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witch hunt

by . . . Len Guttridge

Surely without life there could be no intelligence, no serious threat to man's conquest of the stars. Was Slade then quite mad?

SENATOR TILSON scowled in angry resentment. "Just answer the question," he admonished, "with a straight 'yes' or 'no.'"

The man before and slightly below him inclined his head. He seemed impaled by the beams of the floodlights and the stares of a thousand eyes. The TV cameras clicked dispassionately.

He touched the sweat on his face and looked up. "No . . . it was not life," he groaned. "It was something far more—" He shuddered convulsively.

"Something you saw?" demanded Tilson.

"Not exactly."

"Something you heard then?"

"In a way I could hear it. But not as I hear you now."

"And you say it moved?"

"It did, yes. I've told you it did."

The Senator slumped in his chair under the huge Earth flag and spread his arms appealingly. He addressed the light-spangled ceiling.

"Man, if you heard it, and it moved, then it existed. And if it

Reason and will are so inextricably associated with biological life as we know it on Earth that it is difficult to conceive of a completely disembodied intelligence. Even ghosts are usually envisaged as clinging to a tenuous lifeline leading back to the physical. But suppose a man of daring were to draw a complex mathematical figure and affirm: "This too is alive!" Could anyone refute him? In this utterly chilling yarn Len Guttridge gives that startling idea a spin, in Jovian thunderbolt fashion.

had substance and form and movement it most assuredly lived."

Impressed by Tilson's dubious logic a few spectators applauded. The Senator adopted a more conciliatory attitude.

"Look, Slade," he said almost leniently, "you've been stumping the country for months claiming that the first planet we've ever reached is already inhabited. Now what kind of talk is that? People listen to you and the other cranks because you were on those early exploratory missions. You were just a handful of greaseball crew members. But human nature being what it is, people listen. And pretty soon they'll start doubting the official reports which your own officers compiled.

"Hell," Tilson flashed a boyish look of apology to the TV cameras, "are you deliberately suggesting that your own captains are liars, and their reports rigged?"

The man Slade closed his eyes. Wearily he said, "It happened to only a few of us. We weren't believed. The official reports were based on majority evidence. And it wasn't *life*, as I've already told you. Not even a very unusual form of life." He shuddered. "Maybe you ought to go out there, and see for yourself."

The Senator turned indignantly to his Committee counsel. "Hear that? We should go out there."

He swung back to Slade. "If your crazy conspiracy is permitted to go on unchecked we'll have

built our last spaceship. You'll have succeeded in sabotaging our every attempt at commercial interplanetary travel."

His eyes narrowed. "I've been patient with you, Slade. You've evaded every single one of my questions. Where has it got you? The facts are already clearly established. Ever since you left Space Exploration Service you've been engaged in constant sabotaging activity. You've spread fear. Not only you, but hundreds of ex-SES men. Only yours is an exceptionally bad case."

Slade said nothing.

Tilson glared down at him, and continued. "Earth expeditions have been landing on our first mission objective for half a decade. Those planets should be flourishing colonies by now, centers of commerce, outposts of our global way of life. But we're still making no headway despite repeated SES reports that no form of life exists on them. Think, man, all that virgin territory waiting for—er—enlightened exploitation."

His voice thickened. "Central Government continues to withhold sanction for free space enterprise for just one reason. You space witches have been at least partially successful with your lunatic propaganda."

A mutter of approval rose from the spectators. They turned to one another, nodding their heads. Space witches seemed a peculiarly apt and damning name. Trust Senator Til-

son to find the one right word for characters like Slade.

There weren't many of them. A few hundred, at most. But even a small percentage of SES veterans could trip the march of progress with their vague mouthings of unnameable horrors from beyond the sky.

And when you cornered a space witch, what did you get? There's *something*, but it's not life. Yes, it's harmful. No, it's not tangible. Life is not life, something is nothing. Fair is foul and foul is fair. Witch jargon. Space witch jargon. But the Senator had these babies figured dead to rights. Trust Senator Tilson.

