Escape Felicity

Frank Herbert, 1966

'An escape-proof prison cannot be built,' he kept telling himself. His name was Roger Beirut, five feet tall, one hundred and three pounds, crewcut black hair, a narrow face with a long nose and wide mouth and space-bleached eyes that appeared to reflect rather than absorb what they saw.

Beirut knew his prison - the D-Service. He had got himself rooted down in the Service like a remittance man half asleep in a hammock on some palm-shaded tropical beach, telling himself his luck would change some day and he'd get out of there.

He didn't delude himself that a one-man D-ship was a hammock, or that space was a tropical beach. But the sinecure element was there and the ships were solicitous cocoons, each with a climate designed precisely for the lone occupant.

That each pilot carried the prison's bars in his mind had taken Beirut a long time to understand. Out here aimed into the void beyond Capella Base, he could feel the bars where they had been dug into his psyche, cemented and welded there. He blamed the operators of Bu-psych and the deep-sleep hypnotic debriefing after each search trip. He told himself that Bu-psych did something to the helpless pilots then installed this compulsion they called the *Push.*

Some young pilots managed to escape it for a while - tougher psyches, probably, but sooner or later, Bu-psych got them all. It was a common compulsion that limited the time a D-ship pilot could stay out before he turned tail and fled for home.

'This time I'll break away,' Beirut told himself. He knew he was talking aloud, but he had his computer's vocoders turned off and his absent mumblings would be ignored.

The gas cloud of Grand Nuage loomed ahead of him, clearly defined on his instruments like a piece of torn fabric thrown across the stars. He'd come out of subspace dangerously close, but that was the gamble he'd taken.

Bingaling Benar, fellow pilot and sometime friend, had called him nuts when Beirut had said he was going to tackle the cloud.

'Didn't you do that once before?' Bingaling asked.

'I was going to once, but I changed my mind,' Beirut had said.

'You gotta slow down, practically crawl in there,' Bingaling had said. 'I stood it in eighty-one days, man. I had the push for real - couldn't take any more and I came home. Anyway, it's nothing but cloud all the way through.'

Bingaling's *endless* cloud was growing larger in the ship's instruments now. But the cloud enclosed a mass of space that could hide a thousand suns.

Eighty-one days, he thought.

'Eighty, ninety days, that's all anyone can take out there,' Bingaling had said. 'And I'm telling you, in that cloud it's worse. You get the push practically the minute you go in.'

Beirut had his ship down to a safe speed now, nosing into the first tenuous layers. There was no mystery about the cloud's composition, he reminded himself. It was hydrogen, but in a concentration that made swift flight suicidal.

'They got this theory,' Bingaling had said, 'that it's an embryo star like. One day it's just going to go fwoosh and compress down into one star mass.'

Beirut eased the controls. He could sense his ship around him like an extension of his own nerves. She was a pinnacle class for which he and his fellow pilots had a simple and obscene nickname - two hundred and fifty meters long, crowded from nose to tubes with the equipment for determining if a planet could support human life. In the sleep-freeze compartment directly behind him were the double-checks - two pairs of rhesus monkeys and ten pairs of white mice.

D-ship pilots contended they'd seeded more planets with rhesus monkeys and white mice than they had with humans.

Beirut switched to his stern instruments. One hour into the cloud and already the familiar stars behind him were beginning to fuzz off. He felt the first stirrings of unease; not the push ... but disquiet.

He crossed his arms, touching the question-mark insignia at his left shoulder. He could feel the ripe green film of corrosion on the brass threads. *I should polish up,* he thought. But he knew he wouldn't. He looked around him at the pilot compartment, seeing unracked food cannisters, a grease smear across the computer console, dirty fatigues wadded under a dolly seat.

It was a sloppy ship.

Beirut knew what was said about him and his fellow pilots back in the top echelons of the D-Service.

'Rogues make the best searchers.'

It was an axiom, but the rogues had their drawbacks. They flouted rules, sneered at protocol, ignored timetables, laughed at vector search plans ... and kept sloppy ships. And when they disappeared - as they often did - the Service could never be sure what had happened or where.

Except that the man had been prevented from returning ... because there was always the push.

Beirut shook his head. Every thought seemed to come back to the push. He didn't have it yet, he assured himself. Too soon. But the thought was there, aroused. It was the fault of that cloud.

He re-activated the rear scanners. The familiar stars were gone, swallowed in a blanket of nothingness. Angrily, he turned off the scanner switch.

