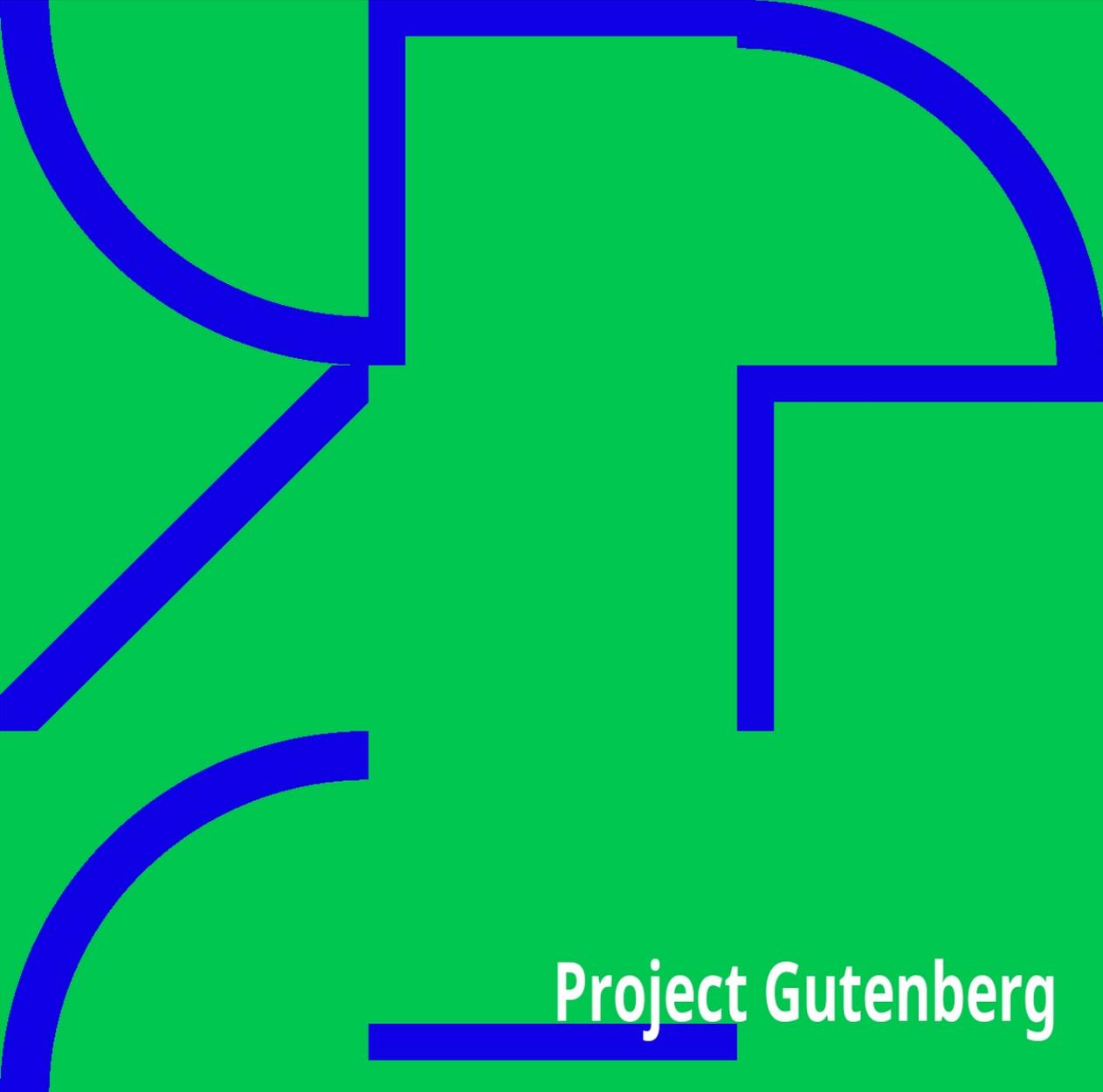

Join Our Gang?

Sterling E. Lanier

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Three figures, standing at the side of a space ship,.

**JOIN
OUR GANG?**

By STERLING E. LANIER

They didn't exactly hold a gun at anybody's head; all they offered was help. Of course, they did sort of encourage people to ask for help....

