

# VANGUARD

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*Cover by ED EMMH illustrating S.O.S. PLANET UNKNOWN,  
Drawing for the TALES THEY TELL, by Kelly Froas.*

*Alyn knew that what she saw was an illusion. But who was to decide what was real—the natives, or the Earthmen?*

# WHEN THE SHOE FITS

by

James E. Gunn

ALYN WAS A XENOLOGIST. She was also a woman. The xenologist was worried. The woman was scared. The natives were throwing a ball, and she had a horrid suspicion that her teammates would insist she go.

She slipped through the market place, unnoticed in the blaze of noon, and damned private enterprise. . . .

Private enterprise made ET exploration possible. Government could do it, but Government wouldn't. That had been proved. Space was fantastically big, and ET exploration was fantastically expensive. ET exploration was also vital: humanity needed a frontier for the good of its soul; for the good of its body it needed that frontier as far as possible from Earth.

Laws were drafted to make exploration profitable, and humanity was unleashed upon the galaxy.

*Jonathan Craddock, Exploiters and Importers*, was born—along with one hundred competitors, more or less.

The Bureau of Extraterrestrial Affairs was born at the same time to enforce the laws and regulate the profit.

If an exploration team located an uninhabited world or a Level 6 culture—stringently defined by BETA regulations as one ready for terrestrial contact—the company received an exclusive franchise to exploit that world. In actual practice only the Level 6 discovery was worthwhile. Exploitation of an uninhabited world was theoretically possible, but at this stage of Earth's technological development, the capital outlay was prohibitive. A company could wait five years for a profit; it couldn't wait a hundred.

On the other hand, one Level 6 discovery recouped a thousand failures. Virgin trade territory was fabulously profitable.

Exploration teams had two assets: the Fairfax field, that subtle electronic gadget which persuades those creatures within its range that they see what they are expecting to see; and the quality of their members, who were motivated by that most reliable of incentives—greed. Their rewards were graduated sharply according to achievements up to a Level 6 plateau which made each team member independently wealthy for life.

Labor unions objected to the incentive system; idealists objected to the motives. Both worked. The persons who signed company contracts sought not security but adventure, not ends but means. They were neither morally better nor worse than the ordinary run of humanity, but they were more determined, more persistent, more ingenious, and more trustworthy.

The teams had an equal number of debits: since the companies could not wait centuries, the teams had to move fast; and speed means mistakes through lack of understanding. Like idioms. The Translators were good, but only experience can translate idioms....

That thought bothered Alyn most as she threaded her way through

the crowded street back toward the ship. A native turned sharply and looked at her with surprised violet eyes. Then she drew closer, and his eyes went blank. Alyn shivered, although Meissner's Star was hot, and drew her cloak closer around her.

"When there's dirty work to be done," she thought rebelliously, "I'm the one who has to do it."

Her lips moved silently, she damned them: Davis, Pip, and the Skipper—her teammates, her men, her children, her lovers.... Long ago Earth's voyagers had found the ideal spaceship complement: three men and a woman. Carefully selected, a woman could easily be all things to three men, and three men, if they tried hard, could be all things to a woman.

But they imposed on her, as men do upon a woman who loves them. They expected her to slave for them all night and all day, too, while they lolled at home....

She focused her desires on reaching the spaceship that towered tall and iridescent in the distance. Home. They would be waiting for her. Her face softened, grew feminine and lovely. Quiet, loyal Davis—the methodical scientist, at home with things, asea in human rela-

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*JAMES E. GUNN first appeared in science-fiction in 1949 under a pseudonym, but in recent years the pen-name seems to have gone into semi-retirement. A prolific writer of short stories, Gunn is also the author of a novel, "This Fortress World" (Gnome Press).*

tions, never expecting anything, always grateful for whatever he received. Little, effervescent Pip—the sure-fingered technician, shrewd, impertinent, and easily hurt. The Skipper—big, blond, self-sufficient, monosyllabic, avuncular. . . .

He was older than the others, Alyn thought, but not that old. She would have to be particularly attractive to him—

A native jostled her back to awareness. She almost screamed. Panicky, she clutched the cloak, hugged it tight. The Fairfax Field was a wonderful thing—it made xenological field work possible—but it was less deceptive in daylight. At the periphery, the natives were catching glimpses of her as she really was. Soon they would start putting the extraordinary together, and they would get “alien.”

