

Spare That Tree

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I

Inspector Judson Kruger was a tanned, thickset man with stiff black hair, heavy eyebrows, and jowls to make a razor cringe. Just now, though his wide mouth was a taut line, his face was carefully immobile. So was the rest of him. He stood in a shallow wooden tray with sled-runners under it, just outside a gate in a high, wire-mesh fence. He wore a green suit and green shirt, the greenest he'd been able to find. He was hatless; also shoeless and sockless. His large feet were planted up to the ankles in soft moist loam.

The sign on the gate was repeated in several languages. The English version read, "KEEP OUT. PLANT REFUGE. OFFLIMITS TO ALL ANIMALS MASSING OVER SEVENTEEN (17.0) GRAMS."

A peculiar large machine was clattering along the roadway just inside the fence. It was long, low and flexibly jointed on eight pairs of small wheels. Elevated turrets, fore and aft, rotated, aiming batteries of eyes resembling the bottoms of beer bottles. A long proboscis swept back and forth ahead, sniffing at flowers and weeds beside the road. Other attachments hinted at other senses. Now and then a short hose would rear itself and squirt a stream of something — nutrient, Kruger guessed — at some shrub. Once a small cage elevated itself to release a swarm of insects.

On a grimmer note, folded atop the machine were various grapples. Some of them looked capable of seizing a man and throwing him over the fence.

The machine rattled out of sight. Kruger listened for a moment, glanced around quickly, and stepped from the tray, shaking loam from his feet. Seizing a short length of rope, he dragged the tray-sled toward the gate. He opened that, got the sled through and closed the gate. Hastily, he dragged the sled across the road and into the thicket beyond, then returned to obliterate the dragmarks on the road as well as he could.

He had pinpointed his objective from one of the sightseeing airbusses allowed to fly over this refuge. It was perhaps a mile from the fence, in an area that served as a stop-over for non-resident plants. He struggled through the brush, which was local flora and not closely tended, muttering various words and phrases when he encountered thorns or when the sled got snagged. Once a flitbot drifted over, and he had to hop hastily into the tray and stand still. If it saw him, it probably assumed he was some exotic plant sprouted from a stray seed. He went on.

In half an hour he reached the inner edge of the thicket and looked out over grassland, contoured in gentle slopes with irrigation pipes laid along the ridges, jetting little fountains of water. The grass was unmowed and unkempt. Spotted about the slopes were shrubs of various kinds, each with its small circle of cleared soil. Farther on were trees, their bases hidden from Kruger by intervening ridges. Among those trees was the one he sought.

A sound like several angry judges clearing their throats drew his attention to his left.

Hastily he stepped into his tray. A flitbot was moving his way, most of its eye-tentacles extended ahead of it. He saw that it was following some insect that buzzed low over the grass. On it came, rumbling ominously.

Not far from Kruger the insect lit, and the machine pounced. A vacuum-cleaner extension shot out. But the prey — a medium-sized beetle — was quicker. It zoomed upward, buzzing frantically, dodged the questing tentacle, flashed in an arc and headed for the thicket where Kruger stood.

The flitbot jerked into pursuit.

It took all Kruger's willpower to stand still. Like a homing missile, the insect shot toward him, did a loop before his horrified eyes and lit on his left cheek. Instantly, the pursuing tentacle snaked out, hit Kruger's cheek ringingly and devoured the insect with a vengeful sucking sound. Kruger heard chitin crunch somewhere in the machine's interior. He also heard his own involuntary yell, "Ouch! Damn it, you don't have to take my ear too!"

The machine turned abruptly to hover before him. "Did you say something?"

Kruger's mind wasn't working well — it was too busy restraining his legs. He stammered, "Uh, no. It was just the wind in my hai — my tassels."

The flitbot glared suspiciously. "Vegetable, animal, mineral or 'bot?"

"V-vegetable."