Illustrated by Douglas

Fancy capital letter C OMMANDER William Powers, subleader of Survey Group Sirian Combine—1027798 and hence first officer of its ship, the *Benefactor*, stared coldly out of his cabin port. The *Benefactor* was resting on the bedrock of Island Twenty-seven of the world called Mureess by its natives. Like all the other such names, it meant "the world," just as the natives' name for themselves, Falsethsa, meant "the people," or "us," or "the only race." To Commander Powers, fifty years old, with eleven of them in Survey work, the world was Planet Two of a star called something unpronounceable in the nebula of something else equally pointless. He had not bothered to learn the native name of Island Twenty-seven, because his ship had mapped one thousand three hundred and eighty-six islands, all small, and either rocky or swampy or both. Island Twenty-seven, to him, had only one importance, and that was its being the site of the largest city on the planet.

Around the island's seven square miles, a maze of docks, buildings, sheds, breakwaters, and artificial inlets made a maze stretching a mile out to sea in every direction. The gray sea, now covered with fog patches, rolled on the horizon under low-lying cloud. Numerous craft, some small, some large, moved busily about on the water, which in its components was identical with that of Terra, far distant in the Sirius Sector. Crude but workable atomic motors powered most of them, and there was a high proportion of submarines. Powers thought of Earth's oceans for a moment, but then dismissed the thought. Biological technical data were no specialty he needed. Terra might be suitable for the action formulating in his mind, but a thousand suns of Sirian Combine might prove more useful. The biologists of Grand Base would determine, assisted by data his ship provided, in their monster computers, what was called for. Powers had been trained for different purposes.

He was, as every survey commander was, a battle-hardened warrior. He had fought in two major fleet actions in his day, and had once, as a very junior ensign of the Sirian Grand Fleet, participated in the ultimate horror, the destruction by obliteration of an inhabited planet. For planetary destruction a unanimous vote of the Sirian Grand Council, representing over four thousand worlds, was necessary. It had been given only four times in the long history of the Confederacy. Every intelligent being in the great Union shuddered at the thought of its ever becoming necessary again. Powers stared moodily over the rocky ground toward a group of figures in the distance which were moving in his direction. The final delegation of the Mureess government, a world government, was coming for its last meeting before the *Benefactor* departed into the far reaches of space.

Powers braced himself mentally for a grand effort. He held equivalent rank to that of a Galactic admiral, and it was held for one reason only, because of his real work and its importance. He was a super-psychologist, a trend-analyzer, a salesman, a promoter, a viewer, an expert on alien symbology and the spearhead of the most ruthless intelligence service in the known universe. Long ago, he had transferred from the battle fleet to the inner school at Sirius Prime for the most intensive training ever devised. Now it would be put to the ultimate test.

He heard the air lock open and turned away from the window. He had a long way to walk to the neutral council chamber, for the *Benefactor* was a big ship, despite the fact that only twenty beings comprised the total complement. Down the echoing corridors he paced, brow furrowed in thought. Mazechazz would have his own ideas, he knew, but if they made no impression, he would have to put his oar in. Each being on board, whether he breathed halogen or oxygen, ate uranium or protein, had to be independent in thought and action under certain circumstances. The

circumstances were here, here and now in his judgment.

He arrived at the door of the Council chamber, and entered, an impressive sight in flaming orange and blue uniform.

Four members of the Supreme Council of the Mureess rose solemnly and inclined their heads in his direction. They were tall bipeds of vaguely reptilian ancestry, most of their height being body. They stood on short powerful legs, terminating in flippered feet, and their long arms were flanged to the second elbow with a rubbery fin. Only four opposed fingers flexed the hands, but the dome-shaped heads and golden eyes screamed intelligence as loudly as the bodies shouted adaption to an aquatic environment. Around the brown torsos, light but efficient harness supported a variety of instruments in noncorrosive metal sheaths. All of the instruments had been discreetly examined by scanning beams and pronounced harmless before any contact had been allowed.

Across the central table, Sakh Mazechazz, of Lyra 8, leader and captain of the Survey stared red-eyed at his executive officer. Mazechazz resembled the delegation far more than he did his own officer, for he, too, had remotely reptilian forbears. Indeed he still sported a flexible tail and, save for his own orange and blue uniform, ablaze with precious stones, resembled nothing so much as a giant Terrestrial chameleon. The uniforms were no accident. Surveyemen wore anything or nothing as the case called for it, and the Falsethsa admired bright colors, having few of their own and a good color sense. The gleaming jewels on Mazechazz's uniform stressed his superiority in rank to Powers, as they were meant to.