Then, at best, the Team would be out—with the Company on its back and the Bureau on its neck.

While she was about it, she damned the Company, too. It cut a corner, saved a penny, and lost a world. These Field generators were obsolescent, and she was getting a bounce effect that made her observations virtually worthless. It was all very well for the natives to see her as a native and the Ship as a native dwelling, but when she saw their world as vaguely Earth-like, the whole enterprise became pointless. It was impossible to tell what was real and what was Fair-

fax. . . .

The town was an 18th century English village trembling perilously on the brink of the Industrial Revolution . . . but not quite.

The picture was just a little askew, as if the signboard of the village inn illustrated a beheading with half a dozen natives lying, mouths open, to catch the blood as it fell.

As a matter of fact, that *was* the signboard of the village inn. It was, apparently, an idiom—or, at least, the way in which Alyn’s mind, reinforced by the bounce effect of the Fairfax Field, interpreted the native idiom. Probably it was not that at all.

So it went. The houses were not quite the proper shape. They were built solidly enough of bricks or stone, but they were painted with intricate, painstaking, many-colored designs.

She came out of the market place into the green common. She threaded her way between grazing ruminants that were not quite cows and restrained an impulse to run. She walked down a street that was not quite cobblestone among creatures that were not quite human.

They were man-shaped, but their torsos were too long and oddly distorted, pigeon-breasted, as if there were too many bones inside. Their arms were short, and their hands had only four fingers, like cartoon characters. Their heads were small and their faces mal-

formed, with pushed-in noses, large, bulging violet eyes, wide mouths and pointed teeth, and prognathous jaws.

They looked like hairless Pekingese dogs, a caricature of humanity that made Alyn want to scream.

Their name for themselves translated as "the People." The Team called them "Pekes," against all rules—BETA, Company, and scientific. By extension, Meissner's Star (2) became "Peking."

The Pekes made Alyn nervous. She didn't mind creatures that scampered or writhed or swam or oozed, but she couldn't stand creatures who walked on two legs and looked her in the eye. If they weren't human, they gave her the willies.

They were humanoid—the Fairfax Field couldn't falsify that. And that was just what made any conclusions dangerous.

Alyn scrambled up the ladder. The spaceship door swung open. She walked through the air lock, went through the inner door, and climbed the stairway to the living deck.

Davis turned from his workbench, a test tube forgotten in his fingers. Pip looked up from the delicately carved lapis lazuli he was examining through a loupe. The Skipper swung down from the bridge. They looked at her expectantly, a little greedily.

Alyn said, "They're going to have a ball."

She let the cloak and hood slip down. It crumpled on the floor. Underneath it she was wearing a halter and shorts. She had a good figure—slim and youthful, but womanly.

She had the type of face that is best described as fascinating. Partly it was her red hair, but it was more the face: forehead too high, cheekbones too prominent, lips too firm, chin too stubborn, eyes too intelligent. They made a combination men found irresistible, but she was too sane to make it her fortune.

Perhaps that was why she had joined *Jonathan Craddock*. Or maybe it was the money. Nowhere else could a woman retire at thirty, unencumbered, with enough money to let her do what she wished for the rest of her life—if her team were lucky enough to hit upon that one-in-a-hundred Level 6 culture.

Or maybe it was because only with *Jonathan Craddock*—or a competitor—could she practice legalized polyandry. Had she, as a woman always had, followed the interesting men, the voyagers, the risk-takers? It was a question she had been unable to answer for herself. She knew only that the ones left at home were culls.

"Careful with that cloak," Davis said absently. "There's ten thousand bucks worth of Fairfax Field wired into that rag."

Alyn scowled at him. "And it doesn't work. I'm getting too much bounce effect." She shrugged and

turned away. "No matter, anyhow. No more daylight work for me. It's too hot in that cloak, and too dangerous."

Pip chuckled. "Trust the incredulity factor, Alyn."

"Don't blabber."

