



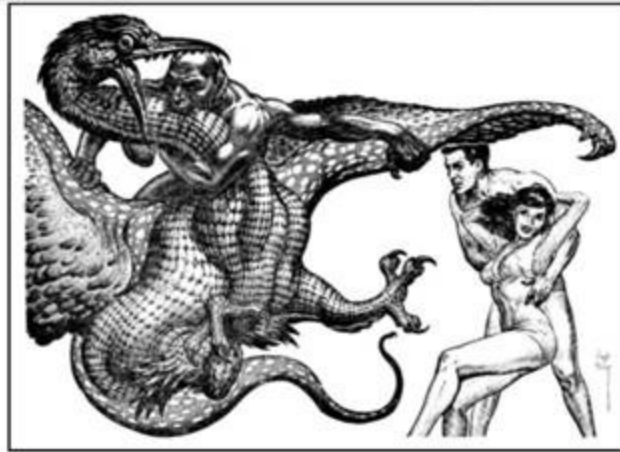
**THE GALAXY  
PRIMES**

by  
**E. E. SMITH**

# THE GALAXY PRIMES

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They were four of the greatest minds in the Universe: Two men, two women, lost in an experimental spaceship billions of parsecs from home. And as they mentally charted the Cosmos to find their way back to earth, their own loves and hates were as startling as the worlds they encountered. Here is E. E. Smith's great new novel...



The guardian struggled to immobilize the beast's gigantic talons as the frightened girl leaped to the safety of Garlock's arms.



## CHAPTER 1

Her hair was a brilliant green. So was her spectacularly filled halter. So were her tight short-shorts, her lipstick, and the lacquer on her finger-and toe-nails. As she strolled into the Main of the starship, followed hesitantly by the other girl, she drove a mental probe at the black-haired, powerfully-built man seated at the instrument-banked console.

Blocked.

Then at the other, slenderer man who was rising to his feet from the pilot's bucket seat. His guard was partially down; he was telepathing a pleasant, if somewhat reserved greeting to both newcomers.

She turned to her companion and spoke aloud. "So *these* are the system's best." The emphasis was somewhere between condescension and sneer. "Not much to choose between, I'd say ... 'port me a tenth-piece, Clee? Heads, I take the tow-head."

She flipped the coin dexterously. "Heads it is, Lola, so I get Jim—James James James the Ninth himself. You have the honor of pairing with Clee—or should I say His Learnedness Right the Honorable Director Doctor Cleander Simmsworth Garlock, Doctor of Philosophy, Doctor of Science, Prime Operator, President and First Fellow of the Galaxian Society, First Fellow of the Gunther Society, Fellow of the Institute of Paraphysics, of the Institute of Nuclear Physics, of the College of Mathematics, of the Congress of Psionics, and of all the other top-bracket brain-gangs you ever heard of? Also, for your information, his men have given him a couple of informal degrees—P.D.Q. and S.O.B."

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The big psionics' expression of saturnine, almost contemptuous amusement had not changed; his voice came flat and cold. "The less you say, Doctor Bellamy, the better. Obstinate, swell-headed women give me an acute rectal pain. Pitching your curves over all the vizzies in space got you aboard, but it

won't get you a thing from here on. And for your information, Doctor Bellamy, one more crack like that and I take you over my knee and blister your fanny."

"Try it, you big, clumsy, muscle-bound gorilla!" she jeered. "*That* I want to see! Any time you want to get both arms broken at the elbows, just try it!"

"Now's as good a time as any. I like your spirit, babe, but I can't say a thing for your judgment." He got up and started purposefully toward her, but both non-combatants came between.

"Jet back, Clee!" James protested, both hands against the heavier man's chest. "What the hell kind of show is *that* to put on?" And, simultaneously:

"Belle! Shame on you! Picking a fight already, and with nobody knows how many million people looking on! You know as well as I do that we may have to spend the rest of our lives together, so act like civilized beings—please—both of you! And don't...."

"Nobody's watching this but us," Garlock interrupted. "When pussy there started using her claws I cut the gun."

"That's what *you* think," James said sharply, "but Fatso and his number one girl friend are coming in on the tight beam."

"Oh?" Garlock whirled toward the hitherto dark and silent three-dimensional communications instrument. The face of a bossy-looking woman was already bright.

"Garlock! How *dare* you try to cut Chancellor Ferber off?" she demanded. Her voice was deep-pitched, blatant with authority. "Here you are, sir."

The woman's face shifted to one side and a man's appeared—a face to justify in full the nickname "Fatso."