Of the twenty Surveyemen on board the *Benefactor*, Mazechazz and Powers were the only two who most resembled, in that order, the oxygen-breathing natives of Mureess. That automatically made them captain and executive officer of the *Benefactor*. The native population saw only the captain and executive officer of the ship, and only the council chamber. On a world of ammonia breathers, Mazechazz and Powers would have been invisible in their own part of the ship providing advice only to the Skorak of Marga 10, Lambdem, and perhaps Nyur of Antares-bi-12. If a suspicious native saw an entity with whom he could feel a remote relationship giving orders to a weird-looking, far more, alien creature, a feeling of confidence might appear.

Since Mazechazz came from a planet of super-heated desert and scrub resembling the Karoo of South Africa, the resemblance could have been bettered, but it was well within the allowable limits set forth in the Inner Mandate. And in Galactic Psychology, every trick counted. For persuasion was the chief weapon of the Sirian Combine. Outright force was absolutely forbidden, save by the aforesaid vote of the council. Every weapon in the book of persuasion was used to bring intelligent races into the Combine, and persuasion is a thing of infinite variety.

As these thoughts flashed through Powers' mind, he seated himself in a plain chair and adjusted the Universal Speaker to his mouth. Beside him, on a more elaborate chair, tailored to fit his tail, Mazechazz did the same, while the four Falsethsa seated themselves on low stools and took similar instruments from the oblong table which separated them from the two Surveyemen. Deep in the bowels of the ship, a giant translator switched on, to simultaneously translate and record the mutually alien tongues as they were spoken. Adjustable extensions on the speakers brought the sound to the bone of the skull. For different life forms, different instruments would have been necessary and were provided for.

Mazechazz, as "captain," opened the proceedings.

"Since this is our last session with you, we hope some fresh proposals have occurred to your honorable council during your absence," hummed the speaker through Powers' skull.

He who was designated First among the council of the Mureess answered.

"We have no new proposals, nor indeed had we ever any. Trade would be welcome, but we vitally need nothing you or your Combine have described, captain. We have all the minerals we need and the Great Mother—he meant the sea—provides food. We will soon go into space ourselves and meet as equals with you. We cannot tolerate what you call an 'observer,' who seems to us a spy, and not subject to our laws by your own definition. That is all we have to say."

That does it, thought Powers glumly. The cold—and entirely accurate—description of a Planetary representative of the Sirian Combine was the final clincher. The intensely proud and chauvinistic

Falsethsa would tolerate no interference.

Mazechazz gave no indication that he had heard. He tried again.

"In addition to trade and education, general advancement of the populace," murmured the mike, "have you considered defense?" He paused. "Not all races who travel in space are friendly. A few are starkly inimical, hating all other forms of life. Could you defend yourselves, Honorable Sirs, against such?"

It was obvious from the speed of the answer that the Council of Mureess had considered, if not anticipated this question. The second member spoke, an obvious pre-assignment.

"In all our long history, you are our first contact with star travelers. Yet we are not defenseless. The Great Mother contains not only food, fish and plants which we harvest, but many strong and terrible beasts. Very few are left to disturb us. In addition, the implications of your ship have not escaped us, and our scientists are even now adapting some of our atomic devices used in mining to other ends." The voice contained a faint hint of pride as it ended. We got guns, too, buddy, it said, and we ain't pushovers.

The First of the Council spoke again. "Let me be plain, Respected Star-farers. It seems obvious to us that you have learned most of what we represent as a council, if not all. We are the heads of the Great Clans and we will not change. It hardly seems likely that you represent a society based on heredity if you include the diverse and nameless breeds of creature you have shown us on your screens. We do not want such an amalgam on our world causing unrest and disturbances of public order. Still less do we desire authoritarian interference with the ordered life we have developed. Your requests are one and severally refused. There will be no 'observer.' Trade, regulated by us, will be welcome. Otherwise, should you choose not to be bound by our laws, we must respectfully and finally bid you farewell. When at some future date, we develop ships such as yours, we may reconsider." The speaker paused, looked at his three confreres, who nodded silently. The First stared arrogantly at Mazechazz, and continued.

"Finally, we have decided to place a ban on further landings by aliens unless you are now prepared to negotiate a trade agreement on our terms!"

