newhouse then adjusted the power unit to a point where he only weighed a few ounces and lifted his feet off the floor, doubling his knees up against his abdomen. Since his mass remained the same, he drifted downwards very slowly under the slight pull of attenuated gravity.

"You're not completely neutralized," Captain Smith then pointed out.

"I don't want to be," Newhouse said. "I've got to have a little weight so that I can get a fingertip purchase on that rough wall. Otherwise, I'm

likely to push myself away from it, and I don't want to use the air jet unless I have to." He landed lightly on his heels and then stood up slowly, so as not to push himself off the floor again. He slid, rather than walked, back to the window. "Bye, kiddies," he said. "Save me a sandwich." And he eased himself out the window.

He was gone longer than he had thought he would be. It took him nearly an hour to find which of the windows in the royal wing opened into Boccacio di Vino's bedroom, moving himself carefully across the stone wall of the citadel, avoiding windows, staying out of sight of the patrols that walked the upper parapets, and keeping his ears open for the distinctive sound of the Earthman's voice. He even found time to curse the nomadic tribes that roamed the grass plains to the south because their very existence kept the city of Oassi in a perpetual state of preparedness against raids, which meant that there were lookouts and guards all over the place and he had to be extra cautious.

At each window, he had to skirt around it, pause and listen, then carefully ease a tiny spy-eye out to take a look

inside, until he found di Vino's quarters.

When he finally found them, he had to wait another ten minutes while di Vino and the young Shannil concluded a rather strained conversation. When the Shannil walked off toward her own room, Newhouse peeked his head around the edge of the window and said: "Hsst! Di Vino!"

The young diplomat jerked his head around quickly. When he saw who it was, he ran quickly to the window. "What is it?" he asked. "Are we getting out of here?"

"Not just yet. I'm getting you out of here all nice and legal-like, if I can. We won't use force except as the last resort." He didn't add that such a "very last resort" might be too late for di Vino.

"But—how?"

"Never mind that now; I've got to get some information. It's vitally necessary. I tried to get it at the banquet, but the Shanni shut you up."

"Sure. Anything you want."

"Well, I know all about the cyclic pattern of Dynakian reproduction, but I need *specific* information. Times and dates, right down to the minute, if possible."

"That's easy," di Vino said wryly. "The Shanni is keeping

pretty accurate records, and so is Oanella. She knows by now that I don't love her, and she's going to be perfectly happy to get rid of me. She—"

"Never mind that now!" Newhouse snapped in irritation. "The *dates* man! The *dates*!"

Hurriedly, di Vino told him. When he did, Newhouse breathed a sigh of relief. "Good! We've got three days yet!" He fished into his jacket and came out with a small, black cylinder a little larger than a cigarette, with a small stud at one end. "You know how to use a sleep gun?"

Di Vino nodded.

"Good. Take it. Keep it on you at all times. Day after tomorrow when Oanella goes to sleep for the night, use it on her. But, for heavens sake, *wait till she gets to sleep*. Got that?"

"Right. Then what?"

"Then wait for me to show up. That sleep gun's got a signal built into it. As soon as you shoot her, I'll know about it. All you'll have to do is blow out your candles, so that there's no light coming from your room. Got that?"

"I've got it. But—"

There were footsteps outside the door. "So long," Newhouse whispered. "Don't slip up. He moved away from the

window just as the door opened, and he heard the Shannil say: "What's so interesting at the window, dear? Getting homesick?" There was more than a trace of sarcasm in her voice.

Newhouse made his way back to his own quarters as fast as he could.

"Hope I didn't worry anyone," he said as he popped into the window.

"Nope," said Pemberton. "We figured if you'd been caught there would have been an uproar and we'd have heard about it. Come in and have a sandwich. And some coffee."

"In a minute," said Newhouse. I've got some radioing to do."

"The call box is on the table," said Captain Virginia Smith.

The next day was largely devoted to discussion between Her Supremacy, the Captain, and Her Splendor, the Shanni, on the increased production of *gakgak* milk. The Shanni, after much careful negotiation, promised that more would be forthcoming.

Newhouse, personally, had a hunch that the Shanni was trying to negotiate a treaty with the southern nomads for *gakgak* milk, with the intent

of selling it to the Earthmen at a profit—which was all right with everyone, if she could swing it.