I've got to keep busy, he thought.

For a time he set himself to composing and refining a new stanza for the endless D-ship ballad: 'I Left My Love On Lyra In The Hands Of Gentle Friends.' But his mind kept returning to the fact that the stanza might never be heard ... if his plans succeeded. He wondered then how many such stanzas had been composed never to be heard.

The days went by with an ever-slowing, dragging monotony.

Eighty-one days, he reminded himself time and again. *Bingaling turned back at eighty-one days.*

By the seventy-ninth day he could see why. There was no doubt then that he was feeling the first ungentle suasions of the push. His mind kept searching for logical reasons.

You've done your best. No shame in turning back now. Bingaling's undoubtedly right - it's nothing but cloud all the way through. No stars in here... no *planets.*

But he was certain what the Bu-psych people had done to him and this helped. He watched the forward scanners for the first sign of a glow. And this helped, too. He was still going some place.

The eighty-first day passed.

The eighty-second.

On the eighty-sixth day he began to see a triple glow ahead - like lights through fog; only the fog was black and otherwise empty.

By this time it was taking a conscious effort to keep his hands from straying toward the flip-flop controls that would turn the ship one hundred eighty degrees onto its return track.

Three lights in the emptiness.

Ninety-four days - two days longer than he'd ever withstood the push before - and his ship swam free of the cloud into open space with three stars lined out at a one o'clock angle ahead of him - a distant white-blue giant, a nearby orange dwarf and in the center ... a lovely golden sol-type to the fifth decimal of comparison.

Feverishly, Beirut activated his mass-anomaly scanners, probing space around the golden-yellow sun.

The push was terrible now, insisting that he turn around. But this was the final convincer for Beirut . If the thing Bu-psych had done to him insisted he go back now, right after discovering three new suns - then there could be only one answer to the question 'Why?' They didn't want a B-Service rogue settling down on his own world. The push was a built-in safeguard to make sure the scout returned.

Beirut forced himself to study his instruments.

Presently, the golden star gave up its secret - a single planet with a single moon. He punched for first approximation, watched the results stutter off the feedout tape: planetary mass .998421 of Earth norm ...

rotation forty plus standard hours ... mean orbital distance 243 million kilometers ... perturbation nine degrees ... orbital variation thirty-eight plus.

Beirut sat bolt upright with surprise.

Thirty-eight plus! A variation percentage in that range could only mean the mother star had another companion - and a big one. He searched space around the star.

Nothing.

Then he saw it.

At first he thought he'd spotted the drive flare of another ship -an alien. He swallowed, the push momentarily subdued, and did a quick mental review of the alien-space contact routine worked out by Earth's bigdomes and which, so far as anyone knew, had never been put to the test.

The flare grew until it resolved itself into the gaseous glow of another astronomical body circling the golden sun.

Again, Beirut bent to his instruments. My God, how the thing moved! More than forty kilometers per second. Tape began spewing from the feedout: Mass 321.64 ... rotation nine standard hours ... mean orbital distance 58 million kilometers ... perturbation blank (insufficient data) ...

Beirut shifted to the filtered visual scanners, watched the companion sweep across the face of its star and curve out of sight around the other side. The thing looked oddly familiar, but he knew he could never have seen it before. He wondered if he should activate the computer's vocoder system and talk to it through the speaker embedded in his neck, but the computer annoyed him with its obscene logic.

The astronomical data went into the banks, though, for the experts to whistle and marvel over later.

Beirut shifted his scanners back to the planet. Shadowline measurement gave it an atmosphere that reached fade-off at an altitude of about a hundred and twenty-five kilometers. The radiation index indicated a whopping tropical belt, almost sixty degrees.

With a shock of awareness, Beirut found his hands groping toward the flip-flop controls. He jerked back, trembling. If he once turned the ship over, he knew he wouldn't have the strength of purpose to bring her back around. The push had reached terrifying intensity.

Beirut forced his attention onto the landing problem, began feeding data into the computer for the shortest possible space-to-ground course. The computer offered a few objections 'for his own good,' but he insisted. Presently, a landing tape appeared and he fed it into the control console, strapped down, kicked the ship onto automatic and sat back perspiring. His hands held a death grip on the sides of his crash-pad.