Powers thought frantically, his face motionless. This was defeat, stark and unequivocal. The parable he had in mind seemed indicated now or never. He turned to Sakh Mazechazz, and spoke.

"May I have your permission to address the Honored Council, Noble Captain?" he asked.

"Speak, First Officer," said the Lyran, his gular pouches throbbing. His ruby eyes, to his associate, looked pained, as well they might.

"Let me pose a question, Honored Sirs," said Powers. "Suppose that in your early history of creating your orderly realm you had discovered on one of your islands a race of Falsethsa as advanced and regulated as yourselves who wished nothing to do with you?" He could feel the alerted tension of the four as the golden eyes glowed at him.

"The implications of your question are obvious," the First of the Council spoke, as coldly as ever. "Do you threaten us with force from your Combine devoted to peace?" The flat voice of the translator hummed with acquired and impossible violence which Powers knew to be subjective.

The First continued. "We would resist to the ultimate, down to the least of our young and the most helpless female weed cultivator! Do your worst!"

Powers sat back. He had done his best. The hereditary dictatorship of a united world had spoken. No democratic minority had ever raised its head here. The society of Mureess was stratified in a way ancient India never thought of being, down to refuse collectors of a thousand generations of dishonorable standing. Ancient Japan had been as rigidly exclusionist but there *had* been a progressive element there. Here there was nothing. Nothing that is, except a united world of coldly calculating and very advanced entities about to erupt into space with Heaven knew what weapons and a murderous arrogance and race pride to bolster them.

He thought of the dead orb called Sebelia, rolling around its worthless sun, an object of nausea to all life. And he had helped. Well, the boys in Biology had the ball now. He forced himself to listen to the First of Council as he bade Mazechazz a courteous farewell.

"Depart in harmony and peace, Honorable Star-farers. May your Great Mother be benign, when you return to give your high council our message on the far-distant worlds you have shown us in the sky."

The Council departed, leaving Powers and Mazechazz staring at each other in the council chamber, their gaudy uniforms looking a little dull and drab.

"Well, Sakh," said Powers, his ruddy face a little flushed, "we can't be perfect. They don't know about spacewarps and instantaneous communicators. Plan II has nothing to do with us."

"Beyond our recommendation, you mean," said the Lyran flatly. "We have failed, William. This means death for thousands of innocent beings, perhaps more. Their world population is about eighty million, you know."

There was silence in the room until Powers broke it again.

"Would you have Sebelia, Sakh," he asked gently, "or Ruller I, Bellevan's world, or Labath?" There was no answer to this and he knew it. There was only one alternative to a dead, burned-out, empty planet. Mureess was in the wrong stage of development, and it would have to be brought in line. The Sirian Combine had to, and would remove any intelligent unknown menace from a position from which it could threaten its Master plan of integrated peace. As they left the chamber, Powers said a silent prayer and touched the tiny Crescent and Star embroidered on his shirt pocket. At least, he thought, the planted ultra-wave communicators would be there when the Falsethsa needed them. He looked out of a corridor port at the gray and rolling sea. The Great Mother, he thought bitterly, benevolent and overflowing!

Traleres-124, female gardener, aged thirty-two cycles, hummed in a minor key as she harvested weed of the solstice crop, twelve miles off the northern islands. A rest period was due in the next cycle day, and she and her mate were ahead of quota which should make the supervisor give them a good holiday.

The tall weed swayed gently against her and several small fish darted past in fright. As the first heavy beat of the water struck against her slim body, she looked up. Frozen with horror, she released her container, but in forty feet of water, the monster caught her before she had moved a hundred yards.

As it fed, horribly, other grim shapes, attracted by the blood moved in from the distant murk of deeper water.

Savathake-er rode his one-man torpedo alertly as he probed the southern bay of Ramasarett. He was a scientist-12 and also a hereditary hunter. If the giant fish, long since eliminated from the rest of the seas, were breeding in some secret area of the far and desolate southern rocks, it was his business to know it. No fish could catch his high-powered torpedo, while his electric spears packed a lethal jolt. Probably, he thought, a rumor of the poor fisher folk who worked the southern fringe areas. What else could you expect from such types, who had never even learned to read in a thousand cycles. Nevertheless, as he patrolled the sunken rocks, he was alert, scanning the water on all sides constantly for the great shape he sought, his skin alert for the first strange vibration. By neglecting the broken bottom, brown with laminaria and kelp, he missed the great, mottled tentacle which plucked him off his torpedo in a flash of movement, leaving the riderless craft to cruise aimlessly away into the distance.

