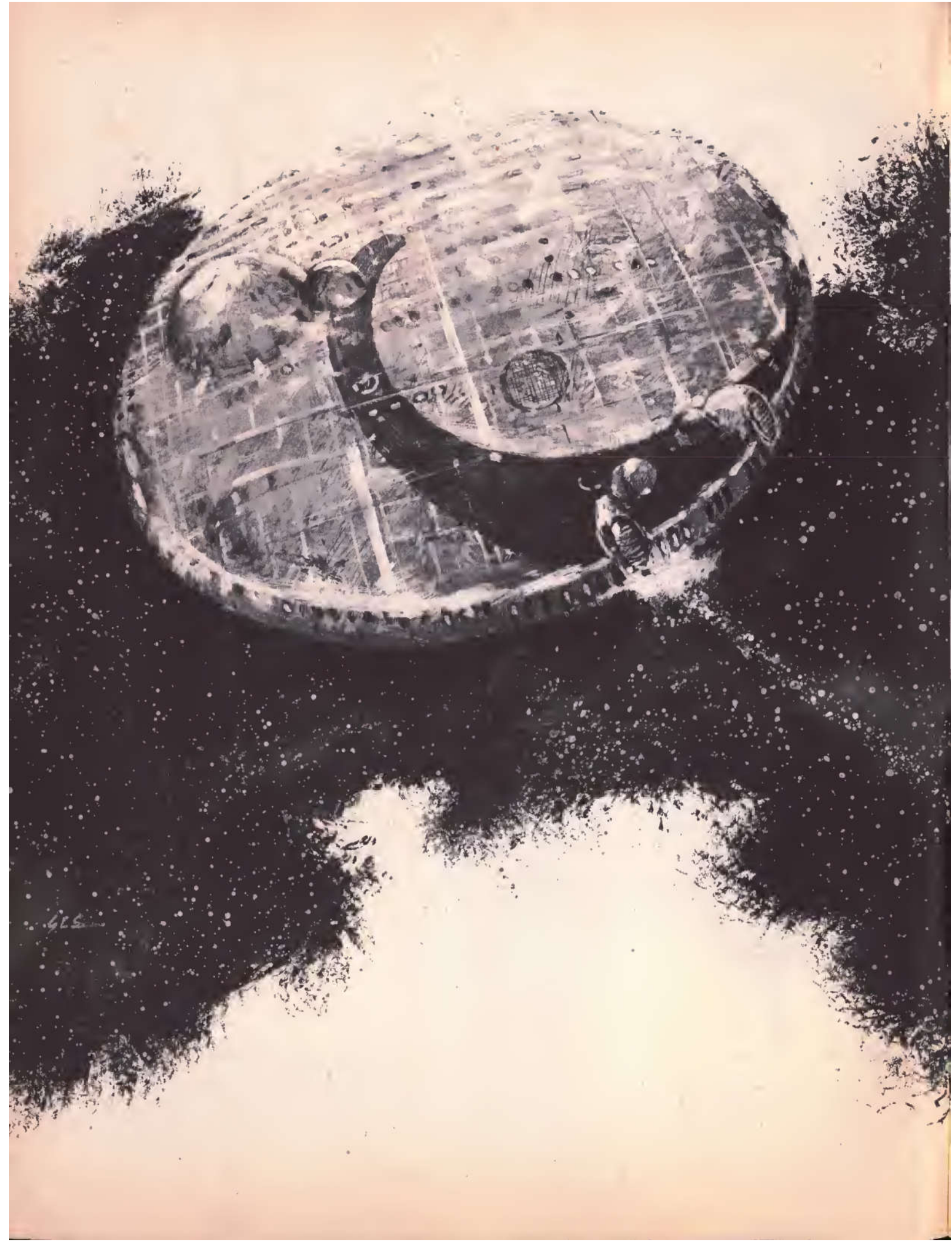


SHORT STORY

ONE MAN'S MEAT

**ALL THE
UNIVERSE
IN A
MASON
JAR**

JOE HALDEMAN



New Homestead, Florida: 1990.

John Taylor Taylor, retired professor of mathematics, lived just over two kilometers out of town, in a three-room efficiency module tucked in an isolated corner of a citrus grove. Books and old furniture and no neighbors, which was the way John liked it. He only had a few years left on this Earth, and he preferred to spend them with his oldest and most valued friend: himself.

But this story isn't about John Taylor Taylor. It's about his moonshiner, Lester Gilbert. And some five billion others.