The B-ship began to buck with the first skipping-flat entrance into the planet's atmosphere. The bucking stopped, returned, stopped - was repeated many times. The B-ship's cooling system whined. Hull plates creaked. Darkside, lightside, darkside - they repeated themselves in his viewer. The automatic equipment began reeling out atmospheric data: oxygen 23.9, nitrogen 74.8, argon 0.8, carbon dioxide 0.04 ... By the time it got into the trace elements, Beirut was gasping with the similarity to the atmosphere of Mother

Earth.

The spectrum analyzer produced the datum that the atmosphere was essentially transparent from 3,000 angstroms to 6 X 104angstroms. It was a confirmation and he ignored the instruments when they began producing hydromagnetic data and water vapor impingements. There was only one important fact here: he could breathe the stuff out there.

Instead of filling him with a sense of joyful discovery - as it might have thirty or forty days earlier - this turned on a new spasm of the push. He had to consciously restrain himself from clawing at the instrument panel.

Beirut 's teeth began to chatter.

The viewer showed him an island appearing over the horizon. The B-ship swept over it. Beirut gasped at sight of an alabaster ring of tall buildings hugging the curve of a bay. Bots on the water resolved into sailboats as he neared. How oddly familiar it all looked.

Then he was past and headed for a mainland with a low range of hills -more buildings, roads, the patchwork of fenced lands. Then he was over a wide range of prairie with herds of moving animals on it.

Beirut 's fingers curled into claws. His skin trembled.

The landing jets cut in and his seat reversed itself. The ship nosed up and the seat adjusted to the new attitude. There came a roaring as the ship lowered itself on its tail jets. The proximity cut-off killed all engines.

The B-ship settled with a slight jolt.

Blue smoke and clouds of whirling ashes lifted past Beirut 's scanners from the scorched landing circle. Orange flames swept through dry forage on his right, but the chemical automatics from the ship's nose sent a borate shower onto the fire and extinguished it. Beirut saw the backs of animals fleeing through the smoke haze beyond the fire. Amplification showed them to be four-legged, furred and with tiny flat heads. They ran like bouncing balls. A light band of fear cinched on Beirut 's chest. This place was too earthlike. His teeth chattered with the unconscious demands of the push.

His instruments informed him they were picking up modulated radio signals - FM and AM. A light showing that the Probe-Test-Watch circuits were activated came alive. Computer response circuit telltales began flickering. Abruptly, the P-T-W bell rang, telling him: 'Something approaches!'

The viewer showed a self-propelled vehicle rolling over a low hill to the north supported by what appeared to be five monstrous pneumatic bladders. It headed directly toward the B-ship belching pale white smoke from a rear stack with the rhythm of steam power. External microphones picked up the confirming 'chuff-chuff-chuff' an' his computer announced that it was a double-action engine with sounds that indicated five opposed pairs of pistons.

A five-sided dun brown cab with dark blue-violet windows overhung the front of the thing.

In his fascination with the machine, Beirut almost forgot the wild urge pushing at him from within. The machine pulled up about fifty meters beyond the charred landing circle, extruded a muzzle that belched a

puff of smoke at him. The external microphones picked up a loud explosion and the D-ship rocked on its extended tripods.

Beirut clutched the arms of his chair then sprang to the controls of the ship's automatic defenses, poised a hand over the disconnect switch.

The crawling device outside whirled away, headed east toward a herd of the bouncing animals.

Beirut punched the 'Warning-Only' button.

A giant gout of earth leaped up ahead of the crawler, brought it to a lurching halt at the brink of a smoking hole. Another gout of earth bounced skyward at the left of the machine; another at the right.

Beirut punched 'Standby' on the defense mechanisms, turned to assess the damage. Any new threat from the machine out there and the B-ship's formidable arsenal would blast it out of existence. That was always a step to be avoided, though, and he kept one eye on the screen showing the thing out there. It sat unmoving but still chuffing on the small patch of earth left by the three blast-shots from the ship.

Less than ten seconds later, the computer out-chewed a strip of tape that said the ship's nose section had been blasted open, all proximity detectors destroyed. Beirut was down on this planet until he could make repairs.

Oddly, this eased the pressures of the push within him. It was still there and he could sense it, but the compulsive drive lay temporarily idle as though it, top, had a standby switch.

Beirut returned his attention to the crawler.

The damage had been done, and there was no helping it. A ship could land with its arsenal set on 'Destroy,' but deciding what needed destruction was a delicate proposition. Wise counsel said you let the other side get in a first shot if their technology appeared sufficiently primitive. Otherwise, you might make yourself decidedly unwelcome.