"'Fatso', eh?" Chancellor Ferber snarled. Pale eyes glared from the fat face. "That costs you exactly one thousand credits, James."

"How much will this cost me, Fatso?" Garlock asked.

"Five thousand—and, since nobody can call me that deliberately, demotion three grades and probation for three years. Make a note, Miss Foster."

"Noted, sir."

"Still sure we aren't going anywhere," Garlock said. "*What a brain!*"

"Sure I'm sure!" Ferber gloated. "In a couple of hours I'm going to buy your precious starship in as junk. In the meantime, whether you like it or not, I'm going to watch your expression while you push all those pretty buttons and nothing happens."

"The trouble with you, Fatso," Garlock said dispassionately, as he opened a drawer and took out a pair of cutting pliers, "is that all your strength is in your glands and none in your alleged brain. There are a lot of things—including a lot of tests—you know nothing about. How much will you see after I've cut one wire?"

"You wouldn't dare!" the fat man shouted. "I'd fire you—blacklist you all over the sys...."

Voice and images died away and Garlock turned to the two women in the Main. He began to smile, but his mental shield did not weaken.

"You've got a point there, Lola," he said, going on as though Ferber's interruption had not occurred. "Not that I blame either Belle or myself. If anything was ever calculated to drive a man nuts, this farce was. As the only female Prime in the system, Belle should have been in automatically—she had no competition. And to anybody with three brain cells working the other place lay between you, Lola, and the other three female Ops in the age group.

"But no. Ferber and the rest of the Board—stupidity *uber alles!*—think all us Ops and Primes are psycho and that the ship will never even lift. So they made a Grand Circus of it. But they succeeded in one thing—with such abysmal stupidity so rampant I'm getting more and more reconciled to the idea of our not getting back—at least, for a long, long time."

"Why, they said we had a very good chance...." Lola began.

"Yeah, and they said a lot of even bigger damn lies than that one. Have you read any of my papers?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not a mathematician."

"Our motion will be purely at random. If it isn't, I'll eat this whole ship. We won't get back until Jim and I work out something to steer us with. But they must be wondering no end, outside, what the score is, so I'm willing to call it

a draw—temporarily—and let 'em in again. How about it, Belle?"

"A draw it is—temporarily." Neither, however, even offered to shake hands.

"Smile pretty, everybody," Garlock said, and pressed a stud.

"... the matter? What's the matter? Oh...." the worried voice of the System's ace newscaster came in. "Power failure *already*?"

"No," Garlock replied. "I figured we had a couple of minutes of privacy coming, if you can understand the meaning of the word. Now all four of us tell everybody who is watching or listening *au revoir* or good-bye, whichever it may turn out to be." He reached for the switch.

"Wait a minute!" the newscaster demanded. "Leave it on until the last poss...." His voice broke off sharply.

"Turn it back on!" Belle ordered.

"Nix."

"Scared?" she sneered.

"You chirped it, bird-brain. I'm scared purple. So would you be, if you had three brain cells working in that glory-hound's head of yours. Get set, everybody, and we'll take off."

"Stop it, both of you!" Lola exclaimed. "Where do you want us to sit, and do we strap down?"

"You sit here; Belle at that plate beside Jim. Yes, strap down. There probably won't be any shock, and we should land right side up, but there's no sense in taking chances. Sure your stuff's all aboard?"

"Yes, it's in our rooms."

The four secured themselves; the two men checked, for the dozenth time, their instruments. The pilot donned his scanner. The ship lifted effortlessly, noiselessly. Through the atmosphere; through and far beyond the stratosphere. It stopped.

"Ready, Clee?" James licked his lips.

"As ready as I ever will be, I guess. Shoot!"

The pilot's right hand, forefinger outstretched, moved unenthusiastically

toward a red button on his panel ... slowed ... stopped. He stared into his scanner at the Earth so far below.

"Hit it, Jim!" Garlock snapped. "*Hit* it, for goodness sake, before we *all* lose our nerve!"

James stabbed convulsively at the button, and in the very instant of contact— instantaneously; without a fractional microsecond of time-lapse—their familiar surroundings disappeared. Or, rather, and without any sensation of motion, of displacement, or of the passage of any time whatsoever, the planet beneath them was no longer their familiar Earth. The plates showed no familiar stars nor patterns of heavenly bodies. The brightly-shining sun was very evidently not their familiar Sol.