The machine relaxed. "Don't be shy. I can see you're new here. Lots of plants talk, you know, in one way or another. You're the first I've heard speak English, though. Why did they plant you here at the edge of the thicket?"

"I — I like it here. I get just enough sun, and I can look out over the grass. Wha-what did

that beetle do?”

The machine said grimly, “It was getting ready to nibble on a young, healthy grass blade. That kind always does, sooner or later. They never learn.” The machine chuckled. “Well, it’s fertilizer now, so we won’t complain, eh?” It suddenly clucked and sent tentacles downward. “Why, look at your poor roots! They’re half uncovered!” Crooning, it patted his feet gently, then pushed loam over them. “Are you sure you’re all right- Do you want a squirt of Nitro-Vite or anything?”

“Uh . . . not right now, thanks. I’ll just soak up a little sun.”

He waited a while, shaking, after the machine left. Then, with a thorough look around, he stepped out of the sled, lifted it and carried it ahead of him. It was an awkward burden, but he wasn’t going to drag it through the grass. His own tracks were risk enough.

He got soaked crossing irrigation pipes, and kept imagining he heard machines coming, but finally he reached the trees, put the sled down, caught his breath and began dragging the sled. Within fifteen minutes he reached the small clearing he sought. He found cover beneath hanging branches, wiggled his toes into the now-muddy loam, and stared at the lone tree in the clearing.

II

It was a lovely tree. There was no denying that. It stood perhaps twenty feet tall, symmetrical and slim, with a graceful taper. The limbs were tastefully placed around the trunk, growing out almost horizontally with a slight up-turn at the ends. The bark was smooth and neat, a pleasing cinnamon brown. The needles, a light and warm shade of green, were like long pine needles but less stiff so that they drooped in graceful curves. At the very top was a blossom — six or seven dainty upright blades, warm pink, like a maiden’s blush.

Cautiously, he reached under his soaked jacket and drew out a small camera. “Damn it. I hope the water didn’t get into this,” he muttered. He checked the setting, raised the camera to his face and peered into the viewfinder, centering on the tree.

A thing like a steel cable whipped around his wrist, knocking the camera from his grasp. “Aha!” a harsh voice growled. “Gotcha!”

This machine had sneaked up on him very quietly. It was about his own height, but broader, especially in the lower body, from which four metal legs sprouted, ending in big dislike feet

with soft padding on them. There were four tentacles at shoulder height. One of them had elongated itself to become the steely strand that gripped his wrist. The head, atop a pipelike neck, was circled with beer-bottle eyes and had various electronic gear growing from it. Kruger jerked futilely to get free. He snarled, "Let go, damn it! What the hell are *you*?"

The thing said indignantly, "I'm a robocop. Don't you see my badge? I guess, though, it don't show up so good against my stainless steel chest."

Kruger blinked. "Oh. Well, for heaven's sake let go of my, er, branch. I haven't done anything."

The machine made a sound that would go well with a sneer. "Don't pull that on *me*, Buster. We're not hicks here. The flitbot you talked to went back and found you gone and saw your tracks and radioed the alarm. Said you talk English. Uh, I talk English. Uh, I talk English pretty good myself, huh?"

"Yeah," Kruger snarled, "good as hell. What happens now?"

"We wait until the flitbot and a patrolbot get here. Then we have the trial."

The patrolbot was like the large wheeled machine Kruger had seen earlier. It was evidently present mainly to provide physical equipment for the trial. It did join, though, in the recital of basic axioms.

The three machines intoned, "ANIMALS WALK ON THINGS CALLED FEET." There was a pause, then the flitbot said in a kind voice, "You may sit down. Prisoner, if your feet are tired."

Kruger looked around for a level spot and lowered himself to it. "Thanks. I have been on my feet for a long time." Then he saw his mistake and made a move to jump up. But it was too late. "The hell with it!"

The flitbot sighed. "It does realize, subconsciously at least, that it's an animal. Well . . ."