This day the weather was fine, so the professor took his stick and walked into town to pick up the week's mail. A thick cylinder of journals and letters was wedged into his box; he had to ask the clerk to remove them from the other side. He tucked the mail under his arm without looking at it, and wandered next door to the bar.

"Howdy, Professor."

"Good afternoon, Leroy." He and the bartender were the only ones in the place, not unusual this late in the month. "I'll take a boilermaker today, please." He threaded his way through a maze of flypaper strips and eased himself into a booth of chipped, weathered plastic.

He sorted his mail into four piles: junk, bills, letters, and journals. Quite a bit of junk, two bills, a letter that turned out to be another bill, and three journals—*Nature*, *Communications* of the American Society of Mathematics, and a collection of papers delivered at an ASM symposium on topology. He scanned the contributors lists and, as usual, saw none of his old colleagues represented.

"Here y'go." Leroy sat a cold beer and a shot glass of whiskey between *Communications* and the phone bill. John paid him with a five and lit his pipe carefully before taking a sip. He folded *Nature* back at the letters column and began reading.

The screen door slapped shut loudly behind a burly man in wrinkled clean work clothes. John recognized him with a nod; he returned a left-handed V-sign and mounted a bar stool.

"How 'bout a red-eye, Leroy?" Mixture of beer and tomato juice with a dash of Louisiana, hangover cure.

Leroy mixed it. "Rough night, Isaac?"

"Shoo. You don' know." He downed

half the concoction in a gulp, and shuddered. He turned to John. "Hey, Professor. What you know about them flyin' saucers?"

"Lot of them around a few years ago," he said tactfully. "Never saw one myself."

"Me neither. Wouldn't give you a nickel for one. Not until last night." He slurped the red-eye and wiped his mouth.

"What," the bartender said, "you saw one?"

"Saw one. Shoo." He slid the two-thirds empty glass across the bar. "You wanta put some beer on top that? Thanks."

"We was down the country road seven-eight klicks. You know Eric Olsen's new place?"

"Don't think so."

"New boy, took over Jarmin's plat."

"Oh yeah. Never comes in here; know of him, though."

"You wouldn't hang around no bar neither if you had a pretty little . . . well. Point is, he was puttin' up one of them new stasis barns, you know?"

"Yeah, no bugs. Keeps stuff forever, my daddy-in-law has one."

"Well, he picked up one big enough for his whole avocado crop. Hold on to it till the price is right, up north, like January? No profit till next year, help his 'mortization."

"Yeah, but what's that got to do with the flying—"

"I'm gettin' to it." John settled back to listen. Some tall tale was on the way.

"Anyhow, we was gonna have an old-fashion barn raisin' . . . Miz Olsen got a boar and set up a pit barbecue, the other ladies they brought the trimmin's. Eric, he made two big washtubs of spiced wine, set 'em on ice till we get the barn up. Five, six hours, it turned out (the directions wasn't right), hot afternoon, and we just headed for that wine like you never saw."

"I guess we was all pretty loaded, finished off that wine before the pig was ready. Eric, he called in to Samson's and had 'em send out two kegs of Bud."

"Got to get to know that boy," Leroy said.

"Tell me about it. Well, we tore into that pig and had him down to bones an' gristle in twenty minutes. Best god-dern pig I ever had, anyhow."

"So's not to let the fire permit go to waste, we went out an' rounded up a bunch of scrap, couple of good-size logs. Finish off that beer around a bon-

fire. Jommy Parker went off to pick up his fiddle and he took along Midnight Jackson, pick up his banjo. Miz Olsen had this Swedish guitar, one too many strings but by God could she play it."

"We cracked that second keg 'bout sundown and Lester Gilbert—you know Lester?"

Leroy laughed. "Don't I just. He was 'fraid the beer wouldn't hold out, went to get some corn?"

John made a mental note to be home by four o'clock. It was Wednesday; Lester would be by with his weekly quart.

"We get along all right," the bartender was saying. "Figure our clientele don't overlap that much."

"Shoo," Isaac said. "Some of Lester's clientele overlaps on a regular basis."

"Anyhow, it got dark quick, you know how clear it was last night. Say, let me have another, just beer."

Leroy filled the glass and cut the foam off. "Clear enough to see a flyin' saucer, eh?"