Who'd have thought they'd have a cannon and fire the thing without warning? he asked himself. And the reply stood there accusingly in his mind: *You should've thought of it, stupid. Gunpowder and steam-power are almost always concurrent.*

Well, I was too upset by the push, he thought. *Besides, why'd they fire without warning?*

Again, the crawler's cab extruded the cannon muzzle and the cab started to turn to bring the weapon to bear on the ship. A warning blast sent earth cascading into the hole at the left of the crawler. The cab stopped turning.

'That's-a-baby,' Beirut said. 'Easy does it, fellows. Let's be friends.' He nicked a blue switch at the left side of his board. His external microphones damped out as a klaxon sent its bull roar toward the crawler. It was a special sound capable of intimidating almost any creature that heard it. The sound had an astonishing effect on the crawler. A hatch in the middle of the cab popped open and five creatures boiled out of it to stand on the deck of their machine.

Beirut keyed the microphone beside him into the central computer, raised amplification on his view of the

five creatures from the machine. He began reading off his own reactions. The human assessment always helped the computer's sensors.

'Humanoid,' he said. 'Upright tubular bodies about a meter and a half tall with two legs encased in some kind pf boot. Sack-like garments belted at the waist. Each has five pouches dangling from the belt. Number five is significant here. Flesh color is pale blue-violet. Two arms; articulation - humanoid, but very long forearm. Wide hands with six fingers; looks like two opposable thumbs, one to each side of the hand. Heads - squarish, domed, covered with what appears to be a dark blue-violet beret. Eyes semi-stalked, yellow and just inside the front*corners* of the head. Those heads are very blocky. I suspect the eyes can be twisted to look behind without turning the head.'

The creatures began climbing down off their machine. Beirut went on with his description: 'Large mouth orifice centered beneath the eyes. There appears to be a chin articulation on a short hinge. Orifice lipless, ovoid, no apparent teeth ... correction: there's a dark line inside that may be the local equivalent. Separate small orifices below each eye stalk - possibly for breathing. One just turned its head. I see a slight indentation centered on the side of the head - purpose unknown. It doesn't appear to be an ear.'

The five were advancing on the ship now; Beirut backed off the scanner to keep them in view, said: 'They carry bows and arrows. That's odd, considering the cannon. Each has a back quiver with ... five arrows. That five again. Bows slung on the string over left shoulder. Each has a short lance in a back harness, a blue-violet pennant just below the lance head. Some kind of figure on the pennant - looks like an upside down 'U' in orange. Same figure repeated on the front of their tunics which are also blue-violet. Blue-violet and five. What's the prognosis?'

Beirut waited for the computer's answer to come to him through the speaker grafted into his neck. Relays clicked and the vocoder whispered through the bones of his head: 'Probable religious association with color and number five. Extreme caution is indicated on religious matters. Body armor and hand weapon mandatory.'

That's the trouble with computers,Beirut thought.*Too logical.*

The five natives had stopped just outside the fire-blackened landing circle. They raised their arms to the ship, chanted something that sounded like 'Toogayala-toogayala-toogayala.' The sound came from the oval central orifice.

'We'll toogayala in just a minute,' Beirut muttered. He brought out a Borgen machine pistol, donned body armor, aimed two of the ship's bombards directly at the steam wagon and set them on a dead-man switch keyed to a fifteen-second stoppage of his heart. He rigged the stern port to the PTW syslem, keyed to blow up any unauthorized intruders. Into various pockets he stuffed a lingua pack receptor tuned to his implanted speaker through the computer, a standard contact kit for sampling whatever interested him, a half dozen minigrenades, energy tablets, food analyzer, a throwing knife in a sheath, a miniscanner linked to the shipcomputer and a slingshot. With a final, grim sensation, he stuffed a medikit under the armor next to his heart.

One more glance around the familiar control center and he slid down the tube to the stern port, opened it and stepped out.

The five natives threw themselves flat on the ground, arms extended toward him.

Beirut took a moment to study them and his surroundings. There was a freshness to the air that even his nose filters could not diminish. It was morning here yet and the sun threw flat light against the low hills and clumps of scrub. They stood out with a clean chiaroscuro dominated by the long blue spear of the ship's shadow wavering across the prairie.

Beirut looked up at his B-ship. She was a red and white striped tower on his side with a gaping hole where the nose should have been. Her number - 1107 - stenciled in luminous green beneath the nose had just escaped the damage area. He returned his attention to the natives.

