

Sculptor

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Jim Frentrup, staring down at the planet he'd intended never to mention, let alone revisit, seethed with a mixture of feelings. There was dread, crawling icily up his spine. There was the futile rage at this ship's hardeyed crew and their master, Trux Madden. There was self-loathing for having piloted them here, even at gun-point. There was the older shame he'd buried inside himself for eight years, since he'd lost an exploration crew on this planet, smuggled out the beautiful and strange little figurines he couldn't resist, falsified the ship's logs, lied through the hearings, and been permitted to resign his commission without official disgrace.

He no longer owned the figurines, and had never shared in the fantastic wealth they now represented. It must have cost terrifically, even by Madden's standards, to trace them back to Jim, piercing the careful series of aliases. He glanced over at the man. Madden's square face showed none of the excitement he must feel; Madden's hands, brutal despite manicuring, were steady. He met Jim's eyes and said softly, "What are you waiting for?"

Jim tried to hold his own hands steady as he reached for the controls. As the ship dropped, he realized with surprise that among his other feelings was a hint of relief. Maybe now some of the gaps in his memory would be filled in.

He landed where he had before, beside a fallen obelisk on the wide rock-and-fill dam at a constriction of the valley. They made him sit where he was for half an hour, then Madden came to him and said, "I want you to go outside and walk around for a while. Don't get more than a hundred yards from the ship."

Jim got up woodenly and went.

They'd burned clear the scattered trees and brush from the middle part of the dam. He picked a way through smoking ashes to the downward side and looked out over the old ruins.

A few rabbit things moved among them furtively, and there were silent gray birds, but he saw nothing bigger. Whoever the people had been (there wasn't even a skeleton, but stone statues showed them to have looked like long-tailed sheep standing erect), they'd built for more permanency than they'd stayed to enjoy. Thick rock walls still stood, though adobe and timbers remained only as traces. The city had stretched the length of the dam, just below it, protected by levees from the two rivers that spilled around each end of the dam to curve down the sides of the widening valley. That had been choice bottom land ; and from aloft, traces of the irrigation

system could still be seen.

There'd been terraces along both valley slopes, too, for miles above and below the dam. Whatever crops had grown on terraces and bottom land were long swallowed up by the natural flora, which ran heavily to squat trees with coarse cinnamon-colored bark and twisting horizontal limbs that supported lacelike sprays of blue-green foliage.

So far he hadn't seen anything he didn't remember. He turned and walked to the lake side of the dam. The water was clear and placid. Some flattish things drifted slowly above the water. A pair moved toward him and he hoped he remembered rightly that they were harmless and almost mindless. They were like transparent pancakes, thin but three feet across, with thickened centers where the vitals were and from which radiated cartilaginous ribs. They flew by scooping air and forcing it downward and rearward. They circled him leisurely, then came close and nudged at his head as gently as butterflies. Finally, having tasted or smelled, they drifted out over the lake again.

He glanced up. The two dots in the sky, barely visible, would be a pair of ships maintaining a telescope watch of the ground. The other three would be farther out, on guard, though the chances of anyone else being in this sector of space were vanishingly small. Madden didn't take even small chances unless he had to.

A voice blared from the ship, "Frentrup. Come back in now." He turned and walked slowly toward the ladder, his anger stirring anew at the preemptory order.

He hesitated before climbing up, with a strange reluctance. Partly, it might be that he didn't look forward to being caged again, nor to the ship's scrubbed atmosphere with its faint smell of isopropanol and formaldehyde, after the planet's spicy air. Mostly, though, he realized, it had something to do with the formless dread. Somehow, the ship didn't seem much protection. He wanted to be outside where he could see what was coming.

Madden took him into the ship's salon, which was luxurious (not surprisingly, since this was a pirated and re-fitted luxury yacht). The outlaw sat relaxed, a beamer pistol stuffed casually in a pocket. He said, "Mix yourself a drink if you like."

Jim ignored the invitation.

"The original offer still stands," said Madden. "Work with me, and you can have your pick of any ship I've got, and a bank account you can live on comfortably for the rest of your life. You ought to realize by now you've got nothing to gain by holding out."

Jim said wearily, "I've told you a hundred times I'm not holding out. I just don't remember."

Madden eyed him for a minute, without expression. "The things are solid diamond, not cast nor ground. That means some kind of fast crystallization, which implies a technology beyond ours. I can see, as you told me, that there was only an agricultural civilization here. So, either you didn't get the things here, or you got them here from other visitors. If you're protecting some alien race, you're wasting your stubbornness; I'm not going to repeat anything I hear from you. Self-interest will keep me quiet. And I only want a few of the things. Too many would break the price."