"I'm gettin' to it. Thanks." He sipped it and concentrated for a few seconds on tapping tobacco into a cigarette paper. "Like I say, it got dark fast. We was sittin' around the fire, singin' if we knew the words, drinkin' if we didn't—"

"Spect you didn't know many of the songs, yourself."

"Never could keep the words in my head. Anyhow, the fire was gettin' a mite hot on me, so I turned this deck chair around and settled down lookin' east, fire to my back, watchin' the moon rise over the government forest there—"

"Hold on now. Moon ain't comin' up until after midnight."

"You-God-Damn-right it ain't!" John felt a chill even though he'd seen it coming. Isaac had a certain fame as a storyteller. "That wan't nobody's moon."

"Did anybody else see it?" John asked.

"Ev'rybody. Ev'rybody who was there—and one that wasn't. I'll get to that."

"I saw that thing and spilled my beer gettin' up, damn near trip and fall in the pit. Hollered 'Lookit that goddam thing!' and pointed, jumpin' up an' down, and like I say, they all did see it."

"It was a little bigger than the moon and not quite so round, egg-shaped. Whiter than the moon, an' if you looked

close you could see little green and blue flashes around the edge. It didn't make no noise we could hear, and was movin' real slow. We saw it for at least a minute. Then it went down behind the trees."

"What could it of been?" the bartender said. "Sure you wa'nt all drunk and seein' things?"

"No way in hell. You know me, Leroy, I can tie one on ev'y now and again, but I just plain don't get that drunk. Sure thing I don't get that drunk on beer an' wine!"

"And Lester wasn't back with the 'shine yet?"

"No . . . an' that's the other part of the story." Isaac took his time lighting the cigarette and drank off some beer.

"I'm here to tell you, we was all feelin' sorta spooky over that. Hunkered up around the fire, lookin' over our shoulders. Eric went in to call the sheriff, but he didn't get no answer.

"Sat there for a long time, speculatin'. Forgot all about Lester, suppose to be back with the corn.

"Suddenly we hear this somethin' crashin' through the woods. Jommy sprints to his pickup and gets out his over-and-under. But it's just Lester. Runnin' like the hounds of Hell is right behind him.

"He's got a plywood box with a half-dozen Mason jars in her, and from ten feet away he smells like Saturday night. He don't say a word; sets that box down, not too gentle, jumps over to Jommy and grabs that gun away from him and aims it at the government woods, and pulls both triggers, just boom-crack 20-gauge buckshot and a .30-caliber rifle slug right behind.

"Now Jommy is understandable pissed off. He takes the gun back from Lester and shoves him on the shoulder, follows him and shoves him again; all the time askin' him, just not too politely, don't he know he's too drunk to handle a firearm? and don't he know we could all get busted, him shootin' into federal land? and just in general, what the Sam Hill's goin' on, Lester?"

He paused to relight the cigarette and take a drink. "Now Lester's just takin' it and not sayin' a thing. How 'bout that?"

"Peculiar," Leroy admitted.

Isaac nodded. "Lester, he's a good boy but he does have one hell of a temper. Anyhow, Lester finally sits down by his box and unscrews the top off a full jar—they's one with no top

but it looks to be empty—and just gulps down one whole hell of a lot. He coughs once and starts talkin'."

"Surprised he could talk at all." John agreed. He always mixed Lester's corn with a lot of something else.

"And listen—that boy is sober like a parson. And he says, talkin' real low and steady, that he seen the same thing we did. He describes it, just exactly like I tole you. But he sees it on the ground. Not in the air."

Isaac passed the glass over and Leroy filled it without a word. "He was takin' a long-cut through the government land so's to stay away from the road. Also he had a call of Nature and it always felt more satisfyin' on government land.

"He stopped to take care of that and have a little drink and then suddenly saw this light. Which was the saucer droppin' down into a clearing, but he don't know that. He figures it's the sheriff's copter with its night lights on, which don't bother him much, 'cause the sheriff's one of his best customers."

"That a fact?"

"Don't let on I tole you. Anyways, he thought the sheriff might want a little some, so he walks on toward the light. It's on the other side of a little rise; no underbresh but it takes him a few minutes to get there.

"He tops the rise and there's this saucer—bigger'n a private 'copter, he says. He's stupified. Takes a drink and studies it for a while. Thinks it's probably some secret government thing. He's leanin' against a tree, studying . . . and then it dawns on him that he ain't alone."

Isaac blew on the end of his cigarette and shook his head. "I 'spect you ain't gonna believe this—not sure I do myself—but I can't help that, it's straight from Lester's mouth.