"ANIMALS MAKE ARTIFACTS."

The flitbot held up Kruger's camera. "Is this an artifact?" Kruger glared. "How the hell would I know? I don't carry a, a encyclopedia around with me." The robocop put in, "It's got data engraved on it. It ain't vegetable, animal, mineral or 'bot, so I say it's an artifact."

"Very well," the flitbot said. "Next Axiom."

“ANIMALS (UGH) EAT PLANTS. (ALSO, GOODY! SOMETIMES EACH OTHER.)”

“Prisoner, do you eat your own kind?”

Kruger jumped to his feet in disgust. “Of course not! Look; I demand to see the Terran consul or somebody!”

“There is no Terran consul here. Do you eat minerals? Or robots? I thought not. You must, then, eat plants.” The flitbot sobbed. “Let’s leave the subject. Ready:”

“ANIMALS TAKE OXYGEN FROM THE AIR AND PUT BACK CARBON DIOXIDE. THIS IS THE ONLY GOOD THING THEY DO, EXCEPT, STRANGELY, ON RARE OCCASIONS, TENDING PLANTS OR ROBOTS.”

The patrolbot suddenly shot out grapples and seized Kruger. “Hey!” he yelled. “What the devil — ” A large cylinder of clear glass or plastic popped from a segment of the big machine. The grapples stuffed him in, and clamped a lid on. He beat at the lid with his fists, but it didn’t yield. He gave up. Exertion would only make him suffocate quicker.

But there were various flexible hoses attached to the other end of the cylinder. Maybe . . .

The lid opened. A grapple reached in, seized him by the coat collar, hauled him out and dumped him on the ground. He rolled over and sat up, sputtering.

“Mm-hm,” the flitbot said, “it absorbs oxygen, all right. And gives off carbon dioxide. Animal, then, by all reasonable tests. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” the other two machines chorused.

The grapples picked him up again and lifted him to a flat platform atop the patrolbot “Damn it,” he yelled, “now what are you doing?”

“Weighing you,” the flitbot said. “If we didn’t make absolutely sure you mass over seventeen grams, some judge somewhere would doubtless set aside the verdict and order a new trial.”

Finally they put him back on the ground. The patrolbot said, “It’d make a nice batch of fertilizer.”

The flitbot sighed regretfully. “I’m afraid we can’t do that. This creature is clearly insane. Though it knows deep down that it’s an animal, its behavior shows that on the conscious level it thinks it’s a plant. About all we can do is eject it with a stern warning. All right?” The

patrolbot muttered something. The robocop said, “Well, if you think so.”

“Patrolbot,” the flitbot said, “do your duty.”

The grapples seized Kruger again and held him aloft, shouting and struggling. The big machine turned and rattled to the edge of the clearing and along a road. At the end of the trip Kruger discovered that he’d been right about the grapples the first time he saw them. They could throw a man over the fence.

He limped into town, distributing glares impartially to the bizzare assortment of aliens who stared at his disheveled clothing and bare feet. Finally he reached a communications booth, wedged himself into it and pulled the door shut violently. He leaned toward the pickup and snarled into it, “English. Voice transmission only; fastest subetheric routing. I want the planet Earth, Solar System. Terran Department of Justice, Interstellar Division, Commissioner Stanzlec. No, I won’t spell it. Just put the goddam call through.”

There was a period of clicking, buzzing, whistling and popping. Then a sultry contralto voice drawled, “Interstellar Division. To whom did you wish to speak to, please? Whom is calling, please?”

“This is Inspector Kruger. I want to speak to the Old Man. Who the hell are you ? Another new switchboard girl?”

There was a languid pause. Then, “Oh, Inspector Kruger. I’ve heard of you. I’m Cherie Grapplewell. Just a moment, please. I’ll, mm, give you the connection you want.”

He waited. Presently his chief’s voice came on. “Kruger, my boy! How are you? Everything hotsy-totsy, I hope? What may I do for you?”