Jim scowled at him. "Don't you think I've figured out those angles? What sense would it make for me to hold out now? I'm in your hands. If I knew anything more I'd be eager to tell it, and make myself as useful as possible. That would be my only chance to survive. All I know is, I think I got them here."

"It's a pity you didn't keep your ship's true records."

"I can quote them to you if you insist," Jim told him, "word for word and figure for figure. They won't mean any more to you than they do to me."

Madden shifted to a more comfortable position. "It's hard for me to believe you sent your whole crew out in a bunch, while you stayed alone in the ship. The X-Corps doesn't operate that way. Nobody does."

"It's no easier for me to believe. I told you I had some kind of a fever."

"Well, we've checked the air and the ground, and there are no germs around here that could infect a man. Obviously it wasn't any plague that wiped out the natives, or there'd be skeletons, at least. What's your theory about that?"

Jim shrugged. "Your theory of advanced aliens is as good as any. For all I know, they may come back in five minutes and take us too." He enjoyed Madden's scowl.

Madden reached for a small communicator, and said into it, "Bring in the movies." To Jim he said, "I'm going to assume for the moment that you're telling the truth. I want to show you something."

Two men came in and set up a translucent screen and a small projector. One touched a stud and a colored movie appeared on the screen. It was a shot of Jim coming back to the ship,

less than half an hour ago, evidently taken by some hidden camera outside. It ran through once at normal speed, then started over in slow motion and kept repeating.

“Notice anything?” Madden asked softly.

Jim frowned. “Well, I remember hesitating before I stepped onto the ladder.”

“Do you remember,” Madden asked, “why you turned and looked up the lake? You weren’t looking at anything nearby.”

Jim clamped his mouth on a retort and watched the screen once more. Now that he noticed it, there was an instant when he turned his head and stared. The nameless dread rose in him again. He fought to control his face and said, “No. I’ll . . . have to think about it.”

Madden said, “Well, you’ll have a few minutes, then we’re going up-lake to see if that jogs your memory.”

If only the dream-memories would stop billowing around in his skull and let him concentrate on what was real! He remembered bending to pick up small objects somewhere beside this lake. Had those been the figurines? All he could say for sure was that when he’d come out of the delirium the seven figurines had been in the ship; each representing, with an exquisite and inexplicable art, one of the dead crewmen. He hadn’t been able to resist them then. Would he have, if he’d known that men would be murdered for them, fortunes squandered on mere rumors of them? He doubted it. There was more to them than mere monetary value.

His thoughts were wrenched back to the present as a gunman banged on his compartment door. “Madden wants you outside.”

Madden and four of his men waited, armed with beamer rifles and sidearms. Madden said, “We’ll go up the left side of the lake. That’s where you were looking. You lead.”

Jim, unwilling to show his fear, turned and went along the dam. He noted that one of the ships overhead had come lower and now drifted slowly with them.

To get to the side of the valley they had to cross the river at the end of the dam. He went down into the ruins and shoved through brush to where the stream spread out and was shallow. Madden and three of the men followed him closely, while one stayed a little behind. Jim found a way across, from boulder to boulder, which he seemed half to remember, then turned upstream, trying to fight off the dread that threatened to paralyze

his mind.

This was late summer, and a sandy strip lay exposed between the water and the crumbling wall of the lowest terrace. Now and then they had to push through reeds. The urgency of his situation was pressing in upon Jim now. He had little hope that Madden would let him live, however cooperative he was. It would be so much more logical to shut him up permanently. Now and then he glanced back. After half an hour's walk. Madden was showing impatience.

Then, a few minutes later, they rounded a bend and he saw a wooded promontory ahead. He paused, remembering suddenly that an old ramp came down there, across the terraces from the valley's rim.

He found that he remembered the ramp in detail. Once, it had been made firm with heavy blocks of stone, and probably paved over. Some of the stones were exposed now, and some were displaced, and twisting gullies had formed, where water came down in the wet season. Along the edges, much soil had washed down from the terraces to form the promontory, which projected a hundred feet or so into the lake and was wooded to the tip.

Hope leaped in him. If he could get among the trees . . . But as they neared, Madden said, "Hold on a second." He was holding a communicator to his ear, listening to something from the ship overhead. Presently he lowered the communicator and looked at Jim. "They say there's something peculiar just ahead."