The third day was much like the second, but this time, Newhouse began to inject something new into the discussions — presumably suggestions from Captain Smith.

"Would it be possible, Your Splendor, to have the young Shanni's consort return home for a space of — say, ten days?"

A wary look came into the old woman's eyes, but the smile never left her face. "The Shannexa's home is Oassi," she said smoothly.

"True, true. We apologize for the error in terminology. Let us say, rather, that we would like to have him visit his previous home."

The Shanni looked almost apologetic. "It would be my pleasure to allow the dear child to revisit his old home," she said, "but, alas, it cannot be."

"Indeed?"

"I fear not. The ancient laws of Oassi are very strict on that point, and I would not dare to violate them. Even the Shanni is not all-powerful. My people would disown me if I violated so powerful a taboo."

"Just what is this — ah — law, Your Splendor?"

"A very ancient one, Your Supremacy. No royal consort may leave his wife until he produces his three eggs. Three offspring, in other words, of which at least one must be a girl."

"Ah, well, of course, we would hesitate to ask you to violate so powerful a law. We will be content to wait. But you will permit the visit at that time?"

The Shanni smiled thinly. "I give you my solemn vow that he will be permitted to leave when — and *if* — that time arrives."

Well, well, well, Newhouse thought to himself, *the old dame suspects already that her daughter can never have children by di Vino. She's out after his hide. And it's getting more obvious by the minute.*

"And how long do you estimate that to be, Your Splendor?"

The Shanni's eyes became veiled. "You know our law. But, even if the first egg is produced within the period, I'm afraid it would be another four years before the next is produced. It would be four years at the minimum before he could leave."

"Very well. So be it." The subject was dismissed as though it were a light thing, but Newhouse already had

what he wanted. Every Oassi noble in the room had heard the Shanni make a solemn vow.

That night, Newhouse sat by his detector, waiting for it to give the telltale blink that would come when di Vino fired the sleep gun. When it did come, Newhouse already had his harness on, and he was out the window before the glow had died in the telltale. He scuttled crabwise across the great stone wall of the citadel, but this time he knew exactly where he was going, and he made it in less than ten minutes.

Di Vino was waiting in the darkened window. "Thank heaven!" he whispered. I thought you'd never get here. Now what."

"Where is she?" Newhouse asked.

"Over on the bed."

"Good. Now put a blanket or something over that window so that the guard can't see a light."

When the window was blacked out and a candle had been lit, Newhouse bent over the unconscious female. The sleep gun had done its work well.

"All right, di Vino, help me get this harness on her. We're kidnapping the Shanniil."

"Kidnap the—" Di Vino choked and blinked. "But *I'm* the one who's supposed to get out of here."

"I'll explain the whole thing when she's gone. Come on! We haven't much time!"

When the Shannil was securely fixed in the harness, Newhouse turned up the power until her weight was a minus twenty pounds. Then he fastened a length of strong plaston cording to the harness. Then he clamly tossed her out the window. She fell upwards fairly rapidly.

When the cord was taut, Newhouse tied the end of it around the arm of a heavy silverwood chair. "That's that," he said. "Now all we have to do is wait."

Boccaccio di Vino said: "Wait? For *what?* What's going on?"

"Your lady-love is about two hundred feet over the citadel, with a signalling gadget on her. There's been an aircar hovering on its anti-gravs up there for the last two hours. When they pick up the signal, they'll pick up the girl. Simple, isn't it?"

"But what are they going to do?"

Newhouse grinned. "I think I'll let you suffer a while longer. Teach you to keep away from strange females."

"I've already learned that," di Vino said morosely.

"Then this ought to drive it home, pal. Just sit down and relax; we've got several hours to kill. Got a drink?"

"Some Scotch," said di Vino in a glum tone. "And a deck of cards, if we have to kill time. Play cribbage?"

"Yup. Drag 'em out."

The cord moved a little, and Newhouse knew they were taking the Shannil out of the harness, which would be left there until they came back.

"That's that for a while," he said. "Get the bottle out."