"He hears something on the other side of the tree where he's leanin'. Peeks around the tree and—there's this thing.

"He says it's got eyes like a big cat, like a lion's, only bigger. And it's a big animal otherwise, about the size of a lion, but no fur, just wrinkled hide like a rhino. It's got big shiny claws that it's usin' on the tree, and a mouthful of big teeth, which it displays at Lester and growls.

"Now Lester, he got nothin' for a weapon but about a quart of Dade County's finest—so he splashes that at the monster's face, hopin' to blind it, and takes off like a bat.

"He gets back to his box of booze,

and stops for a second and looks back. He can see the critter against the light from the saucer. It's on its hind legs, weavin' back and forth with its paws out, just roarin'. Looks like the booze works, so Lester picks up the box, ammunition. But just then that saucer light goes out.

"Lester knows good and God damn well that that damn' thing can see in the dark, with them big eyes. But Les can see our bonfire, a klick or so west, so he starts runnin' holdin' on to that box of corn for dear life.

"So he comes in on Eric's land and grabs the gun and all that happens. We pass the corn around a while and wash it down with good cold beer. Finally we got up enough Dutch courage to go out after the thing.

"We got a bunch of flashlights, but the only guns were Jommy's over-and-under and a pair of antique flintlock pistols that Eric got from his dad. Eric loaded 'em and give one to me, one to Midnight. Midnight, he was a sergeant in the Asia war, you know, and he was gonna lead us. Eric himself didn't think he could shoot a animal. Dirt farmer (good boy, though)."

"Still couldn't get the sheriff? What about the Guard?"

"Well, no. Truth to tell, everybody—even Lester—was halfway convinced we ain't seen nothin', nothin' real. Eric had got to tellin' us what went into that punch, pretty weird, and the general theory was that he'd whipped up a kind of halla, hallo—"

"Hallucinogen," John supplied.

"That's right. Like that windowpane the old folks take. No offense, Professor."

"Never touch the stuff."

"Anyhow, we figured that we was probably seein' things, but we'd go out an' check, just in case. Got a bunch of kitchen knives and farm tools, took the ladies along too.

"Got Midnight an' Lester up in the front, the rest of us stragglin' along behind, and we followed Lester's trail back to where he seen the thing."

Isaac took a long drink and was silent for a moment, brow furrowed in thought. "Well, hell. He took us straight to that tree and I'm a blind man if there weren't big ol' gouges all along the bark. And the place did smell like Lester's corn.

"Midnight, he shined a light down to where Lester'd said the saucer was, and sure enough, the bresh was all flat there.

He walked down to take a closer look—all of us gettin' a little jumpy now—and God damn if he didn't bump right into it. That saucer was there but you flat couldn't see it.

"He let out one hell of a yelp and fired that ol' flintlock down at it, point-blank. Bounced off, you could hear the ball sing away. He come back up the rise just like a cat on fire; when he was clear I took a pot shot at the damn thing, and then Jommy he shot it four, six times. Then there was this kind of wind, and it was gone."

There was a long silence. "You ain't bullshittin' me," Leroy said. "This ain't no story."

"No." John saw that the big man was pale under his heavy tan. "This ain't no story."

"Let me fix you a stiff one."

"No, I gotta stay straight. They got some newspaper boys comin' down this afternoon. How's your coffee today?"

"Cleaned the pot."

John stayed for one more beer and then started walking home. It was hot, and he stopped halfway to rest under a big willow, reading a few of the *Nature* articles. The one on the Ceres probe was fascinating; he reread it as he ambled the rest of the way home.

So his mind was a couple of hundred million miles away when he walked up the path to his door and saw that it was slightly ajar.

First it startled him, and then he remembered that it was Lester's delivery day. He always left the place unlocked (there were ridge-runners but they weren't interested in old books), and the moonshiner probably just left his wares inside.

He checked his watch as he walked through the door: it was not quite three. Funny. Lester was usually late.

No Mason jar in sight. And from his library, a snuffling noise.

The year before, some kind of animal—the sheriff had said it was probably a bear—had gotten into his house and made a shambles of it. He eased open the end-table drawer and took out the Walther P-38 he had taken from a dead German officer, half a century before. And as he edged toward the library, the thought occurred to him that the 50-year-old ammunition might not fire.

It was about the size of a bear, a big bear.

Its skin was pebbly gray, with tufts of bristle. It had two arms, two legs, and a stiff tail to balance back on.