"That's why we subpoenaed you," the Senator was saying. "Central Government legislation forbids interference with progress. It's my belief you are doing just that. Why, there's even a crazy rumor that these space bogies of yours have endowed you with the power to call on them whenever you need them."

"Against our will, heaven help us!" Slade covered his face with his hands.

The Senator narrowed his eyes and thrust his head forward. "Interference with progress. I could quote you ninety-five relevant statutes. You must have broken one in there somewhere."

There was instant, loud laughter from the public gallery.

The Senator gave a tolerant tap with his gavel.

Slade looked up. He studied his inquisitor for some minutes, then said slowly, "How can I convince you without—?"

"You don't have to convince me," the Senator cut in. "You have to convince the court of final appeal." He pointed to the gallery and a tremor entered his voice. "The people.

"The people have a right to know the facts," he added solemnly. A spirit of near-piety touched some of the watchers and several lowered their eyes. But two of the TV technicians exchanged winks and smiled.

Slade said, "There are realities you can't describe."

"Try."

Slade was silent.

"The Committee directs you to try."

"We've been over all this before."

"In closed session, yes. But the people have a right—"

"To know the facts. You've just made that plain. And some have the urge to bait a witch."

The Senator's face darkened. "Proceed, Slade. About Mason. Tell us exactly what happened when he died."

"Mason." Slade brushed a hand across his brow. "Mason was a colleague in Third Navigator Unit. He was some yards up in front when it happened. He screamed and I ran to him. His limbs jerked. He seemed to be having a convulsion, Catalepsy, I thought. After a

minute he said, 'It's behind you, Slade. A toad. It's big, Slade. Purple. It wants me!' Then he didn't say anymore.

"But, don't you see," Slade cried, "It wasn't really a toad. Only to Mason's eyes it had to manifest itself in a familiar shape. A horrible one, but familiar."

"The toad was Mason's familiar? Is that what you're trying to say? Did you actually see it yourself?"

"No, but two others did. Back near the ship. They saw it clearly."

"Yes." The Senator nodded grimly. "Sitwell and Jenks, I believe. More space witches."

A Committee counselman was tugging at his arm. Heads came together whispering. When the Senator looked at Slade again a faint triumphant smirk touched his mouth. "We've served subpoenas on Sitwell and Jenks. Jenks will appear before this Committee next Monday."

The Senator waited, savoring the chill expectancy which had descended on the chamber. Slade frowned.

"And Sitwell?" he asked.

"Sitwell hanged himself this morning."

Excitement swirled through the chamber and the Senator rapped his gavel. "The case for the purple toad seems to be dwindling," he said mildly. "You didn't see—"

"*I felt it.*" A hardness had settled on Slade's face. He sat erect, in an attitude of fresh purpose. But the Senator seemed not to notice. He stared straight before him

as if lost in contemplation of his present audience and the other, vaster one beyond the cameras.

"You felt it," he murmured. "You mean it *touch*ed you?"

"No. But it was there."

"There," repeated the Senator. The taunt was replaced by simulated anger. "There, there, *there*. It was a form of life, wasn't it? It was life on a neighbor world, in the face of irrefutable proof of life's non-existence."

"Not a form of *life*." Slade's lips were white. "I have never said it was alive. You cannot make me say it."

The Senator yawned at the TV cameras and brandished a document. "This is the casualty report from the SES expedition of which Slade was a member. There were four fatalities including Mason. They are all listed as accidental."

Patiently, he glanced down at Slade. "And the big black hen. That's your pet familiar, isn't it, Slade? Tell the Committee about the big black hen."

Slade was silent.

"Then I will. On your second trip out the expedition lost two men. You came back to Earth locked in your ship's brig, gibbering about a great black hen which walked all over your unfortunate comrades."

"But this report," Tilson held the document up, looking about him with an expression of mock surprise, "says both men were killed by a rock fall. No mention of

black hens. How about it, Slade? Do you still think you were in a barnyard?"