They remained stretched out on the grass, their stalked eyes stretched out and peering up at him.

'Let's hope you have a good metal-working industry, friends,' Beirut said. 'Otherwise, I'm going to be an extremely unhappy visitor.'

At the sound of his voice, the five grunted in unison: 'Toogayala ung-ung.'

'Ung-ung?' Beirut asked. 'I thought we were going to toogaya-la.' He brought out the linguapack, hung it on his chest with the mike aimed at the natives, moved toward them out of the ship's shadow. As an afterthought, he raised his right hand, palm out and empty in the universal human gesture of peace, but kept his left hand on the Borgen.

'Toogayala!' the five screamed.

His linguapack remained silent. Toogayala and ung-ung were hardly sufficient for breaking down a language.

Beirut took another step toward them.

The five rocked back to then: knees and arose, crouching and apparently poised for flight. Five pairs of stalked eyes pointed toward him. Beirut had the curious feeling then that the five appeared familiar. They looked a little like giant grasshoppers that had been crossed with an ape. They looked like bug-eyed monsters from a work of science fantasy he had read in his youth, which he saw as clear evidence that what the imagination of man could conceive, nature could produce.

Beirut took another step toward the natives, said: 'Well, let's talk a little, friends. Say something. Make language, huh.'

The five backed up two steps. Their feet made a dry rustling sound in the grass.

Beirut swallowed. Their silence was a bit unnerving.

Abruptly, something emitted a buzzing sound. It seemed to come from a native on Beirut 's right. The creature clutched for its tunic, gabbled: 's'Chareecha! s'Chareecha!' It pulled a small object from a pocket to the others gathered around.

Beirut tensed, lifted the Borgen.

The natives ignored him to concentrate on the object in the one creature's hands.

'What's doing?' Beirut asked. He felt tense, uneasy. This wasn't going at all the way the books said it should.

The five straightened suddenly and without a backward look, returned to their steam wagon and climbed into the cab.

What test did I fail?Beirut wondered.

Silence settled over the scene.

In the course of becoming a B-ship pilot, Beirut had gained fame for a certain pungency of speech. He paused a moment to practice some of his more famed selections, then took stock of his situation - standing here exposed at the foot of the ship while the unpredictable natives remained in their steam wagon. He clambered back through the port, sealed it, and jacked into the local computer outlet for a heart-to-heart conference.

'The buzzing item was likely a timepiece,' the computer said. The creature in possession of it was approximately two millimeters taller than his tallest companion. 'There are indications this one is the leader of the group.'

'Leader schmeader,' Beirut said. 'What's this toogayala they keep yelling?'

From long association with Beirut , the computer had adopted a response pattern to meet the rhetorical question or the question for which there obviously was no answer. 'Tut, tut,' it said.

'You sound like my old Aunt Martha,' Beirut said. 'They screamed that toogayala. It's obviously important.'

'When they noted your hand, that is when they raised their voices to the highest decibel level thus far recorded here,' the computer said.

'But why?'

'Possible answer,' the computer said. 'You have five fingers.'

'Five,' Beirut said. 'Five ... five ... five ... '

'We detect only five heavenly bodies here,' the computer said. 'You have noted that the skies are otherwise devoid of stars. The rapid companion is overhead right now, you know.'

'Five.' Beirut said.

'This planet,' the computer said, 'the three hot gaseous and plasma bodies and the other companion to this planet's sun.'

Beirut looked at his hand, flexed the fingers.

'They may think you are a deity,' the computer said. 'They have six fingers; you have five.'

'Empty skies except for three suns,' Beirut said.

'Don't forget this planet and the other companion,' the computer said.

Beirut thought about living on such a planet - no banks of stars across the heavens ... all that hidden behind the enclosing hydrogen cloud.

He began to tremble unaccountably with an attack of *the push.*

'What'll it take to fix the nose of the ship?' Beirut asked. He tried to still his trembling.

'A sophisticated machine shop and the work of electronics technicians of at least grade five. The repair data is available in my banks.'

'What're they doing in that machine?' Beirut demanded. 'Why don't they talk?'

'Tut, tut,' the computer said.

Thirty-eight minutes later, the natives again emerged from their steam wagon, took up stations standing at the edge of the charred ground.

Beirut repeated his precautionary measures, went out to join them. He moved slowly, warily, the Borgen ready in his left hand.