"Well—we went *somewhere* ... but not to Alpha Centauri, not much to our surprise." James gulped twice; then went on, speaking almost jauntily now that the attempt had been made and had failed. "So now it's up to you, Clee, as Director of Project Gunther and captain of the good ship *Pleiades*, to boss the more-or-less simple—more, I hope—job of getting us back to Tellus."

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Science, both physical and parapsychical, had done its best. Gunther's Theorems, which define the electromagnetic and electrogravitic parameters pertaining to the annihilation of distance, had been studied, tested, and applied to the full. So had the Psionic Corollaries; which, while not having the status of parapsychical laws, do allow computation of the qualities and magnitudes of the stresses required for any given application of the Gunther Effect.

The planning of the starship *Pleiades* had been difficult in the extreme; its construction almost impossible. While it was practically a foregone conclusion that any man of the requisite caliber would already be a member of the Galaxian Society, the three planets and eight satellites were screened, psionically by psionically, to select the two strongest and most versatile of their breed.

These two, Garlock and James, were heads of departments of, and under iron-clad contract to, vast Solar System Enterprises, Inc., the only concern able and willing to attempt the building of the first starship.

Alonzo P. Ferber, Chancellor of SSE, however, would not risk a tenth-piece

of the company's money on such a bird-brained scheme. Himself a Gunther First, he believed implicitly that Firsts were in fact tops in Gunther ability; that these few self-styled "Operators" and "Prime Operators" were either charlatans or self-deluded crackpots. Since he could not feel that so-called "Operator Field," no such thing did or could exist. No Gunther starship could ever, possibly, work.

He did loan Garlock and James to the Galaxians, but that was as far as he would go. For salaries and for labor, for research and material, for trials and for errors; the Society paid and paid and paid.

Thus the starship *Pleiades* had cost the Galaxian Society almost a thousand million credits.

Garlock and James had worked on the ship since its inception. They were to be of the crew; for over a year it had been taken for granted that would be its only crew.

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As the *Pleiades* neared completion, however, it became clearer and clearer that the displacement-control presented an unsolved, and quite possibly an insoluble, problem. It was mathematically certain that, when the Gunther field went on, the ship would be displaced instantaneously to some location in space having precisely the Gunther coordinates required by that particular field. One impeccably rigorous analysis showed that the ship would shift into the nearest solar system possessing an Earth-type planet; which was believed to be Alpha Centauri and which was close enough to Sol so that orientation would be automatic and the return to Earth a simple matter.

Since the Gunther Effect did in fact annihilate distance, however, another group of mathematicians, led by Garlock and James, proved with equal rigor that the point of destination was no more likely to be any one given Gunther point than any other one of the myriads of billions of equiguntherial points undoubtedly existent throughout the length, breadth, and thickness of our entire normal space-time continuum.

The two men would go anyway, of course. Carefully-calculated pressures would make them go. It was neither necessary nor desirable, however, for them to go alone.

Wherefore the planets and satellites were combed again; this time to select



two women—the two most highly-gifted psionics in the eighteen-to-twenty-five age group. Thus, if the *Pleiades* returned successfully to Earth, well and good. If she did not, the four selectees would found, upon some far-off world, a race much abler than the humanity of Earth; since eighty-three percent of Earth's dwellers had psionic grades lower than Four.

This search, with its attendant fanfare and studiedly blatant publicity, was so planned and engineered that two selected women did not arrive at the spaceport until a bare fifteen minutes before the scheduled time of take-off. Thus it made no difference whether the women liked the men or not, or vice versa; or whether or not any of them really wanted to make the trip. Pressures were such that each of them had to go, whether he or she wanted to or not.

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"Cut the rope, Jim, and let the old bucket drop," Garlock said. "Not too close. Before we make any kind of contact we'll have to do some organizing. These instruments," he waved at his console, "show that ours is the only Operator Field in this whole region of space. Hence, there are no Operators and no Primes. That means that from now until we get back to Tellus...."

"If we get back to Tellus," Belle corrected, sweetly.

"Until we get back to Tellus there will be no Gunthering aboard this ship...."

"What?" Belle broke in again. "Have you lost your mind?"

"There will be little if any lepping, and nothing else at all. At the table, if we want sugar, we will reach for it or have it passed. We will pick up things, such as cigarettes, with our fingers. We will carry lighters and use them. When we go from place to place, we will walk. Is that clear?"

"You seem to be talking English," Belle sneered, "but the words don't make sense."

"I didn't think you were that stupid." Eyes locked and held. Then Garlock grinned savagely. "Okay. You tell her, Lola, in words of as few syllables as possible."