They punctured Jim's hopes by making him wade around the promontory instead of crossing it. As soon as he was beyond, he saw the thing up the shore.

It was a cluster of large plants, on a mound at the water's edge that looked too regular to be natural. There were two dozen or more vertical stalks, each three or four inches thick at the base. Every eighteen or twenty inches up each stalk was a disc-shaped horizontal leaf, two feet in radius. Birds and other small creatures rested on the leaves. As he stared, a thing like a frog with flying membranes leaped from a leaf to soar out over the lake and finally plop in.

He knew that this was the source of his dread, but somehow he didn't feel any urge to flee. It was as if it were something he could surely outrun, if he had plenty of room to run in, and he wasn't afraid to approach fairly closely. He did that, staring at the fantastic blossoms fifteen feet or more above ground. They were like monster orchids; some solid hues, some striped or dappled. All colors, bright or modest, were there. Each bloom sent up a number of thin wands, also multi-colored, that coiled and twisted with unmistakable life. Several of

the flat transparent things drifted about the blossoms, and the wands teased at them playfully. There was a strong perfume in the air, like snapdragons but sharper.

He stopped forty feet away, tingling with excitement. One of the gunmen came up beside him, stared, then suddenly grunted and took a step forward, pointing. "Look! Among the stalks!"

The glittering thing was half-buried in the dirt, but it must have been the size of Jim's forearm. It was a statuette of some kind of animal. Eight years before, aerial pictures had showed herds of grass-eaters and various predators, on the rolling lands above the valley's rim, but this didn't look like any of those. Jim itched to hold the thing in his hands, but restrained himself. The gunman wasn't so cautious. He took a step forward . . .

Jim must have known what to expect, subconsciously, for he whirled and ran, bent over, protecting his face and hands. Madden shouted something. A few small pellets or seeds (Jim visualized a shower of them behind him) flew past him.

The gunman cried out, then, as Jim turned, chuckled sheepishly. "Scared me," he said, wiping at his cheek, "I thought — "

Suddenly, his face twisted in terror. He uttered something between a sob and a scream, and began to run. He stumbled into the water, went down and floundered, mouthing odd sounds. Madden and the other three were moving toward him, and Madden was shouting into the communicator. Then the stricken man stood up and waded back to shore, silently, face slack. Ignoring the others, he walked like a zombie toward the plants.

Madden yelled at him but he gave no sign of hearing. A shimmer began to form around the stalks. The blossoms drooped and shrank, withdrawing into the ground. The shimmer grew, broke away, formed a cloud as of very fine mist. It drifted to meet the zombie-like man.

Madden sent a rifle beam into it, causing an agitation, but the cloud kept coming. It settled over the man, who contorted and began to struggle. His mouth was open as if he were screaming, but no sound escaped. His clothes began to char and smoke. His skin turned red, then black; puffed and blistered; showed pink cooked flesh where it split. He was dead now, hanging suspended in the cloud and turning slowly as if weightless. The cloud moved back and hovered over the mound. More rifle beams hit it, but didn't seem to hurt it much. A heavy ship's beam came down, nicked it, and did seem to hurt.

Madden shouted into the communicator, "Don't shoot!", evidently concerned for the statuettes. There was only a charred skeleton left in the cloud, with a few metal objects that

glowed red. Then the bones were gone, and the metal vanished, and there was only one small point of incandescence. The cloud let that fall to the dirt, then began to split up and seep into the ground. Soon it was gone.

The incandescent thing, about the size of a man's little finger, was cooling. Jim knew it would be a figurine with all the vanished features perfectly etched on its face.

Madden, eyes deadly, held his rifle steady on Jim as they backed down the shore. "So you suckered us after all," he said softly. "This is far enough. Talk."

Jim realized that now his only chance was to pretend knowing more than he did. Otherwise, he'd be no more use to Madden. "It happened so fast," he said. "I didn't expect him to go closer. I — you can outrun the things. I was going to tell you that."

Madden grinned scornfully. "It won't wash. I'm not going to be so gentle with you from now on. Are there more of them?"

Jim nodded. "We'd better not stay here."

Madden glanced around, then up at the ship which was settling toward them. "Where would they be? Among the trees?"

Jim thought fast. Instead of answering, he let his eyes flick nervously toward the lake. If Madden had the ship pick them up here, Jim was finished. If he could get Madden to move back to the promontory . . .

Madden looked back at the mound, where the statuettes lay unmoved. "Go get them," he said.