The five awaited him this time without retreating. They appeared more relaxed, chattering in low voices among themselves, watching him with those stalked eyes. The word sounds remained pure gibberish to Beirut , but he had the lingua pack trained on them and knew the computer would have the language in a matter of time.

Beirut stopped about eight paces from the natives, said: 'Glad to see you, boys. Have a nice nap in your car?'

The tallest one nodded, said: 'What's doing?'

Beirut gaped, speechless.

A native on the left said: 'Let's hope you have a good metal-working industry, friends. Otherwise I'm going to be an extremely unhappy visitor.'

The tallest one said: 'Glad to see you, boys. Have a nice nap in your car?'

'They're mimicking me!' Beirut gasped.

'Confirmed,' the computer said.

Beirut overcame an urge to laugh, said: 'You're the crummiest looking herd of no-good animals I ever saw. It's a wonder your mothers could stand the sight of you.'

The tall native repeated it for him without an error.

'Reference to mothers cannot be accepted at this time,' the computer said. 'Local propagation customs unknown. There are indications these may be part vegetable - part animal.'

'Oh shut up,' Beirut said.

'Oh, shut up,' said a native on his left.

'Suggest silence on your part,' the computer said. 'They are displaying signs of trying to break down your-language. Better we get their language, reveal less of ourselves.'

Beirut saw the wisdom in it, spoke subvocally for the speaker on his throat: 'You're so right.'

He clamped his lips into a thin line, stared at the natives. Silence dragged on and on.

Presently the tall one said: 'Aagroop somilican.'

'Toogayala,' said the one on the left.

'Cardinal number,' the computer said. 'Probable position five. Hold up your five fingsrs and say toogayala.'

Beirut obeyed.

'Toogayala, toogayala,' the natives agreed. One detached himself, went to the st a n wagon and returned with a black metal figurine, about half a meter tall, extended it toward Beirut .

Cautiously, Beirut moved forward, accepted the thing. It felt heavy and cold in his hand, ft was a beautifully styled figure of one of the natives, the eye stalks drooping into inverted U-shapes, mouth open.

Beirut brought out his contact kit, pressed it against the metal.

The kit went 'ping' as it took a sample.

The natives stared at him.

'Iron-magnesium-nickel alloy,' the computer said. 'Figure achieved by casting. Approximate age of figure, twenty-five million standard years.'

Beirut felt his throat go dry. He spoke subvocally: 'That can't be!'

'Bating accurate to plus or minus six thousand years,' the computer said. 'You will note the figures carved on the casting. The inverted U on the chest is probably the figure five. Beneath that is writing. Pattern too consistent for different interpretation.'

'Civilization for twenty-five million years,' Beirut said.

'Plus or minus six thousand years,' the computer said.

Again, Beirut felt a surge *of the push,* fought it down. He wanted to return to the crippled ship, flee this place in spite of the dangers. His knees shook.

The native who had given him the figurine, stepped forward, reclaimed it. 'Toogayala,' the native said. It pointed to the inverted U on the figure and then to the symbol on its own chest.

'But they only have a steam engine,' Beirut protested.

'Very sophisticated steam engine,' the computer said. 'Cannon is retractable, gyroscopically mounted, self-tracking.'

'They can fix the ship!' Beirut said.

'If they will,' the computer said.

The tall native stepped forward now, touched a finger to the lingua pack, said: 's'Chareecha' with a falling inflection. Beirut watched the hand carefully. It was six-fingered, definitely, the skin a mauve-blue. The fingers were horn-tipped and double-knuckled.

Try ung-ung,' the computer suggested.'

'Ung-ung,' Beirut said.

The tall one jumped backward and all five sent their eye stalks peering toward the sky. They set up an excited chattering among themselves in which Beirut caught several repeated sounds: 'Yaubron ... s'Chareecha ... Autoga ... Sreese-sreese ... '

'We have an approximation for entry now,' the computer said. 'The tall one is called Autoga. Address him by name.'

'Autoga,' Beirut said.

The tall one turned, tipped his eye stalks toward Beirut .

'Say *Ai-Yaubron ung sreese s'Chareecha,'* the computer said.

Beirut obeyed.

The natives faced each other, returned their attention to Beirut . Presently, they began grunting almost uncontrollably. Autoga sat down on the ground, pounded it with his hands, all the while keeping up the grunting.

'What the devil?' Beirut said.

'They're laughing,' the computer said. 'Go sit beside Autoga.'

'On the ground?' Beirut asked.

'Yes.'

'Is it safe?'