"Why, to get used to it, of course," Lola explained, while Belle glared at Garlock in frustrated anger. "So as not to reveal anything we don't have to."

"Thank you, Miss Montandon, you may go to the head of the class. All monosyllables except two. That should make it clear, even to Miss Bellamy."

"You ... you *beast!*" Belle drove a tight-beamed thought. "I was never so insulted in my life!"

"You asked for it. Keep on asking for it and you'll keep on getting it." Then, aloud, to all three, "In emergencies, of course, anything goes. We will now proceed with business." He paused, then went on, bitingly, "If possible."

"One minute, please!" Belle snapped. "Just why, Captain Garlock, are you insisting on oral communication, when lepping is so much faster and better? It's stupid—reactionary. Don't you ever lep?"

"With Jim, on business, yes; with women, no more than I have to. What I think is nobody's business but mine."

"What a way to run a ship! Or a project!"

"Running this project is my business, not yours; and if there's any one thing in the entire universe it does *not* need, it's a female exhibitionist. Besides your obvious qualifications to be one of the Eves in case of Ultimate Contingency..." he broke off and stared at her, his contemptuous gaze traveling slowly, dissectingly, from her toes to the topmost wave of her hair-do.

"Forty-two, twenty, forty?" he sneered.

"You flatter me." Her glare was an almost tangible force; her voice was controlled fury.

"Thirty-nine, twenty-two, thirty-five. Five seven. One thirty-five. If any of it's any of your business, which it isn't. You should be discussing brains and ability, not vital statistics."

"Brains? You? No, I'll take that back. As a Prime, you *have* got a brain—one that really works. What do *you* think you're good for on this project? What can you do?"

"I can do anything any man ever born can do, and do it better!"

"Okay. Compute a Gunther field that will put us two hundred thousand feet directly above the peak of that mountain."

"That isn't fair—not that I expected fairness from you—and you know it. That doesn't take either brains or ability...."

"Oh, no?"

"No. Merely highly specialized training that you know I haven't had. Give me a five-tape course on it and I'll come closer than either you or James; for a hundred credits a shot."

"I'll do just that. Something you *are* supposed to know, then. How would you go about making first contact?"

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"Well, I wouldn't do it the way *you* would—by knocking down the first native I saw, putting my foot on his face, and yelling 'Bow down, you stupid, ignorant beasts, and worship me, the Supreme God of the Macrocosmic Universe!'"

"Try again, Belle, that one missed me by...."

"Hold it, both of you!" James broke in. "What the hell are you trying to prove? How about cutting out this cat-and-dog act and getting some work done?"

"You've got a point there," Garlock admitted, holding his temper by a visible effort. "Sorry, Jim. Belle, what were you briefed for?"

"To understudy you." She, too, fought her temper down. "To learn everything about Project Gunther. I have a whole box of tapes in my room, including advanced Gunther math and first-contact techniques. I'm to study them during all my on-watch time unless you assign other duties."

"No matter what your duties may be, you'll have to have time to study. If you don't find what you want in your own tapes—and you probably won't, since Ferber and his Miss Foster ran the selections—use our library. It's good—designed to carry on our civilization. Miss Montandon? No, that's silly, the way we're fixed. Lola?"

"I'm to learn how to be Doctor James'...."

"Jim, please, Lola," James said. "And call him Clee."

"I'd like that." She smiled winningly. "And my friends call me 'Brownie'."

"I see why they would. It fits like a coat of lacquer."

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It did. Her hair was a dark, lustrous brown, as were her eyebrows. Her eyes

were brown. Her skin, too—her dark red playsuit left little to the imagination—was a rich and even brown. Originally fairly dark, it had been tanned to a more-than-fashionable depth of color by naked sun-bathing and by practically-naked outdoor sports. A couple of inches shorter than the green-haired girl, she too had a figure to make any sculptor drool.

"I'm to be Dr. Jim's assistant. I have a thousand tapes, more or less, to study, too. It'll be quite a while, I'm afraid, before I can be of much use, but I'll do the best I can."

"If we had hit Alpha Centauri that arrangement would have been good, but as we are, it isn't." Garlock frowned in thought, his heavy black eyebrows almost meeting above his finely-chiseled aquiline nose. "Since neither Jim nor I need an assistant any more than we need tails, it was designed to give you girls something to do. But out here, lost, there's work for a dozen trained specialists and there are only four of us. So we shouldn't duplicate effort. Right? You first, Belle."

"Are you asking me or telling me?" she asked. "And that's a fair question. Don't read anything into it that isn't there. With your attitude, I want information."