Plain death, from a rifle beam for instance, Jim could face without panic; but it took all his will power to get his legs moving back toward the mound. Would the thing come out again, or was it sated for the time being? Had one of these plants consumed all seven of his men? He stepped gingerly onto the mound, which looked freshly plowed now. He picked up the big statuette first, then hurried to get the five others of smaller animals and the figurine of the man, which was barely warm now. He retreated, stuffing into pockets all but the biggest one, which he carried. When he was a safe distance away he raised the thing to his ear, ignoring Madden, and thumped it with a finger. It rang like the finest crystal glassware, throbbingly, persistently. The sound permeated his mind, and it was as if he dreamed . . .

Summer, and sun warm on my fur, and good green leaves to eat. The young of the

grasseaters frisk about and make bleating sounds, for they too feel the goodness of being alive. They'd better beware of that predator that crouches at the edge of the trees, waiting for them to blunder near. He glances warily at me, for he knows the might of my big taloned paws and the crushing weight of my body and the grinding strength of my big teeth.

But what is that, drifting across the grass? One of the Things! I must run! But oh, I am a slow creature, and my limbs are weak with fright, and now it is upon me! Oh — OOOH!

Jim thrust the thing away from him and stood trembling and sweating. The agony and terror were so vivid . . . He looked up and found Madden watching him intently.

Jim's mind went into high gear. He pretended nervousness, glancing behind him and up the lake. When he reached Madden he stopped, but acted reluctant. Madden looked around. To pick them up here, the ship would have to land in the water. Madden nodded to him to start back toward the promontory. Jim moved, pulse thumping.

Now if they only didn't insist on his wading around it again . . . He hadn't acted afraid of the water the first time; would Madden see through his act now? There was one difference. He carried the statuettes now. He turned, made a vague gesture of offering them to Madden, trying to look frightened and dazed. Madden grinned. "You carry them, in case the owner comes after them."

At the promontory he started out along it slowly, eyes on the water. He glanced at Madden and stopped. Madden said, "Go on across," and moved up, with the three men, until the rifles were nearly touching Jim. Jim was sick with hopelessness. How could he hope for anything?

Then he noticed that the ship was following overhead, and that its shadow drifted along just behind them. His heart jumped. Maybe . . . But he needed some other distraction, to set that up.

He climbed the side of the promontory and picked a way among the trees. He pretended to stumble and, leaning for a moment against a tree-trunk, unobtrusively got one of the smaller statuettes out of a pocket. He went on, holding the thing in front of him. He was nearing the other side of the promontory; he could see water ahead. It would have to be now.

He forced his way through some brush, and, as soon as it concealed him below the

shoulders, flipped the statuette ahead of him. Would it reach the water? It did, just barely. At the splash he halted and crouched as if startled. He half-turned his head slowly, gave Madden what he hoped was a terrified look. Then he let his eyes shoot past the men and go wide. "Look out!" The ship's shadow fell upon the trees. They whirled, rifles swinging up, and he was running, bent so the brush would hide him, up the promontory, trying to put tree trunks between himself and Madden.

Madden shouted, and beams sliced around him, blasting chunks out of the trees. One scorched his right cheek and he dodged desperately and went on, legs pumping. He risked turning right, and it was lucky he did for a heavy ship's beam crashed where he'd been headed. He took the second terrace up and pushed along it as fast as the dense undergrowth would let him. He felt exultant now, though his lungs ached terribly. The trees hid him completely from overhead and from all sides; and the sound of the ship's weapons, blasting along the promontory, covered any noise he made.

Madden must have realized that, for he shouted and the firing stopped. Jim stood still for a moment, but there was a crackling of trees on fire behind him, that would mask any small noise he made. He pushed on slowly, and found a chance to climb up one more terrace. He thought he'd best get as high as he could, and as far up-lake.

For the first time, he realized that he still clutched the biggest statuette, and had the others in his pockets. Was that good or bad? If he'd dropped them in the open. Madden might take them and not bother about Jim. Now, he'd be thinking of getting them. On the other hand, maybe he wouldn't let the ships fire for fear of ruining them.

The sound of the forest fire was falling behind, but then he heard similar sounds, faintly, ahead. He stopped again and listened. The sounds were coming from all directions. Suddenly, he understood. Madden had called the other ships down, and they were etching a ring of fire around him to pen him in.