By the time the rope was jiggled once more, Lieutenant Newhouse had taken a week's wages from di Vino at cribbage, to be payable when the diplomat returned to Dynak Base. Newhouse blew out the candle, went over and pushed the blanket aside, and took a cautious look up. He couldn't see a thing, but a second tug on the rope told him that all was well. He began hauling down on the line. The girl came easily, since the men in the aircar had reduced her negative weight to zero, and then added a couple of ounces of positive weight.

When she appeared at the window, the two men pulled her in, and Newhouse took off

the antigravity harness and began putting it on himself. "Just let her sleep," he told di Vino. "She won't know a thing in the morning."

Di Vino narrowed his eyes. "What did they do to her? If—"

"If, nothing," Newhouse snapped. "We got you out of a jam. We hope. Now just relax and take it easy. See you in a while." He climbed out the window again. He grinned to himself as he went crabwise across the face of the wall. Di Vino thought he knew what had happened, and di Vino was dead wrong. He couldn't have been further off base.

The Captain and her entourage departed the next morning amid a gush of good wishes and a show of pageantry, with an invitation to return at a later date. They got into the cars and went back into the jungle, headed for Dynak Base. Newhouse reported to Colonel Hastings and told him nothing except that he had made a "preliminary survey" of the situation at Oassi. If his plan didn't work, Newhouse didn't want Hastings looking smug.

Then Lieutenant Newhouse just sat around, looking as though he were thinking hard, while one day after another

trudged its weary way into eternity.

One fine day, he went with the food car again, and when he returned, he had Boccaccio di Vino with him.

"I still don't see what made them let you go, di Vino," the colonel said with puzzled anger.

"Frankly, I'm not sure what happened, myself," Boccaccio admitted. He turned toward Newhouse, and there was anger in his eyes. "But I think Lieutenant Newhouse can explain."

Newhouse said: "What's the matter, di Vino? You still in love with that girl?"

"Well—" Di Vino paused, and an odd look came into his eyes. "Well I guess I am—in a way. Not that I'd go back; I'm not the right man for her at all. But—well—she was a good kid. And—" The anger came back. "—and what you had done to her would have gotten you hanged if you'd done it back on Earth."

Bruce MacAuliffe, di Vino's immediate superior, was also standing beside Colonel Hastings' desk. "What did he do di Vino?"

"He got Oanella pregnant!" di Vino said. "Or, well, *he* didn't. But he had someone else do it. And while she was un-

conscious, too! Probably got one of the local savages to—”

“I did no such thing,” Newhouse interrupted mildly. “I—”

“Now, just a minute,” Colonel Hastings interrupted. “You said that she got pregnant, di Vino. You mean that she laid a fertile egg?”

“Yes. I mean, well, no, not exactly. She produced *four* fertile eggs. Which is pretty darned unusual. Her mother and father got all excited. The Shanni was all a dither, and her consort was getting so nervous he went into a fit of the shakes. You should have seen that old gal running around like a scalded cat. And you should have been there when the fit hit the Shann. It’s the first time any Oassi female has ever produced four fertile eggs at once.” He looked at Newhouse again. “Just what did you do?”

“Yes,” said Colonel Hastings heavily. “I think we all deserve an explanation.”

“The biotechnicians would be able to tell you better than I, sir,” Newhouse said. “They’re writing up a report on it. It’s a simple process, in effect, but a very delicate one.

“We simply had to wait until the single ovum the Shannil

was carrying had arrived at the proper stage of development—something the biotechs had found out in checking on the local savages. They removed the unfertilized ovum and put it through two different processes. First, they self-fertilized it. When an ovum is formed by splitting of the parent cell, the egg itself retains half the chromosomes, while the other half are thrown off in what is called a polar body. The boys simply used the polar body to fertilize the egg. Then they waited until the fertile ovum divided the first time and separated the cells; when the second division occurred, the cells were separated again, giving them four. These were replaced, and in due time, the Shannil produced four fully developed eggs. And they’ll all hatch females; it’s possible to tell by the shape of the rubbery shell whether an egg will be a male or female, so the Shanni was happy as a lark. The girls, of course, will be exact genetic duplicates of their mother—who is also their father, although she doesn’t know it. Still—” He grinned. “—there’s an old saying: ‘If you want a job done right, do it yourself.’”

THE END