Kruger snarled, “Mainly, I wanted to tell you what you can do with this job, once I get this assignment finished. If I ever do.”

There was a pause. “Gracious. One of those moods. But you sound sober, and that’s something. I confess. I can’t imagine what’s so difficult about finding one stolen tree.”

Kruger sneered at the pickup. “You can’t, eh? I suppose you didn’t know there was anything out of the ordinary about this theft.”

“Ooh. You are huffy! Of course I knew it was an important tree. A favorite of a planetary ruler, an Emperor Brekeke, or something like that. But with the photograph we gave you,

and the leads, I thought surely Haven't you been able to trace it at all?"

"Hell yes, I've been able to trace it! I got within fifty yards of it. But there hasn't been one hint of who stole it, or where he is now. And before I even begin to reclaim it, I have to take a new photograph and register that with the local authorities and send copies to the Emperor. He has to certify that it's his tree and that it was stolen without his permission, expressed or implied, and that if it's extradited it'll be given a good home and not mistreated. There's something damn odd about this whole case. Right now, the tree's in a Plant Refuge, and — "

"In a *what*?"

"A Plant Refuge, damn it! What I called you for is to see if you can apply any pressure anywhere to help me get into it legally. Half this planet's forbidden to, uh, animals. I've been trying all kinds of subterfuge, but "

"Kruger! Are you sure you haven't been drinking?"

Kruger counted to ten in basic Anglo-Saxon. Finally he choked out, "Just get me some backing!"

The commissioner said severely, "Now see here, Inspector. I had my doubts about assigning you to the job. If there'd been anyone available at the moment with even a modicum of tact or subtlety Terragov wants very badly to establish firmer relations with Emperor Brekeke, which is why we've undertaken this little thing for him, on the quiet. I warn you I will not tolerate any high-handed tactics. That planet you're on is in the Moogan Protectorate and, heavens, you know how delicate our relations with them are.

"I did ask our ambassador to see if the Moogans could help you. I believe an old friend of yours is the Moogan Regent in that sector. Mum something . . . long name"

Kruger groaned and broke the connection.

He quickly reached for the door, but the speaker-grill emitted a chime. "Yeah?"

"Inspector Kruger? Emergency Contacts. Please turn on the visio pickup."

He muttered an oath, but complied. There was a gasp from the invisible operator. "Oh! Is that what humans look like? I — I've been holding a call from Governor-Regent Mummumnoonogog. He demands to speak to you."

III

Mummumnoonogog — Mum for short — was a typical Moogan, humanoid but so muscular he looked like two bodies occupying the same space. His jaw seemed to thrust out of the viewscreen. “There you are! Listen, Kruger. I’ve tried to remind myself you’re just a cop trying to do his job. But the last time I saw you I wanted to make pemmican of you, and it wouldn’t take much to revive the wish. My itinerary takes me near there, and I’m swinging over especially to see if I can catch you at anything. Now, I want you to go to your hotel and wait. I’ll be there in a couple of days. I won’t tell you when. And you’d better not let me find you more than two blocks from your hotel. Understand?” The Moogan held up two truncheonlike fingers. “One, two. Two blocks.”

Kruger tried not to cringe. “Yes, sir. Uh, Governor. There’s this stolen article, on the planet here — ”

Mum showed a smile that would have made a shark shudder. “I don’t care if somebody’s stolen the Crab Nebula. No nonsense from you, See?”

“Y-yes, sir. I see.”

The screen went dark. Kruger sat a minute staring idly at his bare feet. They were scratched and swollen and muddy. Finally he snarled, stood up, left the booth and limped toward his hotel.

It was reassuring, if a little painful, to wear shoes again. He spent the next forenoon limping about the area vouchsafed him. He pondered whether two blocks might include the far sides of the limiting street. Probably not, in Mum’s eyes.