'Of course.'

'Why're they laughing?'

'They're laughing at themselves. You tricked them, made them jump. This is definitely laughter.'

Hesitantly, Beirut moved to Autoga's side, sat down. Autoga stopped grunting, put a hand on Beirut 's shoulder, spoke to his companions. With a millisecond delay, the computer began translating: 'This god-self-creation is a good Joe, boys. His accent is lousy, but he has a sense of humor.'

'Are you sure of that translation?' Beirut asked.

'Reasonably so,' the computer said. 'Without greater morphological grounding, a cultural investigation in depth and series comparisons of vocal evolution, you get only a gross literal approximation, of course. We'll refine it while we go along. We're ready to put your sub-vocals through the lingua pack.'

'Let's talk,' Beirut said.

Out of the lingua pack on his chest came a series of sounds approximating 'Ai-ing-eeya.'

Computer translation of Autoga's reply was: 'That's a good idea. It's open sky.'

Beirut shook his head. It didn't sound right. Open sky?

'Sorry we damaged your vehicle,' Autoga said. 'We thought you were one of our youths playing with danger.'

Beirut swallowed. 'You thought my ship ... you people can make ships of this kind?'

'Oh, we made a few about ten million *klurch* ago,' Autoga said.

'It was at least fifteen million *klurch,'* said the wrinkle-faced native on Beirut 's left.

'Now, Choon, there you go exaggerating again,' Autoga said. He looked at Beirut . 'You'll have to forgive Chpon. He wants everything to be bigger, better and greater than it is.'

'What's a klurch?' Beirut asked.

The computer answered for his ears alone: 'Probable answer -the local year, about one and one-third standards.'

'I'm glad you decided to be peaceful,' Beirut said.

The lingua pack rendered this into a variety of sounds and the natives stared at Beirut 's chest.

'He is speaking from his chest,' Choon said.

Autoga looked up at the ship. 'There are more of you?'

'Don't answer that,' the computer said. 'Suggest the ship is a source of mystical powers.'

Beirut digested this, shook his head. Stupid computer! 'These are sharp cookies,' he said speaking aloud.

'What a delightful arrangement of noises,' Autoga said. 'Do it again.'

'You thought I was one of your youths,' Beirut said. 'Now who do you think I am?'

The lingua pack remained silent. His ear speaker said: 'Suggest that question not be asked.'

'Ask it ['Beirut said.

A gabble of sound came from the lingua pack.

'We debated that during the presence of s'Chareecha,' Autoga said. 'We hid in the purple darkness, you understand, because we have no wish to seed under the influence of s'Chareecha. A majority among us decided you are the personification of our design for a deity. I dissented. My thought is that you are an unknown, although I grant you temporarily the majority title.'

Beirut wet his lips with his tongue.

'He has five fingers,' Choon said.

'This was the argument you used to convince Tura and Lecky,' Autoga said. 'This argument still doesn't answer Spispi's objection .hat the five fingers could be the product of genetic manipulation or that plus amputation.'

'But the eyes,' Choon said. 'Who could conceive of such eyes? Not in our wildest imaginations ... '

'Perhaps you offend our visitor,' Autoga said. He glanced at Beirut , the stalked eyes bending outward quizzically.

'And the articulation of the legs and arms,' one of the other natives ventured.

'You're repeating old arguments, Tura,' Autoga said.

Beirut suddenly had a picture of himself as he must appear to these natives. Their eyes had obvious advantages over his. He had seen them look behind themselves without turning their heads. The double thumb arrangement looked useful. They must think one thumb an odd limitation. He began to chuckle.

'What is this noise?' Autoga asked.

'I'm laughing,' Beirut said.

'I will render that: 'I'm laughing at myself," the computer said. Sounds issued from the lingua pack.

'A person who can laugh at himself has taken a major step toward the highest civilization,' Autoga said. 'No offense intended.'

'The theories of Picheck that the concerted wish for a deity must produce same are here demonstrated,' Choon said. 'It's not quite the shape of entity I had envisioned, however, but we ... '

'Why don't we inquire?' Autoga asked and turned to Beirut . 'Are you a deity?'

'I'm a mortal human being, nothing more,' Beirut said.

The lingua pack remained silent.

'Translate that!' Beirut blared.