But Pip was probably right. That was how the Field worked. Or how it was thought to work; there was a lot of disagreement. Fairfax himself had always insisted that it did no more than satisfy the brain's visual scanning mechanism, the alpha rhythm; it stopped—or interfered with—the scanning sweep, giving the watcher the sense of seeing something without specifying what that something was. From there on, the incredulity factor took over—that habit of the mind which directs it to seek always the simpler explanation. That there are aliens among us is a wild fantasy; it is simpler to assume that what one sees is something ordinary, seen badly.

But not every mind has an alpha rhythm to interrupt—for instance, M-types. Some epistemologists doubted that the Field affected the mind at all, and photographs supported them: an object inside a Fairfax Field *was* optically blurred, even to the mindless eye of a camera. But if that were all there was to it, why the bounce effect—and the critical tuning that made it possible to get rid of it?

"I don't think it's just the incredulity factor," Alyn said slowly.

"The Pekes are just humanoid enough to make us forget that they're aliens. But *we're* the aliens; *we* don't expect to see something ordinary here, unless the Field is leaking. And I think it is. It rattles me, Pip."

"The ball," the Skipper prompted.

Alyn started. "That's what the Translator called it. A dance with music. If they dance and if they have music. Maybe it's a party where they play footsie and later pay the piper. Who can be sure with an idiom?"

"Who's throwing it?" Davis asked.

"The king, chief, elder, headman—whatever you want to call him. If he's any of those. We can't overestimate our inability to translate accurately."

"Understood," the Skipper said impatiently.

"Well," Alyn continued reluctantly, "he lives in that big pile of masonry on the hill above town. He's got a male offspring—or maybe it's an heir designate from the village—anyway, he's come of age, and the king has invited all the nubile maidens in the kingdom to a ball at which the prince will take his pick. For what purpose I can only guess. It isn't even safe to guess..." She looked at the Skipper and read something in his eyes which made her look quickly at Pip and even quicker at Davis. "No," she said weakly, and then

more defiantly, "No! NO! I won't do it. You can't make me do it!"

"Big chance," the Skipper pointed out. "Ceremony. Good evidence."

"You're the woman," Pip said, "and the xenologist."

"It's now or never," Davis added.

"Then it's never," Alyn said breathlessly. "Mixing with Pokes at an affair like that! Anything might happen. My cloak could be pulled away. . . ."

Pip reassured her. "I'll take care of that."

"Let's give up on Peking. We're wasting our time. It'll never pay out. The Pokes aren't Level 6 or even Level 5. Anyway, they've got nothing worth exporting."

"Maybe," the Skipper said, shrugging. "Still a chance."

"There's the jewels and the engravings," Davis said.

"Al's right," Pip said. "We can't collect enough secretly to make it worthwhile. Extra-T curios are scarcely worth hold space, anyhow. But Level 6! You never can tell about the Bureau. Tell the truth, Al. Why don't you want to go to the ball?"

She burst into tears of weariness and frustration. "Because I've got nothing to wear, stupid!"

"Is that all?" Pip said slyly.

"Last chance," the Skipper said bluntly.

Alyn snapped, "Well, why don't one of you go?"

"Oho!" Pip chortled. "The Field

is good, but not good enough to turn us into nubile maidens. It will have to work hard enough on you."

"You're hateful!" Alyn snapped, stamping her foot. "When we get back, one of us can just find another group, that's all!"

"She'll go," said the Skipper.

Alyn came out of her cabin with a swish and a swirl of musical white crinoline that made three masculine jaws drop in admiration. She was a creature of elegance and radiant beauty, from her transparent shoes to her living crown of coiled hair sparkling with tiny stars. She was every man's desire. . . .

Pip recovered first. "You've got the Field turned on!"

"Say, now," Davis protested. "We've got to live with you, you know. That's not fair."

"Right," the Skipper said.

Alyn pivoted on her right heel and faded. Not much. Just enough to appear only humanly desirable. "Serves you right. You're mean, sadistic beasts, all of you, and I don't know why I ever signed on." She looked down at her dress, spun slowly around, and couldn't sustain a frown. She sighed. "It's beautiful."

For once all of them were silent. Finally Davis said, "We wanted to give you a present."

Pip added softly, "We saved it for a moment when you needed it

most."

"Surprise," said the Skipper.

Alyn's frown returned. "And you gave it to me now so that I'd do your dirty work for you. Men!" She turned sharply on Pip. "The reason I turned on the Field—I had to try it out. And I got a frightful bounce effect."