He wandered into an all-species lunchroom and ate, more or less — after almost hysterically refusing a lovely green salad. Then he walked some more, scowling at the buildings he’d already passed a dozen times. Finally he stood on a corner, teetering back and forth on his sore feet, watching the assorted aliens stream by in equally assorted vehicles. He was about to go back to the hotel and get drunk, when a hoarse, dry, rather high-pitched voice whispered, “Half a mo, guvner.”

He turned, startled. “Uh, I beg your pardon. Were you speaking to me?”

What the alien made him think of was a fox. Not that it could possibly be related to the Terran species. For one thing, it was tall, even on all fours. Its pert, erect-eared, fur-tufted

face was level with Kruger's shoulder. And it very very short foreand-aft — as if a fox, monstrously big to begin with, had been somehow squeezed together and upward until its hind-paws stood only inches from the forepaws. But it *looked* like a fox.

It winked slyly. "Wasn't I just? Speakin t' yer, I mean. Or praps I has the wrong chap. Praps yer eyent Inspector Kruger spyin' after the tree wot's been swiped from Is Ighness o' the planet Koshkush. If I has the wrong man, I'll just sye me pardons, guvner, an' be on me wye." The creature made a move.

"No — wait! I'm Kruger. How the devil did you — "

The alien winked again. "Oh, blokes like me has a wye o' earin things. Wot's it worth t' yer, t' ear somethin yer oughter know?"

Kruger studied the sharp features. He had little to lose. "How can I tell until I hear it?"

"Coo, guvner. Eyent we the cautious ones? This eyent goin t' cost yer no blinkin fortune. I'll make yer a real bargain, sort o' as a sample o' me services. Sye ten credits?"

Wruger shrugged mentally. He was on a pretty good expense account, this trip. He got out his wallet and extracted the necessary currency. "Here. Now what ought I to know?"

The alien reached with a long foreleg, took the money deftly in its paw and tucked it into what looked like a natural pouch in the fur of his chest. "I'm fair obliged, guvner. Ear it is: them as stole the Koshkush tree has got the wind up. They're fixin' t' move it somewheres else on the planet. Some plyce visitors eyent so blinkin likely to sneak in. I wouldn't doubt they'll do it right after this igh mackamuck Mum gets ear, so yer sure t' be occupied. Now. Eyent that somethin yer oughter know?"

Kruger grunted. It certainly was. If they did transplant the tree somewhere else — the machine could undoubtedly do it — he might never find it again, even if Mum didn't ship him home poste-haste.

He realized the alien was still standing there, as if waiting. He eyed it with interest. "Is there more?"

"Might be, guvner. Somethin might be done. Cost a bit o' the foldin, though. Guess I'd oughter interduce meself. Raynud Raynud, o' the planet Heath. Bit o' a dealer, if I might sye it. This an that. But seein as how yer keyent go more than three blocks from yer hotel"

"Two."

“Two, was it? Coo, things do get distorted. Hinders yer activities, don’t it? A blinkin pity. Course, now, there’s more than one blinkin hotel in town, eyent there?”

Something like a small grenade exploded in Kruger’s mind. He reached out and grasped a handful of pelt at the alien’s shoulder. “I don’t know what your idea is, er, Raynud, but I like the way you think! Start by telling me what hotel to move to.”

The alien grinned. “The foldin, guvner? The foldin?”

Kruger hesitated only an instant. “I think we can reach an understanding.”

“Good, now. We has t’ get yer within two blocks o me cousin’s factory.”

The sign outside the factory read, “GENERAL ’BOTS, LTD.” Kruger stood openmouthed and watch a crew of huge creatures like muscular land-going octopi put finishing touches on a brand-new patrolbot. Five of them seized it, roared out in unison, “Yo Ho Ho Heave!” and, with an awesome bunching and writhing of tentacles, tossed the machine up lightly onto a rack. Then, tentacles flashing, they began putting on the wheels.