The computer spoke for him alone: 'The experience, training and memory banks available suggest that it would be safer for you to pose as a deity. Their natural awe would enable you to ... '

'We're not going to fool these characters for five minutes,' Beirut said. 'They've built spaceships. They have advanced electronic techniques. You heard their radio. They've had a civilization for more than twenty-five million years.' He paused. 'Haven't they?'

'Definitely. The cast figure was an advanced form and technique.'

'Then translate my words!'

Beirut grew conscious that he had been speaking aloud and the natives were following his words and the movements of his mouth with a rapt intensity.

'Translate,' Autoga said. 'That would be *chtsuyop,* no?'

'You must speak subvocally,' the computer said. 'They are beginning to break down your language.'

'They're doing it in their heads, you stupid pile of electronic junk,' Beirut said. 'I have to use you! And you think I can pose as a god with these people?'

'I will translate because you command it and my override circuits cannot circumvent your command,' the computer said.

'A computer!' Autoga said. 'He has a translating computer in his vehicle! How quaint.'

'Translate,' Beirut said.

Sounds issued from the lingua pack.

'I am vindicated,' Autoga said. 'And you will note that I did it on nothing more than the design of the vehicle and the cut of his clothing, plus the artifacts, of course.'

'This is why you are in command,' Choon said. 'I suffer your correction and instruction abysmally.'

Autoga looked at Beirut. 'What will you require-other than the repair of your vehicle?'

'Don't you want to know where I'm from?' Beirut asked.

'You are from somewhere,' Autoga said. 'It has been theorized that other suns and worlds might exist

beyond the hydrogen cloud from which we were formed. Your presence suggests this theory is true.'

'But ... but don't you want contact with us ... trade, exchange ideas?'

'It is now apparent,' Autoga said, 'that the empty universe theory has been disproved. However, a primitive such as yourself, even you must realize such interchange would be pointless.'

'But we ... '

'We well know that the enclosure of our universe has forced us in upon ourselves,' Choon said. 'If that's what you were going to say?'

'He was going into boring detail about what he has to offer us,' Autoga said. 'I suggest we get about doing what has to be done. Spispi, you and Tura take care of the computer in his vehicle. Choon and I will ... '

'What're you doing?' Beirut asked. He leaped to his feet. At least, he thought he leaped to his feet, but in a moment he grew conscious that he was still sitting on the ground, the five natives facing him, staring.

'They are erasing some of my circuits!' the computer wailed. 'A magneto-gravitic field encloses me and the ... aroo, tut-tut, jingle bells, jingle bells.'

'This is very interesting,' Autoga said presently. 'He has made contact with a civilization of our level at some previous time. You will note the residual inhibition against lengthy travel away from his home. We'll make the inhibition stronger this time.'

Beirut stared at the chattering natives with a sense of deja vu. The speaker in his neck remained silent. His lingua pack made no sound. He felt movement in his mind like spiders crawling along his nerves.

'Who do you suppose he could've contacted?' Choon asked.

'Not one of our groups, of course,' Autoga said. 'Before we stay out in the light of s'Chareecha and plant ourselves for the next seeding, we must start a flow of inquiry.'

'Who will talk to us about such things?' Choon asked. 'We are mere herdsmen.'

'Perhaps we should listen more often to the entertainment broadcasts,' Spispi said. 'Something may have been said.'

'We may be simple herdsmen whose inquiry will not go very far,' Autoga said, 'but this has been an experience to afford us many hours of conversation. Imagine having the empty universe theory refuted!'

Beirut awoke in the control seat of his ship, smelled in the stink of the place his own sweat touched by the chemistry of fear. A glance at the instrument panel showed that he had succumbed to the push and turned ship. He was headed back out of the cloud without having found anything in it.

An odd sadness came over Beirut.

I'll find my planet some day,he thought.*I'll have alabaster buildings and sheltered waters for sailing*

and long stretches of prairie for game animals.

The automatic log showed turn-around at ninety-four days.

I stood it longer than Bingaling,he thought.

He remembered the conversation with Bingaling then and the curious reference to a previous attempt at the cloud.*Maybe I did,* he thought.*Maybe I forgot because the push got so tough.*

Presently, his mind turned to thoughts of Capella Base, of going home. Just the thought of it eased the pressures of the push which was still faintly with him. The push ... the push - it had beaten him again. Next trip out, he decided, he'd head the opposite direction, see what was to be found out there.

Almost idly then Beirut wondered about the push.*Why do we call it the push?* he wondered.*Why, don't we call it the pull?* The question interested him enough to put it to the computer. 'Tut-tut,' the computer said.