"I am asking you," he replied, carefully. "For your information, when I know what should be done, I give orders. When I don't know, as now, I ask advice. If I like it, I follow it. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough. We're apt to need any number of specialists."

"Lola?"

"Of course we shouldn't duplicate. What shall I study?"

"That's what we must figure out. We can't do it exactly, of course; all we can do now is to set up a rough scheme. Jim's job is the only one that's definite. He'll have to work full time on nebular configurations. If we hit inhabited planets he'll have to add their star-charts to his own. That leaves three of us to do all the other work of a survey. Ideally, we would cover all the factors that would be of use in getting us back to Tellus, but since we don't know what those factors are.... Found out anything yet, Jim?"

"A little. Tellus-type planet, apparently strictly so. Oceans and continents. Lots of inhabitants—farms, villages, all sizes of cities. Not close enough to

say definitely, but inhabitants seem to be humanoid, if not human."

"Hold her here. Besides astronomy, which is all yours, what do we need most?"

"We should have enough to classify planets and inhabitants, so as to chart a space-trend if there is any. I'd say the most important ones would be geology, stratigraphy, paleontology, oceanography, xenology, anthropology, ethnology, vertebrate biology, botany, and at least some ecology."

"That's about the list I was afraid of. But there are only three of us. The fields you mention number much more."

"Each of you will have to be a lot of specialists in one, then. I'd say the best split would be planetology, xenology, and anthropology—each, of course, stretched all out of shape to cover dozens of related and non-related specialties."

"Good enough. Xenology, of course, is mine. Contacts, liaison, politics, correlation, and so on, as well as studying the non-human life forms—including as many lower animals and plants as possible. I'll make a stab at it. Now, Belle, since you're a Prime and Lola's an Operator, you get the next toughest job. Planetography."

"Why not?" Belle smiled and began to act as one of the party. "All I know about it is a hazy idea of what the word means, but I'll start studying as soon as we get squared away."

"Thanks. That leaves anthropology to you, Lola. Besides, that's your line, isn't it?"

"Yes. Sociological Anthropology. I have my M.S. in it, and am—was, I mean—working for my Ph.D. But as Jim said, it isn't only the one specialty. You want me, I take it, to cover humanoid races, too?"

"Check. You and Jim both, then, will know what you're doing, while Belle and I are trying to play ours by ear."

"Where do we draw the line between humanoid and non-human?"

"In case of doubt we'll confer. That covers it as much as we can, I think. Take us down, Jim—and be on your toes to take evasive action fast."



The ship dropped rapidly toward an airport just outside a fairly large city. Fifty thousand—forty thousand—thirty thousand feet.

"Calling strange spaceship—you must be a spaceship, in spite of your tremendous, hitherto-considered-impossible mass—" a thought impinged on all four Tellurian minds, "do you read me?"

"I read you clearly. This is the Tellurian spaceship *Pleiades*, Captain Garlock commanding, asking permission to land and information as to landing conventions." He did not have to tell James to stop the ship; James had already done so.

"I was about to ask you to hold position; I thank you for having done so. Hold for inspection and type-test, please. We will not blast unless you fire first. A few minutes, please."

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A group of twelve jet fighters took off practically vertically upward and climbed with fantastic speed. They leveled off a thousand feet below the *Pleiades* and made a flying circle. Up and into the ring thus formed there lumbered a large, clumsy-looking helicopter.

"We have no record of any planet named 'Tellus'; nor of any such ship as yours. Of such incredible mass and with no visible or detectable means of support or of propulsion. Not from this part of the galaxy, certainly ... could it be that intergalactic travel is actually possible? But excuse me, Captain Garlock, none of that is any of my business; which is to determine whether or not you four Tellurian human beings are compatible with, and thus acceptable to, our humanity of Hodell ... but you do not seem to have a standard televideo testing-box aboard."

"No, sir; only our own tri-di and teevee."

"You must be examined by means of a standard box. I will rise to your level and teleport one across to you. It is self-powered and fully automatic."

"You needn't rise, sir. Just toss the box out of your 'copter into the air. We'll take it from there." Then, to James, "Take it, Jim."

"Oh? You can lift large masses against much gravity?" The alien was all attention. "I have not known that such power existed. I will observe with keen interest."



"I have it," James said. "Here it is."

"Thank you, sir," Garlock said to the alien. Then, to Lola: "You've been reading these—these Hodellians?"

"The officer in the helicopter and those in the fighters, yes. Most of them are Gunther Firsts."

"Good girl. The set's coming to life—watch it."