In ten minutes the thing was done. One of the assemblers glided liquidly to the tail end and twisted something. The machine came to life. Its beerbottle eyes swiveled. It seemed to cringe from the octopi. One of the latter — the foreman, no doubt, as he’d done no work — rumbled something to the machine and pointed. It dipped its forepart, rolled obediently down a pair of rails to the ground and rattled over to park itself in line with several identical machines.

Raynud Raynud was tugging at Kruger’s sleeve. “Come on, guvner. Me cousin’s wytin.”

An apparent twin of the alien greeted them in the office. “Delighted, what? Earth, eh? Heard a lot about the place. Been meaning to pop out and have a look-o, when I get the chance. Bit of all right, this English; and spreading like wildfire. Do you have any other languages on Earth?”

“Uh, well, a few.”

“Fancy! Well, old chap. Raynie’s told me about your difficulty. Shouldn’t wonder if we can just take care of it. Bit of a rush, eh? Put the night crew on it. Have the thing ready bright

and early. Never was too keen on that Moogan chap, anyway. Not soft-spoken at all.” Kuger stared out the window at the line of motionless patrolbots. “I suppose the two of you can estimate the chances better than I can. And it’s a lot more than I’d hoped for. I was going to content myself with a good color photograph. Uh, you’re *sure* one of your machines can really uproot the tree without damaging it and bring it out?”

“Oh, no question, old top. Special fittings and all that. Matter of fact But you’re not interested in how the dashed tree got there in the first place, are you. Stick to the present game, eh?” The manufacturer smiled. “Beastly poor show if that Moogan chap breezed in a day early, and you popping about outside your quarantine.” His cousin put in, “Faint heart never won no blinkin barmaid, I always sye.”

Kruger peered harder at the machines outside. Something was stirring in his mind. “Lots of room inside those things?”

“Oh, ample. Ample.”

“Uh . . . would there be room for a couch, and maybe a chair? And, er, facilities?”

The manufacturer eyed him. “Shouldn’t wonder. Why?”

“Well, could you install them? And paint a sign on the front of the machine? I might not have to break quarantine.”

The two aliens were watching him narrowly. “How, old chap, might that sign read?”

“Refuge Hotel. Weekly rates.”

Raynud Raynud lifted a forepaw and poked Kruger delightedly in the ribs. “Coo, guvner! You eyent half slippery!”

IV

Inside the refuge, the false patrolbot bumped and rattled along the road. Kruger, sweating at the task of driving, kept glancing nervously at the small computer-screen before him. If some other machine radioed him some message, he had to think up a quick answer for his own vehicle to translate into ’botese. He’d passed several robocops and flitbots, but beyond casual glances they hadn’t paid any attention.

He had to admit the Raynud’s idea was fundamentally sounder than his own earlier one.

Why disguise yourself as a plant, when you could disguise yourself as one of the guardian machines?

He rounded a turn and saw beside the road a very strange creature with a thumb raised in an unmistakable gesture. A suitcase rested on the ground.

At first startled glance, he thought the thing was a gigantic frog or toad. But it was obviously intelligent. He perspired harder. Dare he dare pick up a hitchhiker? Dare he, on the other hand, pass it by? It must be highly privileged, to be here at all.

He braked to a stop and opened the hatch.

It wasn't until the thing was inside that he saw his error. He stared in dismay at what he'd taken for feet. They were *roots*. To be sure, they splayed out nicely, like toes, but they were obviously capable of thrusting into the ground, for anchorage and sustenance. And the rough green skin was . . . bark.

Perhaps, though, he hoped desperately, the thing wasn't all plant. The eyes and the mouth looked almost animal.

The being eyed him impatiently. "Well? Are you the proprietor? Do you have a vacancy?"

Kruger shook himself from his trance. "Uh . . . there's just the one couch"

"Well," the thing said coldly, "do I look as if I need two? Proprietor or clerk, stir yourself and fetch my luggage. If it's payment you're hesitating about, here." It took from beneath its bark a fat wad of orange credit notes, peeled one off carelessly and thrust it at Kruger.