Pip grinned. "We looked good to you, too, huh? Well, it figures. A small unit like that one in the heel of your right shoe can't carry much shielding. It's not centrally located either. A marvelous piece of micro-machining, though. Worth its weight in tickets home. One thing—the battery is good for only four hours. Be back before then."

"It's battery operated?" Alyn exclaimed.

"Just the receiver. The Field itself is picked up from the ship. Don't worry—as long as you get back within four hours."

"Fine, wonderful," Alyn muttered. "Eight-nine-ten-eleven-twelve. Pip isn't this a little thick? Who do you think you're fooling with this fairy tale?"

Pip looked sheepish. "It's a gamble."

"You lost. I won't go."

Davis protested, "But there's no time to change our plans."

"Right," said the Skipper. "Pip's sorry. No difference. Must go."

"Fairy tale themes are endlessly repetitive," Pip said. "The good ones, anyway. That's why they persist. They express something fun-

damental about existence." After a moment he added: "We'll be there too, you know."

Alyn's face softened. "I might have known you wouldn't toss me out completely on my own. Who's going to carry the camera?"

"I—" Davis began, and stopped.

Alyn took a deep breath. "Okay. Don't drop it. I don't know where I'm going, but I'll want to know where I've been—and who I was at the time."

She made her way down the treads to the air lock and through it and down the ladder to the ground as carefully as a conductor threading his way through an orchestra-pit. The dress was an encumbrance, but it was also a necessity. She would have been better off in a cloak, but she would never have gone in a cloak.

Behind her came Davis and Pip. To her they looked like Davis and Pip in hood and cloak. To Pekes they would look like Pekes—perhaps. That was the beauty of the Fairfax Field: it reinforced the expected image.

Or did it? Suppose the Pekes were M types, *Minus* the alpha rhythm, wholly visual thinkers whose minds were so busy manipulating images that they had no scanning pattern to interrupt? Or suppose they were P-for-Persistent types, wholly abstract thinkers, whose alpha rhythm went on constantly without their feeling any need to satisfy it? Fairfax had been



wrong, he had to be wrong. The field, had he been right, should work only for R-for-Responsive types, whose visual scanning stopped when they actually saw something, or their brains threw up a visual thought that substituted for an actual sighting. That would explain the disagreement on how it worked, for human beings were a mixed lot—mostly R.

If the Pekes were a mixed lot too, that left only the incredulity factor—quite unreinforced, except by the optical effect of the Field. It was not much to lean on.

She walked along the streets that were not quite cobblestone streets in her dancing slippers, one heel of which contained a Fairfax Field receiver and amplifier. The street was immaculate. That was one point for the Pekes—they were clean, unlike the pseudo-England she was seeing through the Field. . . . She stopped herself. Comparisons of that kind were the xenologist's pitfall; the use of the Field prohibited them. Too much bounce effect.

Just once she looked back at the ship. To her it looked like a ship—a wonderful shiny fortress of a ship, but still a ship. To the Pekes—perhaps—it looked like a native fortress that had been there ever since they could remember.

Providing the Pekes were all R's—and providing that the Field had anything at all to do with the alpha rhythm.

There was scarcely anyone on the street: a few late shoppers hurrying home, a policeman sauntering along, checking the stores. . . .

*A policeman!*

He saw Alyn and smiled. "Ah, there," he said in a rich Irish brogue, "another maiden for the ball, is it? You'd better be hurrying, me dear, or the Prince will have made his pick and you not there."

Alyn shivered. She was getting a bounce effect to end all bounce effects. A policeman, indeed! She bent her head and moved rapidly toward the large building on the hill.

As she drew near, it looked more like a palace than the native structure she remembered. She climbed the gleaming marble stairs and passed between tall columns to the big, brass doors. They swung open. A uniformed majordomo bowed her into a long hallway carpeted in red velvet. Its walls were hung with tapestries. . . . Tapestries!

She turned to run away, panic fluttering like a bird in her throat. But she glimpsed Davis and Pip skulking behind. They wouldn't let her quit. What they had, the Team, was based on confidence. Once it was shattered, the Team was broken, no good, and what they had was no good either. . . .

She turned back to the hallway.