The likeness of the alien being became clear upon the alien screen; visible from the waist up. While humanoid, the creature was very far indeed from being human. He—at least, it had masculine rudimentary nipples—had double shoulders and four arms. His skin was a vividly intense cobalt blue. His ears were black, long, and highly dirigible. His eyes, a flaming red in color, were large and vertically-slitted, like a cat's. He had no hair at all. His nose was large and Roman; his jaw was square, almost jutting; his bright-yellow teeth were clean and sharp.

After a minute of study the alien said: "Although your vessel is so entirely alien that nothing even remotely like it is on record, you four are completely human and, if of compatible type, acceptable. Are there any other living beings aboard with you?"

"Excepting micro-organisms, none."

"Such life is of no importance. Approach, please, one of you, and grasp with a hand the projecting metal knob."

With a little trepidation, Garlock did so. He felt no unusual sensation at the contact.

"All four of you are compatible and we accept you. This finding is surprising in the extreme, as you are the first human beings of record who grade higher than what you call Gunther Two ... or Gunther Second?"

"Either one; the terms are interchangeable."

"You have minds of tremendous development and power; definitely superior even to my own. However, there is no doubt that physically you are perfectly compatible with our humanity. Your blood will be of great benefit to it. You may land. Goodbye."

"Wait, please. How about landing conventions? And visiting restrictions and

so on? And may we keep this box? We will be glad to trade you something for it, if we have anything you would like to have?"

"Ah, I should have realized that your customs would be widely different from ours. Since you have been examined and accepted, there are no restrictions. You will not act against humanity's good. Land where you please, go where you please, do what you please as long as you please. Take up permanent residence or leave as soon as you please. Marry if you like, or simply breed—your unions with this planet's humanity will be fertile. Keep the box without payment. As Guardians of Humanity we Arpalones do whatever small favors we can. Have I made myself clear?"

"Abundantly so. Thank you, sir."

"Now I really must go. Goodbye."

Garlock glanced into his plate. The jets had disappeared, the helicopter was falling rapidly away. He wiped his brow.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said.

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When his amazement subsided he turned to the business at hand. "Lola, do you check me that this planet is named Hodell, that it is populated by creatures exactly like us? Arpalones?"

"Exactly, except they aren't 'creatures'. They are humanoids, and very fine people."

"You'd think so, of course ... correction accepted. Well, let's take advantage of their extraordinarily hospitable invitation and go down. Cut the rope, Jim."

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The airport was very large, and was divided into several sections, each of which was equipped with runways and/or other landing facilities to suit one class of craft—propellor jobs, jets, or helicopters. There were even a few structures that looked like rocket pits.

"Where are you going to sit down, Jim? With the 'copters or over by the blast-pits?"

"With the 'copters, I think. Since I can place her to within a couple of inches. I'll put her squarely into that far corner, where she'll be out of everybody's way."

"No concrete out there," Garlock said. "But the ground seems good and solid."

"We'd better not land on concrete," James grinned. "Unless it's terrific stuff we'd smash it. On bare ground, the worst we can do is sink in a foot or so, and that won't hurt anything."

"Check. A few tons to the square foot, is all. Shall we strap down and hang onto our teeth?"

"Who do you think you're kidding, boss? Even though I've got to do this on manual, I won't tip over a half-piece standing on edge."

James stopped talking, pulled out his scanner, stuck his face into it. The immense starship settled downward toward the selected corner. There was no noise, no blast, no flame, no slightest visible or detectable sign of whatever force it was that was braking the thousands of tons of the vessel's mass in its miles-long, almost-vertical plunge to ground.

When the *Pleiades* struck ground the impact was scarcely to be felt. When she came to rest, after settling into the ground her allotted "foot or so," there was no jar at all.

"Atmosphere, temperature, and so on, approximately Earth-normal," Garlock said. "Just as our friend said it would be."

James scanned the city and the field. "Our visit is kicking up a lot of excitement. Shall we go out?"

"Not yet!" Belle exclaimed. "I want to see how the women are dressed, first."

"So do I," Lola added, "and some other things besides."

Both women—Lola through her Operator's scanner; Belle by manipulating the ship's tremendous Operator Field by the sheer power of her Prime Operator's mind—stared eagerly at the crowd of people now beginning to stream across the field.

"As an anthropologist," Lola announced, "I'm not only surprised. I am shocked, annoyed, and disgruntled. Why, they're *exactly* like white Tellurian human beings!"

"But *look* at their *clothes!*" Belle insisted. "They're wearing anything and

everything, from bikinis to coveralls!"