Kruger climbed out, hastily grabbed the valise, brought it in and closed the hatch. "I — I'm afraid we aren't very luxurious here. You see, I —"

The thing bestowed upon him a gracious smile. "Quite all right. At least, everything seems new and clean. And I'm travelling quietly, in any case. Don't want to be seen, you know." It settled itself comfortably on the couch. "You're animal, aren't you? I suppose, with the scarcity of help"

Kruger climbed back into the driver's seat and sat for a moment, blinking. Then, because he didn't know what else to do, he drove on.

His guest was taking a keen interest in the manual controls, peering past Kruger at them.

“Fellow, this is a passing strange establishment you have here. A mobile inn, I can appreciate. But why that mishmash of apparati? What are those three hand wheels at the top, for instance?”

“Uh, those are the digger controls, sir.”

“Digger controls? What in heaven’s name has an innkeeper to do with digging?”

Kruger improvised desperately, “Well . . . you see, sir . . . some of our patrons lack the power of locomotion. Sort of, you might say, rooted in one spot. Ha, ha.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Hm.” The being seemed to ponder for a minute. Then it chuckled. “Quite. Oh, quite. You can’t imagine . . .”

Kruger drove on. Presently the vehicle emerged into the clearing he sought. He got out of his seat and turned — and found himself staring into the muzzles of a compact but deadly-looking energy-pistol.

The thing that held the weapon stared at him intently now. “Just don’t make any foolish moves, fellow. Do exactly as I say, and possibly I’ll let you live, though I can’t think why. Turn this vehicle around and back it slowly toward that tree. Start digging it up. Then, handling it very gently — and I hope for your sake you know your job well — uproot it and stow it on top of this inn or vehicle. Or wherever you stow things. Then turn around and go back the way you came. If anything speaks to us, say whatever you must to get us unhindered out of this Refuge. Falter, and you die.”

Kruger felt a tide of crimson mounting his face. He let out an inarticulate sound. *No, no*; he screamed inwardly. *Not even I can have luck this bad!* But he didn’t see how he could doubt it. He’d apparently blundered into the very hands of the criminal who’d stolen the tree.

His mind darted about like a mouse in a cat’s lair. He stammered, stalling desperately for time, “Uh, the tree from — from Koshkush?”

His captor smiled frigidly. “Let us not play games. My patience is limited.”

Slowly, with shaking hands, Kruger reached for the steering-wheel. What mortified him wasn’t so much the desperate plight he was in, but that he’d been such a complete fool. Well, he thought bitterly, it wasn’t the first time. But it might be the last. He got the vehicle turned and backed it toward the tree; stopped a few feet away and stared unhappily at the digger-controls. He’d had precious little instruction. He sighed and took hold of a hand-

wheel. Fortunately, the viewports let him see what he was doing. A huge awl-like thing rose on its derrick, tilted forward

There was a sound as of angry giant hornets. Gobs of molten steel exploded from the drilling-blade. From a clump of bushes at one side of the clearing, a thing came hopping frantically, its weapon spitting incandescence. More liquid steel rained down.

The newcomer was a near-twin to Kruger's captor. "Stop!" the frantic one bellowed, "Harm one leaf of the Princess' foliage, and I'll — "

Kruger could imagine the whole patrolbot melted down, with him inside. He leaped for the hatch, flung it open and tumbled out. His erstwhile guest came right behind him. Now the two alien beings faced each other, weapons aimed.

Then they both went rigid, staring at each other.

"Brekeke!"

"Keshkoash!"

Slowly, the newcomer let its weapon sag, then thud to the ground. "Sire ... I cannot. . . ."

Kruger's captor was trembling. In a voice laden with grief, it said, "Keshkoash. My most trusted liegeman. And I assumed you'd perished in a futile defense of Her Highness."