The tail had a serrated edge on top, that looked razor sharp. The feet and hands terminated in pointed black claws. The head was vaguely saurian; too many teeth and too large.

As he watched, the creature tore a page out of Fadeeva's *Computational Methods of Linear Algebra*, stuffed it in his mouth and chewed. Spat it out. Turned to see John standing at the door.

It's probably safe to say that any other resident of New Homestead, faced with this situation, would either have started blazing away at the apparition, or would have fainted. But John Taylor Taylor was nothing if not a cool and rational man, and had besides suffered a lifelong addiction to fantastic literature. So he measured what was left of his life against the possibility that this fearsome monster might be intelligent and humane.

He laid the gun on a writing desk and presented empty hands to the creature, palms out.

The thing regarded him for a minute. It opened its mouth, teeth beyond counting, and closed it. Translucent eyelids nictated up over huge yellow eyes, and slid back. Then it replaced the Fadeeva book and duplicated John's gesture.

In several of the stories John had read, humans had communicated with alien races through the medium of mathematics, a pure and supposedly universal language. Fortunately, his library sported a blackboard.

"Allow me to demonstrate," he said with a slightly quavering voice as he crossed to the board, "the Theorem of Pythagorus." The creature's eyes followed him, blinking. "A logical starting place. Perhaps. As good as any," he trailed off apologetically.

He drew a right triangle on the board, and then drew squares out from the sides that embraced the right angle. He held the chalk out to the alien.

The creature made a huffing sound, vaguely affirmative and swayed over to the blackboard. It retracted the claws on one hand and took the chalk from John.

It bit off one end of the chalk experimentally, and spit it out.

Then it reached over and casually sketched in the box representing the square of the hypotenuse. In the middle of the triangle it drew what was obviously an equals sign: \sim .

John was ecstatic. He took the chalk from the alien and repeated the curly line. He pointed at the alien and then at

himself: equals.

The alien nodded enthusiastically and took the chalk. It put a slanted line through John's equals sign.

Not equals.

It stared at the blackboard, tapping it with the chalk; one universal gesture. Then, squeaking with every line, it rapidly wrote down:

$$\begin{array}{c} 1 \\ \sim \\ - - - 1 \\ \sim \\ 1 \sim 1 - 1 \sim 1 \\ \sim \\ 1 \sim 1 - 1 \sim 1 \\ \sim \\ 1 \end{array}$$

John studied the message. Some sort of tree diagram? Perhaps a counting system. Or maybe not mathematical at all. He shrugged at the creature. It flinched at the sudden motion, and backed away growling.

"No, no." John held his palms out again. "Friends."

The alien shuffled slowly back to the blackboard and pointed to what it had just written down. Then it opened its terrible mouth and pointed at that. It repeated the pair of gestures twice.

"Oh." Eating the Fadeeva and the chalk. "Are you hungry?" It repeated the action more emphatically.

John motioned for it to follow him and walked toward the kitchen. The alien waddled slowly, its tail a swaying counterweight.

He opened the refrigerator and took out a cabbage, a package of catfish, an avocado, some cheese, an egg, and a chafing dish of leftover green beans, slightly dried out. He lined them up on the counter and demonstrated that they were food by elaborately eating a piece of cheese.

The alien sniffed at each item. When it got to the egg, it stared at John for a long time. It tasted a green bean but spat it out. It walked around the kitchen in a circle, then stopped and growled a couple of times.

It sighed and walked into the living room. John followed. It went out the front door and walked around behind the module. Sighed again and disappeared, from the feet up.

John noted that where the creature had disappeared, the grass was crushed in a large circle. That was consistent with Isaac's testimony: it had entered its

invisible flying saucer.

The alien came back out with a garish medallion around its neck. It looked like it was made of rhinestones and bright magenta plastic.

It growled and a voice whispered inside his brain: "Hello? Hello? Can you hear me?"

"Uh, yes. I can hear you."

"Very well. This will cause trouble." It sighed. "One is not to use the translator with a Class 6 culture except under the most dire of emergency. But I am starve. If I do not eat soon the fires inside me will go out. Will have to fill out many forms, may they reek."

"Well . . . anything I can do to help . . ."

"Yes." It walked by him, back toward the front door. "A simple chemical is the basis for all my food. I have diagrammed it." He followed the alien back into the library.

"This is hard." He studied his diagram. "To translator is hard outside of basic words. This top mark is the number 'one'. It means a gas that burns in air."