It led her into a magnificent ballroom, its dark, parquet floor glistening in the light of dozens of can-

delabra hanging from the vaulted ceiling. The floor was crowded with beautiful women and handsome men, all dressed to the teeth, bejeweled and bespangled. They danced to the music of an orchestra that played on a distant platform.

As she hesitated, the dancers stopped. The music died away. Everyone's eyes turned toward her. Panic surged into her throat again. She bit her lower lip to keep from screaming.

Out of the throng came a man moving slowly, his dark eyes fixed upon her face. He was a tall man, broad-shouldered and lean, his face ruggedly handsome, his mouth betraying an unsuspected sensitivity. He wore a Graustarkian uniform, sparkling with buttons, jingling with medals. . . .

He was—the dream prince, the fairy tale prince, the answer to every maiden's prayer. . . . And he was just as real.

Still, Alyn could not resist a shiver of anticipation as he approached her. His eyes searched her face until he was very close; her knees got a little weak. His hand reached out for hers. He bowed low over it. His lips kissed her palm. For a frantic moment she thought of the Pokes' needle-sharp teeth. . . .

Her last really sane thought was: *How does this look to Davis and Pip. . . ? What is really happening?*

Then she surrendered herself to

the illusions of the Fairfax Field and the arms of the Prince.

The ballroom floor was like an undersea fairyland of color and music through which she swam like an infinitely graceful angelfish around which the Prince pirouetted and returned in a hypnotic mating dance. Around her moved other dancers. Music played distantly, something familiar although she could not quite place it. But neither one made any real impression upon her.

She had no eyes for anyone but the Prince, no ears for anything but his whispers. What did he say? Nothing and everything—she could not remember, and yet it was what should have been said, what had to be said. . . . She knew that at the time. Nothing was done to break the spell—for it was a spell; she knew it, and she could not change it, and she would not have changed it if she could.

She was falling in love. She was falling in love with a Peke, with a creature impossibly alien. She knew it and it didn't matter.

This was not like the love she felt for Davis and Pip and the Skipper. That had been an emotion slow in developing, even slower in being recognized for what it was: an emotion compounded of the maternal, the protective, the tolerant, and the sexual.

This was a love of another color. This was romantic love, a scarlet thing. The Prince was perfection;

his touch made her faint. Life was bliss that would never end, a fire that raced through her veins, a tide that choked her throat, a delicious ache that turned her limbs languorous. . . .

She was in love with a dream, with a Field-induced delusion, but now it didn't matter. The emotion alone was enough.

Time passed like a blurred watercolor. She was delirious, feverish, enraptured, abandoned, reckless. . . . The Prince led her toward a small doorway, his hand holding hers, his eyes fixed upon her face. She followed dreamily. Wherever her Prince led, she would follow. His dear face preceded her, the cute, little upturned nose, the violet eyes, the wide, sensitive mouth. . . .

"Alyn!"

Someone was calling her. Who? No matter. Nothing mattered but the Prince.

"Alyn! Alyn! Alyn! Alyn! . . ." It went on like that, like the tolling of a bell. She couldn't ignore it; somehow she would have to silence it.

Her eyes cleared a little. Out of the surrounding blur came a face she knew. It was Pip's face. It was contorted, the mouth open, yelling at her. . . .

"Alyn! For crimeny's sake, the battery's failing. You're coming through. We've got to get out of here. What's the matter with you? Snap out of it! Alyn!"

The mists thinned. Her eyes

swept the faces around her: Peke faces. Even the Prince's face was a Peke's face, beloved though it was. . . .

Sanity returned like a cold sea wave engulfing her. She would have to run. She turned wildly and fled through the hall. No longer was it a ballroom. It was a big, rough masonry meeting room filled with Pekes. The candelabra were open gas flames.

The Pekes gaped at her. They couldn't be seeing her clearly yet. But they could see that she was acting strangely. Soon they would try to stop her.

Behind her a Peke voice called out. The Prince. She knew it instinctively. Her heart turned over, but still she ran.

She reached the doorway. The tapestries were really the intricate Peke designs drawn upon the walls. The red velvet carpet was a rush mat. Her shoe caught in it. She almost fell, but her foot pulled free, and she ran on.