The other — which, Kruger now saw, was the more youthful — hopped slowly to the tree and knelt beside its trunk. "We love each other, Sire. That is my only defense."

The tree was quivering and bending.

Kruger heard his own hoarse voice. "P-princess?"

The Emperor — for it could be no other — glanced at him absently, then drew itself up and bowed. "Accept a monarch's apologies, fellow. I thought *you* the thief. You must be, instead, that detective from Earth. Kru — Kru — "

"K-Kruger."

"Ah, yes. Kru-ker. A good name. I may award you a baronetcy, if you can prove there's any noble sap in your capillaries. Your superiors messaged me that you'd found my daughter,

and where. I thought I'd best hurry on ahead. When my fleet gets here”

Kruger was staring at the tree. “D-daughter?”

Brekeke frowned. “Why not? Don’t tell me you belong to one of these species in which the females are hardly distinguishable from the males? Revolting!”

The tree, which had been quivering ever more violently, now spoke — apparently by vibrating certain branches and twigs. Its voice was girlish and tearful. “I shall never return to Koshkush!”

Brekeke spun and took an angry hop. “What! You dare think of defiance?”

“I won’t!” the tree wailed, “I can’t! I’d rather wilt first!”

“Why?” the emperor roared. The blossom atop the tree turned crimson. “Because we — because I — I’m going to have a seed.”

Brekeke went motionless and silent. Slowly, its bark became mud-colored. It began to shake. A low growl escaped from it. It fought for self-control; finally achieved it. It drew itself up and glanced coldly at Keshkoash. “You scoundrel. And with all those hungry relatives of yours. And the other trouble this will cause me. Well . . . it appears I am gelt with my own poignard.” It laughed bitterly. “I have not lost a daughter. I have gained a grove!”

Kruger was beginning to realize that he wasn’t really needed here, nor safe. Quietly, he backed toward his vehicle; turned to make a dash

And found his way blocked by three genuine machines.

The flitbot said in exasperation, “It’s that crazy animal again. And look how upset it’s got those plants! Patrolbot, do you remember how you tossed it over the fence before?”

“I remember.”

“Well, do it again. But first, let’s send a workbot to build the fence up twice as high at that point.”

V

Kruger was sitting up. Much of him was bandaged, but there seemed to be no broken bones.

Mummumnoonogog paced the hotel room, pausing at each turn to glare. Sometimes his thick hands inched forward, fingers flexing hungrily. But he restrained himself. “A whole array of machines gone neurotic,” he snarled, “because you demonstrated that any one of them might be a fake. An animal spy. The planet Heath threatening to quit the Customs Union because I’m having to prosecute two of its nationals. Koshkush on the brink of civil war because the Princess broke her troth to a powerful duke and eloped with some mere baron.”

Kruger muttered, “I didn’t have anything to do with that.”

Mum advanced and thrust his face at Kruger’s. “You found them. You found them. So long as it was assumed she’d merely been kidnapped, it was all right. Have you any idea what this mess is costing Moog? What do you think would happen to you if I sent Earth the bill?”

Kruger said, “I’d get fired. Please do.”

The Moogan grunted. “Don’t think I wouldn’t love to. But you personally are under the protection of Emperor Brekeke, and, at least until he’s overthrown, he’s a valued ally. As a matter of fact, he even suggested you for a little job of sleuthing I have to carry out. It might just suit you. The Raynud cousins got away. Turns out they’ve been smuggling and engaging in all sorts of illegal things for a long time. Somebody’s got to chase them down. Do you want the job?”

Kruger knew better than to refuse too hastily, “Well, do you have any idea where they went?”

“Certainly we do. They’re still on this planet. They dyed their fur green and escaped into one of the refuges.”

Kruger pretended to consider it carefully. After a while he said, “Mm, no; I think not. Thanks. But it would hardly be, er, ethical, I’m afraid. Uh, honor among thieves.”

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