"Hydrogen?"

"Perhaps. Yes, I think. Third mark is the number 'eight', which means a black rock that also burns, but harder. The

mark between means that in very small they are joined together."

"A hydrogen-carbon bond?"

"This is only noise to me." Faint sound of a car door slamming, out on the dirt road.

"Oh, oh," John said. "Company coming. You wait here." He opened the door a crack and watched Lester stroll up the path.

"Hey, Perfesser! You ain't gonna believe what—"

"I know, Les. Isaac told me about it down at Leroy's." He had the door open about twelve centimeters.

Lester stood on the doormat, tried to look inside. "Somethin' goin' on in there?"

"Hard to explain, uh, I've got company."

Lester closed his mouth and gave John a broad wink. "Knew you had it in you, Doc." He passed the Mason jar to John. "Look, I come back later. Really do want yer 'pinion."

"Fine, we'll do that. I'll fix you a—"

A taloned hand snatched the Mason jar from John.

Lester turned white and staggered back. "Don't move a muscle, Doc. I'll git my gun."

"No, wait! It's friendly!"

"Food," the creature growled. "Yes, friend." The screw-top was unfamiliar but only presented a momentary difficulty. The alien snapped it off, glass and all, with a flick of the wrist. It dashed the quart of raw 'shine down its throat.

"Ah, fine. So good. Three parts food, one part water. Strange flavor, so good." It pushed John aside and waddled out the door.

"You have more good food?"

Lester backed away. "You talkin' to me?"

"Yes, yes. You have more of this what your mind calls 'corn'?"

"I be damned." Lester shook his head in wonder. "You are the ugliest sumbitch I ever did see."

"This is humor, yes. On my world, egg-eater, you would be in cage. To frighten children to their amusement." It looked left and right and pointed at Lester's beat-up old Pinto station wagon. "More corn in that animal?"

"Sure." He squinted at the creature.

"You got somethin' to pay with?"

"Pay? What is this noise?"

Lester looked up at John. "Did he say what I thought he said?"

John laughed. "I'll get my checkbook. You let him have all he wants."

When John came back out, Lester



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was leaning on his station wagon, sipping from a jar, talking to the alien. The creature was resting back on its tail, consuming food at a rate of about a quart every thirty seconds. Lester had showed it how to unscrew the jars.

"I do not lie," it said. "This is the best food I have ever tasted."

Lester beamed. "That's what I tell ev'rybody. You can't *git* that in no store."

"I tasted only little last night. But could tell from even that. Have been seeking you."

It was obvious that the alien was going to drink all three cases. \$25 per jar, John calculated, 36 jars. "Uh, Les, I'm going to have to owe you part of the money."

"That's okay, Doc. He just tickles the hell outa me."

The alien paused in mid-jar. "Now I am to understand, I think. You own this food. The Doc gives to you a writing of equal value."

"That's right," John said.

"You, the Les, think of things you value. I must be symmetry . . . I must have a thing you value."

Lester's face wrinkled up in thought.

"Ah, there is one thing, yes. I go." The alien waddled back to his ship.

"Gad," Lester said. "If this don't beat all."

(Traveling with the alien is his pet trebblig. He carries it because it always emanates happiness. It is also a radioactive creature that can excrete any element. The alien gives it a telepathic command. With an effort that scrambles television reception for fifty miles, it produces a gold nugget weighing slightly less than one kilogram.)

The alien came back and handed the nugget to Lester. "I would take some of your corn back to my home world, yes? Is this sufficient?"

The alien had to wait a few days while Lester brewed up enough 'shine to fill up his auxiliary food tanks. He declined an invitation to go to Washington, but didn't mind talking to reporters.

Humankind learned that the universe was teeming with intelligent life. In this part of the Galaxy there was an organization called the Commonality—not really a government; more like a club. Club members were given such useful tools as faster-than-light travel and im-

mortality.

All races were invited to join the Commonality once they had evolved morally above a certain level. Humankind, of course was only a Class 6. Certain individuals went as high as 5 or as low as 7 (equivalent to the moral state of an inanimate object), but it was the average that counted.

After a rather grim period of transition, the denizens of Earth settled down to concentrating on being good, trying to reach Class 3, the magic level.

It would take surprisingly few generations. Because humankind had a constant reminder of the heaven on Earth that awaited them, as ship after ship drifted down from the sky to settle by a still outside a little farm near New Homestead, Florida: for several races, the gourmet center of Sirius Sector.