"Yes, but notice." This was the anthropological scientist speaking now. "Breasts and loins, covered. Faces, uncovered. Heads and feet and hands, either bare or covered. Ditto for legs up to there, backs, arms, necks and shoulders down to here, and torsos clear down to there. We'll not violate any conventions by going out as we are. Not even you, Belle. You first, Chief. Yours the high honor of setting first foot—the biggest foot we've got, too—on alien soil."

"To hell with that. We'll go out together."

"Wait a minute," Lola went on. "There's a funny-looking automobile just coming through the gate. The Press. Three men and two women. Two cameras, one walkie-talkie, and two microphones. The photog in the purple shirt is really a sharpie at lepping. Class Three, at least—possibly a Two."

"How about screens down enough to lep, boss?" Belle suggested. "Faster. We may need it."

"Check. I'm too busy to record, anyway—I'll log this stuff up tonight," and thoughts flew.

"Check me, Jim," Garlock flashed. "Telepathy, very good. On Gunther, the guy was right—no signs at all of any First activity, and very few Seconds."

"Check," James agreed.

"And Lola, those 'Guardians' out there. I thought they were the same as the Arpalone we talked to. They aren't. Not even telepathic. Same color scheme, is all."

"Right. Much more brutish. Much flatter cranium. Long, tearing canine teeth. Carnivorous. I'll call them just 'guardians' until we find out what they really are."

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The press car arrived and the Tellurians disembarked—and, accidentally or not, it was Belle's green slipper that first touched ground. There was a terrific babel of thought, worse, even, than voices in similar case, in being so much faster. The reporters, all of them, wanted to know everything at once. How, what, where, when, and why. Also who. And all about Tellus and the Tellurian solar system. How did the visitors like Hodell? And all about

Belle's green hair. And the photographers were prodigal of film, shooting everything from all possible angles.

"Hold it!" Garlock loosed a blast of thought that "silenced" almost the whole field. "We will have order, please. Lola Montandon, our anthropologist, will take charge. Keep it orderly, Lola, if you have to throw half of them off the field. I'm going over to Administration and check in. One of you reporters can come with me, if you like."

The man in the purple shirt got his bid in first. As the two men walked away together, Garlock noted that the man was in fact a Second—his flow of lucid, cogent thought did not interfere at all with the steady stream of speech going into his portable recorder. Garlock also noticed that in any group of more than a dozen people there was always at least one guardian. They paid no attention whatever to the people, who in turn ignored them completely. Garlock wondered briefly. Guardians? The Arpalones, out in space, yes. But these creatures, naked and unarmed on the ground? The Arpalones were non-human people. These things were—what?

At the door of the Field Office the reporter, after turning Garlock over to a startlingly beautiful, leggy, breasty, blonde receptionist-usherette, hurried away.

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He flicked a feeler at her mind and stiffened. How could a Two—a high Two, at that—be working as an usher? And with her guard down clear to the floor? He probed—and saw.

"Lola!" He flashed a tight-beamed thought. "You aren't putting out anything about our sexual customs, family life, and so on."

"Of course not. We must know their mores first."

"Good girl. Keep your shield up."

"Oh, we're so glad to see you, Captain Garlock, sir!" The blonde, who was dressed little more heavily than the cigarette girls in Venusberg's Cartier Room, seized his left hand in both of hers and held it considerably longer than was necessary. Her dazzling smile, her laughing eyes, her flashing white teeth, the many exposed inches of her skin, and her completely unshielded mind; all waved banners of welcome.

"Captain Garlock, sir, Governor Atterlin has been most anxious to see you ever since you were first detected. This way, please, sir." She turned, brushing her bare hip against his leg in the process, and led him by the hand along a hallway. Her thoughts flowed. "I have been, too, sir, and I'm simply delighted to see you close up, and I hope to see a lot more of you. You're a wonderfully pleasant surprise, sir; I've never seen a man like you before. I don't think Hodell ever saw a man like you before, sir. With such a really terrific mind and yet so big and strong and well-built and handsome and clean-looking and blackish. You're wonderful, Captain Garlock, sir. You'll be here a long time, I hope? Here we are, sir."

She opened a door, walked across the room, sat down in an overstuffed chair, and crossed her legs meticulously. Then, still smiling happily, she followed with eager eyes and mind Garlock's every move.

Garlock had been reading Governor Atterlin; knew why it was the governor who was in that office instead of the port manager. He knew that Atterlin had been reading him—as much as he had allowed. They had already discussed many things, and were still discussing.