At the big front door the Peke guard looked at her with startled eyes, but he wasn't quick enough to catch her. She was through the rough, board doorway and into the pebbled street, racing through the night toward the ship. . . .

Halfway there Pip caught up. He threw his cloak around her, and they ran together, side by side.

"Pip!" she sobbed gratefully. "Oh, Pip! What happened, Pip?"

"That's what I was going to ask

you. That Peke waltzed up to you like you were his one true love, and you went into those damn' arms of his like you knew it. He started stamping around you, and you stood there, turning slowly to face him, smiling. . . . Gosh, we were scared!"

"Where's Davis?" Alyn said in sudden alarm.

"He wanted to film the Pekes' reaction to your flight," Pip said quickly.

"You mean," Alyn said, panting, "he was going to head them off if they got too close. You're wonderful, you and Davis. I couldn't have better teammates." *Teammates, team mates. . . . But what about her soul mate? What about the Prince?*

She hadn't answered Pip's questions, but then he hadn't asked any. Not directly. They were there, close to his lips, and she couldn't answer them. What she had been through was too real, too emotionally meaningful. She was still shaken.

Suddenly she said, "Pip! I lost my shoe!"

"Which shoe?"

"The right shoe. The one with the unit in it!"

Pip pulled them to a stop. "We've got to get it back!"

But the hill was black with Pekes swarming after them like bees out of a disturbed hive. Pip muttered, "Maybe Davis picked it up." And they ran again.

Eventually, long after Alyn had decided it would be easier to let the Pekes catch her than to draw another tortured breath, they reached the ship. They scrambled into it, and they waited.

For hours the Pekes milled through the streets, searching for the impossible creatures who had impossibly disappeared. After they gave up, Alyn, Pip, and the Skipper waited for Davis. And waited, not talking. And waited, afraid to hope.

Just before dawn, he walked in, unruffled. They met him at the air lock.

"Wow!" Davis said as he slipped out of his cloak and carefully hung it up. "They were ready to bite each other's heads off. Did, as a matter of fact. The Prince acted like someone had hit him in the head with an axe."

Alyn watched his face intently, her green eyes uncreadable.

Impatiently, Pip said, "Did you get the shoe?"

"What shoe?" Davis asked blankly.

They sat around the living deck, three men and a woman, waiting for something to happen. Pip fiddled with a micro-mechanism, doing more damage than good. Davis pretended to be interested in some tests he was running on an ore sample, but his gaze kept drifting toward the window. The Skipper leaned back in his favorite chair,

his hands thrust deep into his pockets, not talking at all. Alyn sat in the window seat, staring at the street below.

"What I can't understand," Davis said suddenly, not looking at Alyn, "is why she was going into that room with that Peke."

"That's why I was there," Alyn said absently; "to find out everything I could."

"We didn't really intend for that to cover the possibility of cross-breeding," Pip said slyly. "Logically, this should be reported to the Bureau of Extraterrestrial Affairs."

"Don't be ridiculous," Alyn said, but her heart wasn't in it.

"You knew, of course," Pip went on, his eyes studying Alyn intently, "that it was a symbolic marriage. After consummation, the bride is sacrificed as the repository of the bridegroom's youthful sins. He heads into manhood with a clean slate."

"What I can't understand," Davis said plaintively, "is how you expected to get out of that room."

"Maybe she didn't want to get out," Pip said slowly. "And now the Prince is searching for her throughout the land."

Alyn turned sharply on Pip. "What's that?"

"He's got that shoe of yours. He's sent it around to all the workmen in the village to see if they made it." Pip got up and walked to the window. He stared out. "He's trying to find you, Al."

Alyn's green eyes searched Pip's face.

"Let's get out of here!" Davis exploded. "We've fouled this one up completely."

"No!" Alyn said.

"Why?" said the Skipper.

Alyn said flatly, "I changed my mind."

"Can't anyway," said the Skipper. "Bureau would quarantine Peking. Bar Company for good. Company'd fire us. No good. Two chances: Pekes Level 6 or get back shoe."

Pip said to Alyn, "Good thinking!"

"Shut up!" Alyn snapped.

"What's the matter with everybody?" Davis asked in bewilderment. "Nobody's been himself since the ball. Alyn" — he flushed — "hasn't been friendly. Pip has been picking on her. The Skipper hasn't said a word. What's the matter?"