"Your highness," said the Supervisor Supreme, "we are helpless. We have never used metal nets, because we have never had to. Our fiber nets they slash to ribbons. They attack every species of food-fish from the Ursaa to the Krad. The breeding rate is fantastic, and now my equal who controls the mines says they are attacking the miners despite all the protection he can give them. They are not large, but in millions——"

"Cease your outcries," said the First in Council, wearily, "and remove that animal from my writing desk. I have seen many pictures of it since they first appeared five cycles ago. It still looks alien and repulsive."

They stared in silence at the shape that any high-school biology student of distant Terra could have identified in his sleep.

At length, the First in Council dismissed the Supervisor of Fisheries and headed thoughtfully for an inner room of his palace. He knew at last the meaning of the strange metal communicating devices, discovered and confiscated, after the star ship had departed, six cycles before. It was a simple machine to operate, and he guessed food could be sent incredibly quickly to his starving planet. Just as quickly as other things, he thought grimly. And we have to beg. Hah. Admission to the great peace-loving Combine, may the crabs devour them.

But he knew that he would send and that they would come.

"I was comparing the two reports, my friend," said Mazechazz, "but I am not so familiar with your planetary ecology as I should be. When Mureess applied for admission to the Combine, I requested a copy of their secret directive from Biology, but I had never seen the older report until you gave it to me just now. Can you explain the names to me, if I read them off?"

"Go ahead," said Powers, sipping his sherbet noisily. He seldom wondered what alcohol would feel like any longer. Most Old Believers had tried it when young and disliked it.

"I've already looked up the names I didn't know," he said, "so start the Mureessan list first."

"Great White Shark, or Man-eater," read Mazechazz. "He sounds obvious and nasty."

"He is," said Powers. He put down his glass. "Remember, as usual, the birth rate has been at least tripled. An increased metabolism means increased food consumption, and no shark on Terra was ever full. This brute runs forty feet when allowed, in size, that is. A giant carnivorous fish, very tough."

"Number two is Architeuthis, or Giant Squid," continued the Lyran. "Is that a fish? Sorry, but on my world, well, fish are curiosities."

"It's an eyed, carnivorous mollusk with enormous arms, ten of them and it reaches eighty feet long at least. Swims well, too."

There was a moment of silence, then Mazechazz continued. "Smooth dogfish."

"A tiny shark," said Powers, "about three and a half feet in size. They school in thousands on Terra and eat anything that swims. Just blind agile appetite. They have a high *normal* breeding rate."

"Finally we have a Baleran Salamander, so you're free of one curse, anyway. Balera, I believe, is hellishly wet, although I don't know much about it."

Powers rose and stretched. "He's a little fellow with six legs and a leathery hide. A nuisance on Balera, which is the equivalent of a Terran swamp. He eats every vegetable known, dry or fresh, and, being only two inches long is hard to see. He doesn't bite, just eats things and breeds. There must be millions by now, on each island of Mureess. Then the eggs get carried about. They're tough and adhesive. You can guess what their warehouses looked like."

"At least two million starved before the Council gave in," resumed the Lyran sadly. "But they gave in all the way and abolished caste privilege before the first relief ship even arrived. They'll be full members shortly. And this older report?"

"Read the names," said Powers. He was staring out of the Club window at the stars. "They fed us our own dirt, because we hadn't eliminated all our competitors. Disease means microorganisms, so you choose the largest animal possible with efficiency, that is. Just read the list. My grandparents died, you know, but it had to be done, or we'd have destroyed ourselves. The Combine was a far greater blessing to us than it ever was to Mureess, I can assure you of that!"

He listened in silence as the Lyran read.

"Desmodus, the vampire bat,
Rattus Norvegicus, the common rat,
Mus Domesticus, the common mouse,
The Common Locust,
Sylvilagus, the Cottontail Rabbit,

Passer Domesticus, the House Sparrow,
Sturnus Vulgarus, the European Starling."

Powers sat down and stared at his friend. "Terran life by comparison with many other worlds is terribly tough because we have so many different environments, I suppose. Hence its use on Mureess. Of course, the Combine increased breeding rates again, but adapting that bat to stand cold was the last straw," he said. "The rest of them were all ready and waiting, but the bat was tropical. We'll start with him. Desmodus is a small flying mammal about...."

THE END

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