Something like outrage brightened Slade's eyes. "Be careful," he breathed. "In heaven's name be careful."

The Senator shrugged. "Of what, Slade? Tell me. Tell *them*." He gestured at the public gallery. "And these," a wave at the cameras. "Tell your unseen audience what we have to fear out there."

"You want me to confess I've been warning everyone against the existence of life on our first mission objective, don't you?" Slade's eyes glittered. "And that's a criminal offence, isn't it, because Authority says there can't be any life at all out there. Well, Authority's right." He gazed around the chamber. "What is out there ruled our planet once. Then *life* came to challenge it. Life evolved and grew strong on Earth, though the enemy is still with us, waging a constant guerilla warfare. It scores hourly victories all over the planet. But in the great and timeless battle, life prevails and is gaining."

The Senator stared in tight-lipped silence. The assembly in the chamber shifted restlessly.

"Out there on the other planets, the great Opponent of life still rules. It is determined not to suffer the defeats which it has met with here. With no life there to challenge its supremacy it takes no action against us. But since man threatens to bring life to the do-

main of lifelessness, it is on guard. In a million terrifying forms the Arch-Enemy of life is on guard out there."

Abruptly he stopped. His head tilted curiously.

The Senator blinked as if he'd just awakened from a repulsive nightmare. "Are you finished?" he asked. He withdrew another document from the pile at his elbow and held it aloft.

"Psychiatric statement on Slade," he announced briskly. "Issued by SES on his discharge. It's pretty long, but it summarizes Slade's mental condition as being quite unstable. It makes frequent reference to his, quote—extreme hallucinatory condition—unquote. It cites two instances of Slade's allegedly having seen a huge black hen hovering outside the psychiatrist's window. And it recommends his suitability only for civilian posts of minor responsibility."

The Senator turned to Slade. "The record of this Committee's investigations into your sabotaging activities will be sent to Central Government for whatever action they decide to take. Whether your dissemination of lies and fears is due to a disordered mind or to a desire for publicity will be for them to determine. I hope they'll take steps to put you away. You'll serve as an example to other space witches. And if they persist in their attempts to interfere with our destined march across space they'll get the same medicine."

The spectators clapped vigorously. Some cheered. A cloud passed the windows but nobody noticed. The Senator cleared his throat, shuffled his papers. As the uproar subsided Slade's voice rose in bitter challenge.

"That's what you want, isn't it, Senator? The bearers of warning must be crushed, the witches burned so that the greedy men can range unhampered beyond the sky. How much will you get from the commercial space lines for removing this last threat to their expansion? How much from the real estate lords once the soil of Mars and Jupiter has been carved and sliced and parceled out to be profited from?"

"What is your promised cut from the super-theatre moguls, and the TV tycoons, already eager to drug the masses, who'll be out there gouging the land for Earth's industrialists? And what will you get from the industrialists, oh Senator-in-the-pocket-of-the-profitmen?"

Senator Tilson was on his feet spluttering, his face the color of ripe grape. Half the audience was standing, too, and swaying confusedly.

"Fool," shouted the Senator. "Liar. Ten thousand like you won't stop us. No one will. Because there's no life out there, do you hear?" He towered over Slade, his figure a burly threat. "No form of life. Nothing."

He motioned for the guards to remove his accuser.

"No form of life," cried Slade as they closed in, "Only—"

There was a scraping on the roof. Slade looked around, and up. The cameras caught his expression which was later described as mingled recognition, horror and relief.

Then it was that every TV screen in the land blacked out. A vast shadow burst into the chamber to swathe the lamps and smother camera lenses. With a brief wail came the beat of cold wings. And a shriek.

It was over in a second. The lights, bright once more, shone on a frightened crowd swarming like blind ants for the exits. The TV cameras watched again and on ten million screens appeared the Senator, still clutching his gavel and quite dead, the imprint of a giant claw stamped on his staring face.