Nobody answered him. Pip shrugged, stared out the window, and began whistling *After the Ball Is Over*.

"We're waiting for the end of the story," Alyn said.

"And here he comes now," Pip said.

"Where?" Alyn said harshly.

Pip pointed. "See where he comes with the shoe in his hand."

The Peke marched steadily, purposefully toward the ship.

"Get this on film!" the Skipper snapped.

Davis sprang to the control room ladder.

The Peke got closer, became fore-shortened, and passed beneath the curve of the ship. They waited, breathless. Davis backed down the ladder. They whirled on him and then turned back to their vigil.

The slow rasp of wood against metal drifted up to them. The Peke was climbing the ladder. The ship vibrated. Something rapped against the air lock door.

"Well?" Pip said.

Impassively, the Skipper said, "Let it in."

A little, involuntary wail broke from Alyn's lips. "I can't." She turned blindly and ran to her room. "Pip," she called back over her shoulder, "lock the door on that side."

She slammed the door behind her, slid the bolt across, and waited, her hand on it, until she heard the bolt outside click shut. It echoed in the little room with a grim finality. She threw herself onto her bunk and bit the pillow to keep from screaming.

Distantly she heard the air lock opened below and then the slow clomp of feet on stair treads. Voices rumbled for a long time. Once she found herself at the door, her hand on the bolt, before she remembered that it was bolted on the other side, too.

She threw herself back onto the bunk.

Time dripped slowly in discreet seconds. Hours later the ship vibrated again. This time the feet

were descending. The air lock opened and closed and feet went down the ladder outside. Someone pounded at the door.

"Alyn!" Davis shouted. "We've got it. The Skipper swears it will stand up in every court in the galaxy. It's Level 6."

Slowly, wearily, Alyn got up and went to the door. When she opened it, Davis was there, his face flushed and triumphant. He caught her around the waist, lifted her, swung her around, shouting, "Let's celebrate. We're rich, we're rich!"

Finally he lowered her to the floor. Alyn said, "What happened?"

Pip said, "He figured it out. The Prince. The reports came back to him: none of the village workmen had made that unit in the slipper. None of them had ever seen anything like it. They could duplicate it, but they couldn't have invented it. Q.E.D.—aliens.

"He had the whole village questioned, the results tabulated and compared, the discrepancies noted. Then he came here."

"Alone?" Alyn asked. "Unarmed?"

Davis said happily, "He wants more gadgets like that one. They do magic. He's ready to trade."

"What has he got to trade?" Alyn asked sharply.

Pip said, "Skill. Peking is a mine of micro-skills waiting to be refined. They've been developing

them for centuries with that intricate design work. All the Pekes need is a few simple tools and they can duplicate any micro-mechanism. They're quick, smart, accurate. I told you that Fairfax Field micro-unit was worth its weight in tickets home—well, his workmen had made *ten* of them already."

"But the Pekes aren't Level 6," Alyn objected.

"If deducing our presence from the shoe and locating us through comparative interviews isn't Level 6," Davis said, "there isn't a CQ test worth the computer it's figured in."

The Skipper rumbled, "Proof, too. On film. Rich. All of us."

Alyn bit her full lower lip. "What—did he say—about me?"

Slowly, watching her face, Pip shook his head. "He didn't mention you. But he left this." He tossed Alyn the slipper.

She caught it without thinking and then turned it over slowly to look at it from all sides.

"The foot the shoe fitted," Pip said gently, "was his." Pip's eyes were unusually quiet and dark.

Alyn nodded gravely and turned slowly back toward her cabin.

Davis stopped smiling. "What's the matter with her?"

Pip shook his head impatiently.

"What I can't understand," Davis whispered, "is why she wanted her door locked from this side when the Peke was here."

Pip said softly, "She wasn't afraid the Peke was coming after her. She knew he was. She was afraid he would ask her to go with him, and she wouldn't be able to refuse."

"Go with a Pikel!" Davis exclaimed.

"With a Prince," Pip said.

Alyn hesitated at the door. "Let's get out of here!" she said harshly. "We got what we came after. Let's get back to Earth."

Pip said, "And so they lived happily ever after."

Cinderella cried half the long way home.

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