The gray birds, recognizing something wrong, were flitting back and forth in agitation. For a second Jim thought he could feel heat, then he recognized that it was only the ache in his scorched cheek. He pondered which way to go. The fire would probably bum up the slope faster than down. He climbed another terrace. Maybe he could find a cave or something, hole up and let the fire bum past him, then escape. It was only an hour to sundown. But of course the ships had floodlights.

Madden's amplified voice boomed from somewhere above the trees. "Frentrup, you haven't a chance. I'm going to make you one more offer. There's a level spot on the ramp, at the fourth terrace from the bottom, where there's no fire. Bring the statues out and leave them,

and we'll leave you here alive. That'll suit me just as well as killing you."

There was no more for fifteen minutes, while the fires got closer. Then Madden added, "Don't think I'll worry about damaging the statues. We've spotted more, and I can pick up all I want I'd just rather save the trouble. Bring the ones you've got to the ramp. We'll leave you a pistol and some supplies. Yell if you agree. We'll hear you."

No doubt they would; they'd have sound pickups aimed around. Jim didn't believe Madden would let him live, and anyway, he wasn't going to crawl for Madden. He kept looking for a cave. The valley was almost in dusk, and the glow of the fires was beginning to show. The birds were all gone, and other forest creatures were running about in fright. Something big charged by Jim, snarled, and went on.

Madden didn't speak again, and Jim went on with his search. There were hollows beneath boulders of the old terrace walls, but none looked good enough. He was getting worried; it was dark and his eyes stung from the smoke. He found one hollow that would almost do, but decided to look farther.

A few minutes later a beam crashed into the trees scant yards away, seemingly at random. Each started a fire, and each fire made the smoke worse. Desperate, he ran back to the hollow he'd rejected, knelt and scooped out dirt to make it bigger. His eyes were streaming now, and fits of coughing tied him in knots.

A beam crashed on the terrace above him, and a burning branch came down. He threw it off and rolled frantically in the moist dirt, but his clothes were burned through and there was a bad burn on his neck. He squirmed into his hole and pushed dirt up before him for protection. A big limb came down, one mass of flame, and sealed him in. He dug with fingers that bled and heaped up dirt, twisted and tried to find breathable air in the hole, but a fit of coughing seized him so that he was paralyzed.

His back stung like the devil, and his lungs felt as if a blowtorch had been turned into them. If he got through this he'd have to find mud, or some animal grease to smear on his burns. But he was beginning to feel that he wasn't going to get through. He was almost in a coma from the coughing. "Damn him!" he groaned, "Damn him! I hope he—"

Then it was as if something moved physically inside his skull, and a calm thought came, "*I'll take over now.*" Whatever was truly Jim Frentrup screamed, fought a brief desperate resistance, and was overwhelmed.

I can change safely, he thought, but I haven't enough substance to do much. I could reach

unburnt foliage, but that's such lean fare. Animals? They've all fled. The men in the ships? Too dangerous, all by myself.

He consumed parts of the Jim-body, bolstering the brain and whatever else was required for temporary life; materialized a root-tip and thrust it down into the soil; sent out thin filaments, searching. A few feet down he found an inter-colony contactroot half an inch thick. He absorbed back his other filaments and grew them into the right one until it would carry a message. *Brothers! Attend!*

Who are you? came a drowsy reply, *You feel odd.*

It is I, who entered the intelligent animal and went into the sky. Henceforth, I wish to be called Jim-entity. There is danger! There are more of the animals — they are called 'men' — and they have weapons that can hurt!

Another awareness joined in, half awake.

We are aware of them. I dined upon one. They will go away soon, in their hollow metal things that fly.

Attend! Jim-entity demanded, insistently. *There are a thousand worlds full of them, and they have weapons that can blast us to atoms! We must seize them before they go!*

They were coming full-awake now, more of them joining in. Some of them, feeling his weakness, sent power flowing along the root, and he drank it in thirstily. Then Old One came awake; he who ate little, slept much, and who, it was whispered in awe, had come long ago from the sky. His feel was amused. *So; the young traveller has returned. What did you learn beyond the sky?*

I learned much. Marvels, which there is no time to describe; and feelings, which are strange things but which I would not give up now. I have learned to love. And to hate.

Power was throbbing along the root now. He said, *I will send a few small clouds first, to enter the ships unseen, for insurance. Then we will form more clouds to carry the seeds, and try to capture all the men. We can decide later which ones to consume and which to hide in, so they will take us to others of their kind.*

Good! approved the Old One, more vigorously than anyone had ever heard him speak, *It is time we moved again. We have fallowed here long enough.*

Someone else said. *There will be many fine statues.*

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