The room was much more like a library than an office. The governor, a middle-aged, red-headed man a trifle inclined to portliness, had been seated in a huge reclining chair facing a teevee screen, but got up to shake hands.

"Welcome, friend Captain Garlock. Now, to continue. As to exchange. Many ships visiting us have nothing we need or can use. For such, all services are free—or rather, are paid by the city. Our currency is based upon platinum, but gold, silver, and copper are valuable. Certain jewels, also...."

"That's far enough. We will pay our way—we have plenty of metal. What are your ratios of value for the four metals here on Hodell?"

"Today's quotations are...." He glanced at a screen, and his fingers flashed over the keys of a computer beside his chair. "One weight of platinum is equal in value to seven point three four six...."

"Decimals are not necessary, sir."

"Seven plus, then, weights of gold. One of gold to eleven of silver. One of silver to four of copper."

"Thank you. We'll use platinum. I'll bring some bullion tomorrow morning



and exchange it for your currency. Shall I bring it here, or to a bank in the city?"

"Either. Or we can have an armored truck visit your ship."

"That would be better yet. Have them bring about five thousand tanes. Thank you very much, Governor Atterlin, and good afternoon to you, sir."

"And good afternoon to you, sir. Until tomorrow, then."

Garlock turned to leave.

"Oh, may I go with you to your ship, sir, to take just a little look at it?" the girl asked, winningly.

"Of course, Grand Lady Neldine, I'd like to have your company."

She seized his elbow and hugged it quickly against her breast. Then, taking his hand, she walked—almost skipped—along beside him. "And I want to see Pilot James close up, too, sir—he's not nearly as wonderful as you are, sir—and I wonder why Planetographer Bellamy's hair is green? Very striking, of course, sir, but I don't think I'd care for it much on me—unless you'd think I should, sir?"

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Belle knew, of course, that they were coming; and Garlock knew that Belle's hackles were very much on the rise. She could not read him, except very superficially, but she was reading the strange girl like a book and was not liking anything she read. Wherefore, when Garlock and his joyous companion reached the great spaceship—

"How come you picked up *that* little man-eating shark?" she sent, venomously, on a tight band.

"It wasn't a case of picking her up." Garlock grinned. "I haven't been able to find any urbane way of scraping her off. First Contact, you know."

"She wants altogether too much Contact for a First—I'll scrape her off, even if she is one of the nobler class on this world...." Belle changed her tactics even before Garlock began his reprimand. "I shouldn't have said that, Clee, of course." She laughed lightly. "It was just the shock; there wasn't anything in any of my First Contact tapes covering what to do about beautiful and enticing girls who try to seduce our men. She doesn't know, though, of

course, that she's supposed to be a bug-eyed monster and not human at all. Won't Xenology be in for a rough ride when we check in? Wow!"

"You can play *that* in spades, sister." And for the rest of the day Belle played flawlessly the role of perfect hostess.

It was full dark before the Hodellians could be persuaded to leave the *Pleiades* and the locks were closed.

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"I have refused one hundred seventy-eight invitations," Lola reported then. "All of us, individually and collectively, have been invited to eat everything, everywhere in town. To see shows in a dozen different theaters and eighteen night spots. To dance all night in twenty-one different places, ranging from dives to strictly soup-and-fish. I was nice about it, of course—just begged off because we were dead from our belts both ways from our long, hard trip. My thought, of course, is that we'd better eat our own food and take it slowly at first. Check, Clee?"

"On the beam, dead center. And you weren't lying much, either. I feel as though I'd done a day's work. After supper there's a thing I've got to discuss with all three of you."

Supper was soon over. Then:

"We've got to make a mighty important decision," Garlock began, abruptly. "Grand Lady Neldine—that title isn't exact, but close—wondered why I didn't respond at all, either way. However, she didn't make a point of it, and I let her wonder; but we'll have to decide by tomorrow morning what to do, and it'll have to be airtight. These Hodellians expect Jim and me to impregnate as many as possible of their highest-rated women before we leave. By their Code it's mandatory, since we can't hide the fact that we rate much higher than they do—their highest rating is only Grade Two by our standards—and all the planets hereabouts up-grade themselves with the highest-grade new blood they can find. Ordinarily, they'd expect you two girls to become pregnant by your choices of the top men of the planet; but they know you wouldn't breed down and don't expect you to. But how in all hell can Jim and I refuse to breed them up without dealing out the deadliest insult they know?"

There was a minute of silence. "We can't," James said then. A grin began to